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The Existential Bartender

“All the worlds a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

- *William Shakespeare*

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”

- *Oscar Wilde*

“People will do anything, no matter how absurd, to facing their own souls”

- *Carl Jung*

The day was long, and the night was beginning. My persona of the collected, professional, graceful graduate student was closing. The tailored slacks and collared shirt had turned into ratted shoes and a graphic t-shirt. The stiff mannerisms of professionalism had shifted into comfort and relatability in the hopes of obtaining a larger tip for the coming night’s work. The transition at this point occurs effortlessly, without any real conscious thought. This transition is not limited to appearance. My behaviors, personality, and even the way I speak changes with the environment. This metamorphosis is merely a response to the individuals in our environment, for our humane and profound desire to be liked and perceived as adequate and relatable by others. It’s something we are all guilty of and most not even aware of.

The world is an act, a performance, as Shakespeare stated. We are all performing to someone else's ideal of what we should be and are often limited to our own insight. It is more often than not that we can't even face the nature of our own true souls. As a bartender, I see many versions of the people that come in, even abruptly changing with each new person they engage. I occasionally see these shifts mid-conversation when the individuals come in alone. Fueled by the depressant of alcohol, they dive deep into their disgust and anger with one of their altered selves but are often brought back after their realization of speaking with the stranger bartender; then their appropriate personality becomes present again. These events are not out of the normal, even expecting this for my coming shift, but this night was a little different. This night, I was able to observe and truly see the performance of a multitude of personas, and even a glimpse at the true soul we find difficulty facing.

I opened the bar with my usual routine for the night. I was sure to have all my dishes cleaned, bar mats to their exact location, and the fruit garnishes arranged to my specific liking. I had the lights dimmed to highlight the pool table and dart boards as points of interest. The environment was perfect for an individual's altered persona to be presented. This night was very slow, and I had not seen a customer for the first few hours of my shift. Finally, two individuals walked in, a man and a woman both seeming to be in their late 30s. The man was tall, over six feet, dark complexion, and absent of any facial hair along with a bald head. He was not of any interest, very simple and lacking any character. However, the woman was a very different story. This woman was very short with long dark brown hair. She was covered with tattoos. They covered her arms, thighs, between her shoulder's blades and her chest. They all seemed to have been completed periodically throughout her life, as if they were telling a story. Some probably had significant meaning, others little to nothing. Her most interesting tattoo was the one on her chest.

The woman had 8 stars arranged similarly to a necklace; this felt as a call to attention. It provided an intentional focal point that forced your eyes to her open skin and invoked curiosity and interest to the type of woman this was. She was also covered in bracelets ranging from beads to athletic bands. Her right arm had these accessories covering half of her forearm, and while just a few on her left wrist. She was also sporting an anklet that appeared to be some thread that was tied so tightly as if she never wanted it to move. Her appearance was deliberate. It was a means to have attention be called to her, to be interesting, and to have others invested in her. She carried herself as if it was not unknown to her to be noticed either. Frankly, she was poised by a desire to be smothered by attention. She thought if she couldn't do it by her personality, then she would have it done by her looks alone. Strangely, you would assume that she would be wearing something as loud as the rest of her appearance, but this was not the case. She was fashioned in simple jean shorts and a black tank top. Perhaps this was done intentionally, as her ultimate desire was to have her attention on everything except her clothing. My suspicion and speculations were growing as to why this dull man was with this profound woman. My interests were by no means in the romantic sense, but of the pure interest in how her personas interacted. Specifically, my keen belief is that this woman has much more to reveal.

They approached the bar, and I went through my mundane script of what alcoholic beverage I could provide them. The man, without hesitation, asked for a beer in a very formal and polite manner. Just as simple as I had expected. The woman peering over the rows of alcohol while pacing down the bar abruptly inquires, "You have Jim Beam Red Stag?". It was very strange asking for this peculiarly specific type of whiskey, and odd coming from, not just this woman, but by any woman in general. It was a type of whiskey that was typically associated with older, blue collard gentlemen that were wishing to either forget their previous day or the one that

proceeds them. What is this woman wishing to forget? I informed her we did not have the whiskey and she settled for a seltzer but asked for a shot cup to pour her drink into. Despite settling for the mundane, the extra cup allowed her to have another focal point of uniqueness. After retrieving their drinks, the man immediately went to the pool table to set up a game while the woman retreated to the jukebox. It was obvious that the woman had done this many times before. She was very relaxed and coordinated, almost as if she was going through a routine. The man however was very stiff, as if this was his first time ever being out. He was uncomfortable and constantly unsure of himself. Maybe a first date? However, he acted as though he wasn't even supposed to be out in public, and he was doing something morally wrong. My suspicions kept growing. The woman then returned to the table with the man, and her string of songs began playing. The woman's personality shifted from an intense focus and deliberate manner while searching for her music to a charismatic flirt the minute she returned to the man. She was prepping her stage for her performance. The first song that played was Sex and Candy by Marcy Playground. It was deliberate that she wanted this to be the first song. She was ensuring the man that this situation was a mystery and a surreal experience for him as the lyrics of the song indicate. These assumptions only cemented with her next song choices being Hotel California and Not Good Enough. Every single one of her moves were calculated. Her song choice, her steps around the pool table, and even each drink she took. They were always in the efforts of getting the man's attention, as if she was trying to earn something from him. She then returned to the bar and her personality shifted drastically again. A new persona. She was irritated and acted as if the night was a hassle. Her brief period at the bar was a break from the role she was playing. She proceeded to order two Grape Gatorade shots and promptly returned to the man. These are shots from an experienced drinker. A specialty shot for an audience of peculiar taste with

nightlife being their norm. I continued to contemplate this mystery woman. She had all the indications of craving attention but conducted this desire of attention for some sort of personal gain. It was not an emotional gain, but something much colder. What was this woman trying to gain from this dull man? The man then approached the bar and his personality had shifted as well. He had a difficult time looking me in the eyes. He felt guilty for why he was there, for a moment it felt as he may just walk out the door. He coldly asked for another beer and returned to accompany the woman, where his persona shifted again. Strange that a man oozed such guilt and remorse for being on, what I assume, is a date with this woman. I had battled with the thoughts and all my observations extensively, and then I had finally realized that this was not a date, but a formality.

The woman was deliberate with each of her moves and calls for attention. Her tattoos, accessories, and limited clothing was due to the desire to have a man's attention to her body. Specifically, the areas that were covered. The personality that she brought out for the man was not to show any interest in him, but was for him to be interested in her. Each song, each drink, each step around the pool table was her script and act in her job. Her job and performance of getting this man's attention and performing to ensure that his thoughts of her are irresistible. This woman was a prostitute. Their time "going out" was a formality so the artificial love they will presumably have will be masked with the façade of being genuine. The man, obviously uncomfortable, had never been with a prostitute before but was trying his best to go along with his fake persona of going out with this woman to limit his guilt. Unable to face his own soul, he altered his persona to diminish this guilt. The woman was experienced and played her persona to perfection; her performance flawless and deliberate as if repeated many times before. It all finally made sense. The woman finally stated to the man, "are you ready to go back to the hotel

yet?”. The man agreed and they paid their tab and left the bar, and into the night where they changed their personas once more.

I was closing the bar, but the man and the woman could not escape my thoughts. It occurred to me how drastic we change ourselves amid different individuals and different environments and the performances that we give them. The personality and persona for each aspect of our life can vary drastically. The person that your friends, family, and acquaintances know can all be very different people. We alter ourselves to simply fit into what we need, desire, or what we believe we should be. Maybe we should focus on these changes and do our best to be true to ourselves and attempt to not succumb to the environment, expectation, or approval of others. Maybe we should really try to face our own souls. Is this even important, or something that is just another inevitable construct? However, its time for me to return to my persona of a graduate student and maybe they can contemplate this thought further.