
What I Expected

by Jess Adams

When I asked Tena to meet with me on Monday night, I had hoped to gain a new perspective on the trade that I had practiced for the past year, and that she has practiced for the majority of her adult life, bartending.

That's what I had expected.

What I got instead was to step into the beer-soaked shoes of a person not entirely unlike myself, but at the same time, someone whose life I could not have pieced together even in my overactive author's imagination.

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To look at her, Tena is not an imposing woman. If I didn't know her I might make the mistake of calling her slight--which might get me punched in the nose. She is about five feet tall and fit, especially for a 38-year-old mother. The taut skin of her abdomen is showing under the red "My Place Tavern" shirt she has tied just beneath her breasts, and her dirty blonde hair is pulled back into the pony tail I have come to expect to see. She is a woman of constant motion and energy, traits attributable as much to her vitality as to the drug habit she nursed for the better part of her adolescent and adult life. The combination of her tightly pulled hair and vibrant personality give her the illusion of being in constant motion, even when she is simply sitting across the table from you--as she is now.

We are sitting in my bar, the Gin Mill, and between us on the oak-veneered table are two full bottles of beer, a Bud Light for Tena and a Michelob Ultra for me, as well as an ashtray that will soon be full of the Marlboro Red cigarettes that are ever present in Tena's mouth. I realize just before the interview starts that I don't know Tena's last name. I have seen her in my bar for the past year, know to have a bottle of Bud Light ready when she walks through the door at 12:15 a.m. after closing "My Place," know that she will always ask me to turn up the jukebox (no matter how loud it is) when Pat Benetar's "Hell is for Children" is playing, but never got to know her last name. She has always been Tena, more identifiable to me as, "Tena from My Place" than Tena Stilley, which is probably how she likes it.

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I came to the idea of writing about being a bartender after practicing the trade for the past 15 months. The impact it has had on my psyche and outlook has been immense, almost comparable to the impact coming to college has had on me. I thought that other bartenders would have had similar

experiences, but as is often the case, I was wrong. After my two initial interviews with other bartenders the thought crossed my mind to simply title the essay, "Bartenders are Unintelligent People." As a collective, we seemed to have no greater depth of thought than a pool of condensation on the bars we keep. I don't want to lead you to think that we serve no purpose, though. Bartenders always have great stories to tell, and anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time on the serving end of a jigger will confirm the fact that it takes a specific personality to go back to work night after night, even without giving a thought to the greater impact you have on your customers' lives. It is simply difficult to deal with drunk people for a living. However, an essay full of stories about beating drunks up, and girls behaving as their fathers fear they do, simply had all the literary weight of an issue of *Maxim*. In short, this essay was going nowhere except the garbage until I got to dive into Tena's world.

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Dive into Las Vegas, Nevada, circa 1979. Not the Las Vegas from the Travel Channel, more like the Las Vegas from the movie *Casino*. Where rules are rules unless the right person wants to break them, and games are played fairly unless you want someone to break you. The Circus-Circus casino is our backdrop. The focus of our picture, and most likely the focus of the primarily male clientele, is the black jack dealer with the blond hair, bod' and attitude. This is of course Tena, holding down a job as a dealer two years before the legal age even then. She and her dad blew into town running from the people he owed money to in small towns all over southern California. Tena claims to have had twenty different houses in the first fifteen years of her life. Her nomadic existence is attributed to her alcoholic father's inability to hold down a job, or desire to.

Either two years in Vegas, or simply two more years of maturity were all it took to make Tena realize that Vegas, and especially Vegas with her father, was not the place she needed to be. After spending a night at her favorite bar (whose name she can't remember, "probably 'cause I never got a check from 'em"), telling some Hell's Angels about how much she wanted to leave Vegas, she hopped on the back of one of their motorcycles and blew into Phoenix. (She found out where they were headed after they left town.) After driving through the morning, they arrived at Frankie's Biker Bar, and Tena liked it so much, she didn't leave for eight years.

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I looked at Tena across the table that now had twice the number of beer bottles on it and at least five cigarettes reduced to ash in the ashtray, with what must have been a plain look of disbelief on my face, because she laughed at my asking, "You got a job at the first bar you stopped at?"

“Yeah, I was hot back then,” she said with a laugh, shrugging off an accomplishment that dumbfounded this author.

“Unbelievable.” That was all that came to mind. Unbelievable that an eighteen year old girl would want to work in a biker bar. Unbelievable that the Hell’s Angels had packed her down to Phoenix on what was basically a motivated whim. Unbelievable from anyone other than Tena.

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Tena at work is the modern-day version of the Old West saloon barkeep. Give her a crowd of rowdy people, most of whom are slightly dangerous when they’re sober and just plain dangerous when they’re drunk, and Tena will be on cloud nine. I got the same feeling watching Tena work behind her bar that I got the first time I saw Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler sing in concert. Some people are put on this planet to do just one thing: for Tyler, it is to sing rock n’ roll; for Tena, it is to be in charge of a bar. To take either person from their field of expertise would be taking a fish from water. Not only would they be out of place, I have a feeling they might die.

To see Tena working for the first time, it might seem simply like she is having the best time in the bar, so they put her in charge. But upon closer examination, it is evident that she is working with the ease that comes with twenty-plus years of experience. When she moves around the bar her eyes never drop to the floor. She knows where every barstool, table, and chair is like second nature. She is always focused on her customers, but primarily on what her customers are doing. She is watching two men argue over a pool shot, and is between them settling the dispute before either can even think about how hard he would have to swing to break his cue over the other’s head. She is constantly looking toward the doors, looking out for who might come in that isn’t welcome, and for those who are welcome so she can have their beer on the bar before they even get there. She is simultaneously entertaining, serving, and controlling her crowd without ever breaking a sweat. It’s enough to make this bartender jealous.

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Tena has been calling My Place Tavern home for 12 years now. She decided to move here on another motivated whim, not unlike the one that found her on the back of a Harley in 1981. The motivation came about when in one week she: saw a man get shot and killed in his car for driving drunk into a line of Harleys outside of Frankie’s, knocking them over like dominoes; learned that her mother had passed away; and lost custody of her three-year-old son to her ex-husband who lived outside of Manhattan, KS. Her desire to stay in Phoenix and at Frankie’s had been extinguished, and now her internal compass was pointing East. So on a whim and very little gas money, she headed to Manhattan.

Once again she got a job at the first bar she applied to, although this time it was because she knew the owners. They had just bought the bar; Tena was the first bartender to work there. Since then she has seen fights, shootings (again), and people behaving in ways that would make a biker blush. To most people this would be an eye-opening experience, but to Tena it is just another day at the office.

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The table between us is now littered with eight beer bottles (three of mine, five of hers), and the butts of the better part of a pack of cigarettes. Tena has just described the basics of the last ten years of her life to me in less than 15 minutes. She has blown through the description of the past decade because, true to form, her ceaseless energy has bubbled to the surface and she needs something else to do. I thank her for talking with me, and she thanks me for the beers and heads off to the other end of the bar to play pool with some of her friends.

As I watch Tena walk to the other end of the bar, I wonder where she will be when I leave Manhattan. The day before our interview she was fired from the bar that seemed like such an integral part of her just days earlier. It seems now is the perfect time for one of her motivated whims to get her onto the back of a Harley and into another town. I know that wherever she ends up, she will find her way into another bar--this fish needs water--but in the back of my mind I know it will not be what I expected.