

# A sketch of summer

## Musings on phones, people and the city in Fort George Brewery

Story by MATT LOVE

**S**he sat next to me at the bar and fiddled on her phone inside the Fort George Brewery in Astoria. I put her at 40 years old. She wore a paisley sleeveless dress and was tatted up both arms. I wrote a letter in a long hand to a beauty marooned in a big city.

We had beers at our casual command, mine a light Fort 1811 lager, hers considerably darker, perhaps an ale. There was nothing to do but dispose of a sunny summer afternoon, while behind us, the Fort bustled with the summer rush. The word is out on Astoria. The city of rain is hot. Please rain soon or there might be a million people moving here.

A few minutes elapsed. She tucked the phone in her purse and pulled out a book. A book! She placed the book on the counter and began reading. I couldn't believe it. The last time I saw anyone reading a real book in public was the last time I saw someone making a call from a telephone booth.

It is painful to watch sublime (and inexpensive) cultural pastimes go extinct, like reading a paperback novel in public, especially when you realize what followed their extinction hardly improved your life and cost a lot more money. Are we substantively better off as a culture without typewriters and rotary phones and four

free television stations and paper maps as guides? I see no evidence we are.

She folded the book together and sipped her beer. I glimpsed the title: "Cat's Cradle" by Kurt Vonnegut. I couldn't believe it. A woman was reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel in a bar in Astoria.

I was so shocked by this throwback spectacle that I felt compelled to strike up a conversation but was unsure how to proceed. I was rusty at starting conversations with perfect strangers in bars. Once, I'd been decent at it. Now it seemed like ancient knowledge entombed in an age where virtually everyone sitting alone in bars, or any public place for that matter, is fiddling on their phone and completely disengaged from everything immediately around them. The phone is an unwelcome presence in public places. It obliterates potential conversations with random strangers and the ridiculous stories and interactions that invariably ensue from these impromptu human engagements. I've practically built

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a whole Oregon writing career on them. Maybe I'll be going extinct soon.

She was about half way through the novel. I don't remember my opening line, but her response was friendly, garrulous. We discussed the book and a biography of Vonnegut I had recently read where in his last days he was openly wondering to the author of the biography about his legacy. Was anyone going to read him after he died? Was Kerouac going to be more popular in the end?

Well, Kurt, rest in peace. Someone was reading you, for the first time I might add, on a recommendation from a friend. And reading you, while drinking a beer while surrounded by zombies zonked out on their phones in one of the most interesting old buildings on the Oregon Coast.

We talked for about 10 minutes, and then I returned to my letter and she went back to Vonnegut. Fifteen minutes later I said "good-bye" to her and then walked out of the Fort feeling pretty damn good. I thought to myself: Maybe it's time to read Vonnegut's "Breakfast of Champions" again. Vonnegut even illustrated this novel himself! What novelist does that anymore?

*Matt Love lives in Astoria and is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including "A Nice Piece of Astoria: A Narrative Guide" and "The Great Birthright: An Oregon Novel." They are available at coastal bookstores and through [www.nestuccaspitpress.com](http://www.nestuccaspitpress.com).*



Photo by Matt Love