

Gentleman

Joey and I always sat at what we called the Furnace Table in the high school's lunch room. It was under the huge pipes coming out through the painted brick wall from the boiler room. In September of 1957 when we met for the first time we immediately recognized an introverted comic genius in each other. I found it hilarious when he held his finger in his nose, ready to pick it, for the entire trip through the lunch line from soup to dessert. I still laugh when I think about it, but everyone else pretended not to notice. Joey and I drifted away from the crowd when we found we were the only two laughing at our jokes.

Because of the table's proximity to the noisy old furnace, no one else sat there. Many of the kids were sure one day the rumbling old boiler would blow itself to bits, chunks flying out through the bricks to kill half the students in the lunchroom. But at age fifteen, I was indestructible, so I never let it bother me. For Joey and I the table was perfect. It was deserted.

That was the way I felt as I began high school in the tenth grade ... deserted. Kids I had known in the Junior High building passed by daily, but except for Joey they avoided me. I wondered about it, but could not see any great offense I might have committed. Still the same old me, I was a wise-ass who could point out your deficiencies, tell your secrets and laugh at your mistakes. I had no idea why such a winning combination of junior high skills no longer worked as we all got older.

"This is a good place for the two of you," said Mr. Czupryna, the lunch room monitor and Business Studies teacher. "All we need are bars to put around you to complete the picture."

"Picture of what?" asked Joey.

"Imbecility," answered Mr. Czupryna. "Late stage."

Joey laughed his silly laugh, but frankly I was embarrassed to be insulted by a teacher, of all people. I took it to mean he assumed we were too stupid to know his behavior was wrong.

The boiler shaking away behind the wall helped muffle the comments we made concerning the sophomore girls in our class and the other high school maidens up through the more buxom senior girls. The lunch room monitor couldn't hear us over the noise, even when he came down to our end of the room. In the 1950s, discussing female anatomical measurements in public would have landed us in detention. Joey and I normally used superlatives and seldom noted our observations in inches, preferring instead to describe a young woman's attributes with reference to one garden vegetable or another. I suppose that would be two garden vegetables. The produce stand of our imagination provided an adequate vocabulary to carry on our conversation, and a rich set of gestures allowed us to communicate our adolescent impressions over the noise of the furnace.

An older kid, a senior named Ronnie, soon began to show up at our table, but he sat 12 feet away at the other end. We tolerated his presence because he good naturedly ignored us. He was therefore a much more acceptable table mate than someone who would have considered us moronic and said so. I recognized Ronnie from the ball field, had spoken to him a few times and knew him to be what my mother called a gentleman. He never said a bad word about anyone. Ronnie was the kind of kid who would acknowledge you ... he wasn't stuck up ... but he seldom engaged in conversation unless you spoke to him. And if he didn't like what you were saying, he would politely make sure it ended.

Coming from the upper classman end of the school, Ronnie always arrived five minutes after Joey and I sat down. Each day he brought his

unusual lunch and set it up at his end of the table.

He had chosen our all but deserted spot because he needed room to spread out his lunch of multiple dishes and serving paraphernalia. A wide place simply wasn't available at the other tables, crowded as they were with the next generation of criminal nitwits.

He gave us a nod while he hefted his shopping bag up on to the table and emptied out the contents. Joey and I interrupted our girl watching to enjoy the show at the other end of the table. Compared to my consistent fare of either warm baloney or peanut butter and something sugary, Ronnie's repast usually came in a square cake pan which held meat or a pasta dish. There was always a saucer of coleslaw or vegetable wrapped in tin foil, a bottle of A&P soda and usually two cupcakes. There were other bits and pieces, such as celery stalks and scallions and maybe a good sized chunk of garlic bread, probably from last night's Italian dinner. The reverent way he handled the dishes and arranged them in a precise pattern held our attention. I am quite sure that if allowed, he would have brought a candle and lit it with a long taper.

Equally interesting was the ritual he used to serve himself the food. He did not eat out of the cake pan or the other dishes, but neatly laid out three or four five-inch paper plates designed to hold a piece of party cake. Then he stood and served food out of the containers onto the little plates. Ready at this point to eat, Ronnie sat down, blessed himself and said a quiet prayer of grace. Only then did he begin his meal.

Joey and I returned to our discussion of onions, oranges, grapefruits and cantaloupes while we privately longed for that great day in the future when each of us might frolic in our own garden. Something funny caught our fancy ... something funny probably happened 2 or 3 times each minute in the school lunchroom ... and we roared with laughter. Mr. Czupryna gave us a threatening look. We laughed even harder, but not out loud, with our arms held up hiding our faces. Ronnie was unmoved by any of this. He seemed not to care whether his future garden held cumquats or zucchini and I doubted he ever discussed the topic. He was always aloof and sometimes I sensed he felt

superior to us. I was sensitive to what I imagined was his judgment, because Joey was beginning to wear on me with his juvenile antics. He had made suggestive comments to a few girls and then laughed like a hyena when they walked away. I was more and more embarrassed by him, but I was not yet ready to search out new friends.

When a red headed girl walked by our table, my comment to Joey was louder than I intended. She stopped and turned to me and demanded my name. I ignored her.

"Stand up," she said.

I immediately had a bad feeling.

"I said, 'Stand up.'" she said again, this time louder.

I smiled my best *John Wayne I-don't-give-a-damn-Ma'am* smirk and got out of my chair. Her timing was perfect. As I came up from my seat, she stepped in toward me and her elbows shot out from her side. Her cupped fists shot up under my chin and would have connected with a terrific force had I not caught her wrists just in time. Still, she connected and my tongue was caught between my teeth. I could taste blood in my mouth. Incensed, I began to push her downward by the wrists. She broke free and began to wildly slap me about the head. Stepping back, I stumbled over the chair and went down backwards on the floor.

Grabbing on to the chair, I worked my way up to my feet, my head spinning. I didn't want to hit a girl. But this redhead was ready to swing on me again.

She stood with her fists up, ready for me to come at her. I didn't know what to do or say. So I swore at her and left the lunch room. On my way out, I found Mr. Czupryna and, blood dribbling off my tongue into the corners of my mouth, I announced there was a girl student out of control who had just tried to injure me.

"Grow up," he said.

When I saw her in the hallway the next week, I turned and walked away, twice making myself late for class. I stopped going to the lunch room. Joey just laughed it off and he continued to sit at the Furnace Table alone, except for Ronnie.

Ronnie came up to me at the bus stop the next week and peered inquiringly at me. He smirked and rubbed his jaw.

"Man," he said, "that was certainly impressive. She floored you."

"I tripped," I said.

"I notice you haven't been back to the lunch room, though," he said, trying to needle me.

"Got other things to do," I said.

"You're running from her, aren't you?" he said.

"Ronnie," I said, raising my fist, "I'm warning you. Shut up and move along or you'll get some of this."

"No," he said. "I don't think so. You're a coward. You've been running from her."

"Oh," I said, "you think I should beat her up? That doesn't sound like Mister Ronnie Manners"

"Or apologize to her," he said. "Look, it's none of my business, but you were wrong. A gentleman would admit it."

"And you're the expert, huh?" I said. "With the four square lunch your Mommy makes you? You know all about being a man. I'll just bet you do."

The smirk left his face and he looked down at the sidewalk.

"I make it myself at night," he said.

I sneered. "Well, cooking is really manly."

"I live with my older brother," he said.

"Very helpful, cooking for him, just like a mother," I said, with emphasis on the last word.

"My mother died last year in a car accident," he said.

I looked at him. He wasn't kidding. His eyes carefully checked out the concrete surface below as if an army of ants was staging a war dance. He seemed to have lost all interest in me.

"My Dad never came back from the war." he said. "There's just the two of us at home now."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'm ... a ... well ..."

"It's my main meal of the day," he said, "and I ... pretend they're with me. My brother won't allow it at home."

I didn't say anything. He sighed, then looked up at me.

"You should make more of an effort to become a gentleman," he said. "Especially since your mouth gets you into more trouble than you can talk yourself out of and you don't like to fight."

He walked off before I could punch him. But of course I wouldn't have hit him. I was indeed a physical coward. He had that right. I didn't feel bad about it. I'd learned my lessons in grade school and didn't want to get my nose busted any more.

I walked around for a few days and wondered if I was a gentleman. I reluctantly decided I was not, but I aspired to be one. After all, my father was certainly a gentleman in the way he acted with everyone. He came from a family with a rough style, but he developed his manners by what he learned from others. I had his example and I could have my own experience work for me if I hung out with the right people.

The next afternoon I found the red headed girl sitting on the pipe railing by the sidewalk outside of school. She stood up when I approached her, but didn't raise her fists. There was a mixture of fear and determination in her eyes, eyes that were really quite pretty. I wondered if she might date me. It couldn't hurt to ask. One never knows, I've heard, when the love of your life will come along.

"I just wanted to apologize," I said. "For anything you may have heard me say."

"OK," she said. No smile, no comment about what a great gentleman I was to apologize. Not a good sign, coming from the woman I might marry some day ... if she promised not to hit me again.

"Well," I said, "I'm just trying to do the right ..."

"Get lost," she said. She sat back down on the railing and opened her book. An unkind comment came to mind, but I resisted the urge to say it. Instead, I got lost.

Nobody said being a gentleman would be easy.

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