

DIVE IS NOT A FOUR LETTER WORD

A drinker's guide to the upside of the down and dirty BY RICK LEVIN

Hey look, mister. We serve hard drinks in here for men who want to get drunk fast, and we don't need any characters around to give the joint "atmosphere." — Nick to George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*

Swizzle is a glamorous, glittery word. It conjures the image of a cocktail umbrella floating like an oasis in a fruity Hawaiian drink sipped slowly by a bikini-clad paralegal vacationing on a beach in Oahu, a Sue Grafton paperback folded over an oily thigh as she sleeps, burning, under a straw hat and sunglasses. *Swizzled*, as an adjective, smacks of F. Scott Fitzgerald — of audacity and aplomb, of flappers and bourgeois gentlemen for whom knowing how to hold your liquor is a sign of superiority and class. Swizzle is a dance, the straw that stirs the drink.

But there are them that drink who, when they do drink, like to drink in places decidedly un-swizzle-ish. Life is where you find it, and many of us prefer to take our drinks in the darker, but no less colorful, corners — in bars and lounges that are beautifully worn and torn, with caverns of anonymity where the vinyl covering on the stools is red and ripped, and the wooden top of the bar is warped and grooved by years of perched elbows.

Swizzle is lovely, but what we're getting at here is something different — not anti-swizzle, exactly, but perhaps *swoozle*, or *swazzled*, or maybe *woozled*. So, okay, let's out with it: We're talking about dives. For many of us — veteran drinkers and solace seekers and familiars of happy hour — dive is a word with four letters, but it isn't a four-letter word. It just means real, human, comfortable and predictable in its very randomness.

In literature, there are countless poets of the dive: Charles Bukowski, Raymond Chandler, Malcolm Lowery, Mary Gaitskill, Larry Brown. For my money, Denis Johnson is among the best, a writer who wickedly captures the ambivalent lure and terrifying splendor of the neighborhood dive. In his masterful collection of linked short stories, *Jesus' Son*, Johnson — over and over again, like a lush repeating the same story — tries to depict the sundown joys and resurrected sorrows of a bar called the Vine:

"There were many moments in the Vine like that one — here you might think today was yesterday, and yesterday was tomorrow, and so on. Because we all believed we were tragic, and we drank. We had that helpless, destined feeling. We would die with handcuffs on. We would be put a stop to, and it wouldn't be our fault. So we imagined. And yet we were always being found innocent for ridiculous reasons."

You either understand this or you don't. I don't drink anymore, but when I did, I always sought out places like the Vine. Yes, there is danger and caution in Johnson's words — the overblown romanticism of drinking, the outsize emotions and self-created heroism, the nihilistic nostalgic nowhere swoon of alcohol's black holes. Broken-winged angels and articulate failures and could-have-been contenders huddling together for warmth on the dark side of the moon.

But there is beauty there as well, and dignity, and small glories, and real people with real stories of real life, with its stings and triumphs, its fights and flights — in short, humanity. Humanity, and its quiet yearning, its dreams failed and fulfilled, or a little of both.

Again, Johnson: "The Vine was different every day... And with each step my heart broke for the person I would



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never find, the person who'd love me... But every time I entered the place there were veiled faces promising everything and then clarifying quickly into the dull, the usual, looking up at me and making the same mistake."

I know those faces. Bless them.

Consider this, then, a different sort of *Swizzle* — not contra *Swizzle*, but let's say the bittersweet yin to swizzle's yang, the stumbling realism to swizzle's glamour. Inside, you will find stories of bouncers and boozers, dirty martinis, camp and cocktails, cautionary tales about slumming and the sleaze of barroom come-ons. And you will find this truth, between the lines, under the cocktail napkin: Moderation in all things, including moderation.

So raise a toast to the Holy Ghost, and enjoy. ■



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