

Do You Do Hits?

I am a magnet for strangers. They approach me in airports, subways, and bars, and they tell me their most compromising secrets. I never solicit these revelations; in fact, I would rather they left me alone. As a compulsive reader, I wholly prefer the company of books. *The Iliad* and *Moby Dick* are such durable friends to me that I prefer reunions with Achilles and Ahab to making a live acquaintance. But strangers tell me their stories—why I do not know. And they tell me stuff that they say they keep hidden from family and friends. Perhaps I ought to warn them that I'm a very poor guardian of secrets, that whatever scripts I find useful, I will mold into tales of my own. So be careful what you tell writers—it may bite you in the ass.

I will now betray the confidence of a fellow named Finian McFaddle. I met him in a sandwich bar in San Francisco's Mission District. A waitress had just brought my order, a hamburger and fries, when he sat at the table beside me—a bald, middle-aged man with a chin so weak that he looked like a giant mole.

Do You Do Hits?

“How’s the food?” he asked me before I had taken a bite. His voice was thin and whiney, the voice of a practiced complainer. I suspected that if I had told him that my burger was raw, he’d have gladly bawled out the waitress.

Not waiting to hear my reply, he scooted his chair next to my table. “Sheesh,” he said, “the service in here is like waiting for Godot.”

Were it not for this hint of a literary mind, I’d have taken no interest in him. But his mention of my favorite play made a cloying impression on me. Otherwise, I would have made an excuse to finish my lunch in peace. I would never have put my burger down when he said he had stories to tell me. I would never have choked back a laugh when he said that his name was Finian McFaddle.

Sadly, he made no further mention of Beckett’s hapless tramps, perhaps because he considered himself no less intimate with the absurd. His voice bore a wounded assurance that the stars were out of whack, and that he had no choice but to bend my ear to set the record straight. He preceded each of his stories with a guarantee of his victimhood, a claim that suggested that Jesus alone was less deserving of his fate. “Now I was just walking around,” he kept saying, “minding my own damn business, and you aren’t gonna believe what happened to me next.” He described how he’d been a target of several robberies, and he said any crackhead with a knife or a gun considered him an easy mark. “Sheesh,” he said, “it’s not as though I live in Hunter’s Point. I live in the goddamn Sunset District—it isn’t even a bad neighborhood.”

I said, “Do you ever do anything else?”

“Whaddya mean by that?”

“Anything other than walking around minding your own damn business.”

Do You Do Hits?

“What are ya, some kinda comic?” he snapped. “Ya think I asked for it? Why are you acting like a prick when I’m telling ya sensitive stuff.”

I said, “Why are you bragging about being a victim?”

He plucked a napkin from the dispenser and used it to blow his nose. “It’s like what they say about rape,” he said as he balled the napkin up. “If ya can’t do nothin’ about it, it’s smart not to put up a fight.”

“Who says you can’t do something about it?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed like a furnace. “Don’tcha think I tried? The last time I got robbed, I enrolled in this goddamn class. A class called *Verbal Judo and How to Survive a Threat*. I found it on the internet and thought it was worth a try.”

“Was it worth giving up your martyrdom for?”

“Stop being a wise guy,” he said. “I gave the fucking class a try, but it didn’t work out too well. Shit, you’re just not gonna believe what happened to me next.”

*

Having resigned myself to being his hostage, I did not expect further abuse. I did not expect Finian McFaddle to ask me to pay for his lunch. But after he flagged down a waitress and ordered a Rueben and garlic fries, he said, “Lend me a jackson, buddy. All I got is a buck.”

I said, “That’s too much.”

He wagged his head. “You some kinda cheapo?” he said. “Do you think I’m the kind of person who won’t leave a respectable tip?”

Not wanting to force a scene, I gave him a ten and a five. “That ought to do it,” I said. “Not a dollar more.”

Do You Do Hits?

He tucked the money into his shirt pocket and snorted like a mule. “Ya got no savoir-faire, buddy,” he said. “That won’t leave much of a tip. Shit, I don’t know why I’m bothering to talk to you at all.”

After the waitress served him his lunch, Finian began to fidget. He took a bite of his Rueben and said, “The corned beef’s too dry,” and then he set the sandwich aside and picked up one of his fries.

“Lighten up, buddy,” he muttered as he popped the fry into his mouth. “You a reporter or somethin’? Ya look like you’re gonna take notes. I’m lucky the press didn’t crucify me for what happened to me next.”

“I left my pen at home,” I said, and that seemed to satisfy him. Shoving his plate aside, he started to tell me the story.

“It all began with that goddamn class. It was held in the Richmond District in the local YMCA, and I hadda pay an Uber driver to get there ’cause parking is a bitch. I also hadda shell out thirty bucks just to get enrolled—just to walk into this room fulla losers and give up half a day of my life.

“Well, the class was run by this woman with diarrhea of the mouth. She gave us a long-winded lecture that was mostly about body language, then she said if ya wanna stop being a victim, you gotta change people’s perception of you. Ya gotta take charge of the situation, so they won’t keep pulling that crap. Then she spoke about verbal judo, which is nothing but running a con. The trick, she said, is to fool folks into doing what you want ’em to do.”

“Like getting them to pay for your lunch,” I said.

Do You Do Hits?

“Naw, it ain’t quite as easy as that. She had us do some role-play so we could master the techniques, then she gave us each a certificate and sent us on our way.

“Now I got Scottish blood in me, so I know how to value a buck. I put the receipt for the class in my wallet—damn, that was thirty whole dollars. I was gonna scream for my money back if that bullshit didn’t work.”

“How did you plan to test it out?”

“I was gonna walk around, minding my business, and wait for some punk to rob me, and then I was gonna stare him down and put that crap to use. The proof of the pudding is in the eatin’—that’s what I always say. And speaking about eatin’, are you gonna eat those fries?”

“Why don’t you finish your own?” I said

“They got too much garlic in ’em—I shouldn’t have got ’em with garlic. Say, gimme yer fries if you’re not gonna eat ’em. I gotta cleanse my pallet.”

I passed my untouched plate to him, and he gobbled down my fries. He then belched into a napkin and went on with his story.

“No one gyps Finian McFaddle,” he said. “I’m too good at pinching a dollar. But I walked around the Sunset for five whole days, and nobody tried to rob me. So I started strolling around the Tenderloin where it’s easier to get rolled. But even in the Tenderloin, nothin’ happened to me. There were gangs all over the place, selling drugs and talking shit, but no one tried to shake me down. You’d ’a’ thought I was a leper.

“Well, one night I strolled ’round the Tenderloin ’til three o’clock in the morning. Shit, I was gettin’ so frustrated, I was about to tear up the receipt. But just before I called it quits and dialed myself an Uber, this kid wandered up to me, and he was holding a

Do You Do Hits?

handgun. If it weren't for the gun, I'd 'a' laughed at him—he was just some sad little bozo, and his pants were draggin' so bad that I half-expected him to trip. 'Your wallet, please, mister,' he said, and I almost felt sorry for him. His eyes were bloodshot and crusty, his cheeks were acne-scarred, and his gun, a nine mil Glock, was shakin' in his hand.

"So you want my wallet?" I said to him, and he nodded like a parrot.

"My baby momma she's sick," he explained. 'She needs some medicine. I wouldn't be doing this, mister, if it weren't for my baby momma.'

"I handed the punk my wallet and he stuffed it into his pocket, and that's when I decided to change his perception of me. 'Do you do hits?' I asked him. 'I'm lookin' to hire a hitman. There're some folks I wanna have wasted 'cause they keep on fucking with me.'

"Well, the little punk just looked at me like I was speaking Chinese. 'I just want some medicine, mister,' he said. 'It's for my baby mama.'

"I said, 'I'm gonna ask you one more time, so get the shit outta yer ears. What I wanna know is if can I pay you to do hits.'

"Mister,' he said, 'I don't know nothin' 'bout that.'

"Then you're worth nothing to *me*,' I said. 'Now you can stick me up for chump change, or you can earn yourself some real money. How are you gonna play it, son? I haven't got all night.'

"The kid just looked at me funny like he still didn't know what to say. Even for a robber, he didn't seem particularly bright. 'Who you be, mister?' he finally asked, and he started chewin' his lip. His teeth looked kinda old like he'd been smokin' too much crack.

"Now I hadda tell him my real name 'cause my wallet was in his pants pocket. He had only to check my driver's license to find out if I was lying to him. So I looked at him like

Do You Do Hits?

he was a bug and I was thinkin' 'bout squashin' him flat. 'My name is Finian McFaddle,' I said, 'and I'd like my wallet back. I also wanna know if you got the balls to do hits.'"

*

When our waitress passed by our table, Finian ordered a glass of iced tea. "Make it sweet, blondie," he said, "and don't skimp on the ice."

He asked me to lend him another five dollars, and he cursed when I shook my head. "What ya loaned me will leave 'bout a dollar once I pay the check. Even if I throw in the buck in my wallet, that won't be much of a tip. One plus one is just two, buddy boy—ya want me to look like a miser?"

"Just tell me the rest of the story," I said.

"Paaatience, paaatience," he crooned. "All this goddamn talking has given me cotton mouth."

The waitress returned with a glass of iced tea and planted it on our table, and Finian took a lingering sip then wrinkled his mouth like a prune. "*Paw*," he snapped. "It's too damn sweet. She musta put cough syrup in it."

"Are you going to finish your story?" I said.

"Quit naggin' me, buddy," he snapped. "I'll finish it a damn sight quicker if ya show some courtesy."

"Now the little punk handed my wallet back and he said, 'Who you want dusted, mister?' I told him he could start by smoking the mayor, and I'd pay him five grand for that. I ain't sure why I put a hit on the mayor—that was kind of a rash thing to do. But in the heat of the moment, I couldn't think of any other way to take charge."

Do You Do Hits?

“The kid’s eyes got bigger ’an doorknobs, and he put his gun back in his pocket. He said, ‘What choo doin’ in the Tenderloin, mister? If you got that kinda money, you could hire some Mafia dude.’

“I guess the kid needed confidence, so I decided to stroke his ego. I invited him to this all-night diner so we could discuss a deal. After we both ordered breakfast, I said I’d give him a trial. I told him to return to the diner tomorrow night, and I’d hand him a thousand dollars. I said he would get the other four grand when he took care of the mayor. What I didn’t tell him was that I’d be waiting for him with the cops.

“Ya know, that kid was so fucking dumb that I got him to pay for my breakfast. I told him I needed the cash in my wallet to take an Uber to the bank. I said I expected great things from him, and we bumped fists to seal the deal. And then I went home and had the best night’s sleep I had in years.”

*

Pausing in his monologue, Finian pointed at my plate. “Ya gonna eat that burger?” he asked me. “Ya haven’t taken a bite.”

“You may as well have it,” I said. “You’ve already eaten my fries.”

“Don’t act so high and mighty,” he snapped. “It’s gotta be cold by now.”

He called the waitress back to our table and handed her my plate. “Give it a sizzle, sugar tits,” he said. “I like my hamburgers hot.”

“Will you finish the story?” I asked him. “What happened to that kid?”

“Can ya wait another damn minute?” he said. “I gotta take a piss.”

Before I could answer, he rose from the table and shuffled towards the john. I considered leaving the restaurant, so he wouldn’t squeeze me for a bigger tip, but he owed

Do You Do Hits?

me the rest of the story—I had paid for it with my lunch. So I suppressed my survival instincts and waited for him to return.

“Lemme give ya a warning,” he said as he ambled back to the table. “Someone pissed on the floor of that bathroom. Ya don’ wanna go in there.”

“Your burger is ready,” I told him. “Sugar tits warmed it up.”

He sat back down at the table and picked the burger up with one hand. “Ya mind if I eat it first?” he said. “I don’t want it to cool while I’m talking.”

He took a bite and made a face. “She overcooked it,” he grouched, but he devoured the burger in several more bites than leaned back in his chair.

“All right,” he said, “here’s what happened. The next day I went to the Tenderloin Police Station to set a trap for the kid. I walked into the station and I bellied up to the counter, and I saw this gray-haired sergeant nodding off behind the plexiglass. So I hammered on the plexiglass to wake the asshole up, and I told him, ‘My name is Finian McFaddle. I wanna file a report.’

“Well, the cop stared at me like he knew my name, and he handed me a report form, and while I was scribblin’, this dyke detective came waddling up to me. She was holdin’ her cuffs in a pistol grip and clicking the strands into place, and she looked so goddamn grouchy that she hadda be on the rag. I said to her, ‘Sister, would ya mind not breathin’ down my neck?’ And she said, ‘Would you mind dropping the pen, sir, and putting your hands behind your back?’

“Well, before I knew it, I was wearin’ the bracelets and she was reading me my rights. I said to her, ‘What’s the charge?’ and ya wanna know what she said? She said, ‘Conspiring to assassinate an elected official. We have a witness, sir.’

Do You Do Hits?

“I said, ‘Who do ya think you’re messing with, sister—some rube off a turnip truck? I’ve got a master’s degree in English, and I’m gonna sue you seven times over.’

“The dyke said, ‘Congratulations, sir. I have a doctorate in jurisprudence.’ The bitch thanked me for coming into the station and saving the cops some trouble. She said the city’s tactical unit was tryin’ to hunt me down.

“She fitted me with leg irons then frog-marched me out to this squad car, and she told me to watch my mouth as she shoved me into the back seat. I told her I needed to take a pee, but she didn’t give a shit. She just sat there waiting for backup, and a whole buncha cop cars pulled up. Next thing ya know, I was getting booked in that jail on Seventh Street.”

*

Digging his thumbnail into a toothpick, Finian peeled off a sliver of wood. He then used the sliver to pick his teeth, smacking his lips as he worked. “The trouble with toothpicks,” he said, “is that they make ’em too damn big.”

After paying his check with the money I gave him, he kept on picking his teeth. When the waitress handed him his change, he gave her a sportive wink.

“How did they find a witness?” I asked. “There was only you and the kid.”

“The kid *was* the witness?” said Finian. “Can you believe that crap? He went to the Tenderloin station and dropped a dime on me.”

His nostrils flared as he told me this, and he waited for me to reply. I said, “You shouldn’t have hired the kid without checking his resumé.”

“Yeah,” said Finian, still picking his teeth. “He was just a little pussy. Ya know, he was even sitting in court when I went for my arraignment. The judge told the little fucker that he was a mighty fine citizen.”

Do You Do Hits?

I said, "Why would some punk in the Tenderloin want to be a snitch?"

"All I can say," said Finian, "is that one and one ain't always two. But at least the kid came to his senses by the time my case went to trial. He didn't show up for the hearing, and the court couldn't locate him. But I spent three months in the slammer before the judge dismissed the case."

"Maybe the gangs put a hit on the kid."

"Naw, that ain't what happened. After they let me outta the hoosegow, the little shit robbed me again. It was only a coupla weeks later and I was sittin' in Golden Gate Park, and that same damn kid came up to me and pulled a gun outta his pants. 'I need some money, mister,' he said. 'My baby momma she sick.' He didn't even recognize me, he just pointed the gun at my chest."

"Did you give him some verbal judo?" I asked.

"Fuck that," Finian said. He wiped his mouth, rose from the table, and put down a two-dollar tip. "I gave the kid my wallet and figgered I'd got off cheap."

#

Do You Do Hits?