

Americana

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I've lost track of time sitting at the bar. I haven't been here since the place was remodeled. The new management turned it into some kind of high-end restaurant and lounge. It's actually rather nice despite it being the only place like this in town—especially compared to the perpetually almost-closed Burlington Coat Factory across the street.

I watched one of the bartenders marinate an empty glass in a smoke-filled box before pouring the cocktail into it. The deep thick smell filled my nose for a few minutes which made me feel both young and old. Young because part of me disliked it. Wanted the nuisance out of my nostrils. And old because once it was finally gone, I was tempted to order it myself. Tempted to subject myself again to the earthy scent and foggy eyes. Tempted to taste what it did to the drink. Tempted to see if it was all just for show.

I think it's kind of a shame. The place was nearly gutted. The classic wallpaper has been replaced with mirrors lining the walls. The wrap-around bar used to be a charming dessert display. The old fashioned red diner booths were discarded in favor of sleek tables and upholstered wooden chairs. There was now a live DJ, a classy outdoor patio section, some dimmed chandeliers. A smoke chamber for featured cocktails. It felt otherworldly. And I was overcome with the feeling of being in the future.

Looking at the entrance, I can almost see my younger self walking in—adorned in her basketball uniform and messy ponytail—fresh off a Saturday morning game. She meekly approaches the host desk, looking back for a second to make sure her family is close behind. I watch as she tells the host “table for 4 please” before flashing a pleasant smile and nodding along to the response.

I clearly remember being the age where I began giving the host our name. When I was able to practice being seen by the world and engaging with it. Shyness aside, I'd return time and time again to the diner around the corner from home and test out how loud I could be. How *me* I could be. It was only a few seconds, but it made me feel so adult before I even knew what being an

adult was. I'd get to try out asserting myself and asking for what I wanted. I savored those sweet drops of independence.

I knew when I walked in, exactly how it would go. I knew the doors with the chrome handles. The coat rack to the left and the stack of newspapers on the right. I practically knew how many steps it would take, the pattern of the tiles, the exact stride required to approach the desk and put in my dad's name, Rob, which I always thought was funny. And after my part was done, I'd get to guess in my head if they'd seat us in that solo booth next to the cashier or one next to a window, a table in the back by the bathrooms, or a table in the room with sports on the tv and the corner bar with the regulars.

But now, there's no more grilled cheese with the most perfectly soft and thick bread. No more short stack pancakes. No more burger that would always satisfy in the most American way. The first place I tried coffee no longer had the cozy mugs.

I hadn't actually been here in a while. Construction took 18 months but even before then, I'd not stepped foot in the place for a good 3 years. Saturday games turned into sleepovers and high school parties and SAT prep. Then it was coming back from college. My dad would pick me up from the airport and we'd drive home on the turnpike. I'd smell New Jersey the whole way as we talked, but in the last stretch we'd get quiet and tired. I'd sit with the feeling of being home again, in a familiar car listening to radio hits. And when we'd peel off the turnpike, the diner was just up the road from the exit. A landmark. A staple. The retro clock above the name still the same. The parking lot that has its own traffic light. I'd always turn my head to look at it as we passed by, feeling like that kid again asking the hostess what the wait time was.

The half-empty plate of garlic Parmesan fries laid in front of me pretentiously. My feet dangled off the high chair and I mindlessly tried to hook my boot heels on a rung. My wine was gone, unfortunately. And we had already paid, so I took a sip of my complimentary water to do something with my hands. The condensation pooled around the bottom of the glass and left large drops on my pants.

Suddenly, I see you turn the corner from the bathroom. You goofy-smiled as you returned to me. Your necklace dangled in my eyes as you moved and I realized it was the one I got you for your 18th birthday. I didn't know you still wore it, but I guess I didn't know much about you anymore. You noticed me looking and blushed, grabbing your coat off the chair. I stood and did the same.