

Three Burgers

THERE IS A GOLDEN THREAD that stitches through my life. To be precise, it is a golden and raw umber thread with occasional lengths of prime red. This is the burger thread. It is hitched to all those hamburgers consumed on dappled suburban decks, at uneasy kitchen tables, within white tablecloth temples, over highway laps, and in the boulevard diners that stretch from here to my earliest memories of eating.

Among these are hamburgers that nourished significant segments of my story. Sitting at each is a version of myself, a specific diner living my life. To remember each of these hamburgers is to venture out, to look around like a time-traveling tourist moving from station to station. At each stop, an emotional sensorium unique to that moment and phase.

There are three such burgers, the first when I was nine years old.

I. Hoppers, New York City, 1978

The hamburger before me was enormous. It was alone on a white china dish scarcely bigger than the burger. The patty was tall and somewhat squared off, a delicious quasi-puck of ground beef, caramelized onions, and dewy cold tomato slices. This gave the whole thing a formal feeling, which was only fitting. We were in Hoppers, an upscale downstairs Greenwich Village restaurant with glowing blond floors and floating white tables. The whole room was silent, held in place by a bright packet of sunlight that filled the space like air in a balloon.

The burger was so big it needed to be cut to be consumed. This was understood. The waiter provided a black-handled steak knife and my father divided the massive burger with the surety that only adults possess. This was my cue: “Thank you, Papa.” I said this with an English accent, emphasizing the second syllable. He laughed at the joke, at my keen observation that this was a formal place and that this city burger was bigger, better, and more special than my everyday suburban burger.

The stage was set, the show had started: dinner with Dad.

This was what you got with Dad—special dinner burgers, eaten at four o’clock in an empty fancy Village restaurant between seatings. He did not have any food of his own—it was way too early. This was all about me. After all, it was Wednesday. The custody agreement stated that my father could see me on Wednesdays and weekends. And on Wednesdays, as the divorce papers mandated, I had to be home by 6 p.m. The copy I have is a slick-papered and smudgy 1970 mimeograph, text all askew. Reading it now, the document’s contents are rather broad-brush and boilerplate. This precise 6 p.m. on Wednesdays specification stands out. As though my mother needed to erect a logistical barrier against Dad taking me out for burgers on Wednesday, after which we hitchhike around the tri-state area before he finally gets me home at 1 a.m., reeking of popcorn and truck cab air fresheners. In reality, this requirement transmitted from the mimeograph into my life as very occasional daylight dinners.

Despite these logistics, I was always eager for the magical Wednesdays. When he picked me up, his sports car smelled of cigars and leather. He was warm and welcoming, affectionate and aglow. He was, in short, the opposite of my stepfather, who was seething, absolutely unhappy, and dangerous.

Opening my jaws wide in an attempt to match the thing’s great height, I bit into Hoppers’ musky masterpiece. Onions and tomatoes slipped out sideways. The beef, smoky and dense, released its glistening prize of salty fat brine. This is where I learned the joy of salivation—a buccal wash and I was happy all over. I closed my eyes. Breathing out of my nose, the thousand flavors coursed through my face. My heart slowed down.

Suddenly, there was a waitress at the table, a sharp-shirted straight-haired ’70s city waif with freckles and long fingers. My father was making her laugh, making her feel warm and welcome. Her heart-shaped face was alight as she walked away all a-giggle. A few miraculous bites later and I was losing steam. Dad got up then, and disappeared into the back of the restaurant. I could hear him back there, a-murmur in thick, low tones. And I could hear the waitress giggling again. By the time he returned to the table, I was stuffed.

“Almost done?” asked Dad.

“Yes, *Father*,” I conceded, all British and fancy.

It was time to go. He had picked me up at school that afternoon, driven me to the city, to Hoppers. I got the burger, the special treatment, and now it was time to go home. We would repeat this some other Wednesday. Next week, he would promise. But it was never next week. “Wednesdays and weekends” was a suggestion, a wish. In reality, this was “maybe Wednesday” and “not this weekend.” In this way, he was as dangerous as my stepfather. Dad offered a way out, an alternate reality, a warm and welcoming world where strangers laughed and the food was amazing. But in the end, he was as rare as my Hoppers hamburger.

II. Bill’s Tavern, Cannon Beach, Oregon 1994

We did it because we could. Portland was great this way—it was a permissive town then. Lori and I had tried to live in New York after grad school, but that city would not have us. The New York summer spat us out with hot breath, wet with midnight street sweat. Portland, however, was like an open storybook about green and rain and mossy houses all in a row. And Portland said yes to everything. Want to be 25 and live in an Art Deco masterpiece of a building that is long and low and pink like some fantasy ocean-liner? Sure! Want to have a job and eat out every now and then like an adult? Of course! Want to also drink away the last of your escapist impulses at tiny magical dive bars that exist between times? Get in here!

And the coast. A short drive through Sasquatch hills and lumpy towns and you were there at the edge of things. The other edge. Not the New York edge with its claustrophobic gilded bustle and unsettled fumes of transatlantic voyages.

We had left Portland late—maybe 4 p.m. or so, after Lori’s day at the preschool. We pushed through the rainy autumn range in a brown pickup held together by chains and rust. We ascended into the mist at two thousand feet and descended on the oceanside town of Cannon Beach—a pile of toy houses beside a vast unmade bed. The town presented a collection of cedar-clad buildings harboring just a thousand souls, a bookstore, a kite shop, and a tavern: Bill’s Tavern.

Bill’s sat in the middle of the main street, offering an orange glow through brown windows and a puffy stack of woodsmoke from a brick chimney. The rain was everywhere. We parked right in front (I know!). I pulled open the heavy wooden tavern door that jangled as it swung wide into the street. The smell got to us first. This was a magnificent *mélange* of piney woodsmoke, grilled meats, beer, and pipe tobacco. Our eyes adjusted.

Inside was a social opus, the sort of human arrangement that our species was born to form and that our souls search

out all of our days. In the middle squatted a pot-bellied, cast-iron stove, alive with snapping fire. It pushed light and pulled shadows from a group of musicians arrayed around the black metal, all seated in simple chairs, some leaning back, others crouched over their instruments. Guitars, banjos, a mandolin, and I swear I remember a washboard. Bluegrass—an art form that, until this moment, I considered incapable of magic. Born in New York City, raised by the Beatles, and too young to know any better, I dismissed bluegrass as a novelty at best. But loud and live around a dry fire on a wet day, full with beer and smoke and abandon, this bluegrass was downright transportive.

Arrayed around this *axis mundi* of music, the rest of Bill’s Tavern winked in the firelight. Folks sat at tables, at booths, at the bar, eating and drinking, talking and listening, and being together. We took a seat at a dark wooden booth.

Our burgers arrived in plastic baskets set with waxy paper. There was a pile of fries there, but it was the burger that mattered. These were thin-patty burgers, sloppy with shredded lettuce and cold tomatoes. The buns were lightly toasted and slathered thick with butter inside. What an innovation! The butter and beef *jus* conspired to whip up a cosmic gravy in your face with every bite. The crispy patty amended this with a smoky char crunch, the lettuce dissolving in a green wash spiked with the acid tomato buzz. Betwixt and between the music and the meat, Lori and I were captured in time. In love and alive with salt reverie, we ordered another round.

Walking in the rain to a nearby motel, it was clear that we were now free. Only in a state of liberty can one stumble upon such brilliance, enjoy such a perfect burger and firelight bluegrass beside the sea by pure happenstance. New York was all blockage and “do not pass go.” With these burgers, Oregon was stating once and for all that anything was possible. “Here,” the rain was whispering. “Here, have this burger. Take this moment, this wet night at the edge of this vast continent. Be here at the opposite of your origin. And grow.”

III. The Galley Restaurant and Lounge, Lopez Island, 2017

It was the only restaurant open on the island. Our little Airbnb was getting smaller in the rain and it was time to get out for a spell. We were on a short spring-break trip, exploring this brilliant island off the Washington coast. The kids, now 12 and 15, had been walking and reading and music-making all day. Hungry and mellow, we headed to The Galley.

The Galley Restaurant and Lounge was a low-slung structure that may have been originally built to store mounds of oysters. Half the joint was the townie bar. In here, it seemed,

was every local soul we'd seen that day—the gentle-bearded goat farmer, the apothecary hippie pixie wood sprite, the stout taffy lady—all sharing a drink like the cast of a play in their green room between shows. The other half of the place was the restaurant. It was strewn with mismatched tables, various species of chair, scattered domestic lamps, and '80s New Age murals.

I crave beef when I travel. And the burgers on the menu sounded good. I was hopeful but skeptical; small joint burgers disappoint as often as not. Too frequently they're overcooked Sysco patties, as floppy as they are blackened. A miracle of materials science but not a satisfying meal. It was clear, however, when the food arrived, that this was not the case. This burger was tall. The patty was a robust specimen, dripping with beads of slow fat, supporting a rugged crisscross of slab bacon, a sheaf of sharp lettuce, and a perfectly content tomato slice.

From the first bite, it was immediately plain—this was the best burger I had ever eaten. Holy shit. The beef was floral. The crunchy resistance offered by the thick herby bacon created a textural complexity beyond my experience. And the juices. This burger was wet. The moisture content was redolent of the sun, suffused with the grasses, spiked by the salt air of Lopez Island. Turns out, the cow lived just a few miles

from The Galley, the pork belly scraped the ground not a few thousand feet from where I sat. No intervening miles, days, and weeks spent in freezer air, slowly dying a second death; this was local meat eaten in a local joint. Every bite was ecstatic—the bun melted into the mix, juices ran down my forearm, I was making humming sounds around bites.

I had to put it down just to breathe. And to look around.

Lori was strategizing her own burger, clearly up against the same glory. My children were happily munching, looking around, seeing the room with new eyes. This was a happy place, a place for people, for eating, for pausing inside our pause, and for being transformed again by food. It was almost too much. I wanted to cry, felt it welling up in my sinuses, felt my eyes sting. It's hard to gauge progress in this life. The signs are manifold and written in a million alphabets. There are fake oracles, hidden truths, broken companions. But right there, at that table, was proof that, despite these diversions, there was undeniable beauty on hand. My family, this emerald island, this best burger, all so casual and available. These most mundane pleasures offer the quickest route through confusion. There's nothing to see here—no accidents, no fatal collision, no cause to stop, to rubberneck. Just a man and his family, enjoying beef and bun. Move along, move along... 