**The Plateau**

Patrick Malka

Kerry walked through the front doors of The Plateau at 1 pm.

Any large performance space feels alien when empty. It was designed to be filled with people. Without them, something about the architecture feels wrong.

The Plateau, in particular, felt like entering a disused aquarium—a warped structure suffused with moldy, floating particulate. This was still the case when filled to capacity, but at least the abundance of uninhibited humanity provided enough distraction that no one noticed how the space seemed to wheeze in time with the music, further cracking walls and warping floorboards.

The Plateau catered mostly to punk shows but allowed for the occasional local experimental act to play for their nine friends. When Kerry found out they needed an extra person to tend bar over the summer, she made the call immediately. It would be her third concurrent job but could help alleviate some of the month-to-month struggle.

Kerry entered the open ground floor and looked to the stage, which lined the entire left side of the room relative to the entrance. The bar was to her right at the back of the room, under the first-floor balcony. Jangly chaotic noise came from the PA system. A projector splashed images of a forest on the brick wall of the stage, the trees whipped around by heavy winds. There was no one around. She walked over to the center of the floor space and faced the stage. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the last time she was here: an easily forgotten band and unusual, persistent bruises from the disembodied elbows of moshers.

Standing in the middle of the empty room, she began to feel dizzy, just as a gust of wind smelling of rust and sweat shoved her to the left, forcing her to trip over her feet.

“Can I help you?”

Kerry got up quickly and spun in a circle to find who had spoken.

“Over here.”

She looked towards the bar and could see the dark outline of a person leaning on the back wall, perfectly still.

“On the stage.”

Kerry, completely disoriented, turned back to face the stage. The first thing she noticed about the woman was her shaved head and abundance of piercings, at least a half dozen in each ear and curved barbells through her septum and eyebrows. Her glistening skin punctuated by all that steel reflected the projected images on the stage like a constellation in a larger celestial scene.

“Can I help you?” she repeated, only this time her initial hostility was replaced by something like concern.

“Yes, my name is Kerry. I have an interview for the bartending job.”

“Yeah, just give me a sec. Have a seat at the bar.”

Kerry could not explain why, but she was hesitant to turn back towards the bar. When she did and saw nothing out of the ordinary, it worried her even more.

Sitting at the bar, waiting for the interview to start, Kerry tried to convince herself that as far as first impressions go, that could have been worse.

The music and projector were shut off, but the room remained dark. The woman returned from behind the curtains of the stage, walked across the room, flicked on the lights behind the bar and took a seat opposite Kerry, close enough that their knees practically touched.

“My name’s Elle. I guess I’ll be doing the interview. How much do you know about this place?”

“Only that I’ve been here for a few shows. I like The Plateau. Feels worn in. I always assumed it had a history because it’s been around for so long, but I don’t know more unfortunately.”

“Worn in is probably the best way to put it. Look, you seem nice and I’m sure you’re overqualified to pour beers and shots so I’m going to ask you a few questions that may seem strange but are important, okay?”

“Sure, but overqualified or not, I work hard at whatever job I…”

“Yeah, no doubt, but let’s start with this, okay?”

“Okay.”

Elle leaned in. “When you came in here a few minutes ago, what did you see?”

“On the stage? The projector was showing images of trees moving around in a storm.”

Elle produced a remote for the projector and turned it on. The scene was of a crowd moshing at an outdoor show. “You mean that?”

“That is so strange.” Kerry said, at a loss. She could have sworn.

“Second question. When I first spoke, you looked to the bar. Why?”

“I couldn’t tell where your voice was coming from. It was probably bouncing off the back of the room.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, it was dark, and I thought I saw someone.”

“Old places tend to have shadowy corners huh?”

“I guess so.”

“So, my guess is this will probably be the last question. Look to the stage right now, what do you see?”

Kerry frowned; she didn’t understand why this was going so poorly so quickly but did as she was asked.

Kerry turned her head. Her breath caught. The Plateau’s standing room was filled to capacity. Perfectly quiet bodies staring at the stage. Kerry stood from her stool in surprise. Elle continued to stare at Kerry, never shifting her gaze. After a moment, the crowd started to move from the center out, spinning. The people were moving in a messy gyroscopic motion but where there should have been the sounds of stomping and heavy breath, there was just an increasingly loud distorted roar seemingly coming out of the floor. The uncanny scene drew panic up Kerry’s throat. She clamped her hands over her ears and shut her eyes tight. When she finally opened them, Elle was holding her. The room was silent.

Elle spoke confidently in her ear. “Thank you for coming, but I don’t think you’ll be a good fit for The Plateau.”