**Diving In, By Franklin Sami**

# Month 1

‘This bar is a cool place to unwind.’, is what I thought when I first set foot into Blue Ruin. It was a long day, hell, a long week. I just got promoted, and I’ve been trying to balance that with classes. That said, I wasn’t a university student or anything, I was just pursuing an education in Computer Science via certificate courses. I worked 40 hours a week and studied for 15 hours a week. The stress took a toll on my brain and my body. I had no friends or social life to speak of either. Anyway, the Port Authority was surrounded by places where people would go to unwind: dive bars; such as the aforementioned Blue Ruin or Beer Authority. The former was a wild and rowdy bar. There was an old-fashioned jukebox playing classic rock songs. My entry was that of the silent and strong type, or so I thought. Well, actually, I was often told that. Moving on, it was the ridiculously loud music, the dim lights, pornographic posters on every wall, the gorgeous female bartenders, and the crazy-ass customers that drew me in. It was an excitement that matched my experience at work. Minus the heat and the labor, and constantly having a knife in my hand, however. No, the energy and the ambiance of the bar were fueled by the frustration of a long day. As one would expect of an NYC dive bar, everyone had a unique and colorful personality.

Every person I met had a hilarious or wild story to tell. Or some nonsense to brag about. I reveled in every minute of this moment of emotional freedom. The freedom to bitch about my boss or my coworkers. The freedom to become friendly with people without actually having to worry about the burden of friendship. Or the freedom to have an encounter with a lady without having to worry about committing. It was awesome! I could unleash a beast within me that I never knew existed. Furthermore, who knew people thought Sous Chefs were so cool? That drew people to me. I never gave a damn about popularity. Even when I had it, it was somewhat burdening. Except when I was here. Here, it worked to my advantage. Blue Ruin was a hard hat area where everyone looked for the same thing.

Beer Authority, on the other hand, was the opposite when it came to the working class spectrum. Even more so, its ambiance. It was a quieter bar, but not entirely silent. I’d meet a lot of slick Wall Street wolves over there. The cool part about the Beer Authority was that I got along with everyone over there as well. I wasn’t exactly a fish out of water. That said, it was somewhat above my pay grade. Regardless of that, hitting up Blue Ruin and then the Beer Authority became my routine if I was off the next day. I’d waste my hard-earned money without so much as a thought. These were my late-night adventures and they were well worth it.

# Month x

Work was hell today. At least I’m off tomorrow. That means, off to the bar! I’ve gotten familiar with the dive bar scene in Midtown, but there are two that I still frequently visit above all: Blue Ruin and Beer Authority. I have become somewhat acquainted with the bartenders at both places. At the Beer Authority is an old Irish guy named Tommy. He’s got this really cool accent and tells the same stories over and over again. Kind of like a character from a Guy Ritchie film. He always greets me loudly, causing every other customer to turn their gaze at me. Being the center of attention at a bar where there are highly paid professionals networking with one another felt pretty cool. In other settings, I’d likely care far less. The only reason I gave a damn was that I thought it could lead to career opportunities. It was a silly notion. A drunken notion. That said, I liked Beer Authority mostly because of Tommy. He was a sincere guy. A somewhat emotionally scarred dude who truly appreciated virtues like honesty. I’d always been a straightforward and understanding individual, or so I’ve tried my best to be. Plus, I always tipped him well! Another reason we got along, I guess. I had great experiences at the Beer Authority. More so than Blue Ruin. Almost every night I stopped by, there was a significant conversation with a stranger. For example, there was a data scientist I met with whom I shared many of my ideas. At the time, I had this idea for an app. One that would produce its own recipes based on data from the microbiology of food combined with human input. He was impressed and advised me to pursue it. I came up with the idea after going on an evening binge- er, adventure, and spent the entire night at a cafe; drinking numerous large coffees in order to sober up. After writing a few lines of arbitrary code, I’d call it a night and head home.

One time I encountered these two dudes at Blue Ruin. A Colombian guy and an Indian guy. None of us knew each other. It was the first encounter for each of us, but we became the three amigos for the next couple of hours. We hung out and shared all sorts of crazy stories with each other. For example, the Colombian guy was telling me how he witnessed his uncle get shot in the chest. He explained that he was just a kid when he saw this happen. The Colombian guy went out of his way to demonstrate by pressing his finger against my chest while making a vocal imitation of the gunfire. After doing this, he took out this small vile from his pocket and asked me if I wanted some. I was drunk as hell, and without question, I sniffed away. It was the first time I tried cocaine. And, that night was the only time. The next thing that happened was even more exciting. Me and the Indian guy were invited to the Colombian’s house. I couldn’t help but think ‘What the hell are you getting into?’ It occurred to me that I wasn’t on a first-name basis with either of the guys. I soon began to sober up a bit; must’ve been the coke. Moving on, we began to walk through midtown. I assumed the Colombian must’ve lived somewhere in the Bronx or East Harlem, given the story he just shared about his uncle. I’m from the hood, so I wasn’t really a stranger to the element of crime these areas had. Anyway, to my surprise, his place was only a few blocks away from the bar. The freaking guy lived in Midtown! I thought this must have been some sort of joke. Regardless, we walked inside the building, proceeded to the elevator, and then ended up in the hallway leading to his apartment. As one would imagine of an apartment in Midtown, it was spacious and luxurious. This guy was just a kid; how the hell could he afford this? The three of us continued to sniff away as the thought permeated through my wasted mind. As we engaged in mindless chatter, this gorgeous woman emerged from one of the rooms. The Indian guy asked him what was up with the apartment, knowing that the Colombian couldn’t afford it. He was too young and immature. He motioned his head towards the woman, indicating that he lived on her income. I instantly connected the dots. She shamefully exited the apartment with a dog at her side. A dog I hadn’t noticed running around until she had its leash in hand. Once all the dots were fully connected in my head, my eyes widened somewhat. She was an escort. The shame in her facial expression and the Colombian’s made it obvious. My interpretation might be off, but I was fully convinced of this. The Indian guy and I left soon after and spent the rest of the night until 7 am; smoking cigarettes and talking about nonsense. At this point, we had already exchanged names and numbers. We parted ways soon after that. I had to work in 8 hours, which meant I could only sleep for 3 hours since the commute between New Jersey and New York took over an hour; give or take.

My appetite for adventure didn’t stop here. I stayed away from Blue Ruin for a while and spent more time at the Beer Authority. Over there I met this gorgeous musician. It was a rough day of work, and I wasn’t really in the mood to meet anyone. That said, the Musician approached me. She was a very energetic woman who seemed to be into me. That said, we exchanged contact information and met again a week later at another spot. It was a large restaurant bar in the middle of Times Square. A flashy and crowded place. Not my type, to be honest. I got to see her give a musical performance though. She was a very talented musician, but it wasn’t her actual career. The Musician had gone to college and earned a degree in marketing. She was a bright and accomplished woman. A great woman who lived independently of anyone. On the other hand, I was a head case getting my life together. After her performance, I decided to take her to the Beer Authority. I figured we needed a place with a more relaxing ambiance. Also, a place where I’d have the perfect wingman for a sort of social elevation if you will: Tommy. He’d brag me up in front of the Musician over and over again. So would the other regular customers. In a sense, I was sort of a younger brother to a lot of them. A handsome underdog they would all cheer for. Were my troubles so obvious? The Musician and I spent the whole night making out with each other. It was awesome. Right until she said ‘your place’. At that moment, only two words came to mind: ‘Holy shit’. I didn’t have a stable living situation. Either I crashed at a buddy’s place or my mother’s. It was more the latter than the former. Fortunately, she meant that for the future, not that night. To this day, she still reaches out.

Meeting to random guys and doing coke at a fancy apartment in midtown, making out with a beautiful musician, and knowing she wanted to get to know me more, being looked upon as a really good guy across a lot of these dive bars. It was the most I had lived in my entire life. My childhood was less than stellar. Hell, my early adulthood was less than stellar. I started partying like this at the age of 27. I’m a social late bloomer. After some time passed, this nightlife began to take a toll, but it was the only fun I had. For example, I got so intoxicated that I passed out in the middle of the sidewalk outside the Port Authority. The next morning, I woke up in the ER of a hospital. I watched the doctor approach me, he asks ‘Do you know where you are, mister Sami?’, Sami being my last name. My response was, ‘St Joseph’s Hospital?’. The doctor grew silent and then gave a reply that had a hint of annoyance. His reply, ‘You’re at NYU Medical.’, At that moment, he began to explain what had happened. All I heard was blah, blah, blah. A sound that was akin to that teacher in the old Charlie Brown cartoons. Realizing I had lost my bag, I was led into another grand misadventure. One that was much less enjoyable: finding my god damn bag. I backtracked for hours and eventually found it. Turns out this cute bartender from one of the dive bars I had hit up the night before had it. She saved it for me and took my number down that same night. I was so drunk, I couldn’t remember any of this.

# Month Covid

There’s this virus I keep hearing about that has everyone and their mother freaking out. The word on the street is that everything is going to shut down. When they say everything, they mean **everything**. The large retail stores fueling blind consumerism, the greasy mom and pop restaurants, the shitty blue-collar supermarkets, and even a few corporate offices. Basically, the whole economy. With a few exceptions, of course. The larger supermarkets are allowed to stay open so that people can still buy essential products. Toilet paper, napkins, food, etc. Personally, I didn’t give a shit early on. Every day was business as usual. I had another promotion around the corner, and I had to figure out how to balance that new position with class. The chef life was something I had smoothly adapted to. The crazy 60 hour work weeks, the constant yelling and burning and slicing. And, the unhealthy nightlife that usually followed if I were off the next day. Part of me wanted it all to end; the life that I was sinking into. It was a somewhat suicidal desire. It was also a desire to pursue my true ambitions. More often than not, these NYC eateries and restaurants do their best to dissuade their staff from pursuing a path they set out to follow. If they see you as someone with huge potential, even more so. It stems from a desperate need that can come across as being vampiric.

As time went on, I began to notice that my usual spots, Beer Authority and Blue Ruin grew empty. They weren’t totally vacant or anything, but it was noticeable. The few that kept coming were travelers that were passing through. They said ‘screw it’ to whatever it is that they were up to and packed their bags. The fun I got from bar hopping dissipated. Not because of the coming pandemic, but because I became more withdrawn as a person. My health began to slip away as I gained weight. My pockets were constantly empty because of this destructive routine, but I was already locked in. How else was I supposed to unwind with so little time? With all of this in mind, I began to follow the news. The number of people getting riled up by this Covid virus or whatever was increasing. As an aspiring scholar, I did some hard research; reading what known economists foresaw in the near future. The articles I had read were an economist’s analytical way of saying we’re all doomed. Of course, none of this was apocalyptic or anything. What they meant was, everyone is gonna lose a lot of money. Oh, and a few of us might die along the way. But hey, this also meant I could walk away from my job, collect unemployment, and become a full-time student. Since I did my research, I saw months ahead of time that everything was going to shut down. This was during a time where most people I knew dismissed the virus as bullshit. Because I played it smart, I got what I wanted. When NYC started looking like the opening scene from 28 Days Later, I ran away from it all.

I ran away from the downward spiral of my nightlife. I ran from the opportunity to become the Chef De Cuisine at my job. I did all of this without so much as a word to any of my colleagues. At this point, I had become indifferent and sort of nihilistic. There was only one thing that mattered, and that was me. I was in a bad position. I failed to get my life together as I had intended. Going full-time at a community college was a smart choice, but I had a lower sense of self-worth due to my living situation and the quarantine that followed. There was a certain amount of time that I had to wait before starting. I had to wait for this crazy Covid situation to die down. Nobody knew how long that was going to be. This meant that I had to spend a lot of time doing nothing. A lot of time finding ways to cope with my insecurities. I realized that I had been trying to be like the Energizer Bunny my entire adult life. I had been chasing dreams without ever taking a moment to rest. There were many other things that I realized about myself, but that’s not the subject. This is about my overindulgence in a desire for adventure. Like with all matters, there’s a good way to go about it, and a bad way. As a result of the latter, I became an emotionally unstable person; drunk throughout all the time spent in quarantine. All the extra cash I gained from unemployment insurance was spent on crap. I spruced up my room a bit, got a few leisurely items, but I didn’t do anything productive. It was much needed though. I needed to see what was wrong, no matter how painful. The emotional instability was a result of my binge drinking, but it was more so the result of my lack of rest. It took the end of the world for me to finally sit down and realize that I needed a break.