

STARS ALIGN FOR PERFECT NIGHT AT STARLITE

A GIRL WALKS INTO A BAR. . .

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Sometimes it all works. You're out with friends, celebrating one's graduation and another's recent job offers, and everything goes right. You decide spur of the moment to meet up and go someplace nice, someplace intimate with walls painted a soft blue. Starlite.

You get good parking downtown. You pass the downstairs bar, with its cedar countertops and tall cocktail tables. You slip through the main dining room, almost not interested in the patrons' cuisine, and head up a flight of stairs.

The upstairs bar, with its nooks and crannies, potted plants and wild, round, sunbursty mirror, is open. Everything feels more elegant than the porch at the old Starlite did, though this incarnation still charms with funky touches. The bartender catches your absentminded Thomas Hardy reference and you enter into a conversation. You notice the Pimm's up on the shelf, and a waitress begins wondering what it tastes like. Business has slowed down to a steady hum, so the bartender mixes up a Pimm's martini, one of the house specialty cocktails (you have, in past incarnations, tried the Lithuanian Rose with rose petals — too sweet for you — and the New York Ginger — yummy, but you prefer the whiskey without the ginger ale when it comes down to it). The waitress and you and your friends all taste the Pimm's concoction. The drink sits, undrunk for the rest of the night — not because it doesn't taste fine (it does) but because you don't like Pimm's. Not even good Pimm's cocktails.

One of your friends wants champagne, though the wine list is nice, and it turns out that they're discontinuing the bubbly half bottles, so she gets a half-bottle for half-price. The staff, having waited on Quentin Tarantino and friends earlier in the evening, is in a jovial mood. A cook comes up, chats with the bartender, engages in a singalong with your friend — they both know all the words to some Elton John song playing throughout the bar. The cook is so delighted that she sends your friend a slice of fabulous chocolate ganache and mousse cake with chocolate sorbet, which you all help eat.

The three of you admire the décor — the intimate tables where people can eat, the comfy, spare elegance of couches and painted white brick. You wish you owned dresses like Katharine Hepburn wore in "The Philadelphia Story." You wish you were rich enough to rent out the entire upstairs — all 30 or so seats of it, including the dining tables, the couches, the bench in the nook — and invite your friends for an open bar cocktail party. With perhaps some potato and spinach salads as appetizers. (Or, at the very least, you think, you could take a few friends to the downstairs bar happy hour, with discounted drinks and special happy hour menu — items mostly range from \$6 to \$9. But really, you want the upstairs, all of it, and a party. Add it to your post-lottery-winning to-do list.) You know it isn't always like this — you've been in when it was dead, when a less chatty bartender was on, with someone you used to date. This isn't the right place to bring

someone you used to date. You've even been in with the same friends, when the same staff were working, and it wasn't quite like that one perfect night. That evening you sang the Russian children's song your mother taught you. Someone else explained to you at least part of what it meant.

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