

AT DEE AND JIM'S, YOU CAN DEPEND ON THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

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Dee and Jim's has one of those puffy guards on the edge of the bar. I know this because when I was sick last week and feeling wretched (and heroically doing my duty for this column by being in a bar instead of in my bed), I occasionally stretched my arms across it and rested my head in my arms. I was tired, alone and trying to gather enough information about the bar so that I could go home -- and I probably looked pretty pathetic.

Here's the thing -- of the five or so people in the bar at 9:30 on a weeknight, three came over to talk to me. Not because they particularly wanted to talk to me but because I looked like I needed it. "Hey girl," a woman called. "What's your name?" She introduced herself and commented that she knew what it was like to sit in a bar alone and knowing no one, and said that if I wanted to, I was welcome to join them. Later on, her friend walked over and offered me a pool cue. The bartender, in sneakers, a T-shirt and jeans, would occasionally pass comments my way -- comments I could respond to or not as I chose. These were acts of kindness, and I appreciated them.

Dee and Jim's, for the record, is not a fancy bar. Located deep in Austin's south, it's a haven for working-class folks and locals. The outside is covered in Christmas lights year-round. Coozies line the walls (regulars get their own), beer and light beer are the only alcoholic beverages offered (set-ups are available), staff checks on your beer's fullness regularly and the jukebox is real country -- Dolly Parton and Merle Haggard and the like. A sign posted on the wall lists everyone's birthdays for the month, and this spring the bar raised more than \$6,000 for Hospice Austin (and you know that \$6,000 came in hard-earned \$5 and \$10 increments).

Big snack bags of chips and faux Slim Jims tempt the hungry, the pool table dominates the small main room, and just about everyone who comes to the bar smokes. Most importantly, Dee and Jim's feels friendly and like it's a second home to a number of folks. The night I was sickly and stopped by, everyone knew everyone else and chatted with the same jokey intimacy that characterizes conversations between my housemate and me. Most importantly, Dee and Jim's feels friendly and like it's a second home to a number of folks. The night I was sickly and stopped by, everyone knew everyone else and chatted with the same jokey intimacy that characterizes conversations between my housemate and me. One Saturday night a couple months ago, about seven of us stopped into Dee and Jim's (my very first visit). Youngest by about 20 years, we watched women at table across from us, women with almost bouffant-big white hair and very shiny nails, giggle with their escorts. They were drinking and giggling and running that jukebox and having themselves a fine Saturday night, even going to the bathroom in pairs, to gossip, I'm sure. It was fun to watch those folks enjoying themselves as comfortably as if they'd been in their own living rooms.

Dee and Jim's has been open for about 24 years, but the bar is up for lease these days.

Though Dee's mother had the place in the '60s and '70s and Dee's had it since 1980, it's time for new folks. Dee says she'd like the bar to stay a beer joint, though she wouldn't mind if someone came in and added mixed drinks. Let's just hope they don't bring back women looking for a "date."

Before I go, I'd like to correct a few mistakes I made last column about Cuba Libre: The curtains are white, not red; there is only one recessed TV in the back room, not a few; and full entrees are served as well as tapas. I regret the errors.

(from box)

Dee and Jim's. 10 a.m.-2 a.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 3808 S. Congress Ave., 444-7788.