

OSLO GOES '80s BOHEMIAN AS BETSY'S BAR

MOIRA MULDOON

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I've been having a tantrum of sorts this week because I'm not rich. (Feel free to laugh now.) Teaching tickles me, charges me up. Most days, as class ends, I'm so full of energy and excitement I practically crackle. Even if I'm having a bad day, I can't wait to get into the classroom; once we begin navigating the complexities of critical thought and how to write with nuance and clarity, well, the world rights itself. It's just not a job that lends itself well to vacation-home ownership and first-class flights to France. Or paying off student loans in one mighty swoop.

So, in a fit of "why doesn't the system pay teachers like stockbrokers" pique, I called in the troops and we headed off to the bar. I curled myself up on one of the funky couches at Betsy's Bar, right in front of the Jack and Diet Coke my boyfriend had waiting for me. (Awww . . .) It was only 10 p.m. — and a Tuesday — and the place was wide open, so I could see the classic Atari games waiting for players in the quieter back room, could even see the game of Pong going on between two of the four patrons at the bar. The Billy Idol and Led Zeppelin and Strokes songs piped through the speakers were quiet enough that my friends could hear me clearly when I threatened to run away to law school.

We'd had happier conversations at Betsy's a few days before. After seeing "A Scanner Darkly" (good, grim) at the Alamo South, eight of us met up for drinks. When we arrived at 10, the choicest couches and overstuffed velvet chairs were ours for the taking and the coffee table made from vintage metal signs held no drinks but ours. Within an hour, the place was so packed that we could barely see the top of the red velvet Old-San-Francisco-meets-Old-West-bordello awning hanging over the bar, and our conversations competed with — and largely lost to — the James Brown et al on the stereo. And while the lights — colored bulbs hung from long wires that shone through stained glass windows and vintage scarves also hung from the ceiling by long thin wires — added ambience, they were bright enough to let me recognize old grad school friends with cool highlights and crisp summer hairdos whom I ran into.

I lost track of them quickly though, as waves of chic twenty- and thirtysomethings arrived around 11 and fabulously bespectacled women ushered in a crowd of funky hipsters a half-hour later. The service folks represented that night, too — I found out from a poet friend that he and compatriots stopped by after work (and about 10 minutes after I'd left). That notwithstanding, it was easy to lose sight of people; the ultra-sleek 3,800-square-foot Oslo has been converted into two separate bars: the "Moulin Rouge" meets gypsy-caravan meets Atari Betsy's Bar and the more upscale, sleek, DJ-playing, open-iPod-nighting, closed-Mondays-and-Tuesdays lounge Hi-Lo, which is connected to Betsy's by an internal door, though each has a separate entrance. And both, on a Friday night, were packed.

I've been looking for goofy cards to send to an uncle who's undergoing a second round of chemo. Rifling through the choices at Breed & Co., I found one written in a child's

hand, with a quote from an 8-year-old. "Sometimes," it read, "you just need to take a nap and get over it." So I did.

(BOX)

Betsy's Bar. 301 W. Sixth Street. 480-9433.