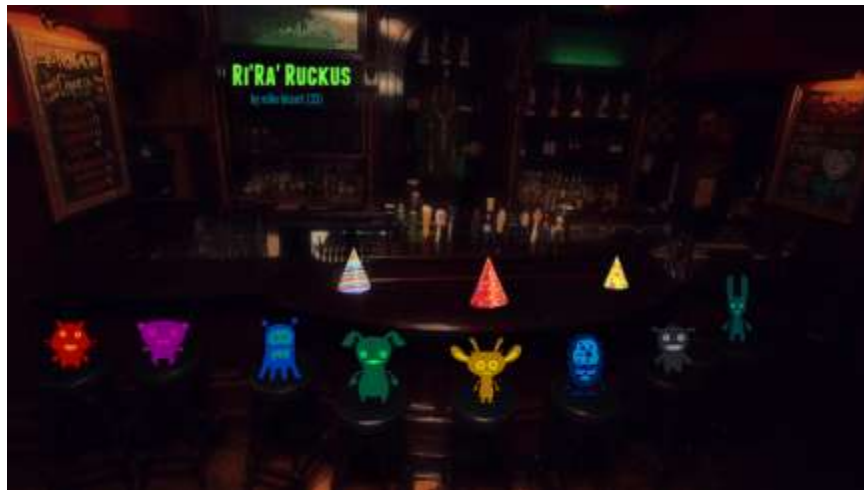


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Ri'Ra' Ruckus by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MAY 2016

It was a cool, cloudy, windy Cinco de Mayo (May 5th) that found me scurrying to get to RÍRÁ, an Irish bar in uptown Charlotte (NC, USA), by 3:05 PM, the start time of the Liverpool – Villarreal Europa League semifinal match. I took the Gold Line streetcar from CPCC (Central Piedmont Community College) to the final stop, across from Time Warner Cable Arena (now Spectrum Center). From there I quickly hobbled (lower back still not fully recovered from a herniated disc; sciatica still nagging) across the brick plaza to 5th Street and then crossed the light-rail tracks, eighty feet (24.4 meters) in front of a slow-moving two-car train.

Soon I was fast-limping it across College Street and up to North Tryon Street. A right turn and few more hitches in gait, and I was at the black double doors of RÍRÁ. I pulled the right door open and walked inside and heard the game. I looked at my phone before going upstairs. It was 3:14. *I hope I haven't missed anything. Oh, it's probably still nil-nil.*

There were two dozen or so LFC (Liverpool Football Club) fans in mostly red jerseys on the upper floor, already quite giddy. When I saw the score on the large projection screen, I knew why. It was 1-0 for Liverpool. *Wow, they're already ahead! Damn, I missed the first goal. Should have left ten minutes earlier. The story of my life.*

"Who scored?" I asked the core of the group.

"An own goal," a bearded, 40-ish, Caucasian guy answered.

"Villarreal were under severe pressure," a familiar, thirty-something, Indian American dude added.

“We came out like a blitzkrieg,” a twenty-something, husky, African American fellow said.

I just nodded, smiled, walked over to the front end of the bar, and ordered a Guinness Nitro IPA. I remained standing next to the Exit door, as it felt better than sitting. I settled my mind on the game. *Wow, Anfield sure is loud and lively once again. Klopp has got them fired up.*

The first half ended with no more scoring. There was an omnipresent lull as the LFC fans dispersed for cigarette breaks and private phone calls.

I ordered another beer, which arrived as the second half kicked off. In the 63rd minute, Sturridge got a nice pass from Firmino and scored a second goal for Liverpool with a well-placed low shot. Thunderous applause erupted. Stomping, chanting and singing soon took over the second floor. *Two-nil is a nice lead, but it's not a safe lead. If Villarreal score, they would advance based on away goals. We really need one more to be out of the woods.*

“Let's get an insurance goal!” I yelled.

“Hell yeah!” someone retorted.

Then in the 81st minute, Sturridge squibbed an attempt that bounced right in the box for Lallana to niftily shoe in. This time the reaction was even louder than last time. Everyone knew that we were safe now. *Villarreal now have to score two goals in the remaining eleven or twelve minutes. That aint gonna happen. We've got this. We're moving on to Switzerland.*

“Basel, here we come!” a fan in the back yelled.

The match ended 3-nil. A much-needed, well-deserved clean sheet for Mignolet.

We all then sang the LFC anthem, *You'll Never Walk Alone*, as patrons of a private Cinco de Mayo party began to trickle upstairs, somewhat startled by what was going on. *These soccer fans are bonkers!*

Soon the projector screen was retracted. It was 5:00 and our time on the second floor was over. Many of the LFC fans then left the pub, but some went downstairs for the public Cinco de Mayo party, including me. *Well, I don't have to pick up Monique (my wife, aka Agent 32) until 9:30. Really don't want to drive back to the eastside. Might as well chill out down here for a while. Maybe record a conversation.*

I surveyed the lower level. It was almost completely full now. *Wow, this place really filled up over the past two hours. I hope that I can find a chair. Tired of standing. I think that I can now manage sitting down for a while. I'll just sit on my right hip. Yeah, just don't put any weight on the left side.*

I spied an open bar stool and made my way towards it. There was a white guy in his mid-50s with grayish white hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses, seated next to my targeted azz- [sic] parking spot.

“Anyone sitting here?” I politely asked.

“No, take it; it's all yours,” the man, who kind of looked like the actor-comic Steve Martin, cheerfully said.

“Oh, thanks,” I said as I strategically positioned my pelvis on the cushion. *This aint so bad. I think I can do this.*

“You got a good seat,” he then said. “If you drink too much, you can just lean against that divider wall.” [on my immediate left]

“Yeah, you’re right,” I concurred. *This guy seems intelligent and just may be recordable-worthy. Let’s switch on the mic[rophone]. There we go. It’s on. I hope he’s interesting.*

“So, what brings you here this evening?” the smiling man to my right asked. “Cinco de Mayo?” *He really could double as Steve Martin.*

“Uh, no. I came for the Liverpool – Villarreal match upstairs.”

“I heard you guys after the goals. What a freaking ruckus! You guys scored twice, right?”

“No, we scored three times. I was a little late and missed the first goal, which was an own goal as they call it. A Villarreal player accidentally knocked it into his own net.”

“I see. I got here at about a quarter to four. I must have missed that one, too.”

“This tavern is the official Liverpool and Arsenal bar for Charlotte,” I informed him. “We share it. It’s big enough for both of us. If our games are on at the same time, they divide us up by floors. We get along pretty well with each other. We used to share a bar with [Manchester] United and Chelsea fans. It didn’t work out so well.” I began to chuckle.

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