

Front Facing Camera Chronicles:

Kanas City

A Jack Simon Traveling Story



Speakeasy bars are tourism's scourge. It is where your concierge refers you, the place your dentist uncle knows the "password" to and when you walk in your elbows best be sharp to get within shouting distance of the bar so you can yelp your order to the overwhelmed bartender dressed in a stuffy wool vest. "Oh please! Oh please! Help me ye! A Jack on the rocks please." The retort comes back fast and unflinching. "Sorry boss only cocktails." All this still a speakeasy. Baffling.

I walk down the hill from my Kansas City place to a rooftop bar and found it pretty with a pleasant view of downtown. Buildings lay out orderly in a jagged skyline, the buildings smushed together without discrepancy. Skyscrapers stand next to squat brick shithouses. I sipped my old-fashioned and chased peaceful thoughts. The bar had no rye to be had so bourbon burned my chest. Bourbon's for people who need their cold hearts melted. A waiter came out and we began to chat idly. I asked him where I should go next and he mentioned Green Lady Bar which had live music and a name I recognized and also he says Protagonist Cafe is a bookstore and a bar but that sounded likely to get me hammered spending a hundred dollar bills on words within a half hour. We talked a bit more then he began the bummer shuffle back to work. Before far he stopped hard on his lead left foot and pivoted back towards me. "There is one more."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it's close to here actually."

"Perfect."

“Swordfish Tom’s, it’s in an alleyway.” His voice began to hush for no reason.

“There’s not really a sign for it,” Ah fuck please no. “but it’s called Swordfish Tom’s. You’ll see it written on the door. You’ll go through the door, down the stairs...”

“This is how motherfuckers get robbed.”

“No no no it’s like a speakeasy.” There it is. “If there’s space inside there’ll be a green light, if it’s full it’ll be red but it’s a weekday so you should be fine. Should be green. Ring the doorbell and they’ll come to the door and let you in.” A water later I took the elevator down to saunter out through the bougie hotel lobby. I find the bar on my phone so it’s not so low-key I can’t find it on Apple Maps. Left down the stairs then right to the locked door with a caged bulb burning bright green beside it. I rang the doorbell. I rang the doorbell again and knocked. I felt like a fucking idiot. I stood for another minute and rang again holding the button hard like that makes a difference. I waited. A gnarly chick with neck tattoos and an Elvis haircut opened the door and led me inside. I took the last seat in the dimly lit dark mahogany L-shaped bar and got curious if the bulb was now red behind me. Only two employees were needed tonight to tend to the place, the one hostess and a shining sunshine of a girl who was tending bar. One of the two men I had been sat beside began to chat me up excitedly through his Latin-accented English. My hat had grabbed his attention, cowboy with a rattlesnake wrapped around. The face used to have fangs but they ripped off in the wind while skiing. I ordered an old-fashioned with Whistle Pig and he said he’d pay for it. Within only a few moments the drink was gone and my new friend Manny and I were trying to

figure out if his English or my Spanish was worse. “Un Poco Español.” I said scrunching my fingers real close together for emphasis.

“All the English.” Came his response as he grabs my wrists and spreads them out real wide. Then we laughed some more. Speaking in our native dialects his white friend between us did his best to translate as the words flew fast over his head.

The bartender returned and I blushed for a second time, she was very cute and had hair that was very pink and she was round with sweet plum plumpness. She wore wide-rim glasses, a sundress, and a toothy smile. “Another one?”

“Yes please ma’am.” She turned to start the drink. “I’m sorry what were your pronouns?” All the way on the other side of the bar I got caught up in a half shout trying to get her attention.

“What?” Was her reply.

“What are your pronouns? I had called you ma’am without asking what was up. My friend just taught me the formal non-binary is MX and was looking if I needed to break it out.”

“My roommate is non-binary. I wonder if they know that.”

“I used to ski Alaska with an Army Ranger Lieutenant and he called everybody sir and ma’am and he was the coolest man to ever live. Now I call everybody sir and ma’am and so my friend taught me for those in the middle.” She served me my drink and Manny began flirting harmlessly with her. I must admit I was enjoying myself. It was a great bar rich with deep smells and strong conversation bubbled into a light ambiance. Kansas City wasn’t a particularly inviting place but neither was Kansas. While the city was cold like a poorly lit grit crime show,

the countryside was simply unwelcoming. The citizens were polite, Kansans are kind and forthright people as most everywhere are but they have a deep reservation. They're hard, something inhumanly stocky. Harder than Dakotans in their inhospitable winters, harder than the forgotten Vermonters, harder than even the West Texans whose skin has turned to boiled leather in the unrelenting sun.

Streets were empty when I had gone wandering and wondering through them. Nobody seemed to live in the city. All the lights I had seen from the rooftop were a mirage of office and retail, nobody lives in these cities anymore. No lights were on in any of the residential windows, no garbage was plopped on the corner ready for collection, nothing indicated that this was the thriving metropolis it should be. Kansas City always had had a romantic tinge to it. Famous for blues venues and barbecue, infamous for gambling and being the first place in American history to have an election turn to bloodshed. For years the place had been greatly intriguing. Unfortunately it too had been washed away in the post-2008 Brave New Economic World tidal wave leaving "FOR LEASE" signs in the windows of the stores that weren't thrift shops. Little pride was leftover for hometown spirit, Kaufmann Stadium had few fans for a weekend day game. "Everybody has to live somewhere." A stadium usher said about it.

Manny left for the bathroom and there was enough room for his friend to speak. His name was Scott. "That guy," Scott said indicating the bathroom and Manny. "Owns castles."

"What a succinct way of putting someone's wealth."

“Yeah, and he does shit like that all the time.”

“Like what?”

“Like buying you that drink.”

“It was a nice thing for him to do.”

“Don’t ask him for anymore, he’ll give it to you.” It came out accusatory.

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good, we’re hammered.”

“You’re holding it together well.” I understand him being protective of his friend.

“We’ve been drinking since the afternoon.”

“It’s the night now.”

“That’s the problem. We have to go home.”

“Go home, sleep well. You married?” I tried to find his fingers to find a ring.

“Yeah. We both are, they’re waiting for us together somewhere.”

“Hey cowboy.” Manny returned, slapping his hand on my shoulder. He didn’t squeeze hard and I appreciated that because I hate when people do that. After removing it he took my hand in his and started to shake it. Two pumps in he put his other hand over mine, his massive mitts were like a first baseman’s and enveloped mine entirely. “How’s the drink?”

“Delicious.”

“Good good good.”

“Muuuuuuuuuy bien.” And he laughed and still did not let go of my hand. Didn’t know if I would ever get it back.

“You’re a good kid.” Don’t think either of those last two words are true anymore.

“Appreciate that.” Was all I said and he finally released his clasp.

“I was thinking about you in there.”

“Odd.”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I am curious though.”

“Curiosity killed the cat.” Interjected Scott.

“But satisfaction brought it back. That’s the rest of that phrase. People forget that.” Was my obnoxious retort.

“Can I get y’all anything else?” The bartender came back.

“A water for me.” When she served me I leaned in. “I need to ask you the worst thing a boy can ask a bartender.” I saw her face run through a gauntlet of emotions. “Well... Second worst.”

“What is it?”

“Can I charge my phone behind the bar?” She laughed, releasing the tension from her chest and filling mine full with joy.

“We have a charger at the end of the bar.”

“I know I saw that I was just looking for the nerve to ask for it.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“I know but,” I maneuvered around Scott and Manny to the outlet at the bar’s inner end. “It’s just a dicky dorky dweeby thing to have to ask.” I plugged in. “Can I borrow your charger?” I said again mocking my own voice.

“All right Manny,” Said Scott rising from his chair. “It’s time for us to go home.”

“Okay, okay.” Manny removed his jacket from his chair before pulling it on gentlemanly like. “Goodnight Jack.”

“Come on Manny.” Scott paid the bill.

“Goodnight Manny. Scott.” We all shook hands and then they walked out of the basement. I returned to my drink. I was slowing down, things were beginning to blacken.

“What should I know about Kansas City?” The bartender and I had struck up a conversation. I did my best to keep my chin out of my glass. Hope she didn’t notice.

“Most of it is in Missouri.”

“I know that.”

“You’d be surprised how many people still don’t.”

“People always surprise me.”

“They’re mostly the same.”

“What was your name?”

“Margaret. She/her.” She wiped her hands on a dish towel and we shook. Having sex with her flashed through my mind.

“Jack He/Him. People don’t surprise you anymore?”

“You meet a lot of people bartending.”

“You meet a lot of people being alive.”

“But bartending you get to talk to lots of them. Intimately.”

“Maybe people just like talking to you.” She fixed herself a drink and we charmed ourselves and giggled. Would be magical if I brought her back to my Airbnb.

Finished the drink and focused on my water. Margaret busied herself polishing



glasses. People flittered out of the bar, only a few and I remained. Waiting past close for her seemed awkward.

“You live here now?”

“Just passing through. Getting breakfast at Waffle House tomorrow then catching the Royals game before heading to St. Louis.”

“You got a full schedule.”

“As I’m sure you do.”

“It’s good to keep busy. Makes the downtime better.”

“True leisure comes only after labor. Aristotle said that.”

“You read Aristotle?”

“Never. A character from Red Dead Redemption Two quoted him and I took it from there. Probably fucked it up too.

“Sounds right to me.”

“Let’s go with it then.”

“Um... I’m sorry, those guys never actually paid for your drink.”

“What do I owe you?” I paid forty dollars for two drinks. Instead of Margaret, I woke next to a cheeseburger with fries, a melted milkshake, and my bare chest covered in grease.