

The Night I Nearly Killed An Urban Cowboy

Gather round, pardners, and listen to how a city slicker found himself in a heap of trouble just because he ordered a drink and sat down to listen to the music. And gather round close—this could happen to you

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I am not what you would call a classic macho dude. In high school and college, I played bass clarinet in the band. When I registered for the draft, in 1956, I did so as a conscientious objector, not out of cowardice—if war came, I planned to risk death to render medical treatment to fallen men on both sides of the battle—but because I did not ever want to hurt anyone deliberately. Later, I backed off from absolute pacifism and decided I would be ethically bound to defend my wife and children and, by extension, a good many other people if they were threatened by bandits, maniacs, or Communists. Still, as a matter of principle, I do not own a gun, I didn't watch the Indy 500 for a year or two after Swede Savage and those other people got killed or caught on fire, I get disillusioned with football when I see my students hobble around on crutches. So I was understandably surprised the other night when I nearly killed a man at a honky-tonk. With my bare hands.

Not that I didn't know I had an aggressive streak. When I play squash, I fully expect to beat opponents of equal ability at least 70 percent of the time. One of my most memorable moments on the court came when a lithe and quick twenty-yearold (who had mocked my middle age) fainted from the exhaustion I had induced in his young body. Further, twice a year I have a dream in which I not only overpower a bully figure but beat him so mercilessly that onlookers—some of whom had originally cheered me—turn away in disgust. I wake up tired and a little ashamed, and I am courteous to people for another six months, except for occasional lapses into hostile wit. And I take pleasure in the fact that of the two behaviors most commonly encouraged by alcoholically reduced inhibition, my own impulse has never been to fight. But let me tell you a true story.

Rex, our eldest son, was home from college and, after a pleasant dinner at a neighborhood Chinese restaurant, my wife, Patricia, and I decided to take him to Gilley's Club, in Pasadena, Texas. As dues-paying members of Houston's culturally alert upper middle class, we go to Gilley's four or five times a year, sometimes to introduce visitors or newcomers to what we regard as a basic Texas experience, sometimes just because it offers more music, dancing, and beer for the money than any other place we know. Our sons are old enough to appreciate songs with tunes and understandable words, and we had been intending to take them with us for some time. Since Aaron Latham's long piece last September in this magazine had given the place national notoriety as the home of the urban cowboy and since John Travolta had visited a couple of times in preparation for a movie based on Latham's

piece, Rex agreed to go along on condition that we reciprocate by going to see Johnny Dee and the Rocket 88s the next time they were in Houston.

I wasn't really dressed for the occasion.

Usually, I wear some faded jeans and a crumpled hat with an American Legion poppy stuck in the band and a shirt I imagine looks authentic, but I'm fairly sure I don't fool real shit kickers. Still, I didn't feel uncomfortable about wearing loafers and slacks and a navy-blue sweater with a button-down shirt. Gilley's is an ecumenical honky-tonk, and almost anybody can find a few others of the same stripe. Besides, I was tired from a hard run a couple of hours earlier and didn't figure to get out

on the dance floor where the two-stepping cowboys might mark me for an alien and sideswipe me as they circled in their distinctive skating-rink pattern. So once we got inside the cavernous country pleasure barn, we worked our way up close to the stage, scrounged some chairs, and sat down to listen to the band. It was a good night for music. Mickey Gilley himself was in a home stand, and the regular house artists, Johnny Lee and The Bayou City Beats, always seem to give their best in

mano a mano competition with Mickey and The Red Rose Express.

As a highly trained social scientific observer, I began to take note of other patrons. I was particularly fascinated by the formidable couple immediately in front of us. I could see by his outfit that he was a cowboy: His hand-tooled belt said his name was Buck, his face indicated he was not given to philosophic reflection, and his 250-or-so pounds discouraged unprovoked aggression. His mate, of approximately

equal stature, wore a black floor-length knit dress with a rhinestone pin that complemented the glitter of her silver mesh slippers. It seemed to be her birthday, unless she always brings a cake and a bottle of toilet water to Gilley's. Despite the occasion, her expression gave no hint of gaiety or, for that matter, of any other recognizable human emotion. She might have been bored, but one could not be sure. One could only be sure she was present.

I assumed as a matter of course that old Buck was the sort of fellow who would not avoid a fight, but that would be true of at least two thirds of Gilley's patrons, male or female, and I had no more intention of angering him than I did of supporting the right to arm bears. I also knew he was drunk. Everyone in the vicinity knew he was drunk. He played his beer bottle like a clarinet and would have climbed onto the stage several times had Mrs. Buck not pulled him down by the pants leg. But he was clearly having a good time, and I was rather enjoying his company, though I did not bother to introduce myself or ask to join his party. It was, therefore, somewhat unexpected when he leaned over to say that I reminded him of a hundred-pound turd and suggested I move.

Like a lot of city mice, I carry some latent guilt into public social encounters. If I open a door and someone is coming through from the other side, I say, "Excuse me," as if the coincidental attempt to use the door were blameworthy and I were the culpable party. In the same spirit, I subconsciously finessed Buck's use of simile, apologized for crowding him, and moved my chair back a foot or two. When he repeated his request, I asked him just what distance he had in mind. He indicated he would like me to get out of his sight. I said, "I haven't done anything to you." This caused Buck to stand, pull back his chair, and repeat a single command: "Move! . . . Move! . . . Move! . . . MOVE!" I didn't challenge him by standing up, but neither did I move. Instead, I looked straight at him and said, quite deliberately, "No." He continued his menacing litany, and I continued to look him dead in the eye.

On balance, it made sense to do as Buck had requested. We could easily find other seats. Patricia, who has alternative evidence of my masculinity, clearly regarded this showdown as madness, and Rex— well, something else may have been going on there, but he is a pleasant young man, given to peacemaking, and I am confident he would have seen that prudence dictated retreat from such irrationality. And finally, I had not been in a fight for over a quarter of a century, when a series of boyhood defeats convinced me of the majesty of reason as a tool of conflict resolution. But for some reason, or for no reason, I continued to hold my ground. I made a quick check of my body and noted with some relief that though all systems were on red alert, I was not shaking. On the con-

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trary, I felt an exhilarating calm similar to what I had often experienced near the end of a squash game when my opponent was several points ahead but I had somehow been quite sure I would beat him because I was mentally and physically "in the zone." Buck was bigger, probably stronger— obviously meaner. I was sober, probably faster—obviously smarter. Except for wishing I could recall the fourteen pounds I had just lost on the Scarsdale diet, I felt it was not a hopeless match up. But as we continued our face-off, I had a growing sense that, wonder of wonders, Buck was not going to hit me. For the most part, I was pleased, except for the recognition that if he didn't hit me, I wouldn't get to hit him either. And then—sure enough—he stopped threatening me, stopped clenching and unclenching his fists, and walked away.

Had the activity of standing and talking, limited though his discourse was, cleared his head to the point of realizing he was out of line? Had he feared he might dreadfully hurt me and decided that would work against him in the long run? Or could it be—really, truly, wonderfully—that I had backed him down? None of the options seemed to justify total relaxation, but I kept looking at the band, pretending the blood rushing through my head had not destroyed my hearing. Patricia said, "He's right behind you." I said, "I know it, but

he doesn't have a beer bottle," and Rex added, "or a gun or knife." She was astonished. "I can't believe both of you have run a weapons check on him," she said, "I never thought of any of that."

Buck walked over to the bar, and our family therapy group went into emergency session. Rex said, "I'm glad you weren't a coward, Dad. I'm glad you didn't back down. If he had tried anything, I was going to help you." Patricia said, "If he had hit you, it wouldn't have been worth it." I said, "You don't understand," not adding that I didn't either. They wondered what I had planned to do if Buck had swung on me. I explained that I would have hit him in the windpipe with the curve between my thumb and forefinger, then used my open hand to drive his nose into his brain, killing him instantly. I had been taught this allegedly lethal combination of punches at age thirteen by a sign painter who had been in the war. It is the only lesson in selfdefense I have ever had, except for what I have picked up from pamphlets and television programs on rape prevention. Suppose, they ventured, that old Buck had not perished as planned? What then? I had never considered this possibility, but I guessed I would do what I had to: stomp his instep, knee him in the groin, stab him with my hatpin, and yell "Fire. "

The longer Buck stayed away, the better I began to feel about the whole episode. By the time he came back and took his seat, avoiding contact with my still-piercing gaze and behaving with a docility appropriate to the circumstances, I was a little sorry I had been so hard on him, poor devil. I was also a little sorry it was over. Protecting your territory, your woman, and your firstborn son beats the hell out of mowing the lawn.

On the way out a little later, I started to take a shot at the test-your-strength punching bag but was afraid I might break it. In the car, Rex said, "Dad, you were great! This is going to be a family legend. I can see us sitting around telling the grandkids about the night you stopped just two blows short of killing that guy." Later, Patricia asked what I had felt at the height of the encounter. I confessed I had been a bit edgy. "You didn't look it," she said. "You looked strong and mature and absolutely calm and steady. It was really interesting to watch." I subsequently gathered that something basic within her had responded positively to the whole experience. Women are like that, I guess.

The next morning, as I finished shaving and rubbed the last of my Chanel for Men on my gleaming torso, admiring the way my shoulders and chest tapered gracefully into the not unattractive ring of tissue at rest that crowned my powerful hips, I tilted my head almost imperceptibly, narrowed my eyes so slightly that only another trained killer would notice, asked in a voice edged with quiet defiance, "You talking to me?" and two-punched my invisible antagonist into eternity. -Hf