That Manufactured Joviality

It was odd. The beaded curtain at Our Place Café was colorful from the dining room but black and garish from the kitchen view, even with the sun shining through. You would have thought it would be the opposite. The beads themselves gave the room an unnatural feel, in addition to the wall-to-wall office carpet. Ficus by the entrance. Hippy décor versus motel lobby. Miranda, my boss, had already set each table with napkin-wrapped silverware, a bowl of slaw, some sliced bread, and a little tab of butter. Even the smells in the dining room seemed to be at odds, warm bread clashing with disinfectant and pockets of funk that proliferated in all kinds of unpredictable spots in restaurants. Grime.

I stood at the front window of Our Place Café with the cook, Fat Sam, and we looked at an angle down University Avenue for festivities. A city parade was scheduled for late morning, but outside, the police had yet to clear pedestrians from the road, although pylons and sawhorses had been set up next to side streets so they could block it off when necessary. Signs up on the lampposts and parking meters let people know their cars would be towed at the owner's expense.

Fat Sam's belly hung so low that his apron seemed more like some kind of abdominal bra. He had shaved his nickname in the back of his head: Fat Sam. He had been training me for kitchen prep, coring cabbages, dicing carrots into matchsticks, mixing up dressing and stirring tubs of coleslaw.

"A parade," Fat Sam said, and had said several times already, as if the concept were new to me, or as if we were about to witness some grand conjunction of planets seen every thousand years. He told me there were going to be customers in droves. He said vehicles would pass that would be covered in decorations, trucks with platforms like pirate ships and covered wagons. People on these vehicles would throw candy and all kinds of trinkets to the crowds.

"Like a parade," I said.

Fat Sam looked at me.

"What?" I said.

"Come on," he said, motioning me back to the kitchen. He had two metal tubs of scrambled eggs keeping warm on the back side of the griddle. We had bread in every phase of preparation placed around the kitchen. Bowls of dough rising under towels, dough shaped into loaves, loaves baking in the oven, loaves cooling on racks. We had a pot of potatoes for home fries cooling on the center steel countertops. The smell in the kitchen, however, was so dense with flavors and pungent with yeast, fermentation, and thick with butter, bacon and eggs that it didn't even make you feel hungry. You felt full. So full you wanted to crawl under a crate and take a nap, fold up your apron and take a trip to REM-stage Tahiti, toes in the sand with an umbrella poking out of your pina colada, Fat Sam sitting next to you testing the tension on his Rubbermaid beach lounger, telling you the sky was blue because particles in space absorbed all other parts of the spectrum, sand was round due to eons of pulverization, water was less salty near the shoreline and every other obvious thing you could think of. Fat Sam broke my muse and told me to hurry up. The parade was coming soon.

Miranda, my boss, also owned Our Place Café. She was pretty, but restaurant work was churning her into pre-mature middle aged. Twenty-eight going on forty-five. Miranda was convinced the parade was going to save her business. I had only known her for less than a full day, but already I could understand that the parade was all she talked about. Even the day before, when she had hired me as an emergency fill-in, she told me she and Fat Sam could swing things themselves, but not during a parade. And the parade was going to be big. The parade was going to get her out of debt. The parade was going to establish the café as the go-to morning eatery along the strip. The parade was going to give her the upward momentum to establish herself with some pull at the Chamber of Commerce. The parade was equal to five thousand dollars worth of advertisement – money she would not have to spend on advertisement, and the allotted advertising money she could pour into the business. The parade was going to get her dad and husband off her back. The parade, the parade, the parade.

I didn't want to say anything but, privately, I wondered if a parade would bring in any real business. After all, parades move along the street, and people move along with them. If anything, you would need to set up tables outside the café to give people a chance to soak it all in, but the city had cleared the sidewalks of all obstruction. Or at least serve samples from one of the floats and scatter coupons like confetti. In my estimation, people move along with parades and then go home. They don't return to any of the places they might have seen along the way. People might make a mental note, but they probably make mental notes all along the way and then just forget everything. After all, most of the people at the parade would be drunk, or have to buy groceries after, or a

zillion other things to think about besides her café. I didn't want to say anything to Miranda, though, since she seemed to be all caught up in her delusion. Besides, she seemed nice, and it would be good working for a nice boss – I had not experienced that before, and I was curious. In a way, the place had already begun to feel like family.

The job at Our Place had saved me. I had quit school and moved to Gainesville to play music and, after two weeks, I was already broke. Not busted, but teetering. Close enough to busted where all of my thoughts and attention had begun to funnel down to finances. Thirty for electricity. Twenty-five for phone. Fifteen for gas. Seven for groceries. When my roommate, Charles Russell, and I had moved in, our landlord had given us a month free, and I had money for the second month, but we had grossly underestimated the cost of cleaning supplies and utility connection fees. I was down to a handful of cash for burritos and Hamm's, and scraping together two hundred dollars by the end of the next month seemed like an impossibility.

I had been promised a job at Schoolkids Records on University Avenue, but upon arrival the manager, an old friend from home, had succumbed to selective amnesia and left me beating the pavement a mile and a half up University Avenue, turning my hand into a claw filling out job applications all the way up. Do you have any experience? *No*. May we contact your former employees? *Please, no*. What days are you available? Are you in school? How do you see your skills functioning in a working environment? Can you thrive in stressful conditions? Where do you see yourself in five years?

It got so bad that I even stopped by the Gainesville Plasma Center for testing and was awaiting word on the salability of my platelets. Ten dollars the first pint, fifteen the second pint.

After my second week of futility, I spent a dollar-ten on a cup of coffee at Our Place Café and sat next to the front window to get down with some Fante. *Ask the Dust*. Ah, Bandini. Where's my Hackmuth? Of course, there she was, and her name was Miranda. She refilled my coffee and said she was the owner of the café. Was I new in town? Did I need a job? The following morning there would be a parade, and she needed an emergency fill-in. Could I start at six? I can wait until six, no problem, I told her. Six in the morning, she said.

Fat Sam said we still needed a tub of potato salad, and we could save the sausages for last, but we didn't want to wait too long. You leave one thing out, and before you know it, a party of fifty comes in and all they want is the thing that you haven't got. We run out of food during a parade, that is a mark, he reminded me. Fat Sam set the tubs of eggs and bacon on the stainless steel countertop, squirted a line of corn oil on the grill, then scraped along the surface a pumice brick that grated and tore at your tympanic membrane. Then he dumped a bucket of water on the surface, creating a mushroom cloud of steam, leaving water marbles dancing on the grill until they shrank into pellets and tiny silver grains. Then he squirted more oil and heaped on cups of chopped onions, shaping them carving the pile until they turned translucent and produced a deep smell of caramel. Fat Sam carved and shaped as if he were listening to music in his head, and then he dumped on a tub of chopped potatoes. He cut a quarter of a bread loaf and

stuffed the entire piece in his mouth, then cut off another quarter and tossed it to me. When he worked down the bread, he told me that a critic was coming out to the café. He was going to do a write up in the *Alligator*. "If he can fight the crowd," he said.

"Why's a critic going to be at a parade?" I said.

"Why not?" Fat Sam said. "Everyone's going to be here." He said he wished his kids could be there, too, but he couldn't be running around the kitchen while he was working. "You have any kids?"

"One," I said. "My roommate. He's twenty-one and worthless." I thought Fat Sam would laugh but, instead, he just told me he had three kids. Three boys. "Three expensive boys," he said, then asked if I was making enough money.

"No," I said, except that I had an appointment for selling my plasma down the road.

"You sell your blood?"

"Plasma."

"What the hell is plasma?"

"It's the fluid that your hemoglobin swims around in."

"Hemoglobin?"

"Your red blood cells."

"I know what hemoglobin is. Don't you need that shit?"

"Of course. That's why they pay you."

Fat Sam reached down and turned the heat up on the home fries, then squirted a zig-zag of corn oil on the potatoes and re-shaped them. He told me that some people

believe that your soul is in your blood, and I told him that some people believe that the moon is made of bleu cheese.

"Listen," he said, and told me that if I was hard up for money, he knew a friend who could hook me up with people in Starke County where you can make fifty dollars for taking part in executions. They hire three people to pull the switch. Only one switch was hooked up, so none of the executioners know who does the job. "Fifty bucks each," he said, "but one person does the job. I can hook you up if you're interested."

"Fifty dollars to kill someone," I said.

"You don't know if it's you. Besides, it's not killing someone. You're *executing* somebody. You're performing a service," he said. He took a tub of sausages from the refrigerator and dumped the heap on the griddle, then spread out the links. "If you don't do it, someone else is going to do it. It's just like a machine."

It seemed as if it happened in a moment but, outside, the street emptied, and pedestrians walked casually along the pavement ignorant of the white-and-yellow lines, and then they disappeared. In a flash, the first float appeared. From our vantage point in the kitchen, all you could see were black or blue pants and the bottoms of wheelchairs, but you got the idea that they might have been veterans of the Korean War, or maybe even World War II, and then the next float had a bunch of naked legs that you assumed belonged to bikini girls from their high school surf club, or maybe a sorority from the university, all dancing about because they were outside and you were inside. And then Fat Sam was right: a covered wagon.

And then there was a float that had an actual lion. It was a real lion, but caged, in a little circus box with iron bars, and the lion was either sedated, stuffed with giraffe meat, or smart enough to stay calm and wait for his chance. I had actually seen the lion two days earlier on the bike ride out to Schoolkids Records when I had cut through the woods behind the veterinary school. I assumed it was the same lion as the parade, because it looked the same. The beast I had seen had been in a similar cage, locked up outside. It was surprising and came as a shock that the lion was not under any kind of guard. I was able to ride up to it and press my face right against the bars and look directly into its eyes. Either way, watching the parade gave me a blue feeling. All of that manufactured joviality.

The chime on the front door sounded, and Fat Sam said they were coming in, the rush was going to start, but it was only Miranda going outside to assess the situation. It sounded again, and again Fat Sam and I bit, but it was just her coming back inside. It happened a third time, but after that we just understood it was Miranda, and Fat Sam tossed me another wedge of bread.

I had to admit, Fat Sam's offer sounded interesting. In the previous two afternoons I had exhausted every foreseeable opportunity, getting the same spiel from managers at the donut shop, burger shop, pizza shop, book shop, yogurt shop, art-supply shop. The Holiday Inn was promising with a possible gig as a banquet waiter, but I needed fifty bucks to put down for a tuxedo. I wondered if Fat Sam were telling the truth, if it were that easy to make fifty bucks up in Starke. I wondered how often they hired people to throw the switch, and if it would be enough to really supplement my

income, and I wondered if it were really a switch. But, certainly, it made sense that they would hire nobodies to carry out the executions. The judge would not want to have taken the trouble of going to law school, work his whole life to rise to the thronehood of judge, only to slink back down to the role of executioner. And it wouldn't be a bailiff, either – they didn't sign up for that. Nobody is going to pull the switch unless they absolutely had to. But I thought about it. I thought if it were a one-shot deal, I could take my chance. If it was a firing range, it would be easy. When the officer yelled "Fire!" I would hesitate. If the man crumpled, I'd pull the trigger. If he didn't, then I would hold my fire. But if it were a switch, then you wouldn't be able to game the system, and God knows I would be the one with the juice. I could not have that. I would spend the rest of my life having forgotten all about it, or trying to forget about it, then at the end of the line make it to Final Judgment, and I would have a death on my hands. That was a mortal sin. No way that was going to work. Either that, or they would find out twenty years later through DNA testing or some found document that my man was innocent after all, and then I would transform from killer to murderer, and I couldn't have that either. But fifty dollars. I asked Fat Sam if he had ever taken part in the executions.

"Oh, hell no," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because I ain't no killer."

"*I* ain't no killer," I said.

"Sure." He told me he didn't think I was. I didn't look like a killer. On the other hand, he said white people had less hang ups about killing people, so he thought he would mention it.

"Black people kill all the time," I said.

"True, but white people justify your murders. Black people do it and know it's wrong. White people murder and think it's okay if they got a good enough reason. Like this. Like…executions. White people are always looking for an excuse to kill someone if the reason is right. Somebody said Vietnam was all about an idea."

"You have drive-bys," I said.

"I don't drive by."

"You don't," I said, "but I don't drop napalm on villagers."

"You never heard of My Lai?"

"No," I said.

Fat Sam said that either way it was the same thing. If I was interested, then I was interested, if I wasn't interested, then I wasn't interested. All he wanted to do was give me a hand.

When the parade had passed, Miranda was still outside, and Fat Sam had me washing dishes, pots and pans, then scrubbing the grease traps, which were impossible. You can't clean grease traps. The grease evaporates from the griddle and cakes up on the metal filters and turns into a kind of gluey goo. Like sap. And you cannot wash it off. You can wash it with hot water, wash it with detergent, wash it in cold water and take to it with steel wool, and you can run it through the machine as many times as you want, but the grease holds fast to the metal filter. In fact, it hardens. Its molecular grip tightens. After a time, I noticed Fat Sam watching me clean the traps, and he told me to give him

the goddamned grease traps, that you aren't supposed to clean them to a tee, just clean them enough to pass inspection.

"Come on, man!" he said. "Toss me the traps."

I asked him if there was maybe going to be another parade, and he said there were not going to be any other goddamned parades. How many parades did I think they had?

Miranda paid me cash for the day. She could pay me five dollars per hour for seven hours, and she threw in an extra ten, which I assumed was a severance package. On the ride home from Our Place Café, the town snapped back in to form, as if the parade was just some kind of half-spoiled food it had to pass before feeling normal again. Even on my bicycle, I still smelled of scrambled eggs, funk and bread. I bypassed Archer Road and cut back on 34thStreet to the shortcut behind the veterinary school. I was hoping that maybe I could see that lion again. Miranda had also paid me in food. I had a backpack full of bread, quarts of potato salad, and one Ziploc bag of sausages. I knew the lion would like sausages, no doubt. Cooked or raw. Maybe if he were there I could toss him a few, see what kind of kick that thing still had in him. If he liked the sausages, I would let him try the other stuff. I had a half gallon of potato salad, and that stuff goes rank PDQ. Maybe he would like it. Maybe not. But of course, this time the lion wasn't there at all. What had I expected to see?