

Copyright Material

Red Dale Ray
A Sober Rebrand

A NOVEL

Debra Cunningham

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For Maureen, I am truly blessed

Hilda's

From my rear corner, I can keep an eye on most of the bar, and use the security mirrors for viewing the rest. A glint of sunlight showcases the dust on the lacquered bar. I debate which is more blinding, the sun or the bright yellow Easter-style suit of the lady coming through the door. Heels clicking across the tile, she has the look of a woman on a mission. When I no longer need to shade my eyes from the glint of the afternoon sun, I get a clearer look of her. I'm guessing she's mid-forties, but all the makeup could be concealing a few years. Pulling out the barstool near my corner, she hooks her handbag underneath, and smiles at me with a flash of perfect white veneers. I lean back, return the smile, and nod.

Patty places a Hilda's cocktail napkin in front of our newcomer. "Hi, what can I get you ma'am?"

After taking a cautious scan of the top-shelf liquor, the lady answers, "A house white zin would be nice."

Patty heads off to the wine cooler, and I take a swig from my bottle of beer, while exchanging raised eye-brow glances with Trucker Bob. We're both wondering what brings this newcomer into Hilda's.

Except for the occasional lost tourist, or folks from the campground next door, Hilda's is a hangout for locals. Located at the edge of Menta Springs, Colorado, and away from the hipster-touristy historic downtown, we rarely see new faces. Our newcomer doesn't look like she's traveling in a motor home. I'm willing to bet she's either in sales and hoping to pitch the latest credit card processing service, or a tourist who got lost on her way to meet the ladies for brunch.

Patty returns with the glass of wine. After taking a few sips, our newcomer casts a curious glance at the note pad in front of me, then looks up at my beat-up cowboy hat. I brace for the question that inevitably gets asked by out-of-towners when they fixate on it. They assume you must have a horse or a ranch in order to wear a cowboy hat. Instead, our newcomer settles into the padded barstool, then swivels to have a look around. Seeing the dark emptiness of the barroom floor, she swivels back, and looks at my hat again.

I'm spared our newcomer's curiosity by the distraction of Johnny New York. Slithering in with some other greasy-haired, low-life, they are snickering. When they start high-fiving each other and slapping their knees, I'm fairly certain they just pulled off some kind of scam.

Too amped up to take a seat, both of them head directly to the pour station. Johnny gets his usual draft with a shot of whiskey. His cohort gets a shot and downs it, then returns the shot glass to Patty, ordering another shot with a bottle of beer. Still snickering, and without attempting conversation among our little group at the bar, they slink off to one of the booths in the dark. From past run-ins, Johnny knows he's more or less worn out his welcome, and he's merely tolerated to a very limited degree.

We overhear Johnny telling his cohort, "I gotta make extra for rent. I got a couple in me, and went down from there. Before I knew it, I was buying rounds for everyone!"

The newcomer seems as curious about those two as she was a moment ago over my notepad and hat. She swivels once again toward the barroom floor. I can't help but notice she's facing in the direction of the booth where Johnny and his buddy are slouched and plotting who knows what. I hope she doesn't make eye contact with him and draw his attention. I'm in no mood to deal with that today.

"Are you looking for someone?" I ask, hoping to divert her attention away from Johnny.

Turning and resting both elbows against the bar, she props her chin on one hand. In a half-flirting tone, "No. It's just me. Are *you* looking for someone?"

I grin and shake my head. "Nope."

Somehow, I must've missed Doc's arrival. She's seated at the other end of the bar working on her happy hour gin and tonic. Even though it's still a little early for the bar's happy hour, Doc is special, and always gets the discounted rate. I wave to her, and she ignores me. She isn't one for small talk until her fourth or fifth. Pretty soon we'll all be hearing about whatever patient has pissed her off lately. At least she's discreet and never gives out the names. That would be a hippo violation, or whatever they call it. Too many acronyms these days.

Patty is sharing one of her "Wally" videos with Doc, who is rubbing her forehead. I'm guessing Doc's wishing her gin and tonic would take effect sooner rather than later. Leaving her phone and wallet on the bar, along with her half-finished drink, Doc eases off the barstool. Then, I spot her reaching for something in the pocket of her ratty old cardigan. Out the back door she goes, to sit in her car for a few minutes to enjoy her recently legalized pot adventure.

I'm noticing the selfies are beginning to trickle in, order their energy drinks and are lurking around the juke box. I've concluded that most of them prefer pot over alcohol and an occasional craft beer at one of the local micro-breweries. The more adventurous of the selfies frustrate Patty by asking for a specific flavored liquor. We've expanded to include some of the premium flavored selections, for this reason. If we don't have it, they may order a mixed drink such as a watermelon margarita or a Sangria with dragon fruit.

Instead of referring to the younger customers as millennials, the older Hilda's regulars refer to them as "selfies." I try not to be bias, but find myself in agreement, since most of them are obsessed with the digital capture of every moment.

Doc scolds us for stereotyping. She's in the same age group as most of our long-time regulars, and equally burned out on her career. However, she has a side of her that remains young and rebellious. As a business owner, I walk the fine line in trying to understand what I think my customers want. Doc doesn't have to worry about meeting consumer trend changes, and I doubt she would bother regardless. One thing is certain, everyone gets sick at some time or other and needs a Doc. Hopefully, they don't get called an "asshat," though.

Our newcomer is looking down at my (now closed) notepad. "If you don't mind my asking. I'm curious what kind of notes you might be taking." Something in her tone changed. Was that a question, or an accusation?

It's part of my routine to have a running list of things to do for the bar, such as purchases, errands and the never-ending repairs. I fiddle with my mustache and pause before making the mistake of being ornery with a newcomer. Even though it's early, and I'm only on my second or third beer, I should be able to muster up some humor. I want to keep the conversation light and give her my own best salesman grin. "I'm working on my eulogy."

Toying with her wine glass, she jokes, "I hope it's a good one."

I like her retort and want to indulge this topic further for the sake of some fun. "Only the living will know," I say with a long, exaggerated, sigh at the end.

She tilts back slightly, bringing her hand over her mouth, looking regretful. I went too far with the deadpan humor. I need to remind myself to stop kidding with people who don't know me. Hell, even my closest buddies don't always get me.

After a long pause, she relaxes and frees her hand, and breaks a grin. "You look bored out of your mind," said more as a statement than a question. Gotcha.

I'm still curious about what brings her into Hilda's. "You got me there. I kinda prefer boredom when I can get it. Believe me, it won't be quiet and boring here for long." Extending my hand, I introduce myself, "I'm Ray. Ray Bowler."

She returns the handshake with confidence. "Bonnie, as in Bonnie and Clyde."

"So, a lady outlaw, huh?" Changing to slightly accusatory edge, I continue, "That explains your curiosity about my note taking. You're wanted?"

Raising her eyebrows, "Now the truth comes. You *were* taking notes."

My train of thought is interrupted by someone pounding and yelling at the juke box. A group of the selfies are arguing over which songs to play. Trucker Bob gives them one of his annoyed looks that reminds me of a big old junk yard dog ready to take a bite. Bonnie looks amused by the ruckus. The skinny selfies are no match for Trucker Bob, and they quiet down. It isn't long before the juke box is booming again.

I'm leaning toward Bonnie being a saleslady versus a tourist. I do my best to avoid these cold-call encounters, but she's already placed herself in my corner and cast her net. I'm suspecting she's unfamiliar with the bar, and uses a roundabout strategy to confirm she's talking to the business owner or someone in charge.

I decide to be direct and get this over with. "I wish I were just taking notes. Unfortunately, it's the never-ending list of things I need to do for my bar."

Bonnie teases, "It can't be too challenging of a list if you're drinking while you're at it."

After insinuating that I'm a slacker, I doubt she's in sales, unless she's overconfident. Most salespeople don't make snide comments until after you've written them a check. Now, I'm wondering if Bonnie escaped the country club bitty group and is curious to see how the other half spends a Friday night.

I take another swig and decide against pretending her comment was funny. Smirking and raising my beer, in a toast, "Cheers. I see we have sarcasm in common."

Patty checks on us between helping those newly arrived, and brings another glass of wine for Bonnie. By now, Doc has been out in the parking lot longer than usual, and I'm concerned she's going to doze off like she did a few nights ago. I think about going to check on Doc, but Bonnie distracts me by asking if we serve food.

"Not anymore, but we can call in an order to Fred's Diner across the road. They'll deliver to the bar, and Patty can get you a menu if you like."

Bonnie shakes her head, "No, thank you. I'm just curious if you still have a kitchen, since I saw the faded part on your sign before I came in."

"We used to be Hilda's Bar and Grill. I took off the part about the grill from the Hilda's sign years ago. We still have a kitchen. In fact, the flat grill still works. My friend, Mike, has a hobby of barbecuing. He prefers using the fire pit out back. On some nights, when we're going to have a good band that brings in a big crowd, Mike will help us out."

We take a drink, and I continue, "After closing, we often have a late-night, beer-side chat over some ribs or whatever's on hand. I'm not usually one to eat when I drink, and I'm usually drinking. Mike likes to keep me fed. It's purely selfish. I make a good drinking bud, and I own a bar. He's willing to grill for beer."

Bonnie surprises me by teasing that we are “friends with benefits.” I guess that’s one way of summing up our friendship. I just wouldn’t have worded it like that.

Good old Johnny couldn’t wait to butt in for a self-introduction to our newcomer. He must have been sizing up country club looking Bonnie and scheming. Weaseling his short and wiry self between both of our barstools, he secures his captive.

Bug-eyed, loud, standing too close, and shifting his feet like an excited kid needing to pee, Johnny is clueless about personal space. One hand is jerking to punctuate his rapid-fire chatter, while his draft beer sloshes in the other. As usual, he’s reeking of smoke. One whiff, and Bonnie’s revulsion is more than evident. Ignoring her dumbfounded expression, he rattles on about himself and his latest achievements.

Johnny’s always hustling the latest “deal.” The regulars give him a wide berth, and for good reason. The first of the month is approaching, and his campground rent for his gypsy wagon is coming due. He’s sniffing for cash.

From her neutral post, mid-bar, Patty had been observing the awkward encounter going on at our end. She reaches for a chilled mug from under the bar and pours a draft for Trucker Bob, then grabs another beer that she places in front of me.

Giving Johnny a firm tap on the shoulder, Patty pushes a few dollar bills in his hand. With a toothy grin, using her ornery tone, “So, Johnny, how about putting some music on the juke box before Meri comes in? That way we have something to listen to besides you!”

Luckily, for once, Johnny shrugs and takes the hint, but not without muttering a snide remark under his breath. Fisted dollars, he repays Patty with the vengeful scowl of a guilty truant who has just been dealt detention and tramps off toward our vintage juke box.

This open hostility between the two began around the time Patty caught Johnny reaching over the bar and helping himself to the peanuts. Even though there’s never been an “official” ration, Patty insists on a two-package limit per customer. Patty will only bend that rule for kids, and she’s a force to be reckoned with. Don’t let her middle-age fool you, she’s feisty. Freckles, and all.

Laughing to myself and wondering how Patty, in her gray pigtail braids, can be taken seriously. I don’t know her history, but I suspect she might have been a rodeo queen in her younger years and grew accustomed to getting her way. If not; I bet she lassoed whomever crossed her.

“That Johnny is a character, I can’t blame you for laughing.”

I hear Bonnie’s remark and consider mentioning the pigtails and clarifying that I was no more laughing at Johnny than I would an annoying horse fly. Good thing I’ve only had a few beers so far. I reconsider, and let it go at that.

Bonnie raises her voice over a thumping Creedence tune playing on the juke box, “How long has Hilda’s been in business, Ray?”

“Since ’56.” I hope that didn’t sound curt and uninterested, but I’m really worried Doc will doze off with a smoldering joint one of these days.

“Tell me more. How did you come to being the owner of Hilda’s?” Winking, Bonnie encourages me.

“Sure, I’ll be happy to tell you all about it. Be forewarned, I tend to go off track and ramble, just ask anyone here at the bar who’s heard the story a thousand times.”

“I don’t have to be anywhere,” Bonnie replies, hopeful.

Because we’re starting to get busy, and Ben hasn’t shown up yet, I opt to keep it short. Ben’s the kid who helps out Patty on busy nights and fills in on her days off.

“Hilda’s was originally owned by my Dad and his partner, Walt. When I was pretty young, my Dad bought out Walt. So, I spent school-year evenings doing homework here, and helped out in the summers. Then I took over for Dad later on.”

At the thought of Dad, I stop and stare down at my beer. There’re times I can talk about the old days and have fun with it. Other times, I get remorseful. Particularly when I think about my Dad’s long illness before he passed. I’ve lost track of the number of beers I’ve had. I must be on the fifth, or is it the sixth? I’m hoping the short version of the history satisfies Bonnie.

The momentary lapse didn’t go unnoticed by Bonnie. “Sounds like you kept busy as a child. Do you have any siblings?”

I shake my head. “No. Just me. My Dad worked hard to maintain the atmosphere where kids could dance to the juke box and play pinball machines, eat hot dogs and burgers. With more convenience-style options for food now, than in the days of my youth, the families started going elsewhere. It wasn’t easy to keep a steady grill master who was willing to work with a hangover on a part-time weekend job.”

A group of young couples have come in, filtering past us and heading to the juke box, all tethered to their phones. They’re disappointed when they realize the juke box requires cash and doesn’t sync with their devices. One of them heads toward the ATM machine.

“Do you get many young customers on the weekends?” Bonnie asks.

I’m relieved for the distraction to get my mind off my Dad. “Only on the nights when we have a band or a singer who has a following of local young groupies, like the one that will be playing tonight.”

“Who’s playing tonight?” Bonnie looks optimistic that we might actually have some good entertainment on the venue.

I have to try really hard at keeping a straight face when I say, “Meri and her tribe of Gargoyles.”

“Who’s that?” Bonnie still looks hopeful, even though she’s never heard of them. She must not be from around here, otherwise, I’m pretty sure she would have laughed.

I think it’s best for Bonnie to have the full experience, and spare her my opinion about tonight’s upcoming performance. Remembering I need to check on Doc, I excuse myself, “Sorry, I need to go check on someone.” I also need to pee, too, but no point in bringing that up.

From the men’s room, I hear car doors slamming, equipment being offloaded from vans, and escaping dogs barking. I catch a whiff of weed coming in through the bathroom window and holler out a warning not to bring the doobie in the bar. I hear a snigger in response. A young woman’s voice then taunts, “Don’t piss off the old man! I hear he has a mean cat!” She breaks out with a choking chuckle.

The group of stoner musicians are dragging the sound and light system into the rear of the bar by the time I leave the men’s room. It’s as if a bus unloaded snowboarders dressed in coven attire, they descend on the bar and scatter about. Ratted, tatted and pierced, a few carry the heavier instruments from the back and set up the stage. Two are brushing past customers as they run extension cords. Others cautiously place themselves among any remaining seats, with glassy eyes equally gauging us.

I make it out to the parking lot, where I find Doc passed out in her car. Staggering back inside, with Doc in tow (and now in better humor), both of us take up our seats.

I get Patty’s attention, and ask her if she’s heard from Ben.

Patty hurriedly says, “He’s already here! He’s just trying to get Pisser out of the dry storage room before he gets into stuff or pisses on the floor.”

Choking on her drink and laughing hysterically, Bonnie looks at me with tears in her eyes and blurts out in a loud shrill, "PISSER?" A few heads turn and look at Bonnie wondering if the crazy lady in the yellow suit has Turrets. Although embarrassed and surprised at her blunder, she starts laughing again. Once she catches her breath, she asks what Pisser is, and I explain he's the bar's territorial mouser.

I'm mulling over my beer. If Bonnie thinks Pisser is hilarious, wait 'til she meets Wally. I just hope he isn't grazing in the parking lot at closing time.

Trucker Bob stops by our corner on the way to the men's room, rubs his belly, looking hungry. "Is Mike going to be barbequing later tonight?"

"No barbeque tonight. Mike is on a camping trip, I can't remember where he said he was going, Dillon Lake maybe? I think he said he'd be back in a couple weeks."

I can feel Patty now glaring at me. "I'll be right back. I need to check on Ben." I wink at Bonnie, explaining, "If Patty doesn't get help soon, it'll be more than Pisser causing problems."

Trucker Bob gives me a disappointed look over the prospect of going hungry the whole evening. I suggest, "We can always order from Fred's if you want."

"Sounds good," Trucker Bob concedes with a nod, walking on toward the men's room.

Standing up, and also feeling the lack of food, I stabilize against the bar, trying to remember what I was going to do. I'm distracted by seeing more people file in for happy hour, some with kids in tow.

Ben emerges from the storage room, while holding a death grip on an angry Pisser. Then, I remember what it was that I was going to do. Relieved, I don't need to get Ben after all, I sit back down just as two eager and ornery looking boys from the campground run toward Ben, arms outstretched, calling out "Pisser, Pisser!"

At the sight of those boys, that big old Russian Gray tomcat tenses up. Pisser is having none of that! Pinning his ears back and barring his fangs, Pisser digs into Ben's arms, gains release and climbs over Ben's shoulder. After clawing his way to freedom down Ben's back, Pisser then transforms into a gray blur and disappears into the dark sanctuary behind the bar.

Big old farm boy Ben isn't looking like the school-yard bully now. Taken out by a cat. Extending two hefty arms, now lined in demon red, Ben's yelling at me, "Damn it! Old Pisser scratched the hell outta my arms again! Just look at that, Ray!"

"If you think that gets you worker's comp, forget about it, Ben. That policy was cancelled years ago." I can't help but mess with him. Ben isn't seeing the humor in things, and gets busy fetching energy drinks for the new arrivals, while Patty is manning the pour station.

Trucker Bob comes out of the men's room, nearly falling on his butt as he slips on one of Doc's tissues that must've fallen from the sleeve of her cardigan on her trek to the parking lot earlier. You can always find Doc by the trail of tissues.

Embarrassed over losing his balance (and wanting to distract any observers of his mishap), he hollers, "When are you gonna get rid of that damn cat, Ray? Hell, he's pissed so much in the men's room that it gags me to go in there."

"Shit, Bob, are you sure it isn't *you* pissing on the floor?" Patty yells in the defense of poor old Pisser. Always to the rescue of critters and damaged humans who need fixing, Patty's working extra hours to pay for her younger son's drug rehab program, yet again.

Just then, the bar seems to stop. Silence, and Trucker Bob is spared further admonishment from Patty. We feel the vacuum that's created as both the rear and front entrances open. The "Queen" has arrived.

The largest parking lot for Hilda's is in back. Regardless of the weather, Meri always uses the front entrance, even if she parks in back. This gives her the advantage of making a grand entrance. Like a queen greeting her subjects following a trip abroad, she scans the bar while nodding and waving to each of her groupie admirers.

Tonight, it's Meri night. Meri is the charismatic one, who travels with her band, the Gargoyles. When she's happy, she is Meri; otherwise, some other God-awful personality comes out. She used to sing mostly country and seventies rock. Seeking a way to pay the bills, and under the guise of "stretching" her creativity, she ventured into creating sleep music online videos, and has garnered a cult-fan base of groupies. I haven't figured out how that type of music could be considered entertainment. I'm guessing that's why her fans tend to drink caffeinated beverages.

Meri is the worst tipper among her other personalities, according to Patty, but she makes up for it by bringing in the business. In our quiet little town, when Meri puts her post on the Internet that she's going to perform, word of mouth spreads fast. Accompanied by a ragtag group of impromptu musicians, the Gargoyles. To those who have known Meri over the years, we have witnessed her personality changes, and understand why there's so much turnover in her musicians. I can only imagine how it would be to show up for a jam session, and Meri isn't Meri, but a different personality instead.

As expected, leading the front procession, Meri glides through. Regal in her cobalt gown and up do, she's dressed for theater. More of Meri's groupies have drifted in from the rear parking lot. Despite the dim lighting, the bangles on Meri's arms sparkle as she waves and blows kisses to her waiting selfies.

Bearing the look of someone under siege with a glint of awe, Bonnie puts down her wine glass and turns to witness the metamorphosis of Meri night. Her tribe of Gargoyles are bringing up the fray as they swarm. It isn't just the youthful age difference of Meri's groupies, but a raw energy, that brings a completely different vibe. With their arrival, the bar is transformed from the neighborhood hang out with a "honky-tonk" feel to something almost Sci-Fi. It's fun for me to watch the expressions of newcomers, such as Bonnie.

Cocktail glass in hand, Meri is floating among the high tops and laughing with her selfie groupies, all obsessed with photographing every moment. Not surprisingly, they are taking selfies together. The cougar in Meri particularly enjoys flirting with the young men and telling them she's old enough to be their mother. She lights up when they tease her about looking like she's in her twenties.

Families are squeezing into the already crowded booths and dragging chairs over. Bonnie asks if it's common for families to come to Hilda's. I explain that we get a few from the campground next door.

With a worried look, Bonnie finishes her glass of wine. She looks back at the booths asking, "Do they live in the little travel trailers there?"

I state my well-practiced narrative, flatly, "The sign at the entrance to the campground says it's for short-term camping, but the previous owner started bending the rules after the last recession. As a result, this attracted a few locals whose credit was ruined and couldn't afford renting elsewhere. From my observation, the majority of the campground's full-time tenants are singles or couples living in travel trailers or small motorhomes. However, there are a few families."

"Can't the community help them?" Bonnie asks, sounding like a country club do-gooder philanthropist.

I'm thinking that, if Bonnie's from the area, she should already know the answer to that. I remember she hadn't heard of Meri and the tribe of Gargoyles. Just about anyone in the area has

heard about crazy Meri. For some uncontrolled reason, I blurt out, “Well, if you live here, *you* are the community and should know that answer!”

Realizing my blunder, I want to overcome by doing what I should have done, by asking Bonnie where she’s from. Instead, I take a swig and wait it out, to see how my slipup landed for her. She’s a talker. Maybe she’ll offer something about herself instead of giving me the third degree about the damn campground.

Bonnie’s expression remains unchanged. She pauses for a moment, then responds, in a matter-of-fact tone. “I’m just in Menta Springs for business and felt like having a glass or two of wine. I saw the For-Sale sign out front. It made me curious. So, I came in.”

In town on business? Business people rarely stop at Hilda’s unless they’re salespeople of some sort. Believing that my first impression of her was right, all I feel like saying for the moment is, “Thanks,” which wasn’t a lucid response.

I haven’t a clue what I meant by that single word. Once, again, I just blurted something out, unthinking. I consider expounding with something like, “Thanks for stopping by; now I’m done talking.” That, at least, would have been clearer. However, I raise my hand and point my index finger up, signaling Ben for another beer. I need more fortification for the inevitable pitch about damn credit card machines, or whatever this Bonnie person is selling.

Ben trades out my dead soldier for a cold beer, and Bonnie asks him for another glass of wine. I’m guessing she’s decided to hang out through happy hour. I wonder when she’s going to get to the real reason she’s here, besides being “curious.”

Apologetically, “Did I say something wrong?” Bonnie asks, and takes a sip. Waiting.

My turn. “No. Go ahead. Tell me what you’re selling.”

“Selling?” Bonnie gives me a confused look.

“If it’s credit cards, forget it! We’re all cash! See the sign?” I point to the big block lettered, black and white, laminated sign that’s nailed to the wall over the cash register. Adding, “Hence the damn vintage juke box the millennials give me crap about because it doesn’t take credit cards or link with a damn app!”

Patty must’ve spotted me pointing to the cash sign and making my angry-man face. She brushes past Ben, stands squarely in front of me with her hands on her hips, scolding, “Ray, you’re getting hangry.” Patty to the rescue of Bonnie; women’s solidarity. I open the peanuts she shoves at me.

“Trucker Bob’s already given me his order to call into Fred’s. What’ll it be, Ray?” Patty hands over a menu and asks Bonnie if she wants to order food, which she declines.

Without looking at the menu, and just to shut her up, I say, “The usual.”

Perturbed with my rant about the juke box, Bonnie turns away and strikes up a conversation with Doc, who has moved to our end of the bar. Patty’s handiwork, I bet.

“What asshat goes to a doctor about bed bugs? Call the pigshit pest control for crissakes!” Good ole’ Doc’s voice is getting raspy. She retrieves a tissue from the ripped pack next to her gin and tonic, blows her nose, and sneakily tosses it on the floor. As if we haven’t figured out the source of all the tissues she leaves in her wake. Doc must be well past her six-drink limit by now. She always tells us to shut her off after the sixth, but that rarely stops her.

Without listening in, I can bet Doc had to bring up the latest patient with a “rash” who should have just gone directly to a “derm.” When Bonnie tires of Doc’s stories, her focus returns to me. Bonnie asks me what I think of the campground.

The campground, again? Why is this lady so obsessed with the damn campground, anyway? I try to be general in my response. “The last I heard, the campground sold a few months back. They

still have a park manager and a maintenance guy who lives on-site. That maintenance guy would be a full story, all of his own!”

I’m saved from further campground conversation, when our order from Fred’s arrives. The delivery guy works his way through the crowd that is now standing room only. After we’ve sorted out the food, I reach into my greasy Fred’s sack and take out the burger. Doc didn’t order food, but I spot her looking hungrily at my sack and sniffing the air. When I offer her my fries, Doc wastes no time in greedily grabbing it, reaching across Bonnie and knocking over the wineglass in the process.

Sack in hand, without even noticing the mess she made or apologizing to Bonnie, Doc stuffs a handful of fries in her mouth. Sliding off the barstool, Doc scurries off to smoke another joint and munch fries in her car. Doc doesn’t share.

Bonnie, looking deserted and disheveled, looks down at her yellow suit to survey the damage. Sighing, she says she’s glad it was white versus red wine. Closest to the pour station, Trucker Bob points out the mishap to Patty, who gives Bonnie a dampened bar mop towel to use for wiping her suit. Ben comes over to clear the mess, and replace the wine.

For Patty’s sake, I reluctantly begin eating my burger. This is to avoid hearing another one of her lectures about drinking all day on an empty stomach. At least I don’t drive home anymore now that I live in my trailer that’s parked in the rear parking lot. That last DUI was expensive.

Bonnie seems to have gotten over Doc’s behavior and is now eating peanuts while chatting with Trucker Bob. His mouth is full, and he won’t stop to talk. Knowing Trucker Bob, he just wants to focus on his food and not answer a bunch of questions. I snicker to myself and wonder when Trucker Bob will bark at Bonnie, like a big dog warning a trespasser to stay clear of its food dish.

Bored of her peanuts and Trucker Bob’s lack of conversational engagement, Bonnie’s attention is now fixed on Meri. When Meri starts moving toward another table, she catches Bonnie watching her. The two women appraise each other like jealous school girls, then lock in an unblinking stare-down. They are two felines, ready to claw, and I’m not alone in perceiving when they visibly stiffen. Chewing my burger and washing it down with my beer, I’m thinking this has the potential of being the best show of the evening. I can’t wait to see which one raises the first paw. Trucker Bob and I give each other a knowing eyeroll and wink, as the two ladies contemplate who has the best plastic surgeon.

We’re spared the catfight when a Gargoyle leaps from his barstool, and skips through the crowd, while shaking a tambourine and bumping into anyone in his path on the way to the stage. A powder blue spotlight snaps to life, casting a misty glow of another Gargoyle slowly beating the bongo drums to summon Meri to the stage.

The bongos stop. The blue light beam cuts to dark, then shifts to illuminate Meri, who remains among the crowd. While she assumes a statuesque pose in her radiant gown, her gaze remains fixed on Bonnie, but has morphed to indifference. She places her cocktail glass on the high-top, taking a slow, deep breath.

The bongos resume. Hypnotically lured by the palpating summons, Meri reaches the stage. The blue spotlight cuts, and a nonchalant female guitarist begins plucking away an eerie tune that evokes thoughts of an insomnia-inducing, dripping, faucet. Provocatively, an orange glow rises over Meri, swaying and singing a sultry snooze about the power of Sol.

Between trying not to laugh at Meri’s theatrics, and watching Doc’s waving of her arms while twirling on the dancefloor with the mesmerized selfies, I finish my burger. More of Doc’s tissues drop to the floor. Patty and I exchange disapproving expressions, and shrug over Doc’s sloppiness.

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I must've missed Johnny weaseling his way back up to the bar. He is standing in the place of Doc's vacant barstool. Curious about their conversation, but unable to hear above the music, it appears that he is trying to chat up a skeptical looking Bonnie. Ben brings two shot glasses over, at Johnny's request. Bonnie and Johnny each down a shot, slap the bar, and shout at Ben for another round. After the second shot, Bonnie face plants right into her peanuts. What the hell? To that, I could only roll my eyes and belch.