

Tonight's Special

by John Olson

I didn't arrive at the Wicked Spoon every night in the same mood. Some nights I would arrive under the spell of a generous emptiness, what I like to call the euphoria of futility. Not exactly a state of bliss, but a dazed detachment in which everything is so pointlessly constructed that you feel strangely elated. No obligations to fulfill, no choices to make, no direction to follow, no puzzles to solve, no arguments to make. Unaffected by anything except sanctuary, saturation, and food. The hedonism of the damned. Other nights, I fought a laser-like ray of anger filled with inner dialogues and refined private soliloquies woven out of the fronds and fibers of my many indignations. I was the Phantom of the Opera sitting at a table with a candle and a checkered tablecloth. If someone's child went running around in gleeful autonomy as their parents sat like zombies, dead to one and all, I would be tempted to plunge a fork into its flesh and eat it whole like a morsel of pork. You can see where this is going. Sordid mental constructions hidden from the public, including the mechanical civility of the wait staff scribbling indifferently at their pad.

I got out my mobile phone and watched a news story of ocean waves pounding a row of quite large houses rimming the shoreline of a coast in what appeared to be the Pacific Northwest, three bulldozers in action trying to keep the road clear, already littered with debris, as a bevy of wind surfers were hurled upward by strong winds, somersaulting, jerked around like cat toys, one of them nearly colliding with a bulldozer. You've got to love the madness of this world.

If you've often wondered why people, couples especially, vacationing in paradisaical locations in Europe and Asia and Polynesia, will share a table in utter silence, transfixed by a gadget in their hands, oblivious to the charms of the moment, faces lifeless as statues. This is why: conversation is dead. It used to be fun. Now it's a minefield. Thank God for TikTok, and cute animal videos.

I'm no different. It has me under its spell as well. A tiny world seemingly under my control.

Charlie refreshed my breadsticks. Good man, Charlie. He's been a waiter here since time immemorial. Survived the pandemic. Solid as a barnacle. Happy as a clam. The staff in general are as volatile as elsewhere, few lasting more than a week. But Charlie? Stable as a radial tire.

Tonight was special. I was in a good mood. Casper Bang was coming to meet me. I hadn't seen Casper in 30 years. We played together in a band back in the grunge days. He played drums. I was the lead singer. Our group was called Umphump. I always liked Casper. I don't know why we didn't stay in touch. Casper achieved considerable fame after the band split up. He wrote two hit songs, formed another band, went to rehab, married a woman from Istanbul and now had two kids, three dogs, a home in Bel Air, and a Cessna Skyhawk. Maybe that's why. My priorities changed. I stopped writing songs and began writing words I could jingle on an imaginary highway. And that brought me to a beautiful, desert-like place called utter obscurity. No kids, no dogs, no wife, no Cessna, no fame, no home in Bel Air. It wasn't jealousy. It was asymmetry.

All eyes focused on Casper as soon as he entered The Wicked Spoon. He was heavier, a bit worn for wear, but still flamboyant. His hit song "Phantom Life" was high on the charts again because it was a track on a recent movie. Casper sat down, grinning ear to ear. Good to see you, man. What has it been, 30 years? Yup, I said. 30 years. Goes by fast, don't it? Sure does. Tell me what's good here. I'm starving. You like potatoes? Yeah, sure. Get the UFO. You'll get both potato lattkes and mashed potatoes, both out of this world. Throw in a filet mignon and you'll be in food heaven. Two young girls swung by for an autograph, which Casper happily provided.

You still writing songs, Casper asked. Not really, no, I answered. Why? I don't know. The music industry left me with a bad taste in my mouth. Writing doesn't pay the bills, but I still get royalties from radio airplay in Europe and digital radio platforms. It's not much. I live simply.

Cool. And so you're writing now? Yup. I'll bet it's a lot quieter than the music we played. It is, I said. I've still got tinnitus from our music. Oh shit man, I'm sorry. I've got it too. We're still connected, dude. True, I said. And I meant it. We were still connected by a shared ringing in the head. How'd this happen, asked Casper. What? This distance, this slippage of time. I don't know, I said. It's kind of a Syd Barrett thing I guess. What do you mean? You had a breakdown? I wouldn't call it a breakdown. It was more like an ascension to another realm. Something blossomed. Dilated. Writing songs just got bigger. I discovered a music in words that our actual music began to obscure. I wanted to explore that further, without all the fuss and hassle of touring and such. I don't think I was cut out for fame. I always hungered for anonymity.

I was about to tell Casper something true, something heartfelt, something I'd been keeping secret, but Charlie came to take our order. Casper turned white. His hands shook. Dad? Hi son, said Charlie. Casper shot his chair back, grabbed his hat and left. And that was the last time I saw Casper. What the fuck Charlie, Casper is your son? Yes. Now then. Have you decided? Decided? On what to eat.

