

[The Paris Review Daily](#)

They Put Him in the Freezer

Joe Kloc

For a long time, when I came to the end of something—a walk across the bridge, an absence from the city—I would find myself inside the Blarney Cove, a hallway-sized Irish bar on Fourteenth Street between Avenues A and B. The place’s gravity came from its total disregard for the passage of time. Its drywall ceiling was never finished. Its walls, wood paneled with patches of green-and-white striped wallpaper, likely hadn’t been redone since the seventies. Outside, four or five customers perpetually gathered for a cigarette, tending to the drunken chain-smoker’s belief that tomorrow will never arrive. Among this crowd, you could always spot a straggler with a folded dollar between his fingers. “Can I buy a cigarette?” he’d ask the group, waving the bill he couldn’t afford to give away. “You can just have one,” someone would say. (As the straggler knew, at the Blarney Cove, no one ever took the dollar.) Once, I asked a regular from Harlem what it was about this odd and dreary bar that made him take the trip more than one hundred blocks downtown just for a drink. He paused, as if it had never before occurred to him to consider his commute, and then said, “It feels like home.”

There was no more lonesome jukebox in the five boroughs than that of the Blarney Cove. Over the years, I watched all sorts of people haunt the bar’s four square feet of danceable floor—a grizzly man in a cowboy hat, a college girl with big hoop earrings—each gyrating in solitary defiance of the sleepy night. Some nights, after the loafers took their positions along the bar, an older woman named Kiko would walk in and ask each of the men to dance with her, one by one; slumped over in thought and beer, they’d always decline. I watched her once as she swayed her hips to Lucinda Williams’s “Drunken Angel,” alone.

One dancer stands out above the others: In 2009, a white-haired woman named May asked me if I would do the jitterbug with her. I made an attempt. She moved like she was sixty but she looked older, as tended to be the condition of the Blarney Cove’s jukebox regulars. I had never done the jitterbug and so we danced only briefly, until my ignorance became an issue. Then we talked instead about Elvis, the origins of the song “The House of the Rising Sun,” and Junior Kimbrough, a

Mississippi electric blues guitarist. She had never heard of Junior and suggested we listen to him back in her apartment across the street. “We can play the music as loud as we want,” she said. I declined, but gave her my e-mail address. She walked over to the jukebox, put on a song I’d never heard before, and danced by herself. The next morning, she sent me an e-mail telling me she had spent the evening listening to Junior’s music. She explained, too, that her husband had just died: “The only advantage in him not being here anymore is I PLAY MY MUSIC LOUD ... WHEN HE WOULD NOT LET ME! I know he is shaking his head in heaven.”

I last found myself at the Blarney Cove in June 2013, a few days before it closed. It was very late, and time, as always, was the unacknowledged enemy. Around the barroom, dusty artifacts loitered in dark crannies, unconcerned with their bygone utility: a graffitied pay phone hung on the wall; two dispensers in the back of the bar offered handfuls of dusty pistachios for twenty-five cents; an arcade machine carried a warning that its poker games were to be “used for entertainment only”; a pornographic seek-and-find video game on the end of the bar displayed no such warning; and, most puzzlingly, a piece of wrinkled, white paper taped to the wall advertised mini-burgers, knishes, slices of pizza, and quesadillas. On it, someone had scribbled “Zagat rated.” In six years, I never saw anyone place an order.

That night, four or five old men were sitting along the bar, nursing mugs of beer; one leaned back on his stool, his Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned. (On particularly hot days, patrons enjoyed the bar’s makeshift air-conditioning unit: a fan propped up on the back table by the pornographic seek-and-find, blowing directly at a dried-out air freshener cone.) Moving behind these men was a Nigerian priest I’ll call Derrick—he was passing out his business cards, promising to sacrifice a chicken at his next service. Like most of the men and women I’d met at the Blarney Cove, Derrick had been a customer for decades. He started coming as a boy. His father was a merchant marine who would bring him along on his trips down from Harlem to pick up his paychecks.

I introduced myself to a toothless old Irishman named George—well on his way, whiskey-wise—who interrupted me: “You don’t have this bar,” he insisted, punctuating each word, staccato style, with a tap of his finger. “This bar has a history, pal. You’re still young.” He’d been coming to the Blarney Cove for more than thirty years. When it opened, in 1977, the neighborhood was one of the poorest in the city. Back then, he said, the Irish and Italians didn’t get along. You’d walk out of the bar after a night of hard, lazy drinking and “no matter where you turned, somebody would try you on for size.” In the eighties, he continued, the bar had a lot of trouble with the heroin addicts outside, but some regular named Sonny eventually set them straight. As George spoke, I

noticed he was seated beneath a framed collage titled *The Mid-Day Gentlemen's Club*, which had sixteen portraits of customers taken a decade ago. Uncle Al, Billy B, Sonny, Paulie, Ray K, Angelo ... "From the beginning, these guys were here," George said. "A lot of guys had wakes in this bar, a lot of memories. The good, the bad, the ugly. That's what they were."

I had never seen George here before, but I took it this was his regular seat. I asked him where he thought he'd go when, in a few days, the Blarney Cove closed down. He sighed. "Home, I guess." Shortly afterward, he pushed himself out from the bar, stood up, and wobbled away.

When George was out of earshot, the bartender, who looked to be in her early thirties, turned to me, her eyes large with sadness. "George had mouth cancer," she said. She was afraid that, home alone in his house, he'd drink himself to death. Behind her was a line of rum bottles, and above them a carved wooden sign that read, in ersatz German, VE GET TOO SOON OLDT UNDT TOO LATE SCHMART.

Tommy, another regular, recounted an oft-told Blarney Cove legend. One evening, he said, a regular was sitting alone at the end of the bar, minding his business, enjoying his \$1.50 mugs of beer with all the usual contentment of an old drinker on a young night. Suddenly, but without fuss, the man set down his mug, shut his eyes, slumped forward, and died right there in his chair. "They put him in the freezer," Tommy said. And the next day his body was gone.

When Tommy finished the story, Derrick, the priest, turned to the bartender, as if to take stock of things. "Every real milestone, I've come in here to deal with it," he said. "I'm happy this place is closing."

She smiled. "Thank you."

It occurred to me that nobody in a lifeboat is happy to be lost at sea.

A moment later the jukebox kicked on. It was George. The bar paused to take in the soft, synthesized melody coming through the speakers. Old guys squinted, obliged by age-old custom to make some effort, no matter how hopeless, to come up with the title of the song. They gave up, of course, and slowly, their curiosities lifted and chatter resumed. New faces shuffled in. The bartender filled mug after mug. George, meanwhile, stayed in front of the machine, rocking back and forth in its green-and-yellow light. He was playing Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings."

The Blarney Cove closed a few days later. In the year since, all the signs that once marked its spot at 519 East Fourteenth Street have been carried off—but even while it was open, the bar was easy to overlook. In daylight, its

half-illuminated “Blarney Cove” sign never quite held its own against the Canal Jewelry awning looming next door. At night it was easier to see. For a long time, a neon sign that said DRINK STRAIGHT FROM THE BOTTLE glowed in the window, sending a column of blue out to the street, through the smokers’ vigil. When Canal Jewelry closed, though, this sign disappeared—in its place was a more traditional neon Budweiser logo, hung perhaps to appease the block’s new gentry, who insisted, in their usual way, that shops dress in their Sunday best.

Today, the last trace of the bar’s thirty-six-year stand on Fourteenth Street is a small “R.I.P. Blarney Cove!” scribbled in permanent marker on the metal security gate that seals the barroom off from the street. The smokers have moved on, but I have seen, now and then, wedged into the gate, a crushed beer can reflecting sunlight in the early hours of the morning.

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