

# The Anti-Derby

By Michele Dutcher

So I've been hanging out at this nothing dive bar called The Mag for a couple of years. It's in the heart of Old Louisville – not the snooty Art Show, flickering gaslights part but the cheap 'your grandma's scripts for sale' part. It's the section of Old Louisville ruled over by those of us who know how to co-exist: the party boys, the whores, the alcoholics going down for the last time, and the bleeding-heart liberals.

The Mag is someplace safe to use your laptop, but not anyplace you'd want to lose sight of it while you step into the bathroom. The women's bathroom is covered head to toe with graffiti that screams stuff like: "Dear America, Once you go black, you can't go back – Barry Obama, aka your baby daddy", and "Shadwick is a god." (Shadwick is a bartender - which in bottomdweller world is the same thing as being a god.)

It's 7 pm on Oak's night (Friday – the day before Derby proper) and I can't go into MY bar because the LEO magazine rated MY bar as the #1 dive bar in Louisville and Churchill Freakin' Downs rented it out for Derby weekend. It's \$300 per head to get in – and I'm a little light on spendable income right now, especially 300 USD worth of spendable income.

A guy walks past the Mag on the West side of 2nd street pushing a red shopping cart from the Dollar General, which is three blocks north. He's screaming on the corner about Jefferson County and blacks and whites – but he eventually passes by. I'm not passing by – I'm planted at the bus stop across the street, watching to see if some big shots will pull up.

Cabs are coming and going down 2nd, but I don't see any limos. I see two ladies in derby hats, black coats and pink dresses stepping lively while following ten feet behind two 50-something bald men in suits. They practically run into the single glass door under the neon sign that reads "Magnolia Bar & Grill". I ain't mad at them for walking really fast into the place – it's that kind of neighborhood. There are no paparazzi standing outside because this isn't the Barnstable Freakin' Brown Derby Gala – it's The Mag – it's MY BAR. Within three minutes they're back outside, walking a little slower and their talking about the beautiful scenery of the 19th century Victorian mansions, before piling into their rented red Jetta and driving away. Good rich people – drive away, that's right, nothing to see here.

The owners stroll out the door of the Mag with red plastic cones, plopping them on the street beside the sidewalk.

The neon signs are off tonight. There's no gas running through the 'Certified Proveyers of Miller High Life' sign.

Three guys with tan shorts on and blue dress shirts are turned away at the door – as are two very respectable ladies with pink straw hats. "Private Party" – secret password: \$300 per body, cash up front. A red, boxy, Jeep from the 90s rolls past with Pimp4hire written on the front bumper. TJ comes outside to smoke and the three bouncers for the night show up.

Three men at my bus stop talk about having worked doubles for the past two days, in one hotel kitchen or another. There's a dude screaming at the bus driver because she didn't pull up to the curb to pick up 'his girl'. Funny thing is Perry is riding that bus and tells me on Tuesday he saw me sitting on the curb with some maniac cursing out the driver. It's a small town in a whole lotta big city.

7:03 pm Mag Bar management puts out more red cones.

Pink shirted shrimpy dude, walks towards the bar with a limping lady in a white dress. She heads across the street to Schellers corner store while her shrimpy man gets turned away. He's on his cell now. Many are called, but few are chosen.

It's beginning to get dusk as a young black man draws up close enough to me that I can smell his dog's urine when it pees on a tree.

7:15 Still no one has passed the 300 USD security test. The weather is spot on perfect. I need a beer. I go to Scheller's, grab two 6-ounce beers (63 cents a can) and head for home. I take some cushions off a couch someone left in the alley (now no one will want that bed-bug infested, 80s couch), sweep the steps to my carriage house, eat a peanut butter sandwich. My cat peed on the floor – I'll clean that up later.

Back at the bus stop 8:14 PM Nothin'. Three bouncers smoking, hanging out by the front door. Car and truck beeping at each other while racing through the yellow light. Car beeping at some dude walking against the light a block over. Young black couple walks back from Schellers.

8:32 Body guards standing around out front of My Bar – bull-shooting about battles with patrons that were fought two weeks ago.

Young girl, blonde ponytail flapping back and forth, jogs past as sunset sets in for real. She's running on tiptoe – probably some new way of firming up your butt.

Turning two women and one man away from an empty bar – pointing north towards 4th Street live. Fuck it. I'm heading up the road. I do a quick walk through at the Granville. It's filled to the brim with 30-year-old boys and girls, as fresh scrubbed as if they just stepped out of their Galt House showers. I tell Chris, the guy working the door that it's too uppity for me.

I head over to The T on 4th street. A sign in the window screams Open 22 hrs a day, 362 days a year. It's a lie. They don't open until 10 AM anymore, 1 PM on Sunday – which is the law in Bible Belt Dixie. They close at 4A.M, which is at least two hours past the time when everyone is s%#t-faced drunk and ready to kill each other. Here's the joke: Have you heard about The T's new breakfast special? – two eggs over easy and a shot!

I grab an ice-cold Budweiser in a bottle and settle into a booth in the dark in the back. Sweet. There's a guy, let's say 27, wearing a yellow shirt that says, "Vendor 1163" in big black letters on the back. I wonder where he got the shirt until I see the black server's half-apron. He came by the shirt honest.

Will is at the far end of bar. He's the guy a used as a character model for an assassin/messiah in 'Heaven's Door. At one time he was beautiful, now he's as old and rotten as the rest of us. But he's there, drinking a draft. Some old-money Louisvillian man is hitting on Will, but Will turns away. He's like the bar itself, older, mostly used-up, jaded.

Karaoke is going on up front – women singing who are so bad, you'd REALLY need to be drunk to believe they sound good. They think they sound good.

Coyote Calhoun is running the gig. Two decades ago he had a radio show that played country music. One decade ago he had a club at Jefferson and 2nd with a huge dance-floor that was packed out every

weekend. Now he's running Karaoke at The Ton Oaks night for the hustlers and the students and the seven track-lovers who are so old-money that they don't give a damn what anyone thinks. His hair went from short, tidy to dreadlocks and he's deathly skinny but he still has that amazing bass voice.

And yet, as the quickly aging girls sing Britney Spear's hit – Hit Me Baby One More Time at least there's something real about the place, about the crowd. "My loneliness is killing me..." the music rolls over me as I empty my 2nd beer. At least it's authentic – it's a marked lack of the phoniness of new money, or social climbers. Here, in this bar is honesty...and I settle in, allowing the dirt and grime of the place to seep into my pores.

Three days later, me and the losers and the lobsters\* are perched on stools inside OUR bar – the Mag, when Shadwick brings four bowls of Trail Mix out from the back and plops them down in front of us. A quote comes to mind from the great philosopher Jesus Christ (proud son of Mary and Joseph Christ): The meek shall inherit what's left.

The End