

Farewell to Dan's Depot

By ReadWorks

It was late on a Thursday evening in Austin, Texas, and I had just finished my shift downtown waiting tables. This Thursday night in April was the first night of the weekend, just like any other Thursday night in Austin. Summer weather had already arrived, and people were a little crazy after being cooped up for the winter. I hopped into my truck and headed away from the chaos to my own personal oasis, Dan's Depot. Dan's Depot was on a four-lane road that went straight from the heart of Austin to West Texas. Once, not that many years ago, Dan's had been outside of the city. But Austin's population had grown, and the city had expanded, until Dan's was swallowed up by high-rise buildings and skyscrapers. Dan's contemporaries had mostly surrendered to the urbanization. The scruffy restaurants that used to be Dan's neighbors had either moved away or shut down entirely. But Dan's Depot hung on, supported by loyal customers who had been going there for decades.

I've been intimately familiar with Dan's since I played my first show there. Like most waiters in Austin, I'm actually a musician. I spend my days serving iced teas and my nights on the stage. Dan's is a great venue for a musician: good acoustics and cheap. The woman who welcomes patrons at the door is Maude, who has white hair, pink cheeks, and a fuzzy cardigan. She also, coincidentally, happens to be married to Dan. Maude sits by the door, collecting tickets, her hands twitching. To look at her, you might imagine those hands twitching because of a desire to crochet another blanket for her grandson. But once you get to know Maude, you would know her hands twitch with the need to wrap themselves around the smooth, long neck of a bass guitar. That's the thing about Dan's: appearances can be deceiving.

This evening, the parking lot of Dan's was almost full. I slid my truck into the last free spot and headed to the door, giving Maude a kiss on the cheek on my way in. She smelled like her own particular perfume, a mix of baby powder and cough drops.

"How's it going, Maude?" I asked. I could see a crease in her forehead, suggesting that something was amiss.

"Honey, I just don't know what we're going to do," she said. "Our lease is up for renewal at the end of the month, and our landlord has tripled the rent. Even if we charged twice as much for the snacks and shows, we could never make ends meet."

My heart dropped as the reality of her words sank in. On some level, I'd been expecting to hear this news for as long as I'd been coming to Dan's Depot. After all, Dan's was now sandwiched between a shop selling yoga pants to people who could afford personal trainers and a luxury furniture store where even a simple dining chair cost more than \$1,000. How could this little live music joint survive with those kinds of neighbors? Dan's Depot was a relic from another time, another Austin. I realized that I hadn't actually responded out loud and was just staring at Maude silently, dumbfounded. She was beginning to look concerned. "Honey? You all right?" she asked.

I patted her arm, "Sure, Maude, I'm fine. What are y'all going to do with this place? Are you moving?"

She shook her head slowly. "I just don't know. Dan and I are getting up there. We're not as young as we used to be. The idea of starting all over... Let's just say it doesn't make me really excited. But don't let my worrying bother you on your night off. We've got a great little band from Abilene tonight; you'll like the slide guitar. Go get a seat up front."

I patted her on the shoulder in thanks and made my way to the tables near the stage. I sat and looked around at the audience. That was the great thing about Dan's. It was one of the last places where truly everyone was welcome. The old-timers were tearing it up, two-stepping on the dance floor, and a group of University of Texas kids sat munching on popcorn. Sitting close to the band were mostly musicians, like myself, who couldn't stand to be too far away from the action. Most of my learning happens at live shows. You hear some new musician do something on a guitar you've never seen before. You have to be close enough to see the musician's fingers on the strings, to see the magic happen.

Tonight, the music seemed even better than usual. Perhaps because the melodies were tinged with the knowledge that there would be a finite number of future nights like these, when I could pull up a seat to the edge of Dan's stage. Maude was right. This slide guitarist was exceptional. I've always loved the sound of the slide guitar. A gifted guitarist can make that instrument wail in ways that sound uncannily human. This woman was one of those gifted guitarists. Her fingers slid up and down the strings effortlessly. The notes sailed out through the room, ripping through the hushed conversations. The guitar howled, lamenting the loss of Dan's, the loss of an Austin where a joint like Dan's could exist.

I sat back, closed my eyes, and let the music wash over me. All thoughts left my brain, chased out by the screeching guitar, until I felt a thought nudging at the edge of my consciousness. I tried to shove it down and suppress it, but the thought was persistent. It wiggled and jumped, pleading for my attention. I gave in and considered it, cautiously at first and then with increasing enthusiasm. When the song ended, I got up and went back to Maude.

"How about I run the new Dan's Depot?" I asked her. She stared at me, as surprised as I had been by her announcement a few minutes earlier.

"Hear me out," I said. "I've got enough money saved to where I can go in with you and Dan as a third partner. I know the Texas music scene in and out, and I can get the best new bands in here every week. I'm young, and I have the energy to run a new place. We'll move it way down South Congress Avenue, where it's still close enough to be accessible from downtown but the rent is more affordable."

Maude was still staring at me silently. I began to grow uneasy: Had I offended her? I started apologizing. "I'm sorry. I know you're so attached to this place. I didn't mean to be presumptuous—"

She cut me off with a huge embrace. "Honey, I think that's a fantastic idea."