



Stan started drinking at Woody's in undergrad while finishing his studies in philosophy. He'd fallen into philosophy because he didn't want to be one of those guys who spent four years getting a bachelor's degree but only had "Liberal Studies" written on his diploma. When his last year rolled around and he had to quickly decide on a degree, philosophy was the only program he could manage to pull together with only two semesters remaining and the courses he'd already taken.

Stan enjoyed the ten philosophy classes he took his final year, but sometimes, after a day spent thinking and talking about Kant, Kierkegaard, and Hegel, he needed to turn his brain down from the

high-pitched buzzing those old men worried into him. He needed intellectual simulation, not stimulation, and that's why he started going to Woody's at the end of every week.

Woody's was a dyed-in-the-wool townie bar. The students didn't hang out there – they liked the campustown joints – places with free-beer Tuesdays and penny-pitcher Fridays and dollar-wells Saturdays. Woody's didn't have all that – the beer was always cheap so they didn't need to discount it, it was a little further away from campus, and a few pool tables were all the place could muster as entertainment. Stan liked going there because he could avoid the students, college, that whole academic scene, but more, because the people there didn't talk philosophy. Well, not traditional philosophy, anyway. Not academic philosophy. They talked the weather, and pool tables, and sports, and beer, and women. But that was all.

After he graduated with his barely-won philosophy degree, he applied for the master's program, because there wasn't anything else he could do with a degree in philosophy. He hadn't really thought that far ahead, you know, to AFTER college, and once he found himself standing there under the hot sun, wearing a cap and robe, clutching a diploma in his right hand, he didn't know what else to do. Plus, cramming all that philosophy into his brain his final year WAS kinda pleasurable, he guessed.

In grad school things changed. The other students going to classes with him now – his peers – they actually cared about the ideas and their zeal began to infect him. He loved the caffeine talks, the nicotine conversations, the mental focus it took to keep an entire system of ideas straight in his mind. Most of all though, Stan liked feeling educated. He didn't know if he actually was, but he liked feeling like he was. And that was something at least.

Two short years of flown time and he was surprised to find he really did enjoy philosophy. Not only that, but he was good at it. His grades were high, he was teaching "Intro to Greek Philosophy" to the undergrad kids, and academia was a decent life, as far as lives go. Stan didn't really have anything to compare it to, since he'd only had the one.

But alongside his time on campus, he enjoyed going to Woody's at the end of every week. After going there for a few years, he was a regular. The guys there expected him to show up every Friday, ready to play pool, ready to drink cheap beer and watch sports games on the old dusty 27" hung above the bar.

He felt a bit like he was leading a double-life. Not in the sexy, secret agent type of way, or even in the "I've been having an affair" type of way – it was more that he enjoyed being able to talk *a priori* knowledge all day with the grad students, and then talk pool geometry with the guys at the bar. He knew that the other grad students wouldn't see the appeal of Woody's – they wouldn't get along with the working-class guys at the bar, but also, the guys at the bar didn't understand all the things he talked about at school. They wouldn't know or even care about philosophy. Stan enjoyed being the overlap, the connection between those two worlds, like he was the slim purple section between the red and blue circles in a Venn diagram.

Stan wasn't a big drinker, but when he drank, he drank big. He didn't drink after school during the week, but when the weekend rolled around he'd head to Woody's and get loaded. He loved the warm kiss of booze: that easy conversation, that feeling of slurred camaraderie.

Every Friday night, after classes were over, Stan would stumble into the bar and share a couple of pitchers with three townies – Chuck, Mike, and Steve. He didn't know their last names or much about them and they didn't know much about him, but they were there every Friday night to drink and play pool and so was he. That was enough, really. Mostly, he liked the debate and conversations. They were similar to the philosophical debates in the classroom, but more serious somehow, even though the topics were frivolous things.

Stan would return to their corner from the bar and set a fresh pitcher on the table. Chuck would say something like, "That better be Miller."

"Bud Light," Stan would say.

“I don’t know how you can drink that swill,” Chuck would say, all the while pouring himself a glass. “Takes like dog piss,” he’d snort. “Hell, dog piss tastes better.”

“You drink dog piss?” Stan would say next. “Why? Besides, when I pay for the rounds, we drink what I want.”

The conversation would move on from there, Mike and Steve would join in, all debating the pros and cons of the four cheap beers Woody’s had on tap. They joked together and called it THE GREAT BEER DEBATE. Frivolous stuff, yet somehow important.

But it didn’t stretch his mind the way philosophy did and that’s what Stan liked about it. It wasn’t like a conversation back in the classroom, where the professor would always open with a loaded question, something like, “Can someone explain to me what the difference is between Hume’s primary and secondary qualities?”

Students would just start talking – no one raised their hands in grad school – all tried to answer at once, citing passages in the text and sometimes just reading them verbatim. But they didn’t have any personal investment in the things they were saying – it was just a game, just words to them, even if the game was fun. Stan enjoyed it, but it was different than THE GREAT BEER DEBATE because the guys at the bar actually cared about the differences in their beer. The grad students didn’t care about Hume.

And that was Stan’s life all the way through his master’s program and into his doctorate. It was his weekly routine, barely altered during the breaks between semesters and through the long studious years. The guys at the bar changed a few times – a guy would lose his job and not be able to afford drink, or get switched to the graveyard shift and not be able to come to the bar anymore. But mostly it was steady.

It wasn’t until close to the end of his doctorate than Stan actually felt challenged. Before then, all the extra hours he spent at Woody’s each week weren’t a problem, but writing his dissertation was burning so much time that Stan couldn’t afford to go to the bar every week.

Finally, after he missed a draft deadline, his overseeing professor called Stan into his office for a meeting. It was a Friday afternoon and Stan's mouth was already watering for Woody's.

"I don't know where your head is, Stan, but if you don't start doing the work, and doing the work on time, you're not going to graduate. You're going to turn into one of those middle-aged guys who leaves without ever finishing his dissertation. Sure, you'll try to work on it for a few months, but being outside the school makes your mind start to fade – you start getting interested in other things, always putting it off, and then you never end up getting back to it. I've seen some bright kids end up like that, Stan – don't let it happen to you. Get to work. I want the next draft on my desk by Monday."

After that, the professor showed Stan the door.

Even though Stan loved going to Woody's every weekend, it was easy to see that the professor was right. Stan headed home and spent all weekend on his dissertation. He had the new draft ready on Monday, but it took him all weekend, so didn't have any time to go to Woody's.

The months continued to pass, but now Stan's routine was different. He was finally committed to his studies in a way he'd never been. He didn't return to Woody's again – he stopped drinking altogether and focused on his work. He spent every weekend researching, reading, writing, and proofing his dissertation.

And after months of work, Stan was finally finished. He wrapped it up and turned his dissertation in for review. His mind was swimming with philosophy and arguments – all those ideas bouncing around in his head, making connections, debating, breaking links.

The months spent in his head and in books changed him – they made him feel more detached, disconnected, spacey, and although Stan didn't like it, he knew that it was necessary – the change helped him finish. Without focusing on his work and spending more time in his mind, he wouldn't have.

A few days after Stan turned in his dissertation, his overseeing professor called Stan into his office again.

“I’ve read this, Stan, and its fine work. You should be proud. You’ve really focused these last few months and it’s paid off. You graduate in a few weeks?”

“Yes,” Stan said.

“That’s great. Listen, I’m sure you have a little work left to do before then, but the hard part’s over now. You should take a night off. Go out and celebrate. You’ve earned it.”

“Maybe I will,” Stan said. “Thank you.” He left the professor’s office and went home, making plans to go to Woody’s later that night. But he got busy and ended up not going.

It wasn’t until the night after graduation a few weeks later that Stan finally found the time return to his favorite watering hole.

When he walked in the door the smell of the place hit him - stale booze and old cigarettes, even though the bar went non-smoking a few months before. But some smells overstay stay their welcome.

The din overwhelmed him, too – it seemed louder than he remembered even though it didn’t look busier than it usually was on a Saturday night.

Stan headed to his usual corner. Chuck and Mike were there, but Steve was missing. In his place was a new guy who Chuck introduced to him as Barry. When introductions were over, Stan got what he was expecting from Mike:

“Where ya been, buddy? Ain’t seen ya in a while.”

“Busy. Had to finish up my schoolwork. It was actually pretty interesting. I wrote my dissertation on Hegel and he had this fascinating idea about–”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya, Professor,” Mike cut him off. “You got stuff to do. You’re more important than us, huh, guys?”

Chuck and Barry cheered and raised their glasses.

“Now you here to play some pool or what?”

Stan nodded and started toward the bar to buy a pitcher. As far as he was concerned nothing was different – he'd only been away for a few months – no big deal – so why all the flak about school? The guys knew what he was doing. He knew what they did, too – Mike worked construction with Chuck – Barry was probably a new guy on their team – but they'd never made a big show of talking about it before.

At the bar he ordered a pitcher of Miller Light. Larry, the bartender, gave it to him, but the usual small talk was absent. Larry was all business.

Pitcher in hand, Stan dodged through the drunken locals back to the pool table in the corner.

The guys accepted the beer eagerly and within a few minutes it seemed like all was forgotten. But things felt different even though the routine was just like old times.

As the night went on, Stan was aware of a change in the room that he couldn't account for. The laughs didn't seem as loud or as hearty, and the usual warm feeling of drunken camaraderie was absent. Normally, after four or five beers, Stan would start to forget himself, to decompress, but even after six beers that night he didn't reach that transcendent place he craved.

All he could think about was the strange feeling in the room and what he was going to do now that he was done with school. He had a few offers from schools to teach, but wasn't sure if he was going to take anything yet.

The night dragged on, the pitchers kept flowing, and soon they were all too loaded to focus on pool at all anymore. Instead, they stood by their table and talked. Stan wasn't really focusing in on the conversation, though. His thoughts were trying to reconcile the disconnect he felt. So when he did tune in, this is what he heard:

Barry: Man, you know, I wish I could afford a pool table of my own.

Chuck: You know how much money we would save if you had a pool table? We could just buy a couple of twelve packs and play as long as we wanted.

Barry: Yeah, I know. I'd really like an Olhausen, but I'd settle for a Presidential. Those are decent tables, too.

Mike: You really want an Olhausen, though. They make a quality table.

Chuck: I don't know. My cousin's loaded and he's got a Presidential in his basement. It's old, but damn, it's solid. He just had the felt replaced. The thing breaks like a dream.

Barry: That's great. Man, I'd give anything to have my own table.

Mike: Yeah. Hell, I'd settle for an extra room to even put a pool table in.

All: *laughter*

During this whole conversation, Stan just stood there, feeling stupid. It wasn't just that he didn't know anything about pool tables so he couldn't participate in the conversation. That didn't matter to him. If he was interested he could learn all he wanted about them with an hour or two on the internet.

No, the problem was that he had no interest in this conversation, even though it was the same as every other conversation he'd ever had with the guys at the bar. He'd never really talked much about his dreams with guys at the bar, but owning a pool table felt like a silly dream to him. Throughout the past few years Stan had been working toward his dream – getting his doctorate. Once he took a professor gig somewhere, he could own a pool table in his basement if he wanted to. He'd have the money.

But a pool table didn't really matter. His dreams were about ideas now – solving philosophical puzzles that these guys with their pool table dreams probably didn't even know existed. What did it mean that it was so easy for him to understand them, but there was no way for them to understand him?

Something had changed.

Something was different now, and Stan's old overlapping Venn Diagram didn't overlap anymore. He'd just picked one side.

He didn't feel better than them, even though he had philosophical dreams and they dreamed of pool tables. He knew that his friends at the school would feel better than these guys, but Stan didn't care about things like social class. What worried him most was that he'd somehow changed, somehow he'd made a choice through his actions alone, without thinking, or the choice had been made for him. But he'd never set out to decide. He hadn't known he was making a choice at all. But now it was made, all the same. Things were different and he hadn't even realized it was happening.

Stan said good night to the guys and left the bar alone.

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