



Jen Burke Anderson

Situation Aktuell: Fear, Beer and Desolation in 2020 Munich

The young men in lederhosen had no idea what to do with me: a single woman wanting to dine at the Augustiner Bräustuben, Munich, in early March 2020.

This popular Bavarian *Bierhalle*'s high-pitched interior housed huge wooden booths with built-in bench seating wide enough to accommodate drunk humans leaping up onto it and walking behind their seated fellow drinkers to squeeze into a place. Top to bottom, it seemed engineered for boozy male bonding.

That night, what we still called coronavirus was already taking its toll, in threat if not in fact. Several booths gaped empty, and yet two waiters had to call a panicky, shrugging conference to reckon where exactly I'd go.

Talks were not going well. The Augustiner could not compute me, but it was too late at night and I was too hungry to simply leave.

In the end I was plunked at the mouth of an empty booth and left with a menu and a perfunctory little nod.

From there it was fifty shades of awkward. Anything you did in that place while alone felt idiotic — flipping through the local entertainment weekly, scrolling on your phone, folding your hands and staring into the middle distance.

And yet the *Käsespätzle* (little dumplings in a cheese and onion sauce) when they arrived were a revelation. Rich, piquant European food the way it was meant to be. On this snowy night the Augustiner delivered exactly what a lonely traveler craved.

Suddenly nothing else about the place mattered. What it would take to keep me away from the Augustiner's *Käsespätzle*?

I was about to find out. A few days later, after an afternoon nap devolved into an epic snooze that ended after 9 p.m., it was back to the Augustiner.

This time they knew me and liked me even less.

And in a move guaranteeing that I and my solitude would never trouble them again, they left me at the back bar.

The German word for dive bar is *Bumslokal*. The back bar was the *Bumslokal* of the Augustiner. Where the booths were stocked with cackling executives and young internationals just back from their Austrian ski weekends, the back bar was where they stuck Munich's forgotten men. There were guys at that bar who had been drinking since the Norman Conquest.

Eyes filmy, skin like roasted meat, they almost looked at me, the fresh blotch on their patchy radar. Possibly they'd lost coherence by conspiracy over the centuries, but words were hardly needed: *Fuck off, female*.

It's a good thing the staff never let me order dinner — the back bar was where service went to die — because I'd lost my appetite, even for *Käsespätzle*. I would make do with the jumbo Bavarian pretzels offered as guest favors back at my budget hotel.

I threw some money down on the counter and split. I almost didn't pay at all, but what if I had to go back there tomorrow night?

Home from the back-bar episode and gloriously peeved, I sat down and banged out the sort of faintly praising, roundly damning review that I thought would make a no-go zone of this long-beloved beer hall.

Great place, wonderful atmosphere, I wrote, *but don't show up as a single woman*. I detailed the whole evening, knowing how many single women traveled.

I got as far as logging in to my TripAdvisor account and pasting the review in.

But somehow couldn't hit Post.

It's normal to wish ill on places that treat us ill; but the likes of Yelp and TripAdvisor make a disproportionate groin-kick all too easy. I had too many friends in the restaurant industry, honest people who'd seen their livelihoods dented by some stupid customer ranting online, unconsciously giving vent to some unaddressed grievance in their life.

On this strange journey, I'd become that person.

I stood at my window and watched the snow twist down around the streetlamp.

Ready? screamed the headline of Britain's *Guardian* weekly magazine from my nightstand. Over the lurid, heat-mapped image of a face-masked woman, the subheading continued *Coronavirus: The Worst-Case Scenario*.

I was rambling through Europe to finish a book and investigate a new direction for my life. Was it really sexism that fueled the Augustiner's gregarious vision of life, their long tables of rowdy fellowship evoking the best of what I'd recklessly walked away from in San Francisco? Was it their fault that, as a loose-cannon virus loomed over this trip that I couldn't even consider ending, more than ever I needed a warm, familiar crowd to hold me close?

If I flummoxed the beer hall staff, I was also the least of their worries. I remembered their nervous eyes casting over the empty tables, the guests leaving early.

There it was, the bulk of the Augustiner across the street from my hotel. Even as my cooler head was starting to prevail, I observed my eyes pelting it with loathing. Its selective *gemütlich*, its unwelcoming cheer.

Traveling alone didn't feel adventurous anymore. It felt just plain stupid.

I logged out of TripAdvisor and went to bed, having cut and pasted that fanged review safely into my diary with the idea it could become some sort of historical artifact.

Within days Angela Merkel closed Germany's borders with Austria, France, and Switzerland. I locked down in Passau with no end in sight.

Munich may have been behind me, but a certain vision was all too clear: The Augustiner Bräustuben shuttered, perhaps for good. No beer, no laughter, no manly *joie de vivre* to accept or reject me.

And the back-bar men — were they locked down in the sort of social housing that afforded no garden, no balcony, and an isolation they might not survive?

The Augustiner Bräustuben. The cafés and bookstores, bistros and ice cream parlors, churches and class halls of my university town: still, dark, and silent as unknowing itself.

The dream that had surfaced from the worst part of me — weak, resentful, afraid — had come abundantly true.

Jen Burke Anderson has written poetry, essays, journalism, fiction, and drama in San Francisco for more than 25 years. Her work has appeared in *The Lowestoft Chronicle*, the *Noyo River Review*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Womankind* (Australia), *High Shelf Press*, *BULL: Men's Fiction*, and *The Fabulist*. She is at work on a mixed-media memoir centered around her time stranded in Passau, Germany at the onset of COVID-19. Jen looks forward to returning to the Augustiner Bräustuben with a hundred good friends.

Image: "[bar counter](#)" by [electricnude](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).