

Nathan's Famous

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It was only a few months after we moved to Cincinnati in 1976. The city was new to me. My wife had abandoned it some thirteen years before. Part of our familiarization process was to get to know the local eateries. You can't feel good about a place unless there are some good places to chow down. We had been to Skyline, The Hitching Post, White Castle, and at the other end of the spectrum, The Maisonette and the Pigalls of that era. This weekday noontime, I found myself at a well-known downtown deli. I was working as a law clerk, at what was then the Kohlen Brothers firm, as Susan and I put me through law school at UC.

I was meeting an old friend for lunch. It had been years since I had seen my friend Tom Blakeley. We had been together at Columbia in 1967 and 1968. After graduating, Tom had come back to Cincinnati. I had lost track of him over those few years, but soon learned after I moved here that he was working for his Uncle Walt at the Walt Blakeley Agency. They were purveyors of general insurance to old line Cincinnati families, and anyone else who had ready money.

I waited nervously in front of the place at the corner of Ninth & Elm. After some uncomfortable minutes, I saw Tom hurrying up the street. We shook hands, went in, and immediately spied behind the counter a portly, none too clean gentleman, in a greasy apron and paper cap, sporting perhaps five days growth of beard. There were no menus, no menu board. We ordered corned beef sandwiches and a Dr. Brown's Cream Soda each, paid slightly different amounts for our identical orders at our host's behest, and went to one of the battered Formica tables, near the dirty front window, to dine. It was my introduction to Izzy Kadetz.

As I knoshed on my thick wad of corned beef on rye, munching an occasional pickle from the open crock on the table, and nibbling at my extra greasy potato pancake, Tom asked, "Are you happy?"

"This isn't New York," I said. "But, yeah-this will do just fine. But what about you, Tom? You seem kind of pensive."

"You know," he said, "Every time I come here, I can't help but think about David and Nancy."

This came as a shock to me. When I first met Tom at Columbia, he was inseparable from David and Nancy Levine. He admired David, and it was obvious to everyone but Tom that Nancy had a crush on him. Close as they were, and maybe because of that, at a certain point I didn't discern the Levines had disappeared from his life. I thought I had figured out why, although Tom had never discussed it-until now.

"Tell me," I said, with the brash confidence of a renewed friendship I was thrilled to have amid the loneliness of starting a new life in an unknown city, "I've always wanted to know: did you fuck Nancy?"

I was sorry right away that I had asked such a crude question. It had obviously made Tom very uncomfortable. But Tom wasn't angry. Instead he answered my boorish question with the story I am about to let Tom tell in his own words:

"My years at Columbia were full of anxiety. I did not take well to the affected, hard-edged sophistication of the Columbia students and faculty that I was thrown in with. Growing up in Cincinnati, even on the east side, a few blocks from Hyde Park Square, I felt like a rube when I came into contact with kids who had gone to eastern prep schools and summered on the Cape or Nantucket.

More than that, there was something irritating about the outlook these people had on life. While many of them had seen and done things I had not even imagined, I found their point of view limited. They affected a jaded attitude about things - sex, money, power - yet had no business being so jaded, because they were either very young, very disconnected from the real world they posed as having down cold, or both. Their knowing attitude jangled against their obvious awkwardness in confronting some very basic aspects of life. More than his "pointy-headed intellectuals" these were the people George Wallace could say would throw up if they were confronted with having to change a tire. They seemed not only uncomfortable in their own skins, but self-centered, affected and unhappy.

So it was a great day when I met David Levine in my Modern British Novel class. The professor was a fop who affected an English air and accent. Everyone knew that he was from Bayonne, New Jersey, and lived at home with his mother. It was fun to watch David's amused toleration of the guy's labored eccentricities. While I wanted to strangle the guy every time he said "shedule" or wore another Turnbull and Asser shirt, David just laughed and still showed intense interest in the great novels we read under the fop's brilliant tutelage. Before long, David was inviting me to his apartment to watch TV or get his basketball for games down in Riverside Park.

At David's place, I met Nancy. She was David's child bride. A Barnard student, she and David had married within months of meeting as freshmen. Nancy and David fit together in some very basic ways. He was about 5'4" and she was probably 4'10". Plain and unassuming, they were funny, quick-witted and bemusedly affectionate with the stiff-necked hick from Cincinnati who was increasingly uncomfortable with the confused, supercilious mores of their fellow students. More than that, they were natural and unaffected, and seemed to care for each other in a very basic way. I liked them both. Their apartment was a refuge from the cold anonymity of the dorms, stark in the pre-1968 Spartan decor that was part of the reason for the Columbia riots of that year.

One of the great events of the first year I knew David was going to his family's home in Brooklyn for Passover. The food, as I recall, should have been quite a disappointment. The lamb was dry and overcooked. Instead of exotic accompaniments from the Levant and the myriad parts of Central Europe where the Levines had taken refuge on their way to Brooklyn I was shocked to see mashed potatoes and watery green beans on my plate. I might as well have been at a truck stop on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. And, yet, it all seemed delicious. I missed a family atmosphere and this certainly was one. And David's irreverent reading of the Passover service in rushed Hebrew to wise-cracks and cat calls from his aunts, uncles and mother was a comic but

comfortable shock to the overly reverential idea of religion I had garnered at St. Mary's in Hyde Park.

The Seder wasn't a meal. It was an event. I can still taste the bitter herbs and the more commonplace foods we experienced that night.

A few months later, Nancy David and I had an even better meal and a more communal experience. It was the end of school for the year and someone, I don't remember who, threw a party. About 2:00 in the morning, Nancy, David and I headed, I thought, home. But, as soon as we were in David's ancient Volkswagen, he said, "Let's go to Nathan's." And so we made our way to Coney Island with me, for once, holding forth, telling my eastern friends the story of my life. David drove and I sat in the passenger seat, Nancy hanging just over my shoulder. Every time I turned to make an emphatic point, I found her almost in my face. With all the Gallo's Hearty Burgundy I had drunk, it didn't register a bit.

We got to Nathan's about 3:00 in the morning. The place was still ablaze with light and doing a brisk business. As we staggered from the car, I was hit by a confluence of pungent aromas from the large, open air booth at the edge of the seashore- French fries, succulent hot dogs, ketchup, and mustard, all wafted to us on a salt breeze, with the pounding of the surf in the near background.

We stood in the ocean breeze munching dogs and wolfing down stacks of heavily browned fries still moist with oil and dripping ketchup. I looked at David and saw a look of pure delight and exaltation, along with a smear of ketchup on his chin. It was a night I knew I would never forget, although I didn't know why at the time.

The next fall passed much like the first year until one night when David and I stopped at the V and T on Columbus Avenue, an Italian eatery with the best sausage and peppers I have ever had. It's still there when you are in New York. As I sat there slack jawed, David made a date with our waitress and, as he told me later, doubled back to pick her up after I peeled off to go home.

So things weren't going well for David and Nancy. They or at least David were descending into the moral bog of the Upper West Side. I didn't give it much thought, still seeing them every week or two. A few weeks before Christmas, David asked me to come over and help them put up their Christmas tree. Like I said, they were both short. It was my job to climb their stepladder and get the ornaments from the very back of a shelf in their all purpose closet. Enjoying helping my diminutive friends, I proudly climbed the ladder. As I rooted through the detritus on the shelf, I felt a hand steadying my ankle. But no, steadying was not what it was about at all. The hand, firm, warm, insistent, was making its way up the interior of my leg. By the time it got to mid-thigh, I got up the courage to look down and sure enough, there was Nancy giving me a soulful, open stare with her limpid brown eyes. I am not sure how I disengaged from the hand but I did without loss of dignity or David noticing what had just occurred.

David was going skiing that Christmas. I stayed in New York instead of going home to Cincinnati. During the holiday I was distressed to receive a bunch of insistent phone calls that I come over and "keep her company" while David was away.

I have to admit I was sorely tempted. For a young guy alone in New York who hadn't had a date in quite awhile, it was something I couldn't help thinking about. But I never went over. In fact, I saw very little of Nancy or David after that, much to my regret and the quizzical dismay of David.

As I think back over the years, I wonder what kept me from doing what would have come very naturally with Nancy, whom I liked very much. I am not pious or a prude. I was not averse to sleeping with willing young women when the occasion presented itself, admittedly, not all that often. Nevertheless, it was a point of pride with me not to sleep with my friend's wife, who was also my friend. I still wonder why I didn't. I think it was all the communal moments we shared -- basketball, laughs at the back of the class, that comic Passover Seder, and David inhaling hot dogs that breezy night at Nathan's Famous on Long Island. The shared visceral experience, completely carnal but completely innocent at the same time, was some how sacred to me, and I couldn't violate that.

David and Nancy stayed together for a while and had a son who is now grown up. Somehow he is a big strapping fellow who graduated from Columbia himself. David and Nancy divorced, not at all to my surprise, and while I still see David when I travel to Washington, I long ago lost track of Nancy. She lives some place in upstate New York. Penn Yan, maybe, her hometown. I still can almost taste and smell that Nathan's Famous hot dog and the oily, brown, hot, fragrant French fries."

That's the story. Tom is gone from Cincinnati now, moved to Santa Fe. For anyone who hasn't been there in recent years, Izzy's remains, but only as a pale shadow of its former greasy splendor. I can't help thinking that Tom remembers not only that dog and those fries, but also an insistent hand moving up his leg. Anybody know where you can get a good corned beef sandwich?
