

Café Ya Ya

At 5:00 a.m. on Wednesday, October 31, 2012, Chef Antoine Neville arrived at Café Ya Ya in the Treme' neighborhood just outside the French Quarter. He unlocked the door, walked in and stood frozen in disbelief. He'd been robbed. Gone were the cutlery, food processors, mixers, slicers, storage racks, pots, pans, and at least a dozen dining room tables and chairs. It was as if the thieves planned to open a restaurant and instead of doing the honest thing and purchasing their own equipment, they'd taken the cheater's way out and simply stole someone else's hard work.

Worse yet, whoever robbed Café Ya Ya had trashed it. BBQ sauce covered the walls in Jackson Pollack-like abstract expressionist swirls. Melting butter dripped from counters onto the floor, but what sent Neville over the edge was seeing his brand-new stainless-steel kitchen sink used as a toilet. The smell was revolting.

Neville wanted to scream with anger and weep with grief. Instead, he reached into his back pocket, pulled out his phone and called 911. When Marie St. Clair, the dispatcher, picked up the call and heard Neville's story she thought it was another on the long list of Halloween prank calls she'd been getting for the past two days. But the anguish in Neville's voice, along with the fact that she'd enjoyed many meals at Café Ya Ya, convinced her he was telling the truth.

After assuring him that help would be there soon, Marie called Dale Stephens, the shift supervisor, who immediately dispatched a team of crime investigators to Café Ya Ya. Then he called Cassie Morrisette, a forty-something bleached blonde mom of three. She'd been a cop since graduating college; following in her father's footsteps. Now she was one half of the best detective team on the New Orleans Police Force. The other half? Her partner Zack Daniels.

Zack, an ex-Marine was fast approaching forty. His balding head, square jaw, and growing pot belly accented his six-foot three frame. Zack and Cassie got called in on all kinds of cases, but this one was personal. They were regulars at Neville's restaurant; eating breakfast, lunch or dinner there at least four times a week.

Café Ya Ya, situated on Claiborne Avenue in Tremé's business district, had somehow managed to survive and prosper despite the construction of Interstate 10 that changed the streetscape forever. The construction destroyed over 500 homes and was thought to be the overall cause for the decline of the thriving African-American business district and the Tremé neighborhood. An historic landmark, Café Ya Ya was a renovated Creole Cottage from the late 1800's that still retained a good measure of old world charm.

The one story building, set along the front property line was painted a soft mint green, with red shutters and white trim. Off-street parking was rare in the district, so Neville's family had purchased the property directly behind it to create a small parking lot and an outbuilding for storage, because the café like most historic buildings in New Orleans was a few feet below sea level and did not have a basement.

Seventy-five years ago, Café Ya Ya was a casual community gathering place serving coffee, tea and light fare, but when Neville inherited it, he expanded the cafe into a full-blown restaurant; keeping the name as a nod to history and family. Now it was famous for its Cajun and Southern inspired cuisine. The gumbo, etouffee, jambalaya, and blackened redfish were famous in and beyond the city limits of New Orleans. That fame also spread to breakfast. Neville began each day by prepping the three most beloved items on his morning menu; creamy cheese grits with shrimp, broiled boudin patties with Tabasco honey butter on Southern biscuits and of

course, chicken and waffles. When his staff arrived, they'd finish cooking the breakfast items and then prepare the rest of the day's menu. But sadly, that would not happen today.

When the crime team arrived, Madeline Armstrong, the team's leader, and a regular customer, handed Neville a takeout breakfast from Cafe du Monde, shooed him out of the kitchen and went to work.

A few minutes later, Cassie pulled into the parking space next to the crime team's white van. She and Zack hopped out, rushed to the back door and met up with the team in the kitchen where they were busy collecting evidence.

"Whatcha' got so far, Maddy," asked Zack.

Madeline, dressed from head to toe in a protective hazmat suit, filled them in.

"First thing we did was sample the poop in the sink to determine the time of the theft. Looks like the dirty deed was done slightly before or after 2:30 in the morning." She chuckled at her *dirty deed* joke. Zack laughed. Cassie did not. Madeline went on. "With luck we'll get some DNA from it." She sucked her teeth and shuddered. "What kind of creep shits in a sink? Yuck!"

She swept her arm in a circle to encompass the entire kitchen. "We were just getting ready to tackle the walls, the floor and the mess on the butcher-block counter when you two showed up. Looks like the perp took their sweet time to enjoy a leisurely meal before trashing the place. See for yourself. There's chicken bones, gnawed ribs, and the remains of a Bananas Foster."

"Geez, what a mess, said Cassie."

"Yeah, but here's the stumper," said Madeline, "Look at that."

Cassie's eyes followed Madeline's finger as it pointed to the far edge of the counter. What she saw was a half-eaten pizza. "That's a stumper all right." Everyone who knew anything about Café Ya Ya, knew that pizza was not and had never been an item on Neville's menu.

"Let me take some photos before y'all deal with the rest of this fiasco." Cassie took a camera from her shoulder bag and began taking photos of the walls, the sink and the counter with her phone. When Cassie was finished, Madeline carefully picked up the pizza with a vinyl-gloved hand and deposited it in a plastic evidence bag.

While the crime team continued their search for evidence and dusted for fingerprints, Cassie and Zack made their way to the dining room. They spotted Neville sitting at the bar drowning his disbelief, grief and anger into his morning coffee and beignet. He heard the creaking sounds their footsteps made on the old wooden floor and looked up. He acknowledged them with a nod of his head.

"Hey, you two." He sighed, shrugged his shoulders and said, "Looks like you won't be eatin' here for a while."

"Yeah, I'm bummed out. I was going to bring my date here for dinner," said Zack.

"And I'll have to go to Willie's Chicken Shack for lunch." Cassie sighed. "You have our sympathies, and I know you know we have to ask you some questions."

"Have a seat. The thieves left the bar stools."

Zack and Cassie sat. Cassie turned on her recorder and asked him to tell her everything.

After hearing his story, Zack asked Neville why he didn't have an alarm system. "It would have gone off at the time of the theft," he said. "We could have gotten a jumpstart on the robbery long before you were scheduled to open the cafe."

Shaking his head, Neville said, “Alarm system? What for? Y’all know this here restaurant’s been in my family for three generations, ever since my Pawpaw opened it and my momma and daddy ran it. Most a’ my customers, including y’all are neighbors, friends, family, and the tourists who come for Mardi Gras. Ain’t never seen the need for an alarm system,” He paused. “That is, ‘til now.”

After listening to Neville, Cassie and Zack made a list of all the missing items. A half hour later, Cassie told Neville they’d finished *walking the grid*, and would be leaving him to clean up.

“Walking the grid? What the hell does that mean?”

Cassie explained that *walking the grid* was police jargon for examining a crime scene. Zack told Neville they were confident they had enough information to trace the missing items and catch the thief or thieves quickly, especially if they tried to fence what they’d stolen. As soon as they got back to the station, Cassie sent the poop and pizza crust samples to the state forensic lab for analysis.

The next morning, Cassie sat down, looked over at Zack who was sitting across from her at his desk and said, “Were you able to find anything that will help us with Neville’s case?”

Zack nodded. “I spent yesterday afternoon checking with a couple of the fences who focus on jewelry and art. They’ll talk to me if I’m not looking for what they fence. They said none of Neville’s stuff has shown up on the black market - - - yet. You got anything?”

“We’ll have to wait ‘til the DNA testing on the poop and the pizza crust is complete. I’ve got my fingers crossed that we’ll get something we can use. The lab said they’d need two or three days.”

Sure enough, three days later they got their first real clue when the forensic lab sent in their report. Between the poop and the pizza, it was the bite marks on the pizza crust that yielded the best DNA sample. And they'd found a match to one Thomas Jefferson Haynes.

When Cassie plugged that name into the NCIC (National Crime Information Center) computer system, she discovered that Thomas Jefferson Haynes had a long rap sheet . . . mostly petty theft. He was originally from New Orleans. His last known address was in Atlanta, Georgia, but he hadn't been there since June. That was five months ago. The detailed history on the man showed that Haynes had graduated from Martin Luther King High School, which made him a classmate of Chef Neville. Thinking that the connection was more than a coincidence, Zack and Cassie went back to talk to Neville.

On the front door of the restaurant was a huge *Closed Until Further Notice* sign. They could see Neville through the window. He was mopping the floor. They knocked. Neville looked up, opened the door, and told them to be careful walking across the wet floor. Once seated on stools at the bar, they brought Neville up to date.

"Haynes! He's the one who did this?" said Neville, as he continued to mop the floor, "Damn! Yeah, I know 'im. And I know he don't hold much respect for me. See, I was the one tagged him with the nickname Bones in the third grade 'cause he was so tall and skinny. He looked for all the world like one 'a them ghost skeletons hauntin' the crypts in the St. Louis Cemetery."

Neville shook his big head and chuckled at the memory. "Bones and me was ride or die runnin' buddies back then. Hell, it was like we were joined at the hip. We went everywhere together. We was on the football team. We'd bust a move and wave handkerchiefs in every Second Line we could find all the way up to high school. Weddins', funerals, festivals; you name

it. Me and Bones was in every last one. Then when we got to high school, we joined the First Line Brass Band so's we could show off even more. I played Tuba and Bones played trumpet. Man, we had us some fun." Neville shook his head and went on mopping.

"Neville, said, Zack, "why would he want to steal your stuff and mess up your place. Can you think of a reason?"

Neville leaned on his mop handle and said, "Oh, yeah, there's a reason. A real good one. It's Etta Mae Wilson."

Cassie looked up from the notes she was taking and said, "Etta Mae Wilson?"

"Yep. Etta Mae Wilson."

Neville told Zack and Cassie that he and Bones went from besties to frenemies in a flash the minute Etta Mae Wilson walked into their 7th grade classroom.

"See, me an' Bones both loved us some Etta Mae. She was - - - is - - -one fine filly. We fought like the dickens over her all through high school. She ignored both of us 'til she asked me to the Sadie Hawkins Dance in senior year. That was it. Me and Etta Mae got hitched the week after graduation. Bones left town after the weddin' and no one's seen him since."

"Interesting." said Zack when Neville finished. "That gives us a pretty solid motive."

"Revenge," chimed in Cassie.

"Sure sounds like it," said Zack, "But we have to find him before we can arrest him."

"How you gonna' find him?" asked Neville.

"We'll start tracing his movements, spending history and see if he has any online activity. If we find anything concrete, we'll be in touch."

Cassie told Neville to contact them immediately if he heard anything on the grapevine placing Bones in New Orleans within the past few weeks.

Neville and his staff spent the next few weeks cleaning Café Ya Ya from top to bottom and giving the walls a new coat of paint. Friends, neighbors and faithful customers brought them food since all the kitchen equipment was gone and they couldn't cook. Neville did his best to keep everyone's spirits up while trying to keep his own lifted. Some days he was successful and some days he wasn't.

Meanwhile, Zack's digging into Haynes's online presence, credit card activity and phone calls yielded nothing. Apparently, in addition to being skeleton skinny, Haynes was an electronic ghost. No credit cards, and no cell phone use detected. A search of Haynes's online activity on Google and Facebook yielded nothing, nada, zilch. Two weeks later, Zack's frustration was reaching critical mode when he got a hit from his police buddies in New York. Turned out that a string of fancy restaurants in New York City were robbed with almost the same M. O. as Café Ya Ya. The places were not trashed but everything else was the same. All the crimes occurred at or around 2:30 am with equipment and supplies missing; the thief vanishing into the night like a ghost, leaving behind only counters strewn with half-eaten food and pizza scraps. Zack asked if he could review security footage from the restaurants that were robbed in hopes of getting a clip of Haynes entering or exiting. That didn't pan out, because the thief, if it was Haynes, was dressed in black from head to toe and masked. But what did pan out was the DNA results on the pizza. It matched the result Cassie got from their forensic lab. It was Haynes.

Where was he now? Zack wondered, and could they find him before he robbed again?

His question got closer being answered when Neville called a few days later to tell him, "Zack, I got a call from Bones. Says he'll consider returning my furniture, cutlery and equipment if I agree to meet him at the café 2:30 am this Friday mornin.' Says he wants to make a deal and I have to show up unarmed and alone. I need my stuff back if my place is going to reopen. I can't

afford to buy new or used. Business was good but not that good. I don't want to scare him off, but I need your help. What should I do?"

"We've been in this kind of situation hundreds of times," said Zack. "We'll send over what looks like a cleaning crew tomorrow. If he's watching, and you should assume he is, he'll think you called them to help clean up, but it'll be one of our tech teams. They'll mount a camera and microphone in the kitchen ceiling. On Friday night me and Cassie will be in a laundry van two blocks away. If we sense you're in danger, we'll send in a SWAT team. Otherwise, we'll wait, watch, and listen."

"Understood," said Neville. He called Bones. There was no answer. He left a message agreeing to the meeting and assured Bones that he would be alone and unarmed.

Friday arrived. 2:30 a.m. came and went. No Bones. Neville calmed his nerves and stood firm, patient and steady; his 200-pound gym fit body leaning against the wall facing the back door. He remembered Zack's advice and exhaled. "Perps tend to show up late to make sure they aren't being *made* or *shadowed* by cops."

At 2:50 a.m. Bones slithered through the back door. Neville took one look at his scrawny skeleton frame and knew two things. One, he could take Bones down if he made a wrong move, and two, he knew Etta Mae had chosen him and was still his wife because his body gave her something solid to hold on to.

'S'up, Nev," said Bones.

"Dunno, Bones, you called me. You took my stuff and got this whole thing started. Now you want to give it back? I know you're not doin' this out of the kindness of your heart if you even have one, so, whaddaya' want?"

Bones leaned against the counter, stretched a long skinny stalk-like finger toward Neville and said, “One night with Etta Mae.”

Neville snorted, “Why you think she’s mine to give?”

“You the man ain’tcha? Cain’t you tell her what to do? Don’t you want your stuff back? And I can give you upgrades on most of your stuff to boot.”

“Where are you gonna’ get what you call upgrades?” Neville did not believe Bones one bit, but wanted to get his answer on tape.

“From a deal I made in New York,” said Bones.

“How do I know it’s not stolen like the stuff you took from me?”

“Cause, you got my word. Now do we have a deal?”

Neville paused. He knew Bones was lying through his teeth about the upgrades, but he let Bones’s offer and his outrageous demand sink in as he ran the scene through his mind frame by frame. Then he said, “I’m gonna’ have to run this by Etta Mae. I need to call her. That OK with you, Bones?”

Bones nodded his assent. Neville walked to the landline phone on the wall and dialed a number. In a calm voice he spoke into the receiver about Bones and what he wanted. He listened for a moment, then said, “Uh huh, Uh huh. OK, Hon. I’ll let him know.” He hung up and walked back to the counter.

“What’d she say? Is she gonna’ spend a night with me to help you out?” Bones was fairly drooling in anticipation.

Neville’s face did not give away his true feelings, which wavered between disgust, fury and an intense desire to laugh out loud. He spoke to Bones in a low quiet voice. “She’s thinkin’ ‘bout it. She’ll call back in ten minutes. Listen, Bones, it’s past your suppertime. I know you

must be hungry. Let me fix us a coupla' plates and something to drink while we're waitin' for Etta Mae to call me back. Whaddaya say?"

"Yeah, okay," said Bones as he lowered his scraggy body into one of the two bar stools Neville had moved from the bar to the kitchen. "I got hunger pangs real bad."

"So, man, what you been doing with yourself between stealing my stuff and trying to get my wife to sleep with you?"

Bones began to complain non-stop about his life since high school while Neville microwaved two bowls of leftover gumbo and rice he'd brought from home. He made Hurricanes, a drink with three kinds of rum, lemon juice, and passion fruit syrup. He passed a bowl and a glass to Bones, put the other on the counter for himself and began to eat.

Bones watched Neville eat from his bowl and drink from his glass. Then he insisted on switching. Neville shrugged and passed over his bowl and his glass. He took back the ones he'd given Bones and continued eating while watching Bones plow into the food he'd prepared.

Over each mouthful of food and between each sip of his drink, Bones told Neville about his love for Etta Mae. He'd never stopped loving her, he said. He promised to treat her right and return her to Neville in the morning. After all he insisted, it was just one night and Neville had had her since high school and fair is fair. He went on and on but with each sentence his words became more hesitant. Each time he plunged his spoon into his bowl, it took him longer to move the spoon to his open mouth. Over the next few moments every part of Bones's body began to sag forward. Finally, he stopped mid-sentence. His face plopped into his gumbo and stayed there.

Neville calmly signaled to the camera, lifted Bones's face out of the gumbo and placed his head sideways on the counter so he wouldn't smother to death. Then he walked to the kitchen

door to let in Zack, Cassie and the SWAT team. While the team frisked and handcuffed Bones, Cassie asked Neville what he'd done.

"I roofied him. Slipped it into his Gumbo and his drink while he was mumblin' on about his sorry ass life. It's enough to keep him out for a coupla' hours."

"But you ate from his bowl and drank out of his glass. Why aren't you out cold?"

"It's a matter of body weight. I'm too big. I didn't eat enough of the gumbo to affect me, but Bones is a lightweight mentally and physically." Neville grinned.

"You might've been pushing your luck," said Zack. "What if he didn't ask to switch?"

"Then I would've given your SWAT team a rest and taken down the bastard myself."

Zack chuckled.

Cassie's eyes held a knowing look and a sparkling twinkle. "Did you really call your wife?"

"Hell naw! If I let on to what was going on, she'd 'a come down here with a baseball bat, beaten that fool into a pulp and you'd be taking two folks to the pokey! Now, get the bum outa' here."

When he woke up at the precinct a few hours later, Bones confessed all. After he made his deal with Chef Neville, he was going to fence the rest of his haul on the black market. He told Zack and Cassie they'd find everything he'd taken in a warehouse in Mississippi. Curious, Cassie asked Bones how he was able to pull off all the jobs single-handedly. Bones told them it was because he planned all his moves in the middle of the night while, "most folks is sleepin'."

"See, I know I ain't that strong so I gotta' use my brain. At 2:30 in the mornin' I can take my time moving the stuff little by little using luggage carts. It's a lotta' work and I get powerful

hungry so I bring my own food in case the places I rob don't got enough to eat." He grinned and patted his stomach. "I may be small, but I gots a big appetite. I can eat me some grub."

"Why trash Neville's place after you cleaned him out and ate his food?" asked Cassie.

Bones curled his lip and sniggered. "I really wanted to burn the place down but figured a fire would bring too much attention 'fore I could make a clean getaway. Trashing it was the next best thing, and it felt as good as I imagine a night alone with Etta Mae would be." Bones shook his head and withdrew into his strange inner world.

With his furniture and equipment back in place and the insurance money in his pocket, Neville took Zack's advice and installed an alarm system *just in case*. Then he reopened Café Ya Ya and returned to serving his grateful customers.

About the same time Bones learned the only thing he'd be serving is a hefty helping of jail time.