

## ***THE DEATH-WISH KID***

**By Michael Ventura**

**December 5, 2008**

Long ago, writing for a paper in a city by the sea, I lived very differently. Not only because I was younger but because I was terrified. Terrified of myself. Terrified of being a public figure (even my moderate fame freaked me out). And, let's see, terrified of relationships, of being alone, of being with others. And (a big one) terrified that I was crazy. My terrors seeped into everything but my work; I wrote like the person I wanted to be. (Which turned out to be a good tactic, helping me, over the years, to grow into the person I wanted to be). Nor did it seem to (most) others that I was terrified, because my terror didn't make me hide. It made me reckless. Nobody who took the risks I took could be terrified, right? Ha. Every morning I woke angry and afraid. Then I'd put on my act – Street-Wise Working-Class-Hero Writer – and hide inside it.

That I actually was street-wise and working-class didn't make the act any less an act. And, of course, some people (usually female) saw through it right away. One woman said, all of a sudden, "I *see* you! A timid Jewish scholar." I shot back, "Not timid." Nor Jewish, and my scholarship has been doubted, but it was "timid" I minded.) (Yes, I am timid. It's just that I refuse to behave that way.)

Now, at my advanced age, I've faced my terrors. Oh, I still refuse to fly except for emergencies... and I know I'd be terrified of Emma Thompson... and ever since an Arkansas tornado nearly swept me off the highway, I don't relish driving in storms anymore. Still. A bounty to getting older is that you grow tired of the uselessly dramatic aspects of yourself. That includes most fears. They kind of evaporate. It's not enlightenment, but it'll do.

But that's now, and my subject is then. Don't know how I wrote as much as I did because almost every night around 10pm, I was out the door, and, if I came back at all, it wasn't until well after last call. I usually headed for The Taurus Tavern in what was then a rough part of town. It was a small, smoky, noisy joint with a cramped dance floor and terrific bands never heard from again – Andy & the Rattlesnakes, A Band Called Sam, Lofty's Zebra, bands I was the only journalist to write about because less haunted people steered clear of this neighborhood. Killings on that block were famous, though not as frequent as fights and muggings. By definition, then, the Taurus was a club for the seriously haunted.

I'd usually close the joint, then hang a while with the regulars – Jackie the bartender, Lofty, Sam, Andy, Debby, Jane, Juke, Milton. Smart, interesting, haunted folk. Finally, in no condition to drive, I'd grab an empty beer bottle by the neck and head for the parking lot. Not that a beer bottle is any good against a gun or much good against a knife or even against two or three unarmed gents, but I'd learned in New York about predators. Street-predators are the same as predators in the wild. They prowl for the weak. If you look like

trouble, they await easier prey. They don't want complications; they want to score. I learned young to look like trouble.

I laugh at the image now: cigarette between my lips, beer bottle in hand, staring hard into all the shadows – the Death-Wish Kid. My dirty secret (secret from myself) was: I wanted the trouble. I just didn't want to be a sucker about it. Getting jacked up in a street fight seemed an honorable way to solve my tortured little problems, didn't it?

(As I write, I realize I might be exaggerating. It was a tough hood, but in memory I can see it only through the eyes of the drama queen I was then.)

Well, that was the place, and that was the guy, and one night that guy, me, was talking to this new face at the bar about literature. He had a good mind, but I didn't like his eyes. After a while he asked my name. I told him. “*You're Michael Ventura? Shit.*” Not an engaging response to my fame. He was nervous all of a sudden, street-nervous, guilty. “Hey, man, look, I hope you don't mind.” “Don't mind what?” “Uh, I, uh, get into clubs all over town saying I'm you.” That's what comes of keeping a low profile. I said, “But it didn't work tonight.” “Uh, no. Hope you don't mind, man.”

I was a hothead then, but it never occurred to me to give him the thrashing that, rightly or wrongly, I felt he deserved. I said: “I always pay the cover, man. Even here.” I picked up an empty beer bottle, enjoyed his very nervous response, said goodnight to Jackie, turned and went home – amazed, baffled, that anybody, for any reason, would want to be the Death-Wish Kid.

Like I told that faker, I always pay the cover. (Musicians need to eat just like anybody.) The Taurus was the only joint where I was known by name, because they'd become my friends. Other places, I preferred anonymity. So, months later, I was about to hit Club Lingerie and realized I had just two bucks. For once, I tried to “Michael Ventura” my way in. The door-guy said, “You're not Ventura, he comes in here all the time.” Could have shown him my press card, my license. Instead I asked, “What's he look like?” The description was nothing like the clown at the Taurus. I laughed and went home. If a fellow wanted to be me, why not wish him luck? I just hoped this faker had better eyes than the last one.

That was long ago. I don't drink less but I've grown up. (As my mother was fond of quoting, “For this relief much thanks.” It's the ninth speech in *Hamlet*.) I'm telling these stories because earlier this year, I learned that someone in Texas was being, uh, “me.” I don't know my informant personally and can't vouch for the story. It involved a woman and it got (let's put it nicely) dicey. So, in the interests of public safety, this is me:

I don't do any substances that go under the rubric of “drugs.” Never have. Not even pot. As a street kid I had enough sense to know the only thing I had that was mine for sure was my mind. Underneath it all I'm kind of a traditionalist. If I was going to fuck up my mind, it would be traditionally: cigarettes, caffeine, booze. Nothing else. Ever. So if the guy does any drugs of any kind, he ain't me.

Except for the occasional South by Southwest pass -- or if a friend puts me on the guest-list -- I still pay the cover. If the guy tries to “Michael Ventura” his way into a venue, he ain’t me.

Some years ago I had to make a decision: either quit drinking or stop embarrassing myself. Well... I like drinking. A lot. (And I think it was Big Boy Medlin who said, “Nothing in excess, including moderation.”) So I devised some rules:

1) Never drink and drive. I hardly go to clubs or parties anymore, but when I do, I don’t drink. Nor in restaurants. Nor at private dinners when I have to drive home.

2) Never drink with people you don’t know. If we haven’t known each other a while, the guy you’re drinking with ain’t me.

3) Never drink with folks you work with.

4) Never make phone calls or answer the phone when drinking.

5) Never send e-mails when drinking (except to intimate friends of very longstanding who know me all too well and don’t take me seriously when I’m foolish.)

I’m religious about these rules. Positively fundamentalist. I cause lots less trouble, I’m no longer a public menace, and it’s been years since I’ve had to wince in acute embarrassment at my behavior of the previous evening.

It takes some of us a long time to realize that creating drama for drama’s sake isn’t really living. Oh, you’ll stir up some experiences worth having when you look back on them – if you survive yourself. But stay hooked on the drama, and you’ll never know who you really are. Never know the naked experience of encountering who you really are and living it out for real from then on.

Oh, and here’s another rule that works for me:

Only get drunk with people you’d want around your deathbed.

***Copyright © Michael Ventura. All Rights Reserved.***