The Cricket Chronicles

Alexander J. Kirkland

If for whatever reason you believe that you are one of the nameless individuals mentioned in this book, you aren't. No litigation will be necessary nor recommended.

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First edition

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To Uncle Paul
& Uncle Homer

I Never Left

I REGULARLY DREAM THAT I'm stupidly weeded at The Cricket. They all seem to go about the same way: I get sat every fifteen seconds, I have a twenty-table section, my patrons can't figure out what they want, I don't know the menu, the POS won't work properly, and any food order that *actually* gets to the kitchen, comes out wrong.

I guess it's fair to say, that as many years as I've been removed from working there, I've never actually left...

History

In early October of 2015, I was a year-and-a-half into my tenure at The Cricket. It also just so happened to be the seventieth year since the restaurant was founded all that time ago. That Friday night, October 2nd, was blessed with champagne, burgers, faithful regulars, music, games, and more…of which I've forgotten.

But I will tell you this: I was proud to be a "Cricketeer" that night. By then I'd found my groove, my friends, and ultimately, a home. What better place for that to be than a top-tier Denver establishment?

Now, by the time this book is published, The Cherry Cricket will be nearing its eightieth anniversary. That's eighty years of grub and drink dating back to 1945, when Mary Zimmerman opened the place, then properly named "Mary Zimmerman's Bar."

The bar was originally in her home and stationed on the south side of 2nd Avenue, where the Cherry Cricket Mall is currently located. There she served mostly blue-collar workers and those in the neighborhood. It wasn't until 1951, when she moved her bar/restaurant to the north side of 2nd Avenue, that the building evolved into where you sit today.

There are conflicting reports in history, but it is believed that around this same time, Mary Zimmerman's Bar was bought by a gentleman named Lloyd Page. *He* is supposedly the one who renamed it "The Cherry Cricket." No one knows why.

In 1963, the place was bought and sold again, this time landing in the hands of one, Bernard Duffy, which is apparent by the rotating sign outside and above that bears his namesake. An addition, of sorts.

What was once home-cooked meals from Zimmerman, turned into more of an upscale establishment under Duffy. Their $2.50 ($25 .78 in 2024) prime rib lunch was a hit. I can't remember if we ever had a prime rib lunch in honor of Duffy while I was working there, but damn, that sounds good.

After Duffy retired in the early 1970s, ownership documentation gets a little…fuzzy. Was it due to the possible beginnings of beer culture in the Centennial state? Was it part of the counterculture movement? Was it because of Einstein's theory of relativity? We truly don't know.

But from pictures on The Cricket's website, the origins of the long-since retired pool table happened around then. Cigarettes, Coors, mullets, and presumably, burgers. Just from the rough-around-the-edges attitude and ambiance — with cigarette smoke wafting out the front door, whiskey shots lining the bar, and probable confrontations as to "slop" rules on the pool table — it seems that was the crowning of "The Black Sheep of Cherry Creek."

I wish I could have met Eli McGuire. Her spirit remains deep in the walls (we'll talk about that later) and I've heard nothing but great things about her from my uncles and employees from the era. The Cricket always had a heart, but thanks to her, it got its soul, which you still see today.

Eli bought The Cricket in 1990 and quickly adopted the slogan, "The Best Damn Bar Around." She was big into the growing Colorado craft beer scene and even was the first bar to put Railyard — from John Hickenlooper's, Wynkoop Brewery — on tap.

But most importantly, she wanted to be known to have the best burgers in town. She focused on the blend of Angus beef and just a dusting of salt and pepper over a flame grill with lava rocks. She knew what she was doing because ask around, damn those burgers are good!

Unfortunately, Eli's time with us was cut too short. Cancer took her away from us in early

2000 and she has been deeply missed ever since.

But thanks to Hickenlooper and the Wynkoop Group (now Breckenridge/Wynkoop LLC), The Cricket remained in good hands —being bought by them — and they graciously let it stay largely the way Eli created it. On top of that, in her name, the restaurant has gone on to win numerous awards at the annual "Denver Burger Battle." The last four years running (2021-2024), and in 2016 when I was still there, The Cricket has been voted the "People's Choice" for best burger. In 2019, they were voted best burger by the judges.

Yeah, The Cricket makes some kickass burgers.

Like an IPA, my memory is a bit hazy.
I tried my best to go in chronological order here, but
some of these stories may be a little shuffled.
Their memory, however, lives on forever...

The Cricket Chronicles

Early Visits

AUGUST 2002

I WAS A WEE ONE. Twelve-years-old. Don't remember much, but I guarantee I was shy. But where there was shyness, there was also excitement. For one, I was heading to Scotland and England within twenty-four hours. Two, I was getting to try a "Cricket Burger" for the first time. We sat in the pool room at table 98 and it may or may not have been smoky.

The Cricket was my uncles' favorite spot; they were considered family there. Hell, even

as time has passed and new faces have come and gone, they're *still* family there. But on that particular day, mere hours before our flight to Heathrow via Dulles, they wanted to take us for the best burger this side of the Mississippi.

That's as far as my first memory goes, unfortunately.

SUMMER 2010

I wasn't twenty-one yet but I was damn close. I'd been flown out by my uncles and the first place we went to, well, you already know. We sat in Norms and numerous servers, bartenders, and managers came up to say hi. I think that's when I realized how famous my uncles were there, even more so than the *Man vs. Food* guy who'd been out there filming an episode only a year prior (ironically shot on my uncle's birthday).

Well, Uncle Paul and Uncle Homer knew what was up. There was a drive-thru liquor store right next door where we made sure to

grab a couple of vodka shooters before going inside the restaurant. I then took my big red Coca-Cola cup with Sprite into the Norm's Bathroom and poured the Deep Eddy Vodka in it. When I walked back out and sat down, I acted as if nothing had happened. Rebel in the making.

SUMMER 2011

I'd flown out again and while Uncle Paul was still at work, Uncle Homer drove me in his Jeep Wrangler to The Cricket to get a burger, but only after the appetizer that would make Green Bay Packers "cheese-heads" happy: Mac N' Cheese wedges. Damn, I'm craving those right now typing this. I'm in the process of an intermittent fast, so it's equally devastating. But I digress.

Uncle Homer and I sat at the main bar and after I finished my favorite burger combination of bacon, cream cheese, and jalapeños, I looked down at the dozen or more beer tabs.

I was new to beer (*wink, wink*) and wanted to try some new styles. Homer led the way. Lagers, Ales, Kolshes, Saisons, Hefeweizens, and Stouts — all kinds I'd never heard of before. I was only familiar with "Natty" and Keystone Light.

So when I tasted Odell 90 Shilling for the first time, the heavens opened up and God was quite pleased with my reaction to his elixir. I was in love. I had no idea what I'd been missing. Although the decision is quite difficult, Odell is my favorite brewery in Colorado. Sorry, New Belgium.

I was out in Colorado for a week that trip and I swear, there's nothing like a Denver summer. I talk about this in my memoir, *Wolves of Hemp Street*, but will just reiterate it here: everyone seems to be so freakin' happy. The sun is constantly out, the mountains are only thirty minutes away, and the parks are always bustling with sports, BBQs, and hangouts. It's magnetic. And seeing those Denver summers was instrumental in me moving out there eleven months after graduating college.

PADDY'S DAY 2012

At first, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to — time was short. Paddy's Day fell on a Saturday and I had classes resuming on Monday. Nonetheless, I was flown out and was to work security for a day. Uncle Paul hooked it up, of course. This security shift was my first real "in" to working at the establishment. Very grateful for it.

Kansas City has always been known for its big Paddy's Day celebrations. When I was young, we went to the parades quite often, but I can't say I've ever been to the green celebration there being of drinking age.

So when I saw the tent in the back of The Cricket where the parking lot once was, and the dozens of kegs…and the Irish band making rounds…and the corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes…I was taken aback. There's no other words for it other than "badass."

As I would learn in a short couple of years, The Cricket goes all out on Paddy's Day while

showing up the rest of the restaurants all around Cherry Creek. There's no celebration in the neighborhood quite like it.

2014

Hired

I MOVED TO DENVER in mid-November 2013, and thanks to Sorcha — a family friend originally from Ireland and also an ex-Cricket worker — I was able to get a job at The Abbey Tavern on Colfax. I'd just come from a cocktail-serving job in the bar district of Kansas City called Westport. I'd worked at a place called The Foundry that specialized in craft beer; I was sure I'd fit right in at The Abbey. I was given the barback job, a step up on the restaurant hierarchy.

My time at The Abbey was great, and I met some fantastic people there, but it was a decent drive from my apartment on Mississippi

and Broadway. That was costing me precious gas money, and for someone new to the expensive Denver area, I needed every penny I could muster.

And to be honest, if I was ever given a chance to work at The Cricket, a place already close to my heart, I was going to take it. So when a manager named Clifton texted me and said that they were hiring expos, I jumped on it.

Yes, I was going back to square one on the hierarchy — and away from the barbacking job I enjoyed — but the hybrid position of expo (food runner and busser) was really the only way to get the coveted serving or bartending job at The Cricket. Very few new hires go immediately to server or bartender, as the restaurant likes to promote workers from within. But I respected that. It made sense and it created loyalty.

So one random afternoon, a group of about seven or eight of us went up the back stairs near the tailor and into the offices directly above the restaurant. We all sat down at a table in the upstairs conference room with our

newly given folder of job material (W-4s, job description, pay, etc.).

"This will most likely be the only time you will be up here, unless you're get fired," Clifton said to us with a devilish grin. Well, he was wrong...at least for me. I went up there multiple times in my tenure, and none of them were for me getting fired or even scolded. I turned out to be a favorite, I guess. The ironic part was, that with the group of new hires, I wasn't one of them.

I didn't receive any special treatment, and that was okay. I think a lot of those in my hiring class were known around the Denver service industry and I was an outsider, still new to the city. But I was willing to fight for my spot and fight I did.

Even us expos were making great money off of tips — sometimes upwards of $100 a shift — and at that time, it was *all* cash. For a semi-broke transplant, I loved going to the little office near the back door at the end of

each shift to pick up my cash tip for the day. It was an exciting moment with some of it going towards a shot that would be chased down with a shift beer.

Then, when the time came a couple months down the road, and if you impressed the managers enough, you would get to that much desired and coveted promotion. From there, the possibilities were endless. There were whispers that servers could make $300 or more a shift, especially during Holiday months and in the summer. That could almost pay your month's rent. At least, back then it could.

So after about two weeks working both jobs, I put in my two weeks at The Abbey and poured everything into The Cricket. The individual stories that follow should put a smile on your face, a laughter in your belly, or a tear in your eye. Enjoy.

Comradery

"HEY EXPO, ICE DOESN'T fill itself!"

> Comradery. *noun.* Mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together.

Comradery comes in all shapes and forms: team sports, class assignments, weekend hang-outs, vacations, leisurely activities, and yes, even the workforce. My favorite example is when a bartender, who probably fist pumps with Pauly D on the weekends, makes sure you know he has it — that he's *all* about that comradery.

"Hey, expo," he bellowed louder. "Did you hear me?! I need my ice filled!"

"Yeah, man, I did! Hold on a second." *Patience is a virtue, jackass.*

I was in the middle of seven other tasks, while this particular bartender in Norms wasn't doing a damn thing, with an ice well already 75% full. He wasn't running out any time soon, yet he *insisted* on me getting the ice for him. He could have easily walked the five feet to the ice machine and got himself a bucket, but he was probably too in the groove rapping Beastie Boys' *Intergalactic* in his head. Just couldn't be bothered to do any actual work, God forbid.

Or was he hazing me?

When I worked at The Foundry, on my very first day I was told by one of the cooks to go across the street to one of our sister bars and ask for the "bacon stretchers." Not wanting to screw up on my first day, and wanting to follow directions from superiors, I walked across the street and into Beer Kitchen.

"Hey, do you have bacon stretchers? Our cooks need them."

"Oh crap," one of their cooks said, his face looking sunken. "We just sent it over to Harry's."

So, I started walking over to Harry's on the other side of the street.

Are they screwing with me?

"Please tell me you have the bacon stretchers."

"Ah, nah man, sorry. We sent it down to Harpo's."

Damnit. They got me. They freakin' got me.

I walked back into The Foundry and everyone lost it laughing. I was a good sport about it and laughed with them, but they'd taken advantage of my blond hair and "go-get-'em" attitude. If someone had told me to "de-must" the old air out of the walk-in freezer by holding an open trash bag, walking around capturing the old air, releasing it outside, and then repeating the process, I probably would have done it.

But this wasn't the case here with Mr. New York, it seemed. I thought it could have been hazing, but there was no joking around here. That was okay, because as the saying goes,

"If you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen."

I got him his bucket of ice and then went on with my morning.

That first week, as all the new hires were getting to know each other, and the seasoned staff were taking us under their wing, shift beers on the back patio was the time for it. Cigarettes were smoked, beers were drunk, and shots were being ordered. Of course, the two-drink maximum was in place for employees, so the next stop would likely be Milwaukee Street Tavern right down the road.

"From KC, eh?" a girl in my hiring class named Lauren asked me.

"That's right. You?"

"From here. Born and raised." She took a gulp of her beer.

One of the few, I thought. Like LA or New York or Chicago, Denver is known for the massive amounts of transplants. I'm sure you've heard that before. It was commonplace to overhear

tables talking about the craft beer spot they'd just visited or what fourteener they were going to hike once summer came around. Especially customary in Cherry Creek, these individuals usually wore plaid long-sleeve button-ups, a puffy Patagonia vest and trucker hat, and drove a Subaru or brand-new Rubicon. Transplant. Can tell from 5,280 feet away.

I was one, don't get me wrong. I may have even once claimed to want to hike a fourteener or see a Red Rocks concert every week in the summer, so it was easy for me to pick them out of the crowd. I went off on a tangent, there. Sorry. Let's get back on track.

The Cricket was known for having little turnover in terms of employees. You hear it all the time with restaurant employees: "We're like family here." I'm sure that's the case with 95% of restaurants/bars that claim that, but when there's rarely any turnover, bonds get ever stronger. That was the case here.

Servers would talk to bartenders about their personal life, managers would laugh with servers about "that one time," and even we

newbies would be invited in to tell how our day went. *This* was true comradery.

Along those lines, my bartender "friend" redeemed himself *slightly* one early evening after finishing my morning shift. He was one of two bartenders working the main bar — it was basically two-deep to get a drink at that point — and he saw me almost instantly after I walked up. With a nod that read, "Whatchu drinkin'?", I hollered to him over the loud chatter.

"Mirror Pond!"

He poured it quickly and handed it off to me. I left him a couple of bucks for a tip and then went out to the back patio. That was one of the last interactions I had with him before he quit. I wasn't *too* dismayed.

Remember field trip days as a kid? Remember the anticipation to finally leave and how excited you got when you started walking out to the big, yellow bus? Well, adults can have field trips, too.

It couldn't have been more than a month or two into working there, when excitement was riddling throughout the restaurant well before the doors opened on a random Tuesday. Usually, it takes a minute for the restaurant and its employees to wake up, if you know what I mean. This wasn't one of those days.

There was a group of about ten Cricketeers laughing on the back patio. They'd been chosen to go on a field trip. What field trip, you ask? New Belgium up in Fort Collins.

To say I was jealous was an understatement. Like the degenerate transplant that I was, I was making my rounds to breweries on the Front Range. So far I'd been to Great Divide, Coors, Avery, Odell, and Black Shirt. I'd been up to get growlers at New Belgium the prior summer on a visit, but never went in. I loved beer.

So, as the clock turned 11:00 am and the front doors opened, I saw the crew leaving to get on a bus in the back parking lot. I walked back inside with head down and sulked in my despair, hoping that one day *I* could go on an adult field trip.

The Server Life

By the time summer hit, I'd finally become a server. Of course, I was one of the last ones in our group to do so, but that's beside the point. I was grateful that I'd made it, regardless.

When starting as a server, you'd still have a majority of expo shifts, but as time went on they'd even out, and eventually, expo shifts would disappear altogether. To ease us in, the three sections on the front patio (Front Patio, C1, C2) were a popular place for new and new-ish servers to start. I believe I started with two serving shifts a week, both on the front or back patios.

Don't get me wrong, in due course you'd have inside shifts as well, but they were mostly during the week. When winter rolled around, the inside — especially the front room — was prime real estate to make money. I mean, it always was, but in the summer, *everyone* wants to sit outside. The high volume of patrons out there would harden servers to tackle the inside during those long, winter months.

And what better way to harden new servers than with the outside patio *and* the madhouse that is Cherry Creek Art Festival?

Each summer during the 4th of July weekend, the non-profit Cherry Creek Art Festival attracts roughly 150,000 people. The main drag through Cherry Creek, 2nd Avenue, is closed off as well as some auxiliary streets. Music, food, and of course, art, are the name of the game.

Just like Paddy's Day, outside security is hired as the streets and restaurants are overwhelmed with people. Cricketeers have to

park in "Egypt," either at the mall (good luck), or the neighborhood streets way up to 6th Avenue. Just make sure you obey the street signs, because those damn Meter Maids have nothing better to do than slide a "note" under your windshield wiper.

Side note: I think one of the girls who worked at The Cricket went on a date with a Meter Maid. Did they meet as he was giving her a ticket? Now *that* my friends, is the plot of a Rom-Com starring Matthew McConaughey and Drew Barrymore. I don't think you can get a title better than *Meter Maid*, either, but I'm open to suggestions.

And no, it didn't work out between the two of them.

Just as fast as the art festival comes up during the speedy summer, so too does it end. When that Sunday afternoon rolls around, and the masses start to disperse, thoughts of "letting your hair down" are on every Cricketeers mind. With the overwhelming wad of cash that you make, it has to be spent, right? Luckily for me, I was introduced to such a place.

When I arrived at 11th and Broadway and walked up the five-flights of external stairs for the first time, I was in awe; never in my life had I been to such a place. Deep house music was thumping and rattling off other buildings, a hundred or so people were dancing, the sun was setting just over the mountains, creating the purple silhouettes and orange-ish/pink hue, and the downtown skyscrapers towered above just due north.

Bar Standard.

When living at my Broadway Junction apartment, I met another guy named Alex and he'd invited me one Sunday night in early June 2014 to a "hidden gem" of dancing. And it *was* at that time. It was never overly crowded to begin with — just the right amount.

Due to the introduction by the friend who shared my name, I wanted to go after the Cherry Creek Art Festival. I met up with a friend and went to a small house party in the area before heading to the rooftop. Like deja

vu, we were welcomed with the same beautiful backdrop and the same groovy house music. What a time to be alive.

It wasn't the last time I went there, either; I went almost every Sunday for the rest of the summer...and the following summer...and the summer after that. Several times I would invite fellow Cricketeers as we'd hop on our bikes, let the wind flow through our hair, and embrace the humid-less night. Needless to say, I was obsessed. It was the perfect place to dance the night away.

Pandemonium In The T-Room

In early 2013, Wes Welker, a quick and shifty wide receiver whom Tom Brady loved to utilize, signed with the Broncos due to the Patriots and Welker not being able to agree on a contract extension.

When getting to town, Welker moved to Cherry Creek. I know this because he came into The Cricket a lot; I'm not a freakin' stalker. I even brought him his to-go food one evening.

What started with just the two of them, Welker and his wife started inviting friends

to join them, and one in particular sent the restaurant into a frenzy. Into pandemonium.

There's no doubt about it, Peyton Manning is a hero in Colorado. Hell, he's still a hero in Knoxville, Tennessee, and probably even in Indianapolis, Indiana. Even as a long-time Chiefs fan, *I* have respect for him. That's saying something.

I remember in early 2004, the Chiefs had gotten to the playoffs. The Colts, led by Peyton, knocked us out in the first round. I cried. I went to the bathroom attached to my bedroom and I cried.

"Damn you, Peyton Manning!"

I was 14 at the time, *not* a grown adult, because grown adults don't cry when their team loses in the playoffs, *right*?...*Right?*

For a while there the Colts were the Chiefs' kryptonite. Then along came the Patriots...and then the Broncos, again thanks to Peyton.

It was a Friday afternoon and the lunch rush was in full force. It wasn't insane by most Cricket standards, but it was busy. That's when I noticed a great deal of commotion coming from the T-Room. When I walked over to the small ramp that led from the main room into said room, I saw heads peaking out of the kitchen, and then the back of a head that I sort of, kind of recognized. When I looked past it, I saw Wes Welker sitting opposite the big head.

Peyton "The Sheriff" Manning was drinking a Bud Light while Wes "Kentucky Derby" Welker was having a vodka drink.

The restaurant went bananas. Kids were going up for pictures and autographs and even us Cricketeers remained starstruck. Of course, it didn't last long. I'm sure both of them were getting overwhelmed with the massive attention and got out of there rather quickly. I'm not even sure if I saw them eat or not. I never even got a chance to see anything but the back of his head.

Anyway, just goes to show who all comes into the Denver establishment.

The Wasp

I WAS OUT ON the patio again. This time I was in C2, tucked back around the corner on the side of Clayton Street. It was hot. Wearing jeans probably wasn't the smartest choice for me, but hey, I'm not always smart.

Even though we had the awnings out, not many patrons wanted to be out in the smoldering heat. But of the few tables I *did* have, was a family of three young kids with their mother. I was in the middle of taking their order.

"Lucas, what do you want to eat?" the mother asked the six or seven-year-old boy. "They have chicken nuggets, PB&Js, burgers — "

"Chicken nuggets!" the young boy yelled enthusiastically as he looked at me with a smile before going back to coloring with crayons.

Mom then proceeded to ask the others what they wanted. That's when I started to feel something move around my ankle. I was wearing "no-show" socks at the time. Probably subconsciously, I shook my leg to make the feeling stop. It didn't. It got worse.

Sharp poke. Another sharp poke. Yet *another* sharp poke.

"Owe. Owe. Owe!" My voice crescendoed with each sting.

I reached down to pull up my pant leg to see a wasp fly out and away.

"Oh my Gosh, are you okay?" the lady asked as she also saw the wasp fly away. All of her kids were looking at me in confusion.

"Yeah, I think. He definitely got me like three or four times."

"Well, I appreciate you keeping calm and not saying any bad words in front of the children."

It was nice of her to notice; it wasn't easy.

"Thank you," I said. "Not going to lie, as soon as I turn the corner to put your order in, some choice words may slip out of my mouth."

And that's exactly what happened. As soon as I turned the corner to go back inside and away from other customers, I let it all come out.

"That &$%@#^!*&$^!"

I'd never been stung before. Well, that's a lie. I'd been stung by a sweat bee when I was probably around the age of the young boy who'd just order chicken nuggets. My dad and I were at a park near our home, and when I was running in the grass, I felt a sharp sting on the bottom of my toes, as I was wearing sandals. I looked down and a small sweat bee flew out. I started crying.

But I'd *never* been stung by a wasp. Ironically, I've only been stung by wasps in Colorado. What's up with that?! Are they discriminating towards me because I'm from Kansas City? Because I'm a Chiefs' fan? Yeah, probably.

Clifton came walking by as I was inspecting my red ankle with three very apparent poke marks.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Damn wasp stung me while I was taking an order on the patio!"

"Ouch. Really? Do you have allergic reactions to them?"

"Not sure. Never been stung by one before."

He then went to the first aid box in the kitchen to get some triple antibiotic ointment and Benadryl. He told me to take the Benadryl only if I started to feel worse. Luck was on my side and no nasty side effects came about that a post-shift beer couldn't fix.

If you're from anywhere but Colorado, Colorado wasps are like Vicki Vallencourt — the devil. Watch out.

"Behind."

"Behind."

"Corner."

"All-Day."

"POS."

"Corner, please."

All very common lingo that is needed in the service industry. Why, you ask? With sometimes upwards of fifty employees running around both front-of-the-house (servers, bartenders, expos, hostesses, and managers) and back-of-the-house (line cooks, dish washers, and head chefs), there is a need for common

language amongst the staff to communicate, as disaster can strike at any given moment.

I was working another hot, patio lunch shift mid-week. The sun was out, Mercedes and Teslas and the occasional Ferrari were all out in the neighborhood "playground" of Cherry Creek. And everyone coming in to eat wanted to sit outside to enjoy it all.

Back in Norms, where the patio servers work out of, there's a secondary kitchen with a bartender, a dishwasher, and a soda fountain — "pop" in the Midwest. When someone is in Norms facing north, there is a small hallway that leads to two bathrooms on the right. On the left-hand side of that hallway, right as you reach the threshold, is an open doorway that leads into the kitchen. Directly on the left of the doorway is the pop machine, and if you keep going, you run into the bartender. If you hang a right at the pop machine, there is the kitchen staff, refrigerators, and eventually, the dishwasher.

It was a very tight space to work in and communication between all moving parts was key.

I was in the middle of making some drinks for my newly sat table, fully in the zone of what I needed to do. Something I learned early on, was that you think of all of your tables as one big one. That's the only way you will stay "out of the weeds," especially at a high-volume establishment such as The Cricket.

Little Cricket for the gentleman. Farmer salad with ranch for the wife. Arnold Palmer for the both of them.

Sure, I had it written down, but saying it in your head only helped you further.

103 is out of ketchup. 105 is out of napkins. Bring bill to 101.

I was ready to rock. Arnold Palmers were filled to the brim in the big, red *Coca-Cola* cups, and slices of lemons were perfectly garnished, hanging on the lip next to the straws with the paper wrapper completely ripped off besides at the top. A little trick we servers would do.

When I took a step back and away from the soda fountain, and right before I pivoted left to

head out into the hallway, someone slammed into me from behind. Luckily, I hadn't been carrying a tray, or else the Arnold Palmer would have probably exploded *everywhere*.

I had absolutely no warning, no "Behind," and no clue someone was coming up to me at rocket speed.

I heard a large splash as I turned around angry, but that faded just as quickly as it came on. What I saw will forever be painted on the inside of my eyelids.

There was an unrecognizable face covered and dripping in chocolate milk. I mean, utterly *drenched* in chocolate milk.

My first inclination was to apologize — although it wasn't my fault whatsoever — but instead, I lost it in a roar of laughter. The bartender and the kitchen staff all stopped what they were doing and looked to assess the situation. They started to join in as well.

The girl stood there, the chocolate milk running off her face and onto her shirt. She was stunned, but through the layer of brown, I could see a smile.

She was one of our expos who'd just mixed a cup of chocolate milk in a kid's cup and was coming to the soda fountain station to grab a lid for it. That's when the collision, followed by the explosion, happened.

I dropped everything that I was doing and grabbed a handful of napkins to help her clean up.

"I'm so, so sorry," I cried, in-between heaving laughter. She started to join in as well, a good sport in the matter.

She was given a new Cricket shirt from the front of the restaurant, as her lightly colored shirt was no longer a lightly colored shirt.

So the moral of the story is this: If you're working in a restaurant and are coming up from the back of someone, please say "Behind." Unless you want to be on the new campaign of "got milk?"

Forgotten Sunglasses

It was a Friday. I know this because that's the day I always had B2. The pool room had about seven tables in the section, but once you got the hang of it, it was a piece of cake to manage — just one, big "U."

We opened at 11:00 am and the Friday lunch rush was almost immediate. I didn't get slammed with tables right away, but I did receive three in pretty quick succession. One of the three was two gentlemen at table 97, a four-person booth.

I could tell right away that the gentleman on the left with salt and pepper hair had an attitude. He must have just parked his Lambo

or G-Wagon in a parking garage made solely for him. He must have scoffed when he first entered The Cricket, seeing that it was a pub and not a first-class dining hall straight off the Titanic. He was a Caledon Hockley and I was a shaggy-haired Jack Dawson.

As we've already talked about, The Cricket is very well known as "The Black Sheep," as it does not fit into everything around it. With the exception of a few places, it's all fine-dining with Italian, sushi, oysters, and $30 espresso martinis. At least it was when I was there.

But I knew what I was dealing with. Working there in Cherry Creek, attitudes come with the territory and you need to accept that.

That doesn't negate the fact that this guy was a "Grade-A-You-Know-What." He was short in dialogue, rude without manners, and made me feel like I was an inconvenience to him. I was *thrilled* when the two finally got up to leave, about forty-five minutes after arriving. By this time, all of my tables were full and we were on a wait.

That's when I noticed that he'd left his designer sunglasses on the table. They were like

Marc Jacobs or Ray Bans or something. They weren't cheap.

He was already out the front door and on the busy streets, but I was determined to get to him. I wanted to do my good deed and receive some good karma for the rest of the weekend — you need it if you are a server or bartender at The Cricket.

"Sir, you forgot your sunglasses," I hollered, breathlessly after I ran out after him.

He turned around, didn't even make eye contact, and snatched the sunglasses from my outstretched hand.

"Oh s***, those were $200."

He turned back around and started walking away. No "thank you." No acknowledgment of me *actually* caring. No nothing.

I stood there for a long ten seconds, flabbergasted. I couldn't be bothered about my busy tables. What bothered me was his lack of some damn courtesy. Manners were pounded into me as a kid. My dad was from Georgia and southern hospitality's "yes ma'am" and "no sir" was deeply embedded in me. My grandpa on

my mom's side was a WWII veteran with discipline.

Respect. Politeness. Compassion. This guy was none of that. He seemed like some wannabe socialite with an upper-class attitude.

I walked back inside, and not acting with the morality that I preach, I thought, *Man, screw him. I should have just kept those damn things.*

I sure hope karma bit him in the ass at some point shortly after.

Okay, I'm done venting. How much do I owe you for this session?

Summer Nights

SOME PEOPLE SAY DENVER has no culture and no soul. I disagree. Ever since getting invited to Bar Standard and going there regularly each summer, I'd found a culture and a home in "house." Not only that, but my roommates were in bands, my friends and I were DJs, and I was also part of a music collective or two. I loved the Denver music scene.

When riding my bike home each night from The Cricket that first Denver summer, I'd put on one of my many personally curated stations on Pandora. It was my "Goldroom" playlist most of the time. Being one of my favorite deep house artists at the time, I had

songs of his but also invited other genres of house to the station. It turned into a chill mix.

There was no better time to listen than during those lovely summer nights while riding my bike home from work. It was a release.

Deadmau5, Morgan Page, Adam K and Soha, Kaskade, and Armin Van Buuren. My progressive house. But then was the dive into early 2000s downtempo: Oceanlab/Above and Beyond, Groove Armada, Kreo, Sunlounger, Robert Miles, Motorcycle, and Thievery Corporation. Although I loved them all, songs from Thievery Corporation usually took the cake after those long work days.

The first house I lived at was a straight shot to Cherry Creek on a bike; it was mostly downhill on the way there. The dreaded uphill ride back would suck some nights, but with the love of music and the motivation from it, I powered through.

The night breeze was nothing like that of my native Kansas City. It wasn't sticky. It wasn't damp. I was neither too hot nor too cold, even when I would pick up speed. The air was just...light, during Colorado summers.

So as I listened to “Breathe” by Télépopmusik, I was grateful for the life I was living and how I’d gotten there. I was grateful for the excitement of the job and the new world that was Denver.

The "Haunted" Cricket

I DON'T CARE WHAT you say, everyone likes a good ghost story. If you are one of the few who aren't great at handling them, go to the bar and get yourself some liquid courage. Or, if you need some comfort food, get an order of Mash Puppies with raspberry jam. It helps. Because, yes, The Cricket may just have a ghost roaming its grounds.

I don't remember when I first started hearing rumors of a ghost there, but it couldn't have been far into my first year there. This particular ghost? Eli McGuire.

I can understand why she never left — it was her baby. It was her home. My guess is that if given the chance again, she would love to go behind the bar and pull the tabs of beer for her lovely customers.

Now, don't freak out bartenders, no poltergeist has done that there. At least not that I'm aware of. But wouldn't that make your heart stop?!

No, the rumors of Eli still haunting The Cricket come in several different forms. For one, hearing your name called. Some employees swore that they heard their names even when no one was around. My guess is it would have had to have been pre- or post-shift. Like *way* early in the morning or closing up late at night around 2:00 am. And I wouldn't be surprised *whatsoever* if that happened in the basement. Yes, there are rumors that the basement, as creepy as it is, also could be a source of "paranormal activity."

The second sign that she may still be around, was a "haunting" at the main bar. I just so happened to be working that particular evening. To be honest, though, I was so weeded and

busy that I don't remember being told what happened until way later that evening, nor do I remember the significance of that day, but it *was* important for The Cricket.

Behind the bar was a photo of Eli nailed up against a wooden pillar. Like it was *really* nailed in there. I'm not sure if a bartender could accidentally brush up against it, but I don't think so.

It ended up falling on its own.

Could it have been a sign? Was she happy? Was she mad? Did she just want someone to know she was there? We may never know...

The last thing, and probably the spookiest of them all, is the jukebox. No, not the Touchtunes that is in there today, but an old school jukebox. Maybe not 1950s style, but just a basic 'ole jukebox that takes dollar bills and quarters.

So picture this: You're in the pool room by yourself closing down your section and minding your own, all while wiping down menus and refilling ketchup bottles. *I Only Have Eyes for You* by The Flamingos starts playing on the jukebox. No one is around it. No one has put money into it. It just...comes on...by itself.

What do you do?

Supposedly, this happened on numerous occasions, leaving workers spooked and wanting to get the hell out of Dodge. If a song like that came on by itself while I was closing up, *ohhhh brother*. I'd probably baptize myself with whiskey while I cried at booth 1.

So I ask again, what would *you* do?

2015

4/20

Devil's Lettuce. Mary Jane. Herb. Pot. Weed. Tree. Dank. Almost like the whole soda vs pop argument — what do *you* call the leafy green "vegetable" that is all over the state of Colorado?

I'll tell you this, I'm down with the plant. Hell, I grew it — mostly in hemp form, mind you — but I grew it nonetheless. There too have been times where I've felt like a mashed potato after partaking, I won't lie. I guess it's just different when you're stone-cold sober at work and masses of people come walking in smelling like they just got back from Reggae On The Rocks.

You most likely know that 4/20 is an unofficial national holiday in Colorado. It's been like that for decades and has no signs of slowing down. Boulder, Red Rocks, Cervantes, and Civic Center Park are all known to throw the biggest events for the celebration of the taboo plant.

But eventually, after all of the weed in the state has been smoked, the stoners must eat.

I was in the T-Room that evening and it reeked of a mixture of stale ash, skunk, french fries, and burgers. One particular group of guys came in and sat at one of the tables in the middle of the room. They were probably around my age, or just younger, and had eyes redder than Clifford the Big Red Dog. They were giggling like school girls.

After they all ordered water, I came back to take their food order.

"Can I like…have a burger…with like…cheese?"

I stood there, dumbfounded, or possibly getting second-hand high. "Umm, *yeahhh*?"

"Ah, cool bro! Thank you."

"What kind of cheese would you like?"

"Um, like yellow? Do you have yellow cheese?"

"We do. We have smoked cheddar."

"Did you say, *smoked*?" He looked at his friends who started giggling some more. "Cool, I'll take that. Thanks, bro!"

I'm not positive if the last part of that conversation happened, because, by that point I was probably feeling a little different. But to similarly quote one of Matthew McConaughey's classics, *it'd be a lot cooler if it did.*

"Smoked cheddar, it is."

More giggles.

Raw Meat Lady

I WAS TOLD TO beware of her. I was told she was incredibly particular. I was told she was a regular. I was told she could be mean.

It was actually quite common for some of our regulars to ask for specific servers because they *actually* got their orders right every time. Including when it was a bit…strange.

Because of this, for the longest time I never had to serve the 'Raw Meat Lady.' But when her favorite server wasn't working and I had his normal section in Norm's, she was sat there.

"Good afternoon. How are you today?" I asked as I set down a paper coaster.

"Fine, thank you."

"Glad to hear. My name's Alex, I'll be taking care of you today."

"Thank you, Alex. I'm sure by now, I'm pretty known here, huh?"

I played dumb.

"Yeah, I'm the 'Raw Meat Lady.'"

I'm not sure if that's exactly how it went, but without a doubt, I remember her claiming the title of 'Crazy Raw Meat Lady.'

"Now, I know I'm weird, but it's just how I've always eaten it," she explained. "I don't like buns — so no bun, please — and it is quite literally a quick sear on each side."

She used her hands pressed together and flipped them from one side to the other to give me a visual representation of how she wanted her burger patty.

"No more than forty-five seconds- to a minute on each side," she reiterated. "I want the inside still very red."

"I gotcha. No worries. I'll stand back there with the cook to make sure he does it right."

"Thank you, Alex."

Sure enough, I hovered over that cook like a teacher trying to catch cheaters during a test.

I made sure that he followed her instructions to a 'T' as she was known to send burgers back because they were *too* cooked. That's *completely* opposite of 99.999% folks we got in there. The usual complaint was it wasn't cooked enough.

Less than two minutes later, the burger was put into our small, red baskets and stabbed with multiple, plastic 'Rare' stakes that we would put in all of our burgers.

"Perfect," she said, as I delivered the mooing cow. "I really appreciate you doing this. Again, I know I'm weird."

"Don't be. It's just like sushi, right?"

Looking back now, that lady was just fine. She wasn't the devil others had made her out to be. All you had to do was follow the directions and stay on top of it.

At the end of the day, would I eat a lightly seared burger? Yeah, probably not. Have I had raw sushi before? Plenty of times. Do I think that a well-done steak is a sin? Absolutely.

But hey, you do you, boo.

Entitled Parking Only

We've probably all done it. Actually, I haven't. I'm a stellar driver. I'm a stellar *parker*. I pride myself on my motor vehicle capabilities due having worked at the Ford plant for a stint. I deserve an award.

Although no longer there, there used to be an underground parking garage just north of The Cricket's parking lot (also not there anymore; outside tables take its place). This particular parking garage was a well-kept secret for many who worked in Cherry Creek, but especially

those at The Cricket, as it was normally free and just next door.

I'm sure that in the time that I've been away from Cherry Creek, parking has gotten even worse than when I was there. At times, I had to park at the mall. At times, I had to park way down Clayton into the neighborhood. Most of the time, when weather permitted, I just rode my bike to work instead to escape the headache.

But on the occasion that I *did* drive in, this parking garage was a Godsend. The Florist in the same building seemed not to care who parked in its berth, as the parking gate was always up. I actually don't know if they were the ones who owned it or not.

However, there was one thing regarding this parking garage that undoubtedly scared others away who knew about it: it was tight — really tight. Remember how I gloated about being a good driver? I lied.

One morning before my shift, I came flying into the garage — probably listening to *Tha Crossroads* by Bone Thugs & Harmony — when I scraped the passenger side of my '98 Toyota

Corolla on the side of the cement wall heading to a lower level.

But I'm not here to turn myself in. I'm here to blame others.

Because of the unpredictable weather in March, I drove into work. Especially because we were leading up to the mayhem of St. Paddy's Day and I needed to conserve my energy.

When I pulled into the parking garage and drove down to the floor that I usually parked at, I noticed that someone decided not to obey the lines. Actually, *two* people decided not to obey the lines. One was a Chevy SUV and the other was a VW Beetle. I decided to take action.

I ran up to The Cricket hostess area, where they had chalk galore, and ran back down. The captions I have below the photos are what the chalk says. The captions to the side are what I wrote when I posted these on Facebook. I just wanted you to see how funny I am. That's also my beautiful Corolla on the left in the first picture...

So, I made a new parking space for the entitled. Watch it, you may be next ...

"New Parking Spot"
(Mar. 15th, 2015)

I can do this all day…

"Slug Bugs Only"
(Mar. 15th, 2015)

About a week later, I ran into another one. This time, a BMW:

"Zero F's To Give"
(Mar. 23rd, 2015)

People just don't learn…

Cougar Town

WALKING INTO WORK WAS mayhem. I mean, I half expected it; it's what St. Paddy's Day at The Cricket is all about. The traditional Irish band was making their loud rounds and corned beef and cabbage was being served in mass quantities. That was all fine and dandy; I was ready for that. What I wasn't ready for was being thrown to the wolves right away.

I had the 5:00 pm shift and the best section on the inside of the restaurant: T1. I guess that was a plus. But there was a caveat: I was passed off an incredibly intoxicated woman to take care of.

"*Ionlydrunk—Ionlydrink…twodaysssayear.*" She was talking in cursive as she put up two fingers. "*Paddy'sdayn'myburfday.*"

I guess she'd been there when the doors opened at 11:00 am and hadn't stopped. Guinness and Jameson, Jameson and Guinness.

"I think we need to call her a cab," my manager told me not more than ten minutes into my shift. As he said it, the lady was reaching into her purse when it flipped over and all of its contents fell out onto the floor. My manager and I looked at each other briefly, then he turned around and went directly to the bar to call a cab from the landline, while I went over to help with her spilled belongings.

"We're calling a cab for you, darlin.' I'm going to get you some more water."

I tried to be as kind and compassionate as I could, but my section — except one table — was full and I needed to check on them. But first on the list of rounds was more water for the poor lady.

Bagpipes. Drums. Dancers. Guinness. Jamo. The man at table five wanted a Little Cricket Burger. Table 31 needed more napkins. 30

needed orange juice for their two boys. 29 were ready to have their order taken. Lady was still struggling and falling asleep over her purse with a smile on her face.

Where's that damn cab?!

Well, unbeknownst to me, it'd come and gone because the lady wasn't outside. My shift was already burning to the ground and I hadn't been there more than twenty minutes. That's when I was sat at my last open table.

I went up to the bar to have the bartender call the cab again before I went over to greet the new table. It was just one girl, about my age of twenty-five, who was waiting for friends.

Side note: During the time I worked there, we were still alluded to being "The Black Sheep" in several ways. One was past T-shirts that we could wear proudly displaying "The Black Sheep" across it. Another included our menu and the artwork on it. It seemed to have...taken shots at some people.

"Hey there. My name's Alex, I'll be taking care of you today."

My mind was there, but not really. I think you know what I was worried about. But what

the girl at the new table said next was enough to grab my attention.

"So yeah," she said with attitude. "I notice that on your menu here you say 'No Tofu.' Well, I'm vegan and I find that offensive."

Oh. My. Sweet. Jesus.

This was *not* what I needed to hear or to deal with at that moment.

Maybe I should have bit my tongue, but my mind was working too fast and my filter had shut off rather quickly upon arriving to chaos. Without skipping a beat, I gave a rebuttal.

"Look. On the back of the menu, here…" I took a hold of her menu and flipped it over for her, "…it also says 'Cougar Town,' but you don't have cougars coming in here and complaining. I *really* don't have time for this s***."

Sure enough, Cherry Creek is notorious for single women in their forties and fifties prowling the streets, hunting for prey. So, what I said, I'm not going to lie, I'm really proud of. I still laugh at it to this day. *Should* I have said it? Probably not. For any server or bartender currently working there, don't follow my lead. I don't want you to get in trouble.

By the time the cab came back around, we were outside waiting *with* the drunken lady. She was still able to walk, which was shocking, considering how much she was slurring her words.

But my good deed — and ultimately, good karma — was done. I wasn't mad at the intoxicated lady. If Paddy's Day was one of the two days per year that she drank, then so be it. I'm glad she had fun while it lasted. I just hope she had some Pedialyte and Tylenol ready on her nightstand.

Clumsy Ox

WHEN I WAS GROWING up, I had the nickname "clumsy ox." Is an ox just an inherently clumsy species? Was it just a funny animal at the time to attribute to clumsy? Well, I just learned at least one of the origins: the 1941 cartoon movie, *Dumbo*. No, I don't have gigantic ears.

When I arrived to work that morning I was groggy. Instead of riding my bike as I should have during the summer, I drove in because I slept in a little longer than I should have.

It was a sunny Sunday and I was in the T-room with T2 as my section. The doors had

just opened and patrons were starting to get sat. Luckily, it wasn't too long of a line out front, easing us all into a slow start.

About five minutes after doors opening, I was sat. It was a group of five and they all piled into the corner, circular booth.

"Good morning, my name's Alex. I'll be taking care of you today."

There was a nice round of "good mornings" back. *This is going to be a great, easy table,* I thought.

Someone around the table spoke up, "It's her birthday today." He pointed to the lady in her mid-thirties right in the middle spot.

"Well happy birthday," I said. "Is there a certain drink you would like, on the house? Or we can do dessert at the end. Your choice."

"Thank you," she replied. "Dessert will be fine." She was trying to be humble about it, which I respected.

"No rush. I'll go get ya'll some water while you glance over the menu. Be right back."

I meandered into the kitchen where I grabbed five, twenty-four oz red Coca-Cola cups from the stacked tower of them next to

the drink fountain. Like clockwork, I followed my same routine: first ice in all of the cups, then garnish with a lemon wedge on the edge, then slide them in front of the three large water reservoirs, and ultimately, flip open all three switches at the same time. Off to the races.

If you were well-practiced enough, you could swipe away a filled cup and slide the next one in without disturbing the continuous flow of water. Sometimes — and I'd done it before — you can accidentally tip a cup over, or forget to turn off the spigot when you're done. The water would flow out like water flowing in from a hole in a boat. *Not today, Satan.*

I walked back out, all five cups perfectly on a tray. It's a balance game, that tray is, and I was proud to say that I mastered it. Plus my biceps looked good.

When I reached the table, the first water was going directly to the birthday girl; I always liked to give the birthday person the most attention. Gotta make sure they feel special on *their* day.

I made her feel special, alright.

When sliding the big cup of water over to her, the edge caught an invisible lip and toppled over. As the horizontal cup clanked against the table-top, twenty-four ounces of ice-cold water flooded out right towards the birthday girl. It was like a slow motion disaster film.

The people around the table gasped. My jaw dropped. The birthday girl's eyes widened. Then all twenty-four ounces went rocketing into her shirt and all down onto her lap. Her shoulders tensed up in a shrug while she tried to stand, but couldn't because she was trapped in the middle of the booth.

"Holy s***, I'll be right back."

Wide awake now, I ran back into the kitchen and grabbed a whole industrial sized package of napkins and ran back out.

"I'm so, so sorry," I spluttered.

"It's fine." Her tone and word choice spoke volumes.

It wasn't fine. She was trying to put on a good face about it, but that's not a great way to start your birthday. I would be mad, too. So, it wasn't all surprising when I left to get another

cup of water and more napkins, that they all were getting up to move to a new table outside when I returned.

It was there that she could dry off and stay far away from my section. She could stay far away from me. As Uncle Homer would say, "Good job, dumbass."

Oh well, s*** happens.

Happy birthday, ice-water-covered lady.
Always yours,
Clumsy Ox

Chad's Dream

I WORKED WITH A guy named Chad. He'd been at The Cricket longer than I had and was a bit of a comedian. He wore hilarious shirts that one could only seek out at a Limon, Colorado gas station. If you know, you know. One such shirt showed Jesus with his arms spread out over an eighteen-wheeler semi-truck. Now, I don't mean to be sacrilegious, but you have to admit, that's kind of a funny and utterly bizarre t-shirt.

Next, he wore a faded blue and tie-dyed shirt that said "Denver" on it and had a pack of wolves howling at the moon. I jokingly said, "Yeah, nothing says Denver, Colorado

like a pack of wolves running down 16th Street Mall." Everyone around laughed.

But now that you understand a little bit about Chad's personality, let's get to his hilarious dream.

Our Sunday morning shift was about ready to start, but we had yet to open the doors. It was early fall and there was already a decent line waiting outside. Several of us were in the T-room where I was serving for the day. We were all cracking jokes as usual when Chad decided to tell us about one of his recent dreams. For the sake of the story, although I don't remember the actual restaurant, let's just run with Red Lobster.

"So, I used to work at Red Lobster and they have several locations around the Denver metro, but I worked at the one in Aurora," he started. About four or five of us gathered around intently, like the little hobbit children listening to Bilbo's troll story on his 111th birthday. "So, in my dream, I'd ridden my REI

mountain bike to work. It was hot. Like 100 degrees outside or something. Inside I was getting sat left and right and getting freakin' *weeded*. Like, I think I had around twenty tables at one point and more people were coming in. The POS wasn't working and the kitchen was falling way behind. Then my manager came up to me.

"'Chad,' he said. 'We're getting really swamped at our Thornton location, too. Can you go and take some tables up there to help? You need to keep the ones you have here, but go up and take a section to relieve them up there as well.' So I got on my bike and started peddling from Aurora to Thornton…"

The Flick Of A Cigarette

THE DAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING is wild. Each year, the place is rented out by the same high school in the area for their reunion. And each year, something wild happens (will get to the infamous fire later in the book).

Whenever the day before Thanksgiving came around, I was always moved to security duty. I didn't mind it, to be honest, because I didn't want to deal with the drunks — I had Paddy's Day for that. I would much rather sit back and police the area, so that's what I did.

As it's already been established, back in the day it was completely fine to smoke cigarettes inside, especially in the pool room. Servers

would be smoking while putting in orders into the POS and patrons would have ash falling onto the pool table's felt as they lined up a shot, cigarette pursed between their lips. Later, the designated smoking section was strictly constricted to the back patio.

Well, fast forward to 2015 when smoking inside was obviously prohibited.

I was stationed at my thirty-minute post right there by the old smoking section and the Touchtunes jukebox. Irony at its best. The place was already a s***-show and there was a group of three or four "yungins" probably freshly twenty-one sitting at booth 9. I noticed a blonde girl reach into her purse and pull out a cig. She proceeded to light it up.

"Hey!" I yelled, from my vantage point. I jumped down the two steps and turned left, directly in front of the booth. "Put that out…NOW! And don't you dare think about it again!"

With glazed eyes and a delayed response, she gave me a snarky look before pretending to put the cigarette back into her purse. I went

right back up to my post and spied down on the table with hawk eyes.

I was sober. She was drunk. She thought she was smart. She wasn't. I noticed that she kept the fire stick in her hand and put both underneath the table. She paid no never mind to me when, thirty seconds later, she pulled it back out and lit it up.

"Hey! I told you —" As soon as my voice boomed over her, she flicked the lit cigarette under the booth as if trying to hide it. "Are you f'n serious?!"

I ran into the kitchen, grabbed a big, red Coca-Cola cup, filled it with water, and ran back out to douse the cigarette out.

"You're done. Out!" I pointed to the back door as she rolled her eyes again. "Out!" I yelled again.

She gathered her stuff and I escorted her down the short, back hallway where another security guard was stationed at the back door. I told him the story. We then relayed the news to the others in security as well: she was not to be let back in. She was done.

As soon as she realized what she'd done and that her sentence was final, she started sobbing in the back parking lot. As much as her friends pleaded with us and tried to console her, there was no way we were going to acquiesce to their begging. Justice was served.

Stiffed

Some days at The Cricket weren't as great as others; sometimes people would come through with mal-intent. If there's one thing a server is good at, it's observation. To be highly efficient and on top of things with your tables, you *must* be observant.

That same strength in observation can be implemented on a customer who is giving red flags. Sometimes you can notice them right away. Sometimes you can't. Sometimes, even, you give them the benefit of the doubt.

Let's just say my radar wasn't up that night.

I was closing one evening and had B1, which included tables and booths in the main room, pool room, and the back patio. Usually by that time of the night, when other staff members are cut, the twenty table section that you inherit isn't full and won't get full again. It's really just the main room tables that will fill up.

I can't remember what time it was, but it must have been around 11:00 pm or so when a couple came in to eat. They wanted to sit on the back patio, and figuring they were smokers, I honored their wish.

They ordered their drinks and burgers like any other table. After their meal was done, I dropped off the tab and went back inside. Maybe five minutes passed before I went back out to check on them. They were gone.

My first inclination was that they left cash. Usually, it's common courtesy to hand cash directly to the bartender or server so that they acknowledge that you paid. That doesn't always happen. So, I expected cash to be on the table somewhere. It wasn't. I looked on the ground. Not there. Because it was dark, I

looked more intently, straining me eyes, but still nothing.

This had never happened to me, so I freaked out. I ran out the front of the restaurant and saw them scurrying away into an Uber a block or so down. I ran after them and yelled.

"Hey! You didn't pay!"

The guy turned around to me as he was getting in the car and said, "We left it on the table."

What I should have done was say, "Okay, come back with me just to make sure." I didn't. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and let them go.

When I got back, I scoured the back patio with a flashlight. Not a cent was left. There were no dollars hidden under a menu or a coaster or nothing. Nada. Zilch.

I'd been stiffed.

The crappy thing about getting stiffed was that their bill had to come out of *my* pocket. The manager at the time, Heidi, tried her best to discount their tab the best way possible, but it still left me covering $25 or $30 of their tab. In the grand scheme of things, that isn't that much. But if you've ever worked in the service

industry and worked paycheck-to-paycheck, $30 *is* a lot.

Needless to say, I was in the dumps until we closed down. All I wanted to do was get out of there and go home. So much so that when we were completely closed down and Heidi asked if I wanted my shift beer, I declined.

"Nah. Thank you, but I just need to go."

I hurried down to Milwaukee Street Tavern to hopefully catch them before they closed up. GM and bartender, John Skelly, was kind enough to pour me a quick pint of Coors and a shot of Jamo, but Colorado liquor laws are strict as hell; he was rushing me to finish it before 2:00 am. I'd gotten there just after 1:50 am.

I chugged what I could of the beer, but didn't finish it. I then thanked him for waiting for me, ordered a Lyft, and headed home.

2016

Good Day

THERE WERE SEVERAL SONGS in college that we'd listen to when starting out day drinking. *It's A Great Day To Be Alive* by Travis Tritt, *What I Got* by Sublime, *Levels* by Avicii, *Hey Ma* by Cam'ron, *Take It Easy* by Eagles, and anything Zac Brown Band.

But even more so than the ones above, one was a staple above everything else. As for the title, I'm sure you can guess that it started each drinking session off on the right note. Everyone whistled and cheered when it came on and then started to sing/rap along with it. The song in question? *Good Day* by Nappy Roots.

Sometime in the early months of 2016, we had a visitor come into The Cricket. When I heard the name "Fish Scales" being thrown around, I knew exactly of whom they spoke. I was several years removed from college, but the rap group from Bowling Green, Kentucky was still a favorite of mine.

Sure enough, one of the key members of Nappy Roots had made his way into the establishment.

"Oh man, I'm a big fan." Yeah, I was being a fanboy, but I didn't care. He thanked me kindly as he hung out on the snowy back patio having a drink and a smoke. Eventually, when my night shift was done, I went back and joined him.

"We listened to 'Good Day' like crazy in college. It was like our day-drinking anthem," I told him.

He went on to tell the story about how it was written and how it was kind of his brain-child. The song was a little bit removed from their standard stuff and the timeframe it was produced was after they were no longer under contract with a record label. Navigating being

an independent "anything" can be tough, yet they pushed for it to be released.

It was picked up by a DJ by the name of Greg Street, who also helped in releasing it. From there the single gained traction, blew up on the radio, and eventually was certified gold as an independent single. That's saying something. I'm sitting here right now, a self-published author, knowing how big of a deal it is to get reach being independent. So yeah, my hat is off to them for getting that to happen.

"You want another beer?" I asked.

"Hell yeah," he said.

I was already getting tipsy after two IPAs. I *may* have gotten a little bit too generous because I started going behind the bar and pouring free pints for him and me. I don't remember the bartender who was working at the time, but I'm sure they were like, "Dude, what the hell are you doing?"

I was never a bartender. I had no business going behind the bar after I was clocked off and getting drunk. But I did it anyway. Oopsies.

Anyway, "It Was a Good Day," that day. Yeah, that's an Ice Cube reference, as well ;)

After looking up his name on Google while writing this, I saw that Fish Scales was robbed outside of his brewery, Atlantucky, in Atlanta. He was even shot. Luckily, he survived and has well recovered since then.

Such a tragedy that people — most likely an inside job — would do that to such a good dude. I haven't met a ton of famous people in my day, but just like Mac Miller was, Fish Scales was a pretty laid back dude and didn't let the fame get to his head. So I'm glad he's alright.

Lastly, if you haven't already, go turn on Good Day and do just that.

Odell Trips

SPEAKING OF A GOOD day, the time had finally come for me to go on an "adult field trip." My excitement to do so was radiating and I felt honored to be invited. I guess I'd reached the point of being in good enough standing to go on an exclusive trip.

Where were we going? Odell.

In the bustling and competitive landscape that is Colorado craft beer, Odell Brewing has always been at the top of the metaphorical mountain. Things may have changed since I've been out there, but to me the "Mount Rushmore of Craft Breweries" on the Front Range have always been the following, in no

particular order: New Belgium, Avery, Breckenridge/Wynkoop, and of course, Odell. Oskar Blues receives an Honorable Mention.

And for those wondering about Coors, sorry to burst your bubble, but it ain't no craft beer. I do love a good Banquet to quench my thirst from time to time, though. Okay, I'm going to stop ranking things now, because Colorado beer is like politics and I'm not a politician.

Katie from Avery (that rhymes) was amazing; from the get-go, you notice her bubbly and fun spirit. She was Odell's brand ambassador for the area and we would sometimes see her roll through The Cricket to get keg and bottle orders taken care of with Clifton. She was to be our tour guide. So, the eight of us lucky Cricketeers piled into the van and aimed due north.

An hour later we arrived at the sprawling brewery just off Lincoln Avenue. The sand-colored brick section of the building reminded me of castles in the shires of Ireland. The red, wood siding reminded me of a cabin in the woods just up the way around Horsetooth Reservoir.

I won't lie, I'd been there before and done the tour. Ironically, it was right after I started working at The Cricket and I had to leave early because I volunteered to cover an expo shift. But that made no never mind to me. I love Odell and I treated it like it was my first time, regardless. If I could just go there to hang out and drink tea, I would. Heard they started making wine, too. *Wink, Wink.

Immediately upon entering the building, we went to the bar and were each greeted with flights of beer. Repeat Session IPA, Maintenance Moment Coffee Pale Ale, Big Cookie A La Mode Vanilla Brown, Mahogany Ale, and Theo's Imperial Stout, were presented to us with our very own pilot tray, 4oz tasters, with descriptions of each.

After we got a slight buzz on, Katie pulled us away to start the tour. Up a flight of stairs, we entered the room with mash tuns and some kettles.

I think this is a good time to do a quick beer-making 101 session.

Mash tuns are what combine water, grains, and malt to create what is called "wort." The

combination of all of the above, plus heat, converts the grains and malts into sugar. From there, the wort is taken to the kettle to boil.

But here's where things get interesting. The infamous hops, which are synonymous with IPAs, can be added at many different times in the brewing process. Most brewers mix it in during different stages of the wort process and before the boil. These three stages are: Bittering, Flavor, and Aroma. However, for *some* styles of beer, they will be added *after* the boil and before fermentation (when yeast is added to convert sugar to alcohol), while others even add them *during* fermentation.

Now that my *fantastic* knowledge of beer has been passed down to you, let's move on.

From there, Katie took us back into the warehouse/commercial-brewing side of the building. I may be wrong, but some areas were off-limits to the normal guided tours, but not to us. We went passed the "red line." If I can remember correctly — it's hazy — we saw the big tubs and storage bags for the hops. I must say, that room smelled *great*.

And thankfully, due to moments captured via photography, I was reminded that we got to do something that *absolutely* isn't on the traditional tour.

You know those big, steel kettle-looking things? Fermentation tanks, if I'm not mistaken. Well, Odell has twelve of them that are about two stories high, easily spotted from the road. We got to walk on top of them. How about that for VIP status?

Speaking of these huge steel vats, Odell has the capacity to push out 150,000 barrels of beer a year, or roughly 4.6 million gallons. That's enough to get all of Denver drunk. Drink more beer.

After the tour, we went back to the tasting room bar and ordered one last pint before we headed out. The KC Royals had just won the World Series, and they must have had a guy on the staff also from KC because there was a beer that was Royals-themed. That's what I got.

Turnt and twisted, we got back in the van and Katie drove us rowdy individuals back down to Denver that afternoon. With yours truly as DJ, we listened to the best of Bone Thugs, 2pac,

Biggie, Ice Cube, and even a little Fleetwood Mac. Yeah, didn't see that last one coming, did ya?

At one point, one of us on the drive back may or may not have relieved himself into a plastic bottle, already having "broken the seal." Could have been my imagination, too.

That wasn't the only time I went to Odell. Near the end of the year and after Thanksgiving in 2016, most of the staff got to go. There was a reason for that, which we will get into later.

That second trip we even got an extended tour, seeing things that we didn't the first. As well, we all had a chance to get great discounts on Odell swag. I decided to pull the trigger on a 90 Shilling mechanic shirt, which I still have to this day.

1st Odell Trip Selfie... Minus Layton

I guess I'll wrap this up by saying thank you to Katie for the lovely tours, thank you to Odell for hosting them, and thank you to Breckenridge/Wynkoop and The Cricket for allowing us to do so.

Although the memories aren't as clear as they once were, they're still in there somewhere.

Beer Flight

On Top of the Kettles

Composite of Our Second Trip

Purple Rain

TO BE HONEST, I never listened to Prince before this. I remember one of my roommates in Denver having the *1999* album framed and up on a wall, but can't say I ever listened to any of his songs or even would be able to recognize a song of his if it was played.

That all changed on April 21, 2016, when Prince Rogers Nelson passed.

How many times in life has something happened to you that is far bigger than a coincidence? Like, I know we've all heard "It's a small world" before when referring to knowing someone that someone else does. Sometimes this "small world" can encompass thou-

sands and thousands of miles. But most of the time, it's just someone on the other side of town.

At what point, though, does a coincidence turn into a sign? I think on that April day in 2016 we all witnessed just that.

I believe I was working in the T-Room, but was hanging out in Norms that late Thursday morning, as it hadn't gotten busy yet. That's when the news started to spread.

"Someone died at Prince's house."

"Did you hear?"

"That's devastating if it was him."

And finally, "Prince is dead."

I swear, not more than thirty minutes after getting the confirmation that it was indeed him that passed, pipes in the ceiling above the back kitchen burst. It started "raining" and "crying" down water. The back kitchen had to shut down and all orders from the T-Room and Norms had to be diverted to the front kitchen. That created chaos in itself.

It was at that moment, someone decided to play "Purple Rain" on the Touchtunes jukebox. Can it get any more surreal than that?

Shortly after his death, I went on a small binge of listening to Prince's top tracks, but nothing stands out to me more than one the best live performances I've ever seen: his 2007 Super Bowl Halftime Show. It is arguably the best halftime show to ever be done, and I would have to agree.

The Super Bowl took place in Miami that year, and in typical South Florida fashion, it started raining. No, it started pouring. When asked if he was okay that it was raining, Prince famously said, "Can you make it rain harder?"

I Wish I Could Take It Back

I wish I could take it back. Truly. As they say, "I guess you live and you learn." But did I *have* to learn like this? Unfortunately, I think I did. I'd lost some of my humility over the years and needed it back.

Over the three years as an employee at The Cricket, I had some incredible highs and equally devastating lows. I learned to love people yet be cynical at the same time. I became a mirror to the rude and pretentious, but as well, looked down on others as if I had some sort of superiority. That ain't right.

I mean, it goes both ways. I *am* a human being, after all; I deserve respect, too. But at

the same time, standing up for myself is a *much* different scenario than the need or want to put others down.

That's when I made a huge mistake. It pains me even to this day writing it, being nine years removed. Needless to say, it's changed me ever since.

One early afternoon on a patio shift — I was C1 — I noticed a lady sitting at a table on the Front Patio. She had two or three kids with her, ranging from two-years-old to probably around six or seven. She looked depleted. There was pain and sorrow in her eyes; she had tangled hair and no makeup on.

There were a couple of chairs that were next to the POS in Norms and I was sitting in one of them. As the server who was taking care of her came walking up to the POS, I said, "Man, that lady looks like she hates life right now."

I said it with a small chuckle and condescending attitude, like *my* life was much better. I knew *nothing* about her yet I was eager to

cast the first stone. The server gave me a quick glare and said, "Hey, follow me a sec."

We went back into Norm's kitchen and he looked me dead in the eye. "Now, I know you don't know this, so I'm going to be light on you, but that's my sister and her kids. And yes, she *is* going through a tough time right now."

He walked away and left me standing there speechless. I tried to mutter out "I'm sorry" but it just wouldn't come. My heart sank and I felt like a complete low-life.

After five minutes passed, I found him again and said, "Dude, I don't even have the words. I'm *really* ashamed of myself right now and I'm *really* sorry. Like *really* sorry. I had no idea."

I have to give it to him, he was incredibly mature about it and simply said, "It's okay, man. I know you didn't know."

I can't remember what I did after, but I know I apologized at least two or three times more. I may have bought him a beer after our shift or food for lunch, but I don't remember.

The moral of the story: you never know what someone is going through and/or who they know or are kin to.

Don't Be A Chester

IT WAS GETTING TO twilight outside. I believe it was an early September evening with a slight briskness to the air. I was working C1 on the Front Patio and it wasn't busy by any means, but it was steady. I probably had four or five tables and they were all chill...except one.

There was an older gentleman and I think his wife...or mistress. Hard to tell these days. I guessed he was in his mid-sixties with an incredibly receded and white hairline. He wore a white, short-sleeved Polo shirt and was short — 5'5" on a good day. The lady was probably ten, maybe fifteen years his younger, with curly brown hair and a floral sundress.

He'd arrived there first and ordered a glass of chardonnay. I gladly brought it to him. He wasn't interested in any appetizers while waiting and went directly to his iPhone with spectacles on.

Alright Al, don't bug him if you don't need to. I understood when space was wanted and didn't want to hover.

After his lady arrived and I got her drink order, the man ordered an appetizer for them. I think it was artichoke dip. I then checked on my other tables and let them catch up.

To be a good server, it's an important skill to have intuition. Luckily, I'm pretty darn good at reading body language and sensing when I'm wanted or if they want to be left alone.

Without a doubt, the best example of reading body language is eye contact. If you make eye contact with someone at one of your tables and it sticks, you may just want to see if they need anything. On the flip side, if there is no eye contact as you walk by, especially if they are trying hard to *avoid* eye contact with you, then they are more than likely content.

However, there are exceptions that are well justified, like when ten minutes or so have passed and there's no contact.

It's important to note that there's a little trick I learned early on in my serving days and well before The Cricket. If a patron were to put their drink glass on the edge of the table closest to the walking area, more than likely it's running low and they're looking for a refill. Non-verbal cues.

It seemed that I fell for the red herring.

"Sir, would you like another char—"

The man's chardonnay was getting low and was on the edge of the table, easy for me to see. But before I could finish the sentence, like I was a peasant, he put up his left hand, waved me off with an audible grunt, and continued to give his attention to the lady. Not a smidge of eye contact, either. I was an inconvenience.

But I knew how to handle it.

Oh, it's going to be like that, is it?

I went back inside and imitated what the old fart had done to me to Layton. He laughed and sympathized with me.

Now, if you're a current employee at The Cricket, DON'T DO THIS. I don't want you to follow in my footsteps and find yourself fired.

But my thought process was this: I'm a person, too. I should be treated with respect and when respect isn't given, it isn't returned. That's been a motto of mine ever since the breakups of early girlfriends.

So, I ignored them. I purposely gave them horrible service and when they finally *did* ask for the check, I said nothing while dropping it off, picking it up, and returning it.

Servers and bartenders have to put up with a lot of crap in the service industry. It's what we signed up for, I know, but the job is hard enough as is with keeping things organized, having great short-term memory, entering orders properly, and being personable.

What makes it astronomically harder, is someone who comes in and treats you like a low-life — like someone who doesn't deserve the grace of being in the presence of the all-glorious "Chester." Don't be a Chester.

The Mysteriously, Baffeling Ballad of "Air Guitar Chris"

HAVE YOU HEARD THE term "86'd" before? If you've been in the restaurant industry for any amount of time, you most definitely have. Even from the outside looking in, you may have heard the term once or twice.

There are really only two interpretations that I know of, but there may have been more added since I left the service industry in 2018. Let's talk about them.

The first involves the kitchen. "86'd" simply means it's out of something.

"Can I get mac n' cheese wedges on the fly?"

"We're 86'd mac n' cheese wedges."

"How the hell can you be out of mac n' cheese wedges?!"

"I don't know, ask the bodybuilder guy at table 4 who ordered ten baskets of them."

*Gulp. "No, thanks."

Okay, that scenario never happened, but you get the point. Sometimes it can be a minuscule item that is 86'd, like fried onion straws. Or, it can be serious, like ketchup. The world would end and ground zero would be The Cricket if ketchup disappeared. Don't even get me started on bacon.

But let's move on to the second meaning.

How many of you have been kicked out of a bar? It's not something that I like to admit, but it's happened to me twice. I clearly wasn't a serial offender like some people I know, but I *am* guilty.

Sometimes, if the crime is big enough, you can be permanently banned from an establishment, or "86'd." Hilariously, some patrons get "43'd," in which they just need to stay away from said establishment for an allotted amount of time while all settles down.

The Cricket was known for having a small dry-erase board up above the backroom at the main bar. It was labeled "86 For Life."

Unsurprisingly, the 24x36-sized board was completely full of degenerates who were no longer welcome for acting a fool: Psycho Guinness Guy, Biff da Crip, Greg the parking Nazi, Wonder Woman, Chris Rock (No Not That One), Nutty Librarian, Crazy Heineken Chick, Visor Lady-Debra, and Virgil.

But the one that's stuck with me the longest, the name that's haunted me in my dreams at night, the story that remains ever so elusive amongst all who walk in The Cricket doors, is none other than that of "Air Guitar Chris."

The mystique and lore behind Air Guitar Chris has always been a topic of conversation between employees and customers alike. No one ever quite knew the story, as the event happened before their time. I believe that an old friend and bartender there *may* have known the story and told me once upon a time, but that may be a false memory, a false hope.

So the mystery remains. Who was he? Was he good at playing the air guitar? Was he playing too loudly the day he got 86'd? I know how loud those air amplifiers and speakers can get.

I'm sure someone has the story out there. Whispers will continue to fill the halls of the restaurant at 2nd and Clayton but maybe, just maybe, we will find out the truth. Until then, forever will be the mystery of Air Guitar Chris...


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October, '16

SOME DAYS IN LIFE are blessings. I mean, every day is a blessing, but some more so than others. Without trying to sound cliché, each birthday we get is a gift — treat it as such. There are those who've gone before us who would only wish for another day on this earth. Make them proud by living your life to the fullest.

On my birthday in October of 2016, I was blessed with a beautiful day. I had to work, but that was okay; I wasn't mad in the slightest. My section was the Front Patio, one of my favorites, so I was in a good mood as is.

At one point mid-shift, when I was carrying a tray of drinks to a new table, I was stopped before reaching it. A wave of my coworkers led by my GM, Kathy, came outside in front of me; Kathy had a cake in her arms and a smile on her face. Then the Cricketeers started to sing.

Although the tray got heavier, my biceps stayed strong. I was in awe and filled with gratitude that Kathy went out of her way to get me a whole cake. I mean, I know the managers would do that with employees when they could, but I didn't expect it.

When the singing was done, I thanked them as they went back inside, hovering over the cake like hyenas. I then proceeded to drop off the drinks.

Sure enough, because the singing had happened in my section, all of my tables wished me happy birthday and even gave me a little extra in tips. Did Kathy do that on purpose? Did she make a scene in the hopes that my pocket would be a little heavier by the end of the day? If she did, that's another reason as to why she was such a great GM.

That was a lovely day working at 2nd & Clayton. Thank you, Kathy and crew. You guys rock.

Me working the front patio another day...happy...with weird hair

The Fire

NOW, AS OF WRITING this, I haven't been to The Cricket since August of 2020. I'd gone in several times after I stopped working there while enjoying my time as a paying client. The perspective was clearly different being on the outside looking in.

Because I haven't been in a long time, I'm not sure if it's still talked about, but I'm pretty positive it is. My 2020 visit was just under four years removed from it, and as I'm sitting behind my laptop now in November of 2024, it's coming up on eight.

I know that a great deal of employees that worked there during that time are probably

gone or have moved to the other Cricket locations, but the scars are still there, even if they don't show.

Here is my firsthand account of the infamous kitchen fire of November 23rd, 2016.

I was still hungover from the night before. The headache had more or less passed, but the hangxiety was setting in. The night before I'd probably drunken myself into a stupor to forget what the following day entailed.

From my chapter, "The Flick Of A Cigarette," you learned that each year, the day before Thanksgiving was always a nightmare. A high school reunion took over the restaurant and was *easily* the biggest bar night of the year. You also learned that I did security during those nights. This was no different.

So, like deja vu, I stood right where I'd stood when I threw the girl out for lighting up the cigarette inside, with a clear view of the entire front of the restaurant as well as straight into the kitchen.

I believe my shift started at 7:00 pm and to be honest, I wanted to be anywhere but there. Hangovers will do that to you.

By 7:30 pm the restaurant was already filling up. It wasn't getting rowdy by any means, but only a table or two were open in the front and the T-Room and Norms were getting full as well.

This is going to be a long night, I thought. Indeed it would.

Shortly before 8:00 pm something was happening. I didn't quite know at first, but the worried looks on our managers' and servers' faces told all. Then I noticed some of the faces of the customers, accompanied with whispers that crescendoed into chatter which crescendoed into commotion.

From my vantage point, I noticed that employee traffic and patron eyes were all leading up the ramp to the T-Room where an open opening to the kitchen was. That's when I peeked into the kitchen and saw it.

There's a device called a salamander — yes, like the reptile — and it's used for broiling. What our burger chefs would do is put the

burgers on the salamander for a short amount of time to melt the cheese. Part of what makes a Cricket Burger so good.

But when I saw it, it was engulfed in flames.

Kitchen workers were swatting at the fire with wet dish rags as the fire grew and grew. Eventually, someone took a gallon of milk and dumped it all over. To my surprise, it worked. If you were to do a Google search today, it would warn you *not* to use milk for grease fires. I'm glad I haven't had to put out a grease fire (knock on wood), because a gallon of milk would be the first thing I would have grabbed! After that night, I thought it was *indeed* the best way to put one out.

But it was already too late. I didn't know it right at that second, as I saw that the origin of the fire was contained, but the flames had spread into the grease-covered vents that ran along the side of the T-Room.

That's when I noticed Kathy telling everyone to evacuate. I went up to her to share what I saw and that I thought it was contained, but she sharply told me to "Get everyone out."

When I looked up the ramp from down on the floor, I could see the smoke getting worse and worse. It was starting to fill up the main floor which was now eerily empty with half-drunk beers, half-eaten burgers and fries, and forgotten coats and sweaters hanging over chairs. There may have even been a few credit cards accidentally left out, as some patrons were trying to frantically pay their tabs.

The restaurant emptied faster than I'd expected, and by the time I went outside as one of the last in the building, I could hear the wails of the sirens getting closer. Minutes later, two or three fire trucks rocked up and went to work.

The night had fallen and the temperatures had dropped. I put on my double-breasted pea coat and waited with the rest of the employees to see what needed to be done. We may have waited there for about thirty minutes before we were told that we could leave, that nothing could be done for the night and that the restaurant wouldn't be re-opening.

The lot of us walked down to Milwaukee Street Tavern and picked up where my night before had left off: Jim Beam and Sprite.

The rumor mill was on fire that night, no pun intended. Gossip was floating out onto the streets and into other parts of Cherry Creek. News reporters were everywhere. We were the talk of the town and not for good reasons.

The next morning, online newspapers were flooded with titles such as "Cherry Cricket closed until further notice after kitchen fire" and "Kitchen Fire Forces Out Cherry Cricket Customers."

What was to become of the restaurant? What was to become of our jobs? I was planning something big the following summer and I needed to save up money (I'll talk about that soon). And we *all* had bills to pay. Our fate was going to be determined at a meeting at the ballpark location several days later.

To this day I feel for Kathy. I know she got through it, and it probably doesn't bother her

anymore, but it was one hell of an event. She handled it like a champ, but damn, it must have been stressful and somewhat traumatic for her; The Cricket was so incredibly important to her.

The Meetings

CONFUSED. DISTRAUGHT. WORRIED. ALL the thoughts that were going through our heads as we walked into The Cherry Cricket Ballpark location the following Monday.

How bad was the damage?

Are we going to be unemployed?

I don't want another job.

Well, to start, the damage was substantial. The fire had indeed traveled up the vents and into the wall that separated the kitchen from the T-Room. It would take several months for them to demo and then to rebuild. The executives at Breckenridge also figured that there were some other aspects of The Cricket that

could use a face-lift, so some of the kitchen appliances were updated and tile was set along the main bar. There were probably some other renovations that I'm drawing a blank on.

But there was no doubt about it, Breckenridge was caught in a tough spot. Did they have fire insurance to help cover this? Maybe. Did they have to take a dip out of savings? Maybe. I don't know for sure and don't want to speculate. Regardless, they did the right thing and eased most of our minds on that overcast and cold day.

They knew how important it was to keep great employees around, so rather than hiring from scratch when the Cherry Creek location was to open up again, they made sure to pay all current employees an average "salary" (paid weekly) based on how long they'd been there. Luckily for me, I'd been there for two-and-a-half years. I can't remember the weekly amount, but it was enough to pay rent, bills, and save a little. Our only obligation was to attend weekly meetings at the Ballpark location.

I only missed one due to terrible food poisoning, and yes, it was *actually* food poisoning. I made it to those meetings even when I *was* hungover. Get off my back, fellow service industry peeps ;)

It was Super Bowl night and I'd had nachos. I think the sour cream had gone rank, but I hadn't noticed. Yes, I had a beer or two with those nachos, but that's it. Nothing that would render me drunk by any means. An hour or so later, things took a turn…fast. I won't go into details, but it wasn't pretty. At a certain point in my week of hell, I had hallucinations straight out of *The Sopranos*, when Tony is talking to a dead fish.

But anyway, I'm getting off-topic. What those at the corporate offices of Breckenridge Brewery did for us, I'm forever grateful. *That* is how you run a business and *that* is how you show you care about your employees. It goes to one of my favorite quotes from none other than Richard Branson:

> *"Take care of your employees and they will take care of your business."*

2017

The Last Day

ALL GOOD THINGS MUST come to a close at some point in our lives whether we want them to or not. It's usually bittersweet, but is often needed for growth. A dream of mine — a vision, a challenge — I'd had for *years* was finally coming to fruition.

Ever since seeing photos in magazines and history books, and after meeting two great buddies from the country during college, I decided I wanted to spend a year in Australia. I'd toyed around the idea for a long time, but knew that my window of opportunity was closing.

In order to acquire a working visa to the country, you had to be no older than thirty-years-old. I was twenty-seven. However, even though there were a couple of years left in my twenties, I knew that if I didn't go then, I never would. The stars aligned themselves too much for me to ignore. I started the process that January.

With the help of my prior savings, a second credit card (don't recommend it), and the savings I acquired from our severance pay, I was able to get everything in line. I write about this in more detail in my memoir, *When Obstacles Limit Freedom*.

When The Cricket opened its doors once again in April 2017, I had about two months before I left on the big jet plane. It was great getting back into the restaurant and I'll tell you what, patrons were ever so excited to walk in the doors again for a burger and a beer. I believe it was opening day, but I may be wrong — we employees were given red t-shirts that

said "Smokin' Up The Hood Since 1945[] — a nod to, and a small joke, regarding the fire.

To be honest, those last two months were but a blink of an eye. My mind was focused on one thing and one thing only: saving money. Well, that's a lie. I had to worry about moving out of our house and selling off half of my belongings. I had to sell my car. I had to figure out a place to stay once I was out of my house completely. There were a million stressors in my mind, but concerning The Cricket, I tried to make as much as I could during those final months.

When I put in my notice — I believe I told them a month in advance — I had support from everyone. They were happy for me, yet sad at the same time. Lee, the CEO of Breckenridge/Wynkoop, was also pleased for me.

One night while I was working, Governor Hickenlooper showed up. Lee was kind enough to introduce me and told him that I was leaving shortly. Governor Hickenlooper went on to tell a brief story about his travels to Australia. Just a small, yet profound mem-

ory of mine snapped in a vast portfolio called "life."

Scott from my hiring class, was the last one standing from it. Just like the seven or eight of us, he started from humble beginnings with me as an expo, but eventually worked his way up to bartender by the time I left. Good on him. Everyone else from our class had gotten fired, even those who'd been the favorites. Funny how that works.

The last day I stepped foot into The Cricket, before I came back from Australia, that is, was a rollercoaster. I no longer had a house and was on the couch-surfing gig, something that I unfortunately had to get used to in Australia. Luckily, a good buddy of mine from The Cricket, Tim, was kind enough to let me stay at his place for two days before I left.

So, in the limbo of homelessness, while waiting for Tim to get off work, I sat at The Cricket's front bar no longer an employee. A weird feeling, it was. All I had with me was a duffle bag, a backpack, my favorite blanket wrapped around the shoulder straps of my backpack, and a half-drunk pint of beer.

I had fears. I had concerns. I had second thoughts. I was leaving the comfortable and diving into the unknown. Where I was going wasn't just a hop, skip, and a jump away. Never had a traveled so far away from home, *especially* all by myself. But it had to be done. Life needed to be lived. The world needed to be explored.

Australia, here I come.

"Can I get another Breck Lager, please?"

Cricket Lullabies

To wrap this up, *yeah*, I have some Cricket dreams for you. I wasn't just going to tease it at the beginning of the book and not deliver.

I'm going to pretty much copy and paste what I have in my phone's notes as I typed them just waking from my sleeping beauty slumber. There will be typos. There will be things you may not understand. That's okay. There are still things that *I* don't understand. Yet here I am. Nonetheless, I will put things I'm describing, or typos I'm correcting, in parentheses; they were *not* part of the dream.

Anyway, without further adeiu...

Dream #1

I had been back to college, I guess, although it actually looked like the street by my grade school, and we were snowboarding at this random hill. Coach Murphy (*my wide receiver football coach in college) got made (*mad) at me because I was "dancing, not skiing," because I was doing all sorts of tricks at an advanced level.

Fast forward, I went into The Cricket to get some food and Kathy was there. She told me that I really couldn't be in there until I solved my "issue." I had no idea what she was talking about. I then went up to Emily and she had all of the info.

I guess Coach Murphy had filed some sort of report, kind of like a police report. On a half-ripped paper it said, "Mr. Kirkland, Dancing not Skiing." He involved on (*one) of my ex gfs and was going to get her involved for no reason. Don't know why.

But essentially, he filed this report that was pretty lame and unnecessary. I then caught a glimpse of the money that I owed, $300 dollars. I asked Emily what that was, she said it was my fine. I lost my s***. Got really mad and stormed around the restaurant cussing.

When I returned to her I thanked her for her time that I kind of wasted (*she was on break trying to eat). Got a little emotional too (*to her), before I left and walked out of the restaurant to take care of business...

Dream #2

Was working at The Cricket, getting weeded, like usual. When one table (*with a couple) kept on trying to move me along quick to order as I was bussing one of my tables next to them.

"We're ready to order."

"Okay, oon (*one) second please."

They started listing their order.

"One second please," I said again.

"Come on, Alex," he said in a demeininf (*demeaning) tone and just started listing off him and his girlfriend's order when I wasn't ready. Then went on to ask for "heated napkins." I got pissed off, gave him a dirty look, and then walked off.

Ended up getting fired because I neglected my tables and didn't go back. Went back to my house with one of my best friends and noticed that *all* of my past roommates—ten or so—were living at the house.

I said, "Well, needless to say, looks like I'm unemployed."

To (*two) of them came to console me and put their hands on my shoulders.

Dream #3

It was my first shift back serving after a long hiatus. I had the b1 section, but it was wayy different. Didn't really habe (*have) my tables down whasoevrr (*whatsoever); my sec-

tion kept changing. Sure enough, I was getting swamped and running around like a madman.

A girl that I guess I was serving, said she really liked the water. Didn't comment on the food, but said the water was absolutely delicious.

A guy wanted his tab and when he asked, his friend went, "Dude, you didn't buy anything."

And he went, "I still want it."

Sure enough, I went to the POS and printed it out: $0.00. He was super happy and he and his friend got up in a hurry to leave. They didn't have any food on the table.

Then my whole family was coming in and I was going to serve them. Mom, dad, brother and his girlfriend, aunts, uncles, cousins.

Oh, and the kicker? I wasn't wearing a shirt the whole time…

Thank You

MY FIRST THANK YOU goes to Uncle Paul and Uncle Homer. Without them, I wouldn't have known anything about The Cricket. Because of the great people they are and the great people they've met, I got welcomed into their Denver world in multiple ways, The Cricket being at the top.

Speaking of amazing people my Uncles' met, next I want to thank Sorcha for hooking me up with my first job getting to Denver. I really did enjoy my short stint at The Abbey, especially the deliciously, traditional Irish food: Bangers and mash, Shepherd's Pie, Guinness

Beef Stew, and even just Guinness. Yes, Guinness is a food group to the Irish, FFS ;)

Thank you to The Cricket family, past and present: Kathy, Sam, Heidi, Johnny, Sorcha, Mark, Brad, Clifton, Jill, JJJ, Sean Post, Tim, Danekas, Angie, Broome, Ike, Lia, Bri, Kat, Layton, Abi, Frank, Dani, Tessa, Jeni, Lyne, Jordan, Chad, Scott, Karlon, Nick 1, Nick 2, Drapal, Emily, and Lee Driscoll. And rest in peace to Vanessa and Sam Sanchez...gone way too soon.

I'm sure I'm missing names, especially back of the house, so please forgive me. Anyone that I worked with during those three-ish years, thank you for the good times.

And thank you to corporate (Breckenridge/Wynkoop). The benefits that they gave employees, plus what they did post-fire, will never be forgotten.

Lastly, thank you to my family and friends for being supportive as I start this new writing and authorship journey. It's new yet fun and exciting.

I'll leave you with a traditional Irish toast...

"May your troubles be less, and your blessings be more. And nothing but happiness come through your door."

About The Author

Alex Kirkland is a writer and author based in Kansas City. He and his debut memoir, *Wolves of Hemp Street*, were nominated for 'Best Local Author' in *The Kansas City Pitch*. The book has also been featured in *Westword Magazine* and *Canvas Rebel*.

His most recently released book, *When Obstacles Limit Freedom*, is the first in a two-part mental health memoir series.

His current project is helping to write a paranormal memoir for his Uncle Paul titled, *When The Footsteps Stop*. Hope is to have it finished by the end of summer, 2025.

When Alex isn't writing he's watching his Kansas City Chiefs win Super Bowls and be the villains of the NFL...sorry Broncos fans ;)

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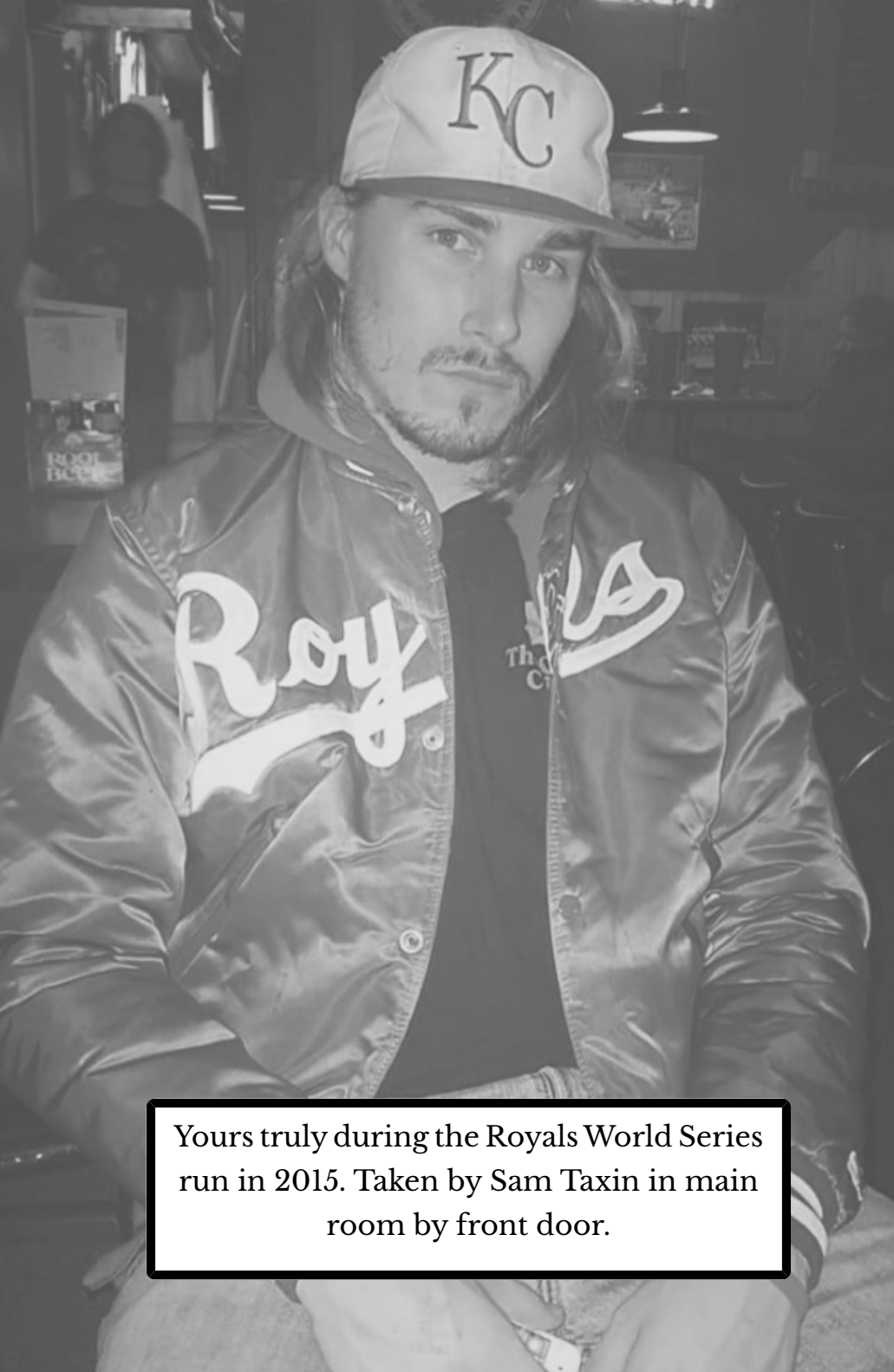

Yours truly during the Royals World Series run in 2015. Taken by Sam Taxin in main room by front door.