

Doughman

I hate mysteries. So let's just not leave things hanging, like some "Rosebud"-like mystery. The Doughman was a prep cook at a pizza place where I once worked, plain and simple. Done. Now that we've taken care of that, we can get onto the more interesting details. Like how people react to unusual situations, how people get stuck in ruts, and how they break out of them. Sometimes the motivation comes from within, and sometimes it needs an external nudge. No surprise there. But it's funny how the oddest things can trigger seemingly unrelated memories. Or maybe it's just eventually coming full circle and you finally catch back up to them.

For example, that job I mentioned.

I generally referred to it as a summer job. But in truth, it lasted a lot longer than the summer. And since I had just finished my degree, technically speaking, it was my first "real job," in that I used the money from that to pay my own bills. But let's face it, I was a waiter, making shitty pay with no plans, just waiting for something to come to me. I wasn't even an out of work actor or a screenwriter, working as a waiter. And State College, PA isn't exactly Hollywood or NYC. With an undergrad degree in Human Ecology, and the economy in the shitter, I had barely enough ambition to take the empty beer cans to the recycling center every other week, which served to mark the time when I wasn't at PSU. I must admit that I had risen to my level of incompetence, or at least stagnation.

Oh, PSU. That was the restaurant's name: Pizza Source Universal. Of course no one ever called it that. They called it PSU-Pizza, even though that was redundant. The owners thought people might connect it to the university. That was about as clever as they got, and I think they were pretty stoned when they came up with a name that matched the initials. (Of course the initials came first.)

But to be honest, their pizza was good. Not "pretty good." Not "not bad." It was good. And people knew that. It was a hole in the wall place that wasn't much to look at, but big enough to hold a crowd on the weekend. They had pick-up and delivery and the kitchen was open till 1am, so they got a lot of post-last-call customers, even during the week. They had shitty, generic, slacker bands with delusions of adequacy perform once or twice a week. Usually it didn't drive away customers. And since the place had been around for at least 20 or 30 years, it was considered "an institution."

Many people who came back to visit the school would stop by. Usually there'd be one or two tables of alumni during the afternoon. People who had been there back in the early '80s and wanted to see if things were the same as they remembered. (Of course not.) Or recent grads. Or parents dragged there by their kid. Or a researcher from another country visiting some colleague's lab for a few weeks, checking out the place. Plus there were regulars. And there were strangers.

I had been working there for a few months and sort of drifted into working the closing shifts. I tended to be a night owl—I hated getting up before noon—plus there are more customers at night and they tip better. OK, there was also the fact that I had very little to do in the evenings other than drink and play

video games. It had been months since Amy and I split (that sounds more retrospective and equal than saying “since she dumped me,” even if it’s less truthful), and after four years working on my degree, I wasn’t really interested in doing much.

That’s not true either. I was interested in doing things, even doing helpful things, it’s just I lacked the impetus, the will power, the focus. Like I said, it was a period of personal stagnation, or maybe a plateau after achieving my bachelor’s degree. I liked State College, it was familiar. My lease ran till December (for various reasons, most of which were related to Amy). So I figured I’d stay for a while. And after a quick check to verify no Wall Street tycoons or Silicon Valley geeks were knocking down my door with lucrative job offers, or even returning my phone calls or letters, I took a job I could handle at a place that was familiar.

PSU-Pizza is a homey sort of place. That’s because it’s in a converted house. There are a bunch of rooms, most with a dark wooden finish, but a few with whitewashed walls. There’s an upstairs balcony that’s popular on summer nights. The main kitchen is in the basement (the kitchen where they make the few desserts, mostly brownies, cake, and ice cream, is on the main floor). The big bar is downstairs, and a smaller one is upstairs, they open it only when it’s busy. For those who care about sports, there’s a big 26-inch TV mounted in the corner of the wall behind the bar.

Adding to the homey feel, graffiti adorns most of the walls. Some of it is recent, some from the early 80s, and some goes back to the 40s or 50s.

The bathrooms were converted decades ago to be nondescript and industrial. With all the undergrads, the owners wanted to make it be a place that, to the maximum extent possible, ruined any “romantic” thoughts by drunk, horny undergrads. The bathrooms are not homey, but neither are they disgusting. Usually the dishwasher was responsible for keeping them clean, so as a waiter, I never had to deal with a defiled stall. While they certainly had taken their share of abuse, especially on football Saturdays, they were usually in decent shape.

There were regulars, customers that showed up at the same time, the same day of the week, year in and year out. There were also ones who stopped by more nights than they didn’t. “Two Beer Bill” would always stop by two or three weeknights, as like his nickname, he’d have two beers, and he’d leave a tip of two bills (except for Christmas, they were always singles). He was a young faculty member. No one really knew his area, something science-y.

“Leaning Lenny” was an old black man, probably in his 80s, wire thin, who played a blues ukulele. He’d often be on a street-corner, playing for change, and then drink it all away at our bar or one of the others down the street. He wasn’t a good musician, but he was a walking institution.

“Creepy Pete” was a short-ish guy of indeterminate age (somewhere in his 30s, perhaps), with ragged dirty blond hair, often tied into an awkward pony tail. He’d “mistake” a patron for a friend, putting an arm around her, and then apologize, introduce himself and then leave. He never harassed anyone more

than that. I still thought it was creepy. I guess most people did too, certainly all the women.

And speaking of the women, there were the Pepperpots. Four middle-aged-plus women, who would talk a bit too loud, cackle, and think what they said was the most clever and funny thing they ever heard. Perhaps that was true, but that didn't actually make them clever or funny. Janice, another server, came up with the name. She had to explain to me that it was a Monty Python reference, and then explain what that meant. She did an impression of old ladies with British accents. I had no idea what she was talking about but it was funny, even if it was a bit of a cruel exaggeration. The name stuck after that.

With the exception of Leaning Lenny, all of these were our private nicknames for our regulars. Some of them tipped enough that we wouldn't have wanted to piss them off. Everyone in town knew Leaning Lenny by that name, which he had for longer than anyone knew, probably before most of us at PSU Pizza were born. He was a local celebrity, of sorts. A few of the area shops sold bumper stickers of him, like one with a silhouette of his distinctive posture that said "Keen to Lean" or another that said "A penny to Lenny? Throw a ten to old Len!" with a crude cartoon likeness of him playing his ukulele next to his upturned hat.

I should introduce the staff. At least some of them. There's no point in mentioning the ones that aren't involved here. Janice was probably 10 years older than me, and shared some of her tips with me my first week, and advice the second, which brought in more tips, which I shared with her. She had the smooth style of a seasoned professional. She'd bring a pizza to a table, take an order from another, make change, and fill water glasses, in what seemed one continuous path. She was very even keeled, though as I found out later, not terribly happy, since she hated to think of herself as a lifer, yet she had been at the job for more than a decade.

Bert was a year younger than me but had worked there for a year and a half. He was still in school, claimed he liked science fiction and classical poetry, but really he just used it to try to impress the ladies. It only took me a couple veiled references to ferret out his ignorance, referring to someone as The Mule or saying how the eyes of the least attractive number at a table of Ag Girls were "nothing like the sun." I didn't hold that against him; in fact I kind of respected him to try that angle in his game. While not chummy, we got along fine.

Sarah was the dyke, perhaps making it too obvious, with piercings and a tattoo. Pity she wasn't straight, but she made the point pretty clear. She liked to come off as the tough girl, with a fuck-you attitude, but occasionally I could see that she did care about people. She hardly ever joked, but sometimes she let it show that there was more behind her attitude. She'd stand up for anyone she considered her friends. She didn't like Creepy Pete, but as long as he didn't cross some line, she'd just ignore him.

She didn't get along well with Bert, but at times it almost seemed like a game, though I do believe she genuinely didn't like him. They had no problem working together. "Being in the same room, waiting for him to put in an order ahead of me, or watching him try to get a tri-delt to spread her legs for him isn't exactly like cruel and unusual punishment," she said. "It's not like I have to suck his cock or

anything. And it's pretty funny watching him strike out, again and again." On a rare occasion she once admitted, "At times it makes me almost want to give him some advice." After a moment, she added, "Bad advice, of course." She didn't even smile when she walked away towards the cash register.

Emily was the petite bartender. She had a friendly smile and wore a low-cut top, tight pants or shorts, and got good tips because of it. I think she and Bert had had a thing at one point in time, before I was at PSU Pizza, but Bert was more about "closing the deal" rather than "customer support." She didn't seem to show any hostility or really any negativity towards him. She wasn't that sort of person. There was a rumor that she and Sarah had also been an item but it seemed born out of homophobia towards Sarah than anything relating to Emily. She was engaging and sympathetic and never overtly judgmental, a good combination of qualities for a bartender. The package they came in served only as a bonus. I suppose that's not true either. For some customers, T&A was all they cared about, while others were more concerned with what was on top, namely the ears, especially when they could be bent by unloading your burden.

Steve was the frat-boy bartender. Dressed impeccably, up on who the Lions were playing (be it football, basketball, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, polo, table tennis, water polo, badminton, ultimate, and on and on). He'd chat with the customers, trying to impress them or compliment them like a Donald Trump yes-man. It works for a lot of customers. I generally avoided anything more than minimal interaction with him.

And then there were the cooks. While none of the wait-staff were puritans, the cooks had the reputation of generally being stoned out of their gourds. All the time. After all, making a pizza is not that hard. Sarah mentioned how the hoods of the stoves ventilated everything from the basement, and if something was cooking, it'd mask any other smells.

It was three weeks in before I actually met and talked to any of the cooks.

The cooks kept to themselves in the kitchen in the basement, and most of the time all of us "topside" people were too busy to go down to hang out (or bum a joint). Well, except for the runners, but it was their job to serve as go-betweens for the kitchen and topsiders.

It was an unusually busy Saturday afternoon and Kevin, the day manager, told me we were running out of some kind of plates, and to get more from downstairs. There were no runners on duty, since it usually was a slow time.

Halfway down I realized I had no idea what he actually wanted. In retrospect, it sounded like he had said the word "turtle." I knew it was some kind of plate or glassware, since he said the dishwashers were falling behind, so I should bring up a couple dozen of them. Kevin was a bit high strung and blew-up pretty easily, so usually it was best to just say yes and then ask someone else what he wanted. Another bit of Janice's advice that had kept me mostly below Kevin's freak-out radar.

I walked into the kitchen, and a man in his early 40s wearing a cook's white apron looked at me and said, "You work here" in a way that made it hard to tell if it was a question or a statement.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm Sean. I'm, uh, still kind of new here. Kevin asked me to, to get some..." I realized there was no way to hide my ignorance, so I just plowed on forward, "uh...turtles?"

"Box or snapping," the man asked, as he turned and opened one of the refrigerators and looked in. "I can spare some box, but if he wants snapping, then you're going to have to tell Kevin that we'll have only five 'surprise special' pizzas left," he said, pulling a large ten gallon container out of the refrigerator. Muttering to himself, he added, "Probably for the best, five people today already had to get stitches from the snappy special."

I stared out at the cook, slack jawed and dumbfounded. "Uh...I don't... Kevin didn't say..." I had no idea Kevin meant actual turtles. I think I turned a bit pale thinking of how he'd react to us running out of the special. We had a reputation, we never ran out. At least that's what Janice, Bert, Sarah, and others had told me. Well, mostly never. We had a reputation, in either case.

I think I stammered a few more indistinct phrases, when the cook reached into the big cylindrical container, picked up something and tossed it to me saying, "Here, catch."

I looked at what I caught. It was a small glass bowl, slightly frilly along the edges. The sort of thing an ice cream sundae would go in. It was cold, having just come out of the refrigerator.

"THAT, my friend Sean, is what the people topside refer to as a 'turtle.' Don't ask me why. They've been doing that longer than I've been around here, believe it or not. Personally, I call it an ice cream dish or ice cream bowl, but then I sometimes do crazy, confusing things like that."

It all started to click as the cook broke out laughing. "Sorry, man," he said, wiping his eyes, "I didn't think you were THAT new here; that you'd take everything I said seriously. You know, I kind of feel a bit bad for putting you through the ringer like that." He stopped, looked around for a moment, and then, shrugging, added, "no...wait...I'm over it."

He held out his hand and said, "You can call me John."

That was my first introduction to the cooks.

Over the next few months, I got to venture more into the bowels of the building and spent a bit more time in the kitchen, sometimes for a few minutes during a slow afternoon before the dinner rush, and sometimes, in a pinch, to lend a hand lugging something.

John was, by far, the most dynamic of the cooks. He was the senior cook (pizza places don't have fancy chefs...well, at least this one didn't) and often worked with a minimal support staff. A runner, a prep cook, not much else. The dishwashers worked in the upstairs kitchen. On busy nights, there might be three others there besides John, either two line cooks, and one prep, or vice versa. Most of the others were legitimate stoners who thought they were hilarious and deep, but in reality just infinitely distractible.

John was different. He was philosophical, but not in the "hey guys, I had this REALLY crazy, deep thought" way. He just had interesting things to say. And the few times I was there during a really busy time, he had the curious quality as if here were standing in the eye of a hurricane. Around him, he was surrounded by chaos, but in his immediate vicinity, it was calm, even when the oven held its full capacity of 20 pizzas.

One busy night I was sent to retrieve some extra silverware because the runners had their hands full, literally. I walked into the kitchen and saw John standing there, casually arranging four platters. I mentioned that it was pretty busy upstairs. He nodded and said, "I imagine so. The oven's full." And he went back to arranging the platters, without any sense of urgency.

"Shouldn't things be ... well ... crazy down here? In ten minutes, you'll have as many pies coming up."

"Oh, much sooner than that. Two come out in two minutes. Then another two, two minutes after that. Then there'll be a five minute gap, and then 6 will come out. By the way, in one minute, I'll need to get to where you're standing. If you're still here, stand by the sink."

He said it in the same way someone might say, "No rush, but when you have a minute..." He was completely unfazed. When I asked him how he could juggle so many things at once, he smiled and said, "It's just pizzas. I've dealt with a LOT worse, where the stakes are much higher," and left it at that.

Nothing seemed to bother him. Plus, he had a frighteningly accurate internal sense of time. He knew when two minutes had elapsed, pulled the pizzas, put them on the platters, cut them, and put them in the dumbwaiter for delivery. He put four more platters out. All the time he was maintaining a casual conversation, as if he were making light after-dinner conversation.

I got the silverware and left as he was pulling out another two and repeating the process. Even though I was walking up the stairs, I knew what would happen next. Two more platters put down, then six pizzas would come out. He'd casually walk by each one, cutting them with what almost looked like one smooth continuous motion. And then he'd have two of the runners there to make sure the pizzas were delivered—he would have called them in the five minute gap to let them know they'd have to be ready. Nothing by itself was amazing, but he never missed a beat.

Making the pizzas took longer, of course. And on most busy nights John had help from the prep and

line cooks. I rarely got to observe how that orchestration worked, because by definition it was busy, and there'd be two or three other people in the kitchen and I'd just be in everyone's way.

Sometimes, if my shift started early, I'd leave at 9 or 10pm, and would say a quick goodbye to the people who'd be there till closing. I'd give Bert a thumbs up as he smiled and wiggled his eyebrows towards a table of sorority girls, share a quick joke with the others, which would get an appreciative smile from Janice, or an oddly friendly "fuck you" from Sarah. A few times, I poked my head into the kitchens to say a word of encouragement to the dishwashers, runners, and cooks.

It was one of those times where I first heard any mention of the Doughman.

More mystery, I suppose. So what's the best way I can clear things up? There's a school of thought that says that unearned knowledge is useless. I already told you who the Doughman was: a prep cook. But if I only said that I heard one of the line cooks say, "Doughman, don't fail me now" as he was headed towards one of the back storerooms, there's really no way to understand it all. At least not without first understanding how pizza making worked at PSU-Pizza, and then understanding our reputation for good pizza. At the time, I knew none of that.

It was a week later, while on a break during a slow time around 4pm on a weekday, that I asked John what the line cook meant, and added, "What, is The Doughman some sort of Patron Saint of Pizza-makers?"

John laughed at that and said, "He'd like that notion." He looked at me for a moment and furrowed his brows, the way I see those Fad Food Diet of the Week People trying to read the labels on food to see if it contains gluten or soy or hydrogen or animal or vegetable products. "You don't know the process of making a pizza." Again, it was that statement/question mix.

"I've only got free time when things are really slow, so I don't know about the Secret Recipe or whatever it is you use. Your pizzas look pretty normal, but they taste damn good."

"Of course a good pizza needs good toppings, good cheese and good sauce, the last of which is the most challenging. But it's more basic than that. The base, the bread, the dough has to be good. You with me so far?"

"Yeah," I said, "I think my college degree can cope with those gems of ancient wisdom." I don't mean to sound like such a prick, but sometimes it just happens. John never seemed to be too bothered by it, which somehow made me feel worse.

"Of all the ingredients, including the sauce, the dough takes the longest time to make. It takes several hours, preferably overnight, when done properly, that is. Of course most places don't have the time to spare, so they do it the fast way."

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

“Well, recipe-wise, it’s mostly the same. The difference is how long it takes the dough to ferment, which is controlled by the temperature. The slower it happens, the better the flavor and the lighter the crust. THEN you add the homemade sauce. Then you add good cheese. Then you add good toppings. Also, cook it properly. But if you’ve screwed up the dough, you’ll never get above a B- grade, even if everything else is stellar. THAT is why our pizza is so damn good.”

“You use the slow-rise dough?” I asked.

“Damn straight.”

“So why doesn’t everyone else do that? Just create a stockpile.”

“How many days did you work this week?” asked John.

“Uh...four. Tonight, last night, then off for a day, then on one, off one, and on one,” I answered. I used to think his questions out of left-field were simply non-sequiturs, but eventually learned that, as the Bard said, there was a method to his madness.

“And how busy were they?” he asked.

I had to think about it for a moment. The last two days hadn’t been too bad, and the day off had been a blur. Partially because I slept late and then had to run a few errands, which killed the rest of the day. But that was because the previous night had been a pretty busy night. Some sort of fraternity/sorority thing, and not just one. Some came for dinner, others came back later for drinks. And some got hungry while drinking. It was rough. I didn’t even remember the day before that. It was probably normal, at least by comparison. I told that to John.

He patiently waited for me to finish before summarizing, “so one night we need maybe 2-3 dozen pies. Another 5 or 6. And on a busy night we can top 20. Do you start to see the challenge?”

“Uh, you mean making enough?”

“Yeah. And not making too much. We can always use the fast-rise method and have more dough in 45 minutes to an hour if we’re really running low. And if it’s late enough, it’s probably a drunk or stoned kid who really won’t know the difference.” He chuckled, likely imagining one of the less discerning late-night customers, happy to eat anything.

John continued. “And on the flipside, if there are a few extra batches of dough leftover, they’ll keep

for another day. It might not be our best, but it won't be sour yet."

He turned towards me, locking my eyes with his gaze me and said, "Maybe you haven't heard of our reputation, but we don't run out of dough. And we don't have to pawn off day-old dough on customers. It's not an exact bullseye every night, but it's within a rack."

Reading the confusion in my eyes, he added, "a rack holds 20 pans, each with dough for one large pie."

"So, given that the pizza needs fluctuate wildly from one night to the next, how do you know how much dough to make each night?" I asked.

"That, my friend, is the heart of the question. And that is where the Doughman comes in."

I only got a few more bits of information from the cook that night. The Doughman made the dough for the next day. He comes in around closing, makes the dough for the next day and leaves it in the cooler so it would slow rise. He had his own method for figuring out how much to make. Certainly he must have had various schedules, like parents' weekend, the somewhat rare times a well-known band would play, and any events going on in town, like Farm Fair Days, that might draw extra people. Beyond that, that's why he made the big bucks.

It was only later that I realized he had actually said "that's why he makes more dough than any of the other cooks here." Stupid bastard and his dumb-ass puns.

Beyond that, John had no idea and didn't seem to care. He was simply incurious about it all. As long as he could make pizzas, in his own particular way, he didn't care what the Doughman did at night or what astrology charts he consulted. And since the kitchen stopped taking orders an hour before last call, John was usually long gone before the Doughman showed up. He didn't even know the Doughman's name, even though he had seen him a number of times. When they did cross paths, it usually it meant that John had stayed late, helping to clean up (metaphorically or literally), some disaster in the kitchen, and was tired and wanted to get home. His conversations were little more than a "Hey man" and a "How's it hanging?"

I can't really say that it was a huge mystery, but there were just a few details that seemed a bit hidden. And I hate mysteries, even small ones.

Actually, had it been anything other than a small mystery, I probably would have ignored it, because as it was, it took me several months to make any progress. My slow progress was mostly caused by me forgetting about the whole thing for weeks on end. I'd think about it occasionally while at home, and then forget about it when I was back on shift or on a break. The next beer was more appealing than learning more about this not-so-mysterious Doughman and his probably-pretty-mundane method for doing his pretty boring job super late at night when I'd rather be sleeping. Still, every now and then, when there was nothing else to talk about or I happened to be a bit more sober during a break, I might remember to do a little investigating. I managed to find out a few more details.

Often there'd only be one bartender on duty during last call, since at that point things would be slowing down. Both Emily and Steve liked to work that shift, since often the tips increased as people got drunker, and it didn't take a mathematician to know that last call was where the tip-curve-graph ended.

I asked Emily what she knew about the guy who makes the pizza dough. I was a bit surprised at how little she knew, yet how blasé she was about it. She had seen him many times. Her description couldn't have been more generic than if it was in a white box with nothing other than black letters that read "person – male." She practically said, "He's just this guy, you know"—another reference Bert wouldn't get. Anyway, sometimes he'd get a drink, sometimes he'd go into the office, sometimes the kitchen. He generally kept to himself, since most people were busy cleaning up when he arrived, and then once he started his work he was busy and everyone else was eager to get home.

Like I said, it was a pretty weak mystery. Emily was pleasant, but had no idea about the pizza end of the restaurant. She was mostly concerned with keeping the customers happy and slightly tipsy. She knew most customers seemed happy with our food, but had no idea about if we ran out of anything.

Bert had practically nothing helpful to say. He didn't like working the closing shift. If he left by 11pm, there was a reasonable chance he'd be in someone else's bed by the time midnight rolled around. If he didn't get out till 1 or 2am, his companion would probably be drunk enough to vomit on him, and even if not, he'd be too tired to want to do anything other than sleep, which violated most of his moral codes of sleeping in someone else's bed. So it was conceivable that he might never have seen the Doughman, and if he did, he would have simply mistaken him for another customer. He did suggest I talk to Steve. "Even though he's an ass-kissing douche, he notices a lot more than most people. It helps him with his ass-kissing and douchery."

It took another couple months for me to work up the motivation to talk to Steve. I have a low threshold for douchebag induced pain.

"The Big S, Mr. Shaun C and his Hardy Boys! What I can do you for, buddy?"

It was amazing how much he could achieve in just a single sentence or two. Somehow Steve could spell my name wrong even when only just speaking it. And being compared to Shaun Cassidy was hardly a compliment. And the intentional mixing of word order to sound...I don't know, cool, funny, hip, something other than a total douchebag, made me have to actively fight the urge to say "nothing" and just walk away.

OK, I should actually say "and just walk away again." I didn't actually wait two months to talk to Steve. I tried on three separate occasions but aborted each attempt after little more than a sentence. I can't call it wimping out or chickening out because my little mystery just wasn't important enough for

me to need to interact with him. But at some point I began to question whether it was a moral flaw in me. Whether I could really handle it or not. After all, even if it's a jerk, a five minute conversation isn't exactly going to be a turning point in my life or as bad as getting hit by a car. Not even as bad as cleaning the bathroom during the Frat Rush Week. So this time I didn't back down.

Instead, I managed to say, "Uh yeah...so Steve, I heard a couple rumors or stories or something about this place and wondered if you might know the truth." It pained me to act polite to him, but sometimes when you're a slacker detective, you have to do things that are in a minute way ever so slightly unpleasant or inconveniencing. Bogart would have been proud of me, I'm sure.

"Local rrrrrumors, eh?" he said, without rolling the 'r'. "Well, I've heard a few, if you know what I mean, with a capital Em." He wagged his eyebrows.

"No, not about Emily," I felt somehow at fault, responsible for her name, or even just the first letter of it, being desecrated by Steve. "The first one's simple. It's that we never run out of pizzas, even on busy nights."

"Hmmmph," he said with little interest, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. It's something Kevin often brags about, even though he's got like nothing to do with it. But yeah, as far as I know, they manage to keep the specials coming. Well, I suppose it's mostly the pizzas, since we've run out of soups and the occasional desserts, but hardly anyone cares about that. Most people have their dessert at home, if you know what I mean. I don't think I've been around when we've had to tell someone we're out, or they'll have to wait another hour before we'll have more pizzas."

"So who's responsible for it? And...how do they manage that?"

"Ah ha!" he said, pointing a finger-gun at me and winking. "Now that is a good question. Turns out yours truly knows the man with the plan in that department."

"Oh?" I couldn't hide the interest in my voice.

"Yeah, the big-D. Don-o, I call him. Comes in after midnight, usually closer to one. Often sits by himself somewhere along the back. I think he doesn't like the smoke. But sometimes if it's slow, he'll stay by the bar for a bit while he has a drink. Never booze, but then Kevin or Mitch might get pissed if they saw him getting drunk right before going on duty, knowing he's got the place to himself. Sometimes he's curious about what's been going on...you know, in town. I figured he worked a late shift and sleeps during the day, since it seems like he misses a lot of the local scene. It was a couple of months before he mentioned that he worked HERE. Can you imagine that?"

He slapped my shoulder, as if we were close friends. I wanted to slug him, but this information was exactly what I was looking for. I forced a smile and through pure will prevented my hand from forming a fist or reflexively wiping any possible sycophantic contamination from my shoulder. I even managed a little chuckle and let him continue.

“Yeah, so he’s the overnight chef. Or cook. Or whatever. He makes the pizzas at night. Or at least the prep for it. I don’t know, maybe just the crust. Turns out he works the graveyard shift here. He’s usually downstairs, just starting up by the time we close the place up.”

“How do you know if he’s around when you close the place?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter. He even told me as much. Said not to worry about leaving lights on or anything. Just turn stuff off and lock the doors. Said he’s got a key. And if he needs to go upstairs and it’s all locked and dark, he’s got a flashlight on him. That way, if he’s not around, no one has to look for him.”

“That’s a bit odd.”

“Maybe, but the dough-meister seems to like keeping to himself. Seems like the type that’s shy around crowds and doesn’t want attention.”

“And his name’s Don?”

“Don. Donald. Yeah, that’s what I call him. Since I don’t know his real name. Dough-nald. He said he makes the dough, so I figured he needed a D kind of name.”

I went slightly slack jawed. I wondered how much of what he had said was him just filling in the blanks...incorrectly. Nevertheless, it was the most I had heard about him from anyone so far. I asked, “Is he here every night?”

“Well, I think he works most nights, though I don’t know which ones. He doesn’t stop by the bar every night, but usually he’ll poke his head in once or twice a week when I’m tending, and hang out every now and then.”

I swallowed my pride, took a breath and said, “You do seem to know everyone. You’ll have to introduce me to him sometime, or at least point him out to me. Thanks, Steve, I should get back to work.”

I walked away feeling like my soul needed a shower. But at least it was a reasonable lead. I also knew that I could not stomach another conversation with Steve for at least a couple of weeks. Maybe I’d talk to Kevin about volunteering for bathroom duty when Rush Week rolled around, so I could definitively say which was worse.

One Thursday afternoon, I was taking a smoke break in the back as Lester, one of the prep cooks, was heading home for the day. His job was to cut things up. He spent the day slicing tomatoes, cucumbers,

mushrooms, cheese, anything that could go on a salad, or a pizza, or basically whatever was going to be on the menu. He also cleaned things up. All of the grunt work and none of the glory. But he usually went home by 4 in the afternoon.

“Good luck, man. Looks like it’s going to be a busy night,” he said.

When I gave him a puzzled look, he responded, “I saw the list of phone-ins and the waiting list. At least it looks like there’s going to be an early dinner crowd.”

I nodded and took a long, thoughtful drag.

“Hey,” I began, as the idea hadn’t fully formed in my head. “The list is one way of knowing who’s on their way over. But...you ever see how much pizza dough is ready to go for the day?”

Lester shook his head and smiled, as if I had suggested cutting the pizzas twice as small but giving the same number of pieces out and seeing if no one noticed the gaps. “Three reasons why that won’t work, brain-boy,” he began, while taping the side of his forehead.

“One: you’ve seen the cooler, and how the racks are lined up, including the empty ones to keep them out of the way. Unless someone wanted to pull everything out and count, and we don’t, that ain’t going to work. We only see the next rack in line.”

“Two: Doughman does his thing when he’s the only one around, and he has the kitchen, hell, the whole restaurant to himself. Try blocking off that sort of space during the day when there’s three or four people in the kitchen, and everyone is running around trying to cook and shit. That’d never work.”

“And three: it’s strictly kapu, brother. Mister John doesn’t care and doesn’t want anyone wasting time. You’ve seen how crazy it can get. He knows the rest of us don’t have a fucking Timex in our heads and don’t tend to skate over stress, unaffected, the way he does.”

“So no,” he summarized. “From the practical to the philosophical, the only way the kitchen knows we’re running out of dough is when we’re running out of dough. And at that point, it’s usually pretty close to closing.” He looked at his wristwatch and said, “and speaking of that, I’m out of here, bro,” then gave me a high-five-like hand clasp, and headed home.

I later confirmed from John that the rule was almost exactly as Lester had described.

Time passes, the world changes, and everything stays the same. Perhaps I was getting uncomfortable with how comfortable I was getting. Perhaps it was another “relationship,” as they call it, that went

south. Anne seemed nothing like Amy, and yet things wound up fizzling in a similar, unspectacular way. Or maybe it was my outrage at our so-called political leaders, though that stayed the same, even though the names change. Or my hope for progress, when there were hints of it happening in the world. Or my disillusionment when it didn't. But actually I think my unrest started after having some conversations with people, when I had something insightful to say. When I realized that after spending four years studying about people and how they live, that I could contribute. But my daily contribution was little more than taking orders and wiping tables.

I don't know what was worse. Feeling like I was on a carousel, having already been around several times before, or realizing that I was aware of it but not doing anything to change my situation.

I wasn't miserable by any degree. I had friends. Well, a few. I wasted some time on video games, but even that wasn't totally asocial. But I started to understand the sort of dread that I always saw on Janice's face.

I felt like I was staring up at a looming wall with no idea what was beyond it. I could stay behind the wall or try to climb over it. If I tried to climb it, I might fall and get hurt. But what was worse was having no idea what was beyond it and if it was any better. If I climbed and made it to the top, I'd have only an instant to choose a side, and then... well, the unknown is always scary. Would I prefer the known-boring or the unknown-scary, knowing that by trying to climb the wall, I was, in fact, committing myself to going over. If I climbed back down, I'd be stuck forever, in Janice's situation, and I knew I couldn't handle that.

It was a stupid sense of doom, but it slowly grew over time.

I talked a little about my fears to Janice, not admitting that I was looking for some "don't do what I did, kid" kind of advice. It never came. I don't think she even realized I was, in essence, asking her how I could avoid making the mistakes she made, whatever they were.

I talked with John a number of times, about things like the choices we make, how to change your life, especially when you're lazy, and things like free will versus predeterminism. Sometimes John just sat and listened to me talk in circles. Sometimes he asked a question or two. On occasion he'd tell a story. But usually he'd have that same sort of detached, light touch that let him run a busy kitchen with the same sense of urgency I might exhibit when trying to read a few pages of a book before going to bed. On occasion, he would throw away the Socratic method and take a more active approach.

"So you'd rather be a something than a nothing?" he asked, trying to rephrase a recent flood of nonsense that I had just spewed out one afternoon.

"Uh, yeah, I guess. Something like that."

"How about if we make it a bit more specific. What you are and what you aren't. You are a waiter. A video-game player. A beer drinker. A bachelor's degree holder. A smoker. Unmarried. Employed.

Literate. Politically aware. Healthy.” He paused to see if I was going to object to any of those labels.

When I didn’t, he continued.

“You are not rich. You are not dumb. You are not a virgin. You are not happy with your job. You are not happy with the world. You are not politically active. You are not sexually active. You are not a drug addict. You are not an alcoholic. You are not without friends. You do not have a great idea on how to change the world, get rich, or rid the world of disease.” Again he paused and cocked his head to the side a little, waiting for me to offer some comment.

“That’s hardly fair. I don’t think that completely describes me, either positively or negatively.”

“Of course not. But it’s a starting point. And even that’s too long of a list. But no matter. The positives aren’t necessarily good and the negatives aren’t necessarily bad. So let’s just pick something in either list to change.”

He waited a beat before he went on. “Smoker. You spend money on it. You spend time on it. You know it’s not healthy. You know it’s not helping you with much.”

Suddenly, something flashed in front of my face.

I was so used to John’s lackadaisical manner, that his sudden movement caught me completely off guard. He had grabbed the cigarette out of my mouth, and held it a foot from my face.

“You’re always talking about wanting to change. But lacking motivation. So let’s put it to the test. Here’s something right up your alley. All you have to do is...nothing.”

“What, stop smoking? Why?” I asked.

“Because, it’s a test. If you’re not going to go trying to change the world, can you do the smallest thing to change yourself. If you had been drinking, I might have picked that.”

“Too bad you didn’t pick the not-getting-laid part,” I said cynically.

“That takes effort. I’m challenging you to do something that takes no effort.”

“Bullshit. These are more addictive than drugs. I can’t just give them up like that,” I said.

“But you’re not addicted. I can see it in the way you smoke. You’re lucky...for now. But are you just trying to avoid doing anything to change?” he asked.

“Is this all about free will again?”

“I don’t know. Are you a person who sets your own course or just something that responds to input? A white ball going in a straight line, predestined to bounce off a few rails, and end up in the pocket.”

“Are you comparing me to a billiard ball?” I was starting to get angry.

“I don’t know. ARE you more than one?” He held up the cigarette again. “Care to rise to the challenge? Grow a pair of balls, make a decision, and stick to it?”

“OK, kick the habit, but for how long?”

“It’s not a countdown. It’s a life change. How long? How about a lifetime, less however many years old you are now?” He was staring right at me now.

“Or,” he said, as he rotated the cigarette between two fingers and then held his open palm towards me, smiling, “you could just take this and continue where you were, for the rest of your life. Going around and around and around again.”

“Keep it!” I said, and turn my back, about to walk away.

“It’s a simple choice, but it shows you do have preferences and can act on them. Maybe you ARE a person.”

I walked away, back inside the restaurant. I wasn’t sure if I was more angry with John or myself. I didn’t know how, but he had managed to hit some sort of sensitive spot in my ego. I think I figured he expected me to be back to smoking in a few days, a week at the outset.

I never smoked again.

The first time I actually saw the Doughman was hardly worth noting. We didn’t even interact. I was told to bring a couple of racks of clean glasses to the bar. I was in a bad mood. It had been a rough night, too many nutters, gripers, whiners, and poor tippers. Plus Steve was on duty, and there would be too many glasses for me to just throw them down and run. I knew he’d say something to me.

When I got there Steve was sucking up to a bunch of sorority girls, telling them about a sale at Neiman Marcus or a winery he knew somewhere or something. I just tried to ignore it, since it’s bad form for two employees to fight in front of customers. Maybe I was a bit more sensitive to the cigarette smoke

than I used to be. It didn't make me want to smoke, it just reminded me of how pissed off I was when I quit.

I flinched, nearly dropping the rack of glasses on the floor, as I felt Steve put his arm around my shoulder. He pointed towards the door and said, "Hey Shawnie, Pawnie, don't forget that the Stevemeister never goes back on his word. There goes your Doughboy." And he pointed to the stairs that went up to the upper bar and offices.

I only got a quick glimpse. He was about average height and build. Short blond hair. Dark eyes. He wore nondescript clothes, like faded jeans and a t-shirt that might have once said something. I nodded thanks to Steve, ran up the stairs to take a quick look but no one was around. He had probably gone into the office, since the door was closed but the light was on. It'd be kind of stupid to bust in and say...what? "Allow me to introduce myself? I'm a creep." We already had Creepy Pete to fill that roll. Plus, if he wasn't in the office, it'd be pretty rude to burst in on one of the managers who deliberately closed the door for some privacy, maybe to go over payroll or something. And on top of that, I really needed to get back to work.

So that was it. Like the blurry black and white film footage of Bigfoot, it was, at best, a sighting. But know I knew what he looked like. It was another few weeks before I actually met the Doughman face to face and finally earned the knowledge of who he was.

It was a quiet night, after the dinner rush. There were a few tables of people still hanging around, either finishing their desserts or just talking. The bar had maybe a half-dozen people in it. The Pepperpots table had just left, and Janice was still going on about how much they annoyed her.

"And they asked for a different cheese shaker." Her face twisted and her voice then transformed into a creaky cackle as she said, with an exaggerated fake British accent, "Oh, this one 'ere's got something nasty i' the bo'um of the jar. Naw, I wouldn't wan' t' pu' i' on my pizza. You migh' get some sor' o' nasty pizza disease. Eh, heh heh heh heh heh heh."

"They still sound like Pennsylvanians to me," I said after a moment.

"After all this time, you've still never seen any of their shows or movies, have you?" she said incredulously, back in her normal voice. "Just rent a tape. Live at the Hollywood Bowl or something. And it's not their accent, it's that they're a total pain in the ass to me. Putting jar cheese on a pizza is like saying our pizzas don't stand on their own. Like someone who salts the hell out of everything. Before even tasting it. Anyway, they drive me fucking nuts. They're gone now. It's dead here, and I'm going home early. Think you can handle the last couple hours on your own?"

I smiled and gave her a one-armed hug. "I've done it before. It's fine. At best we might get a couple more tables in the next two hours and the bar might get some people. Go home and unwind."

And the next two hours went by as predicted. Once the kitchen stopped taking orders, I started wiping down tables and putting up chairs. I had already done that upstairs an hour ago. The remaining customers were here for drinks. Most were at the bar and only two tables were occupied.

Emily was starting to close up the bar, restocking glasses, putting away some of the things that weren't going to be used that night, like all the assorted "girly drink things." At this point, people were just drinking beer and occasional shots, nothing fancy. It was slow enough that she could be away from the bar for a couple minutes at a time.

I was wiping down the tables, just like I had done a hundred times before. Hundreds of times before, actually. I was spacing out. It wasn't bad. There was nothing else for me to do, so I could just let my mind wander as my hand continued with the "wax on, wax off" motion again and again, occasionally moving onto another empty table after putting the chairs up on the previous one.

I was a little happy table wiping robot. Was that good or bad? Being happy is good. But was I wasting my life? Could I be doing more? And if so, what? And more importantly, how?

I thought about smoking. Not about wanting to smoke, but about the habit of smoking. I had long since gotten over my petty anger when John challenged me to quit. And I had come to admit that he was right. For me, it was simply a decision, and act of will. I even admitted it to John at some point.

He told me that I shouldn't be too smug about so easily kicking the habit, because I was one of the lucky few who hadn't been addicted, at least not yet. Most find it worlds more difficult and I should never compare or doubt their earnestness or willpower. I said it was oddly humbling to think I had succeeded at something, yet deserved less credit than those who tried and failed. John pointed out that effort, not success, tends to be a better measure of merit.

He also said that I should not, ever, discount my own abilities. Taking a step, no matter how small, is an achievement. A journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step, and all that crap. "You know how to change. It is your choice, your responsibility." He patted the side of my shoulder and walked away, adding, "the rest is up to you. Daunting, to be sure, but you know you're capable of it."

I envisioned two versions of me. One was easier to imagine than the other. The first was me, the same as always, just 20 years older. Still wiping tables, the rag going around and around, just like me on some cosmic carousel. Except that by then I wouldn't be able to hide that I was miserable. The second me was a bit harder to imagine. I would be different. Still older, still having suffered life's small and great outrages, and having had the same amount of misery, if not more. But something was different. My attitude, my direction, my goals. Hell, that me HAD goals.

And the difference. That was the part I couldn't quite make out. There had been a fork in the road somewhere where the two versions of me had gone their separate ways. But I couldn't quite tell what it was. I concentrated a bit harder. Trying to backtrack the two paths, to see where they met.

My reverie was interrupted by the sound of a few voices nearby. I looked up, realizing I had probably spent five minutes absentmindedly dragging my rag across the same table. There were four people standing at the far side of the bar. John was standing there, not talking. The Doughman was there, staring down the other two. At least, I assumed it was him, since he had the same phlegmatic demeanor that John did. I had never seen his face, but he seemed a similar build and short hair. It was as if my daydream was calling me back. It would be much easier to go back to thinking about my big plans than pay attention to the group. The other two people were unfamiliar. They didn't belong, they were much more agitated and aggressive. They wore long, nondescript coats, covering them, hiding them. It looked as though the two were arguing with the others, yet I had heard none of what they were saying.

What was the difference between the two me's, the one who escaped from this job and the one who didn't? In the general sense, the answer was easy. The "me" who escaped took action, plain and simple. Decided to make a change and then made that change. The other me simply stayed on the same road, never changing. As simple as not smoking, and just as difficult. But the specifics, the "What the hell do I do to get out of here?" is much harder to know.

It wasn't an argument, per se. But the body language indicated that the two strangers were trying to establish a dominant position over the other two. John was hanging back a bit, opposite the Doughman, but not at his usual ease. When I listened, I could only get a few bits and pieces of what was being said.

"...violation of code..."

"...breach of protocol..."

"...careless and reckless..."

I couldn't even tell who was talking, let alone what they were talking about. They weren't drunk. They weren't about to get into a fight. There was no need for me to do anything. I moved to the next table, a few feet closer to them, and started wiping it down.

To change one's life... The more I traced them back, the closer the two paths become. I was approaching the fork. The more I thought about it, the more things seemed to become a bit clearer. Looking at it from the other perspective, to be the 25-years-of-service waiter, all I had to do was continue doing everything the same. Keep going around and around, just like the rag wiping the table. Sometimes it's a different table, but it's still just a fucking rag wiping a fucking table. Night after night.

I saw the fork. Literally and figuratively. The table had been bused hours ago, but someone had left a fork there. That didn't make sense, no one busing the table would miss something like that. More than likely, the table had been cleared, but later, someone had put a fork down there on the empty table. They had taken an action and put a fork down. A simple action of free will. And it was a fork in the road. They could have done nothing, but they chose to take an action.

I looked up.

John was looking right at me. For an instant, his eyes darted over to his companion, and his head moved, almost imperceptibly, in my direction. The Doughman turned his head ever so slightly and looked at me, then gave a fractional nod back to his companion. John's gesture to me was equally fleeting, equally subtle—a bit of a blink with a bit of a nod with just the hint of a smile. Yet the meaning to me was clear: approach, but with caution. The other two had not noticed me.

I moved to the next table and started wiping it. Yet now there was no reverie, no urge to ignore them. I continued to act as I had earlier, as a mindless cleaning automaton, but now I was paying attention. Now I was awake. Now I was a person. Looking around the room, I could see that the other people present had the same vacant, lost look that I'm sure I had, distracted by faraway thoughts.

I thought the pair of strangers might be undercover cops. They seemed to be talking about laws and codes, and the danger of non-compliance. Then I thought maybe they were health inspectors, since they were talking about laws and codes and the danger of non-compliance. But it didn't really seem to make sense. And the health department usually makes it pretty obvious when they inspect us.

No. When they inspect the restaurant, not us. I am not part of it. I work there, but I not the restaurant. I move to the next table and continue to pretend to be the cleaning zombie.

I heard John talk about free will and predeterminism. Good old John, trying to get them off track, confused. He mentioned knots, holes, cause and effect, equivalence classes of energy conservation states, and multi-dimensional manifolds. The four of them seemed to be discussing the finer points of something that's a cross between science, law, and philosophy. For a moment, I lose my focus, I hear his words, but not what he's saying. But I force myself to pay attention.

It didn't make sense. Were they health inspectors or theoretical physicists? When they talked, they sounded like cops.

The Doughman said, "...no rules were violated. We have strict protocols." He told them to ask John about the racks of dough if they didn't believe him.

"Of course he'd agree. That means nothing," said the first cop.

"Then ask someone else," said the Doughman. "Someone uninvolved."

The four of them, in unison, slowly turned and faced me.

It was an odd sensation. I had been looking in their general direction, watching them while trying not to appear like I was watching them. As they all slowly turned and looked at me, the part of my mind that had been the mindless cleaning drone seemed to wake up. Even though I had already been watching and listening to them, I realized that now somehow I was actually “able” to see and hear them. Under “normal” circumstances, until my mind had been “granted permission,” I would not have noticed them. They did not suddenly appear—it was more like I finally realized that they were there and looking at me. My “natural” inclination would be to walk up to them. So I did.

I was still of two minds at that point. I could tell what I “should” be seeing and noticing, but I could also see “behind the veil,” or at least somewhat behind it.

John looked at the cops, then back at me and said, “Oh, Sean, if you have a minute, could you come here—you could be a big help to us. We have a few quick questions you might be able to answer.” He then took half a step backwards, as if having read his lines, he ceded the floor to the others.

The first cop, a woman, looked at me and said, “What’s your job here, son?”

I immediately felt resentment towards her and her condescending attitude. But also “felt” like I should answer the question.

“Waiter. I occasionally lend a hand where needed, but mostly a waiter.”

“You know Mister...John?” she asked as if she were pronouncing a foreign name.

“Sure. He’s one of our main cooks.”

The second cop looked at me and said, “Without looking, describe him to me.”

“Come on,” I said. “He’s right here. Look, he’s about my height, maybe a bit taller or shorter. Not fat, not skinny. No beard or mustache. Uh...” I was running out of details. I wanted to turn my head to pick out sometime, but that would have been cheating.

“You ever see his hair under his hat?” he asked.

“Um...” I tried to remember. I guess most of the time he wore some sort of hat or cap or something. I imagine he didn’t want to wear a hairnet. “I guess not really,” I admitted.

“Eyes?”

“No glasses,” I said confidently.

The first cop chuckled and glanced at the second. The second said, "That's fine. Uh...I just wanted to make sure you knew him."

I looked quickly at the group. John had short curly hair, no hat this time. His eyes were brown. His face had a hard look to it like his features had been carved from stone. The part of me that wasn't supposed to notice, noticed that I had never noticed any of that before. The Doughman wasn't all that different, at least based on my description. His hair was darker than John's, but his eyes were lighter, blue, but a dark blue, shadowed by his brow. He was a bit thinner, more wiry, and his complexion was darker, like he had spent more time working outdoors. His age was in that indeterminate range of 35-45, plus or minus.

The first cop continued with her questions. "You spend much time in the kitchen?"

"Not really. Occasionally I go in there to get stuff, you know, plates, glasses. Sometimes I'll lend a hand running," I realized she probably didn't know our terms, and added "that is, bringing out the food, if a large party has their meal ready to be served all at once."

"But you don't work in the kitchen."

"No."

The cop turned to the others and said, "Then he wouldn't know about any of the details."

John sighed and said, "He's impartial. He TALKS to the other staff. They take breaks together. This is a job where people are friendly." From their reaction, I could tell he had just insulted the cops. Intentionally.

The first cop turned back to me and said, "You ever talk to the kitchen staff about their policies?"

"Look," I said, "I'm not going to get anyone in trouble. Sure, some of them bitch about things, but they all follow the rules, no matter how arbitrary. They run a tight ship. And for the most part, all the rules, at least the ones I've heard, make sense, to me and the staff. So people aren't breaking them." I didn't want to rat out anyone. These weren't local cops. They had to be state or even federal inspectors. FDA, CDC, something like that.

"Warming trays and coolers..." the second cop began, as if he were reading a quiz from a book.

"All have timers and thermometers. To be honest, I don't know WHAT the numbers are, but I know they're posted. Soup's kept hot. Salads kept cold, that sort of stuff."

The first cop looked askance at the second, who silence her with a brief shake of his head and

continued. "Used utensils?"

"I don't know. I assume they put them somewhere and wash them. I don't know if it's after each use, or if they can wipe them down. I don't do that sort of shit."

"Pizza dough. Stored where?"

"In the cooler. It holds the supply for the next day."

"That's the dough for this one?" and the second cop pointed to the Doughman.

"Uh...well, yes...I guess. I mean he makes it."

"You've seen him do that? You know him?"

"Well, no, not exactly. We haven't actually met. But yeah, I know he's the one who makes the dough overnight. At least that's what everyone around here tells me."

The cop frowned slightly, thought for a moment, slowly nodded then asked, "Does he have a name?"

"I'm sure he does. But we've never been introduced. I'm Sean," said with a smile.

Before the Doughman could say anything, the second cop continued. "They pull it all out at once for the day?"

It took me a moment to realize he was asking about the pizza dough. "How should I ... no. No, actually they don't. Lester, a cook, told me. They only pull one rack out at a time. Once one is finished, they'll pull the next one out. They're actually pretty strict about that. For food safety reasons as well as just being lazy and not having time to waste, I suppose."

The first cop said to the second, "Lester's a prep cook, first shift."

The second cop nodded. He asked, "Then how do you know how many customers you're going to have for a night?"

"We don't," I said without hesitation. "I mean, sure, we know it'll be busy on a weekend and dead usually mid-week, and not bad if Leaning Larry brings his ukulele to open mic night, but beyond that, it's just play it as it comes. At least that's how all the cooks do it. And the rest of us just follow their lead."

“He could be a plant, fed a story,” the first cop said.

“You could tell,” John said exasperated.

The two cops looked at me, through me, into me. I felt like I was being flayed alive, like some sort of human-onion-vivisection. They were sifting through the details of my story, trying to see if they could find any expression on my face, in my soul, that would indicate I was lying or hiding something. I noticed the second cop was no longer looking at me, but down at something in his hand. It was small and had buttons. It looked like one of those electronic calculators the engineering students seemed to love. But I could see the images it displayed reflected in his glasses. I hadn't even noticed that he was wearing glasses. They looked archaic.

I focused on the image. I saw what looked like a genealogist's dream. Family trees branching off again and again. But then I recognized one of the branches. The fork. I realized it wasn't a family tree. It was just a single person. It was me. Somehow I understood. The machine was showing him my life. My past, present, and possible futures.

He was a cop, and human, but something more, something different. He was not from here. Not from now. The whole idea was stupid. It made no sense, precisely because it made perfect sense: it all fit together. I was face to face with some sort of Time Cop.

And as he was looking at me, I was looking at him, looking at me, taking it all in.

“See? Clean,” said the cook.

The two cops wore dark blue uniforms under their nondescript jackets. There were no adornments or obvious rank markings, though it was possible the stitching or color indicated that they were Field Officers. Their belts held a few objects, devices, and possibly weapons.

I said, “Why are you asking me these questions?”

“We need to verify the story of these two, s--”

“Don't call me 'son,’” I said, interrupting the cop. “That's disrespectful, and I don't think I've done anything to merit that.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't realize who I was talking to. Here, I thought you were just a waiter.”

I ignored the taunt. “You asked about the dough. That's what's important to you for some reason.”

The one cop shot a nervous look to the other. I followed a hunch and said, “That time I told you about, when I was talking to Lester, I was wondering why no one bothered to look at the how much dough had been made the previous night. I never really thought about it again...until now, thanks to you.”

The last three words seemed to strike a note of fear into the cops.

“If the Doughman was so good about planning how much dough to make for the next day, why wouldn’t people want to know what to expect? So the question is: Why has nobody ever tried to do this?”

The cops were struck dumb, they looked at each other, and back to me, and had no idea what to say. The cook and Doughman looked on showing very little expression, as if trying neither to encourage or discourage me from saying anything.

I continued. “I’ll answer the question. It’s because then we’d know the future, in some small way. And that would be Wrong. Apparently it’s OK for time travelers to know the future, but when it affects the past, it’s Bad with a capital B.”

“This...is a problem...” the first cop said. At first I thought she was talking to her partner, but then realized she was talking to the the other two.

“We can fix it...somehow...” said the second cop, nervously.

“I think you are causing more problems than you are solving,” said a voice from the bar. A man in a long brown robe sitting on a bar stool turned around. Just like the others, it felt like he had been there all the time, just not noticed, until someone raised a curtain or brought up the house lights a bit. Even when I was seeing the other four argue, I had no idea that he was there. I wondered how many other people were in the room that I was not seeing.

He was an older man, with long, gray hair. His face was worn and wrinkled, but had a sort of warm, friendly look to it. But his eyes, while bright and sharp, held a twinge of sadness to them. Like he had spent a lifetime watching the suffering of others. Perhaps more than just his lifetime.

“Why are YOU here?” “We don’t need YOUR help!” The cops spoke angrily to the old man, their aggression attempting to hide their fear.

“At this point, it appears that you do,” the man said genially. In a somewhat ominous tone he asked, “Are you here to try to solve problems or create them?”

“This was our investigation. Our jurisdiction!” the first cop insisted.

“And our people,” added the second. “We hold our own to stricter rules than we accept in others.”

“It would seem,” the old man began, “that those two in their roles have a strict protocol that strictly preserves all causal relations.”

“Even so,” said the second, “it’s within our right to investigate.”

“This is of no concern to you!” the first cop barked.

“You two are investigating to make sure no one’s violating causality?” I asked. “About how many fucking pizzas are made in a night?”

No one said anything. As if all of their “rules” forbid them from helping or hindering me.

I thought about it for a moment more. It came to me in pieces. “So wait, both of YOU are Time Cops too?” I said to the cook and the Doughman. “But they’re not doing anything. Either it’s an undercover stakeout of some sort in the most boring time and place, or ... what, are they like off-duty, on vacation?” I asked.

“On the file it’s called a ‘leave of absence,’ generally considered an extended vacation of sorts. Not an uncommon practice after a series of difficult cases,” the cook admitted. He turned to the others and said, “Just clarifying what he’s already figured out.” The Doughman gave him a cautious, concerned look.

“But then you do some...some sort of time travel to make the dough? No, wait, the Doughman comes in at the end of the night, finds out how busy it was and THEN he goes back a day and makes exactly enough. Then he returns and leaves. The whole thing takes 10 minutes of our time or something like that. The rest of the night, it’s the Doughman of Tomorrow who’s in the kitchen making the dough.”

“Please go on,” said the cook, noncommittally.

“No one sees him, since it’s in the wee hours, so his risk of messing anything up time-wise is minimal. The only risk is knowing how much dough was made. Aaaaand...that’s where the cook comes in. He’s the wingman. He’s not a clueless stoner, like the rest of the kitchen staff, who aren’t big into figuring out things on their own. His job is to make sure no one counts the dough ahead of time. And if he knows a little more than he should, well then, I suppose he’s a trained professional, and can be ignored. I guess it’s like rock climbers having a belayer to anchor your rope for safety. How’s that sound?”

“Seems like you’ve got a pretty good explanation for everything,” the cook said.

“Except there’s one thing I don’t get. What’s the point of it all? If this is some sort of vacation from time traveling, then why would you be time traveling?” I was on a roll, so I just went with the flow.

“Sure, it sounds like the metaphorical ‘postman taking a walk on his day off’ scenario, but it’s different,” the cook began. “You’ve heard that fire-fighters tend to like fires? Pilots like to fly planes? Cops like to play with guns? Things like that. So what do you think is the one thing that a Time Cop would NOT be able to do, on his or her own terms, no strings attached, just for fun, when they’re not working?”

“What, is this like some sort of joy ride?” I asked.

“For them, quite possibly,” the old man said with a sympathetic smile. “They have many rules and restrictions, and many share a love/hate relationship with it. So this provides a nice, safe way for them to test their skills, relax, enjoy the world, and do things they can’t do. They often enjoy being in challenging, difficult situations, where only very subtle actions and light touches can resolve problems.”

“So then you two are here to make sure everyone’s following the rules?” I asked the two cops.

“ANY causality violations are strictly against the rules, regardless of how limited a scope they have,” the first cop barked.

“And are you their superior officer or something?” I asked the old man. He looked more like a monk than a sergeant.

“Not their officer, only their superior,” he replied with a smirk.

“This is all within our jurisdiction. These are our own agents. Clearly, any interference could be used for personal profit and attempts to reshape the future. Therefore, we inspect and oversee any and all of these so-called ‘funlands,’” the second cop said with a nod.

The old man said, “Your jurisdiction is to prevent humans from trying to misuse Time, to prevent them from harming themselves and others. You have investigated and found no problems.” He paused for a moment and looked around the room. The few customers still around either not moving or just repeating the same movement, over and over with, what I must assume was, the same vacant expression on their face that I had a few minutes earlier.

He continued. “However, by the entanglement of the various actors, they are now poised on the verge of causing damage to the Time Continuum itself. And THAT is MY jurisdiction.” He spoke the two words with a fiery conviction and a baritone pitch that hinted of a vast power. I understood why the others feared him, even though I didn’t.

Predictably, the cops protested, with impotent rage. The old man waited till they had finished their tirade.

“By your very actions, you risk damage to the continuum,” he said in a voice of stone. In a slightly warmer, quieter voice, he said, “You know I cannot permit that.”

He turned to me and said, “Were you coached in any of your answers?”

“Of course not.”

“Before you were summoned to approach, you were cleaning tables. Over there, I believe. You finished that one, then moved on twice before joining this little ‘conversation,’ no?”

When I confirmed that, he asked me why I had moved to different tables. I said, “Well, I had been wiping the first one over and over, so I think it was clean. There was no point in staying there.” I couldn’t read the glances exchanged between the various people. After a moment I added, “There’s...another reason. I...I wanted to find out more. I saw the two of you arguing with them,” I indicated the cook and Doughman, “and wanted to know what it was about. I had never met the Doughman before, so it’s been a sort of low-level mystery for me for a while.”

“And seeing them made you take actions, despite your daydreaming?” asked the old monk.

“Yes,” I said simply.

The cops began to protest but the old man silence them with a glance. “You understand the seriousness of this. Where this would lead? Had you let things go, none of this would have happened. You always are so naïve.” Again, there was a sadness in the old man’s voice.

He turned back to me and said, “To answer your question: I am not their supervisor. I simply work at a level beyond them, with goals that are far beyond their limited vision. They have rules. They have guidelines, but they do not really understand the system, how it acts, interacts, relates and interrelates. What I do is prevent problems with the time stream itself. And when there are problems, I help fix them. We untangle matters one bit at a time, in the order they occurred.”

He turned to the cops, and his voice once again assumed the tone of command. “Simple questions, direct answers. Yes or no. Have you found anything substantive regarding this pair and their ‘vacation’ in this so-called funland?”

“No.”

“Have you any formal requests you would like to submit to the order I serve?”

“No.”

“Then assuming your carelessness can be mitigated, we have no interest in pursuing the matter any further with you. We leave it to your own devices to ensure this does not recur and, if so inclined, punish those responsible as you see fit. Or not.”

“If you can undo anything, then why should we--” began the second cop.

“We do NOT undo matters!” the old man snapped in response. The second cop flinched at the words taking a step back. “Such actions would risk further damage on top of what you have done. We merely place limitations on such damage and let the time stream right itself. There is no returning to some imaginary pristine state. But we can help stop the continuum from straying into a more dangerous state.”

“Like drilling a hole next to a crack that’s growing, to stop it from getting bigger. I had to do that on the door of my car last winter.” The words left my mouth without permission. I did not want to get between these two groups.

The man paused for a moment and looked out into nothing, then nodded a little and said, “Um...yes, I suppose that is a reasonable analogy, to the extent you could understand any of this.” Again, with the sympathetic tone, he added, “No insult intended to you. You simply have no contextual reference for any of this. So you are holding your own admirably. And since they have already entangled you in all this, I can tell you a bit more. It’s even possible that it might help.”

He smiled at the cops, knowing that he was breaking every rule in their book, just to show them how powerless they were.

His voice took on the drone of a Sunday preacher giving his sermon. “Your curiosity would eventually lead you to meeting multiple versions of the so-called ‘Doughman,’ risking causing one aspect of him sending information in an anti-causal direction...that is, backwards in time, the future informing the past. It would not end there. John wisely chose to share only a limited bit of information to you. For example, he implied the dough is allowed to age only overnight. The more you learned, the more you would be able to probe into how things worked—you have already managed to break out of the inattention loops they set up. Your actions could eventually lead to having two versions of the Doughman meet, and even beyond that to *paradoxes*.”

The last word, he spoke with fear. It was the first time I had seen anything other than an odd sort of Grandfatherly affection or righteous anger in him. The other four all tensed and breathed in sharply. Apparently I had it in me to do something truly, pants-soilingly awful. I must reluctantly admit I felt a moment of pride, of importance.

The old man continued. "As you can tell, those are outcomes we will not permit." Everyone was silent for a few seconds.

"You mean you're going to kill me?" I asked, more puzzled than afraid.

"No. Too many other ramifications. Instead, you must move on, which means your life must change, but perhaps that is acceptable." Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a brief smile flash on John's face.

"What'll I do?" I asked the monk.

"What do you want?" His question was like some summons. Even though I had been honest with them before, at that point I felt compelled to answer it truthfully, as best as I could. I thought about it for some time.

"To get out of here. To do something, be someone."

"Fame and fortune?" he asked.

"No. Just...not to waste my life. To do something that makes a difference, in some way. So I don't look back at the end with regret. Maybe it's not like living for the day, like the cook said, but living for something." I thought about the implications. "I guess the first step means leaving here. Maybe getting involved with some organizations, putting my degree or skills to use. It doesn't have to change the world in a 'history textbook chapter dedicated to me' way, just something for better not worse."

The old man closed his eyes and nodded once, deep creases lined the edges of his cheeks and radiated from his mouth. "I think you can leave now," he said to the two Time Cops. "Now, of your own volition, or later, against it." He turned away from them, having no more to say to them.

The two cops looked at each other. The first set her jaw, and the second looked down at his feet.

"You know we're watching you. Don't make any mistakes," the first said, and the two of them turned and started to walk towards the staircase. I have no idea which of us she was addressing.

Before getting there, the second said sourly, "Enjoy the dead-end funland. Freaks." As I watched them, they became insubstantial. They were still there, but somehow not there, like a mere outline of themselves. The images turned and started to walk towards the front door before becoming blurry to the point that they were not there anymore.

"Impressive that you managed to follow them that long, without having had any training for such things," the old man said. "But rest assured, they are gone."

“These two,” he nodded towards the cook and the Doughman, “have been trained, are disciplined, and know the risk and consequences of interfering with the timeflow. They tread lightly, surprisingly lightly,” he gave the cook a knowing glance, “leaving essentially no footprints. Unfortunately, you are not capable of that.”

His voice took on a slightly more stern tone, as if he were making a pronouncement, and maybe he was. “Therefore,” he stated, “you will not be permitted access to the memories of tonight, for the rest of your life.” He reached out and touched me.

It felt like something was radiating out of his arm, into me. Suddenly I felt like the two cops had looked, insubstantial, disoriented. It was as if he had become Atropos, holding the thread of my life in hand, and all I could do was stare at the “abhorred shears” in his other hand. His hand was empty, yet I still felt helpless, adrift on the sea of time.

“Your life line will need a slight nudge to remove it from this place, so you’ll never miss those memories,” he said. He looked at John and said, “Perhaps you would take care of this. It’s a simple matter to set up. I’ll backfill the rest. Besides, a friend can do this with more subtlety than a stranger. And anything you say will be tied up safely in the loop.”

John looked concerned, more than I had ever seen him look. Slowly he nodded and said, “OK, as you wish. I...I’ll take care of it.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and breathed in sharply. Somehow this was more painful to him than to me.

“Don’t be too long, Doughman,” said the robed man.

John gently pushed me, and both of us started to walk towards the front window. We turned slightly and walked through the wall. We kept going. After the wall, we were on the street, but it felt as gray and fuzzy as when we were walking through the wall.

“Wow...” I said quietly observing this nether zone. And then added with some surprise, “Hey, I can talk.”

“Of course you can. Why do you think this is so fucking painful to me? I’m deflecting a little of the effect of the time flow, so we CAN talk,” John said.

“Thanks...I think,” I said.

“I’m...I’m sorry, Sean. This got way more complicated than I intended.”

“So what did you intend? You look like you’re sending me to my death. What aren’t you telling me?”

“In a way, that’s true. From my perspective, I can’t see you again until your death, since I’ll be prohibited from interacting with you until then. Even though it will be quite a long time for you, to me, it would be moments or minutes. I’m not even sure if it’s something I want do.”

We kept walking, I couldn’t tell if it was day or night outside. I sensed, more than saw or heard, shapes, shadows, outlines of people, as blurry as the Time Cops before they disappeared.

“What did I intend?” John stopped walking for a moment and then said, “You know, the old man was right. Time Cops DO enjoy challenges. Running the kitchen solo on a busy night was nothing compared to some of the things I’ve done. It IS a good test. But that was only a tiny part. One reason I’d talk to you when lots of things were going on was so I could challenge myself. And not just the distraction. That was pretty easy. The challenge was to interact with people in this time and place WITHOUT interfering with anything going on. The ‘light touch’ that he mentioned is essential. That wasn’t the only reason—I enjoyed our talks, and you were the only one here with whom I’d really talk.”

“But in this scenario the pizza cook is the easy job. All the stuff I did was while moving in the normal time flow. It requires attention but not a lot that’s special, just simple speed tricks. The pizza-maker, he had to do a bunch of time jumps. He had to avoid himself, others, and any situation in which causality could be broken. That’s the more difficult job. THAT was the job I was practicing for.”

“On your vacation?” I asked.

“No,” he said with a tone that implied he was rolling his eyes. “That’s the point, it’s a training for Special Agents. Hardly anyone knows it. Even the Internal Affairs cops didn’t. The story is that it’s just a sleepy low key vacation to help people decompress after some long, messy job. The long, messy job was just another challenge to find those with promise. Here, my challenge, before I could become the Doughman, was to make a very, very subtle modification to the time stream. One that can make a difference but that even the fucking Time Priests wouldn’t notice or at least care about.”

“Wait. Before *you* could become the Doughman?”

“Yes. I was only recently promoted. The personnel swap is what caught the Time Cops’ attention.”

“You’re the Doughman?!?”

“At your service. And know that hardly ANY of them were known by people. Sure, they’d order a drink at the bar or something, but we make it a point so that people don’t even know what we look like.”

“So who was the Dough--...the other guy with you?”

“My new partner. You’d call him ‘the cook’ and eventually ‘John.’ It’s his job to make sure I don’t fuck up and help keep people from looking too closely into things.”

“But you don’t LOOK like the Doughman. I saw him.”

“You noticed him, though only recently. Still, that’s something few people manage to do. That’s why you didn’t really think much about the new cook, whether he fit or not.”

“So, what happened to him? The previous Doughman, I mean.”

“On assignment, more training at an even stranger time and place, maybe a real vacation? I’ve no idea. That’s the whole point of this place. People change, swap in and out, and no one knows or notices. You think I’m the only one who’s had the role of the cook since you’ve been here? Come on. I consider you a friend, but I haven’t known you for THAT long.”

I feel hurt, embarrassed, angry, and a mix of other things. I push them aside for a moment, as I tried to understand all this. “Hold on. You said you had to complete a challenge before you got promoted. What was it?”

“Come on...you haven’t figured that out yet? It’s so simple. I have to change things in a way so that no one cares or bothers to undo it. It’s this, now, here. Your life is about to change. Well, again. And I’ve managed to make it so that I was ORDERED to do this,” he beamed as he said that. Clearly he was proud of this feat.

His face grew somber and he said, “Look. I really hope this helps. But it pains me. I like you, you’re a good guy. I don’t like seeing memories get yanked from someone. But...well...this is the best I can do, so we’ll see how it goes. So once I let you go, before you drift back into the normal timestream, I’ll tell you one last bit of advice. Actually more of a demand. If I were a Time Priest, I could make it a command, but I’m not, so it’s a request. But more than that. Do it. Please. Without thinking or analysis. It’s the only way I can help, and I can provide you with nothing more than that, and that will amount to just a single word. OK?”

The world was still gray and I had no idea where I was. But I nodded my head and said, “OK. I’ve trusted you up till now, so I see no need to change. Is John even your real name?”

“Of course not,” said John. “Any more than Doughman is. Or the cook. But it’s nice and common, and replaceable and interchangeable. What more could I ask for? Also, don’t forget to bend your knees. Lock them and you’ll limit your options.”

I nodded.

John the Doughman stepped away from me and said, “Good luck. This is the best I can do. Now about that word of advice you need to follow immediately without thinking...?”

I nodded again.

“JUMP!”

I jumped. As quickly and high as I could. The gray world vanished, the muffled sounds became clear. And for an instant, I had an unobstructed view of where I was. It was night. I was outside. The shadows in the world resolve themselves into people, out for a night on the town. It was a Friday night and the sounds of traffic were all around. Two bright lights eclipsed the rest of the scene. They belonged to a car that was 10 feet away from me.

Before I could think of any of the implications, it hit me.

Technically speaking, I hit it. That was why I survived. I was in the air, so the front end passed below me, missing me. I hit the hood, which made me roll, which reduced the force from the impact with the windshield significantly. Still, it did some damage. The driver was drunk, never saw me till it was too late. Or wouldn't have, if he had had the chance. Another factor in my favor was the car's long trunk. It was a late '70s model, before both ends of the car started shrinking significantly.

A lot of the events that followed I only know second-hand, or through deduction. I was taken to the Centre Community Hospital, flown by helicopter to the big hospital in Hershey, spent a couple months there. Mostly broken bones and stuff like that, but a few complications that had them worried for a bit early on. It took time for my memory to return too.

After that, well, I've been very aware of those events and memories. And grateful. It was a turning point in my life. I started to get involved in things, in life. I moved to New York City, then San Francisco. I know human rights is still a global and local problem, but I'd like to think my small contributions helped make some positive changes in the world. Oh yeah, and I met a girl in the hospital. That worked out well, and she's been by my side ever since. So maybe I can't take all the credit for my accomplishments. Still, it worked out pretty well.

The memories of that time, not just that night, weren't locked away or placed in some hidden part of my mind. They were moved forward in time. They simply didn't exist with me. And I never thought of them, I never felt that anything was missing. My life was full enough, had enough meaning, and the

things in it were higher priorities by far. Like Natalie and the kids.

There wasn't anything that triggered the memories, like a familiar sight or sound or smell. Well, I suppose there could have been, but it doesn't feel like it. The Time Priest had mentioned a loop. Like most of what he said, I really had no idea what he was talking about back then. But it was never that complicated. A loop. Something that happens again. The memories would be at the end of the loop. And here they are, a part of me again, waiting at the end of the loop.

And the loop. Another car accident. But this time there was no advice, no timing for a Burt Reynolds or Lee Majors stuntman-like roll. And I'm about 25 years older, so I probably wouldn't have been able to pull it off anyway. Hell, my metaphors are a quarter century out of date too. There's surprisingly little pain, but I can tell it's bad. Perhaps it's all a dream, all these memories, but I don't think so. And given the tricks these people can do, maybe it's not even the end. But that doesn't matter, I can look back on things without regret. What more can someone ask for?

Still, I can't help but think back to that era. Damn, but those pizzas were good.

Perhaps I've been a bit lost in myself, but I think I'm justified. Still, only now I notice the crowd gathering around me. Most have looks of shock and terror on their face, yet they're running to help. On the periphery I see a familiar face. No fear, no shock, just sadness.

I hate mysteries. And the thought of leaving people with such a baffling final three words pains me, much more than the physical pain I'm currently feeling. But they'll assume I was incoherent and not care, and it's important to me that one person understands, knows that things actually worked out well.

I look out to the crowd and manage to say, quietly, "Nice job, Doughman."