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All We Can Afford Is Memories

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By George Capsis

Perhaps nothing has so suddenly dramatized the loss of the “old” Village as the sale of the building in which the beloved White Horse Tavern has sat unchanged since 1880. Generations and generations of young and not so young people have eased their way into a chair or booth there to sip a lager or two and talked—just talked—“Meet you at the White Horse.”

Now, we have learned that Steve Croman, the caricature of an ice-blooded landlord, fresh from eight months in the Tombs prison and still owning over 100 tenement buildings housing anxious rent-stabilized

tenants, has bought the building in which the White Horse sits. Will he kill it? The dead-faced landlord may just do that—mordantly seeking revenge for the slurry of hatred he has stirred from his decades of heartless harassment of tenants who, for protection, have had to form anti-Croman activist groups such as the Stop Croman Coalition and the Croman Tenants Alliance.

We have also learned that Eytan Sugarman, a newish innovative restaurateur who owns a chic pizza restaurant and several other “high profile” restaurants, has bought the bar from the two retiring owners and has had his application for a liquor license approved by Community Board 2. Will he save the White Horse? Will he turn it into a breathtakingly expensive pizza parlor capturing gob-smacking amounts of cash from innocent domestic and foreign tourists and leaving us old-time Villagers with only wistful memories of a fifty-cent mug of porter? (Oh, how many I drank). He kept saying “no” before the community board as he pleaded for the liquor license. His self-confident PR guy assured me that all Sugarman wants to do is “change the pipes.” I asked that Sugarman come and visit me at 69 Charles Street and was told that he’d “try.” Sugarman did not come so I have to write this without his face-to-face testimony. He offered in a *Villager* article about the White Horse that he plans to “maintain this legacy.” But he also said that prices could go up. Will those prices exclude those living on a fragile income from the bar forever?

The almost palpable memories of the White Horse—Dylan Thomas getting up after many beers and reciting in his Welsh nasal drone; and meeting my wife to-be. Can we save those memories? We can enjoy memories at no cost, but a cold lager may become too expensive—there is more than one way to lose the past.

The West Village is a rare enclave of old buildings built along cow paths and family farms; we have saved how our memories looked 50 years ago but can we save our apartments or our favorite restaurants when the costs move beyond our grasp? It is not just the change of decor that kills a great piece of Village history, but prices. Way back, I used to go to the Waverly Inn for charm and good cheap food. Now a plate of pasta costs \$50 and the charm has evaporated.

Andrew Berman of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation has come up with a unique suggestion, a last-ditch solution that has rarely been attempted before—to landmark the interior of the White Horse (this could start something new)—sweet.

On one of many evenings that I sat at the White Horse drinking porter with my former apartment mates (Atlantic City painter John Collins and Grand Junction Colorado sculptor Chuck Littler), Dylan Thomas got up behind us and began, in a sonorous voice, to enunciate his poetry. Some nights later, he met his death while walking home from the White Horse to the Chelsea Hotel. Not so long ago, when the mayor of the Welsh province of Dylan's youth came to *WestView* to film an interview with me, I wished I had walked over to Dylan's table on the last night I saw

him and offered to buy the next round. What makes a living landmark valuable are the living memories of those who have helped to make its history.
