

Out of the Gate:  
The Woman in the Window Seat  
by Jim Gordon

Kip's Upstairs on Durant Avenue has been part of the Berkeley experience for generations of students. I arrived as a transfer in 1984 and discovered the poorly lit stairway, wooden chairs and tables and food hoisted by dumbwaiter. Sports memorabilia and TV sets adorned on the walls. Upstairs became a place to go with friends and solve the world's problems over beer and pizza.

A cross mix of Berkeleyans found their way up those dingy stairs: former students and future leaders, jocks and scientists, sorority girls and potheads. Game days, win or lose, brought in big crowds. Guys drew attention to themselves by clapping hands and laughing too loud at remarks that weren't funny while girlfriends feigned adoration. At night, a bouncer enforced an occupancy limit because students will pile into a bar until the windows bulge if you let them.

One day I noticed a woman in a window seat. I didn't know her name so I dubbed her "Crystal." She sat with one woman, two men and three pitchers. Crystal wore pressed jeans, silk top, black heels and braided hair. The other woman squeezed her doughy figure into tight pants and a tank top. The guys wore faded jeans and leather jackets, bellies straining against belts. I guessed they were thirty-something and it wasn't their first night out at Kip's. Fragments of their conversation reached me, mental wanderings about a camping trip, a vacation to Vegas and a desire to own a sail boat as the epitome of luxury.

I imagined them arriving as freshmen in the 1970s with the confidence and entitlement of middle class white kids. The women studied literature, psych or biology. The men wanted to play sports and become engineers or start a business. They all managed classes and studying between parties and sleeping until noon. Then their college days faded into blue collar jobs, forgettable offices, trips never taken. Kip's still gave them a sense of place. The jukebox still played rock 'n' roll.

For a few years, I continued to see Crystal at Kip's as her entourage dissipated. Friends drift apart when separate lives overwhelmed common interests and the same thing happened to my group. After graduation, I started a career in the Library but I didn't go back to Kip's for years until one day I went by myself.

Crystal occupied the same seat by the window. She looked heavier, clothes a little tired. Rouge made her look older. An empty pitcher guarded the table. Her hand was curled protectively around a half empty mug as she faced the unavoidable decision either to leave or continue drinking alone. When anyone entered the room her head snapped up but hopeful anticipation faded when she saw another stranger. The party was over and last call wasn't for her.

I walked over and she looked at me with sad eyes. She was a lonely character in a Scott Fitzgerald story, ready to speak if anyone would listen. I asked if she'd like another drink. She nodded and offered a weak smile.

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Recently, I visited Kip's Upstairs for the first time in many years. Tables and chairs are newer. Tall tables and stools line the windows. Flat screens replaced old TVs and the jukebox surrendered to digital music. A coat of paint in the bathrooms

covered old graffiti and presents a blank canvas for new. The old menu mounted on the wall was replaced by a flat screen rolling through happy hour discounts and the full bar has twenty-nine beers on tap. The rear area features a dance floor and karaoke starts at ten o'clock.

It was late afternoon. One guy around my age was at the bar sipping a beer and watching a ball game. The other patrons seemed very young. I didn't expect to see Crystal--I've forgotten her real name--but it wouldn't have surprised me. I would have bought her a drink. We would have chatted about the old days.

I drank a beer and my thoughts drifted backwards. People grow old even if they don't grow up. Kip's was a link to my youth and a time in life when ambition and expectation mattered and many things seemed possible. But those days are gone and this time I was the one who had stayed too long.

Descending to the street, I wondered how many others had come this way to revive their past and who would be next to find Kip's Upstairs and create their own memories.

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Jim Gordon graduated from Cal with a degree in American History in 1986 and retired from the Library in 2014. He remembers his first visit to Kip's as clearly as his last. Many of the visits in between are a little hazy.