in which are discussed Rendezvous and Gus’s Fried Chicken, Memphis, TN; City Café, Murfreesboro, TN; Miller’s Grocery, Christiana, TN; and a bloodthirsty Macedonian sheepdog

I’m fortunate to be writing this from somewhere other than the Memphis jail, where I nearly landed after my traveling companion and albatross, Dan, pulled another one of his stunts, this time in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel, where we’d gone to have mint juleps and watch the famous ducks frolic in the fountain. It was apparently some sort of panic attack, induced no doubt by a combination of alcoholic myopia and, ironically, an overindulgence in his antianxiety medication. A mere twenty minutes after we’d arrived, I found Dan half-undressed and assailing imaginary enemies near a bank of elevators. It had started, as it so often does with Dan, in the men’s room, where he claimed to have been accosted by some bachelor-party types wearing Polo shirts and boat shoes, and shortly thereafter of having had the sensation of being harpooned in the chest. That’s his story, anyway. It’s all quite incredible, though, especially considering this is a man widely known to be lacking complete possession of his rational faculties and who just moments before had seemed to be having some sort of out-of-body experience and had warned me to “stand back, I might vomit.”

I wasn’t halfway through my Scotch (the Peabody bar does not serve mint juleps, I was informed, a little cheekily, I thought, by a young bartendress) when we were forced to retreat to our motel, as Dan’s theatrics had drawn the attention of the concierge and several well-heeled locals. I’d warned Dan to can this sort of behavior down here. “Remember, we’re Yankees traveling in the South. Cultural emissaries and whatnot, so let’s travel lightly,” was how I put it to him, gently yet firmly, as a father might to a wayward son. But it had obviously made no impression on him. And so, under cover of darkness, we had to hightail it back to our sparse and decrepit little room at the Knight’s Court Inn, which smelled as if someone had recently been murdered in it. Unfortunately, we could not locate the remote for the TV—despite a thorough excavation of our quarters—and were compelled to spend the remainder of the evening in song, running the gauntlet of sea shanties from “Haul Away Joe” to “Lass of Swansea Town,” inspired by the bottle of Cutty Sark we passed between us, until we both lapsed into comas.

We’d come to Tennessee for reasons that remain a mystery to me. It was Dan’s idea, as I recall. Something

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to do with spending an idle week in the adoptive state of Andrew Jackson or Johnson, or both (Dan is a history buff, you see, as further evidenced by the garish tattoo of Leutze’s George Washington Crossing the Delaware on his fleshy upper arm). Or it might have been for another reason altogether. What it amounted to was a kind of walkabout, largely aimless in nature, guided by the vaguest impressions of geography, and punctuated by moments of unpardonable sloth and gluttony. Having been briefly liberated from the tyranny of office work, my only intent was to eat and drink shamelessly while trolling the countryside for tchotchkes, the kinds of things you see hanging on the walls at Cracker
Barrel—ancient farm implements and stuffed muskrats and the like, which I can’t seem to get enough of. I dare say Dan harbored similar notions in that oblong skull of his. It’s just that he abandoned all sense of propriety along the way.

A word about Dan. He is short, pale, of above-average weight, and occasionally given to prelunch gin-and-tonics and tiresome locutions such as “The Sun is once again in the clutches of the Lion!” (In contrast, my own udder-like midsection, failing hairline, and dismal income make me irresistible to women.) His vocabulary is generally above par, but his clothes are in such poor taste that one suspects they have been chosen as a sort of provocation (his aesthetic, for lack of a better word, is best described as “pit crew”). Despite all of this, he possesses certain qualities I admire, namely, an innate, almost Houdiniian ability to escape from impossible situations. Dan, if you can believe it, has a certain kind of charm. For instance, I once saw him prance away from a poker game after relieving several drunk and shirtless rednecks of an impressive bundle of cash. The air had been thick with the promise of violence, but Dan soon had them all chortling and smacking him on the back as if they were
old army buddies. This is an invaluable commodity in a traveling associate, especially when roving a foreign land.

For the record, I didn’t half-expect to encounter in the South what you hear so much about on the cocktail circuit in New York City (that cesspool of liberal aristocracy I call home). That is, yecomen moonshiners sporting profane tattoos and brandishing rabbit guns astride monstrous ATVs with bleached possum skulls mounted to the handlebars. No, my prejudices are far too refined for that sort of thing. Vegetarians and the Irish are my scapegoats.

That said, you do occasionally get a feeling in Memphis of being like Marius amidst the ruins of Carthage. The architecture ranges from the sluggish to the menacing to the patently absurd. And while Memphians are almost uniformly enlightened, their city, like New Orleans, is besieged by a year-round plague of college transients, led by a Greek phalanx whose malefacency shows no bounds. At all hours these guzzlers carouse from bar to bar along Beale Street like a herd of mastodons, grunting cravenly, sick with a pagan lust for cheap booze and clueless rockabilly (Dan, of course, felt perfectly at home). It is one of the more horrifying sights in the western hemisphere. In this vein I propose that Beale Street be burnt to the ground.

There are, however, a disproportionate number of good restaurants in Memphis. On the night of Dan’s Peabody Meltdown we’d gone to a place called Rendezvous, which came highly recommended by a friend, and for once in my life a recommendation actually paid off. It took some searching, as the front door to Rendezvous is located in an alley and behind some dumpsters, but once inside it was just moments before our rapacious maws were glutted with Memphis-style pork ribs, which were some of the sweetest and crispiest I’ve ever sunk tooth into. Dan was already well into the booze by then, and he attacked his ribs with frightening indiscrimation. I have to admit they warranted such an approach, being extraordinarily meaty and copiously supplemented with beans and slaw, so I followed suit. For a moment it had all the signs of being a photo finish, until Dan, sensing my challenge, pulled ahead on the final lap, leaving me several furlongs behind. The rolls were apparently quite good, but I’d hardly noticed they were there before Dan had scarfed them all down.

On the walls of Rendezvous are hung many impressive watercolors, including one of former Crimson Tide football coach Bear Bryant, which I very badly wanted to take home with me, and nearly did, but thought the better of it, which I mention only to illustrate how prevalent were the temptations during our Tennessee junket and how resolutely virtuous I remained throughout.

The Peabody is a fine place to repair after any meal in Memphis. Aside from being a four-star hotel, it’s home to the aforementioned family of mallard ducks. They live in a cage on the roof, where they sleep in puddles of their own filth, a custom I previously thought observed only in American fraternities. Twice a day they take the elevator down to the fountain in the lobby, kindly assisted by a bellhop, for much-needed baths. It’s a well-documented Memphis ritual and, we were incessantly reminded, not to be missed. Sadly, the mallards were back in their cages by the time Dan and I arrived, which is typical.

Suffice it to say I did not sleep soundly. I awoke feeling as though I were suffering complete pituitary shutdown. There seemed to be an artillery barrage resounding through my head. Dan slept hogishly, as is his habit, although upon waking he looked far worse off than I. I quickly fortified him with coffee and vitamin E, which seemed to invigorate him. After a detour to the Stax Museum, where we lingered over Isaac Hayes’s majestic gold-plated Cadillac Eldorado, we sped over to Gus’s Fried Chicken on Front Street for lunch. Gus’s is a charming brick shack with few of the usual restaurant accoutrements, such as menus and cutlery. There is simply a handwritten sign over the kitchen that says, “Today’s Special: Chicken.” That’s all they serve, plus, of course, beer. Rarely have I been so gratified by a cold bottle of Mr. Anheuser’s finest. There might have been slaw, but I was going on several days of near-sleepless, angst-ridden, heroic drinking, and I just can’t remember whether it made an appearance. The chicken, however, was spectacular. We had fragments of it in our hair.

After Gus’s, we adjourned to that grand monument to infamy and shame known as Graceland. It’s been said that Elvis effectively died after his second record. I tend to agree. But a part of me admires the man. His life exemplified the most banal horrors of the American Dream, and yet he seemed to enjoy every minute of it. I, however, did not enjoy the Graceland tour, which began ignominiously with an accidental roundhouse kick delivered by yours truly to the vulnerable noggin of a small boy standing in line behind me. This tragic event unfolded as follows: in order to gain access to Graceland you must first stand in line for an eternity amidst hordes of jabbering tourists, ropped off and swaying like cattle under a blazing, molten sun, with flies buzzing your head like a squadron of MiGs, until you are herded onto a stifling trolley and ferried to the mansion grounds. Naturally, Dan and I sought to abridge this whole process by cutting in line. As I was swinging my leg apishly over the rope partition, I struck the poor lad with a blow that would have made Jean-Claude Van Damme quiver.
with envy. The boy’s parents quite reasonably wanted to murder me. Many apologies sprang to mind, but for some reason the words would not surface (I blame the emotional rigors of the previous evening). We were forced to remain in distressing proximity to the family for the duration of the tour, the father eyeballing me like it was all he could do to keep himself from tearing out my heart and eating it. It was one of the worst experiences of my life, and I recall nothing substantive of Graceland, except that we weren’t allowed to use the notorious upstairs bathroom, even after I explained that it was an emergency.

The next day we made haste northward and in a few hours found ourselves in the leafy yet sweltering enclave of Murfreesboro, southeast of Nashville. Murfreesboro was the site of several bloody battles during the War of Northern Aggression. At the close of the war a Yankee general rode his horse through the courthouse in the town square, an act that still ranksles the locals. Just down the street from the courthouse is the City Café, which serves perhaps the finest fried chicken I’ve ever encountered outside of my own home, including Gus’s. It was indescribably juicy, with a peppery finish, and the skin was fried so flawlessly that I felt almost sad to bite into it. The mashed potatoes and gravy, slaw, and fried okra proved worthy if unremarkable complements, while the corn on the cob seemed to have passed through the bowels of some lumbering line-cook before reaching our table. However, we were advised ahead of time that the rolls were of Dionysian caliber, and we were advised correctly.

Our previous evening had been spent—“squandered” is a better word—in the company of Messrs. Seagram and Schweppes, and the tempest in my skull told me I was still in the early recovery stage. Dan, it almost goes without saying, was in exceptionally poor shape, even by his standards. It was all I could manage to get him out of bed and to the City Café in time for lunch. Dining with us that afternoon was a better word—in the company of Messrs. Seagram and Schweppes, and the tempest in my skull told me I was still in the early recovery stage. Dan, it almost goes without saying, was in exceptionally poor shape, even by his standards. It was all I could manage to get him out of bed and to the City Café in time for lunch. Dining with us that afternoon was two fine ladies, admirers you might say, fresh off the plane from New York. Unfortunately, Dan’s attitude at being roused so early put a damper on things, and our young admirers were appropriately scandalized. Dan kept remarking on the toothless and leering clientele surrounding us, but for the life of me I could not see any. To make matters worse, he made yet another disastrous order (keeping his astounding record going), this time of salmon cakes and sweet potato casserole, both of which had clearly been concocted in a chemistry lab. It’s rare to find such horrifying and superb cooking so closely juxtaposed, but so it was at City Café.

In an attempt to pacify Dan, I made the mistake of offering him a bite of my chicken. He snatched the drum-leg from my hand and tore at it like a savage hunter, snapping and wheezing, his mouth in a lupine scowl, and began emitting low barks and growls as he gnawed. Then, with the cleaned bone jutting from his lips, he gazed longingly at my plate. You could practically hear his synapses sputtering across the table, and my heart briefly went out to him. But when he saw that he’d be getting no more of my chicken, he took a large ear of cold gray corn in his paws and ate it in the rudest possible manner, vertically and with butter dripping from his chin.

Afterwards, the four of us waddled over to Steve’s Pawnshop, where one of our admirers purchased for me a timeless Grimace milk glass for two dollars. The place was crowded with breakables, and I sensed the danger at once. Although Dan was reasonably lucid, he somehow still managed an acrobatic tumble at the entrance that nearly unended a display case full of Confederate sabers, a move that surely would have gotten us hounded out of town.

“These are CSA officer’s swords, like that carried by J.E.B. Stuart at Bull Run...,” Dan was saying as I approached.

“That’s all quite riveting, Dan, and I’m grateful for the history lesson, but we must leave, toot sweet.” Safely outside, he started to sulk. Even my pocket flask failed to mollify him. He remained in a vile temper for the rest of the afternoon. It was only much later, during an illuminating tour of the Stones River Battlefield, complete with cannon-fire reenactments by a costumed Confederate regiment, that the black cloud lifted from his brow.

At any rate, I’ve strayed off course. What I’ve meant to say is that you find yourself in the Murfreesboro vicinity, City Café is worth your time, if only for the chicken and rolls. I might add that the waitresses are uncommonly friendly, the fare cheap, and the location—near the site of prominent Union glory—of historical interest.

After a few days’ rest, and with my nerve-endings sufficiently recharged, we undertook a harrowing, white-knuckle drive down Highway 269 (Dan insisted on driving) to Christiana and the culinary fiefdom of Miller’s Grocery. A former general store that was converted into a restaurant years ago, Miller’s is a beacon of hope and sanity amidst an otherwise tepid sea of fast-food abominations along the Shelbyville Pike. For whatever reason, almost all of the good eating in the Nashville area is to be found in outlying communities like Christiana, Murfreesboro, and Hurricane Mills. Nashville proper is a wasteland of gruesome reconstituted trailer slop, and you are hereby advised to forsake the city for its outskirts.

Dan and I went to Miller’s for Sunday “dinner,” as lunch is called in those parts, and we were not disappointed.
Dinner is buffet style, which is my preferred way of eating. There's no cheating yourself at a buffet. Dan had a bit of everything—twice—including a heaping trough of something called “mayonnaise apples,” which looked appalling but were apparently quite good, judging by the fiendish grin and smear of food across his face.

I returned from my first trip loaded down with catfish, mac & cheese, corn pudding, three different kinds of casserole (broccoli, squash, and green bean), pineapple salad, coleslaw, and biscuits, all of which was transcendently scrumptious. My second and third trips were repeats of my first, except I swapped the catfish for meatloaf and the slaw for fruit salad with marshmallows. To drink, there was tea punch, also called “fruit tea,” which could very well be classified as a controlled substance by the DEA. For dessert,
a cornucopia of sweets, including banana pudding, chess pie, red velvet cake, chocolate pie, fudge pie, chocolate mousse, and so on.

I should mention that reservations are vital at Miller’s. The crowds can swell to rock-arena proportions, and if you fail to make a reservation you’ll find yourself pacing the dusty sidewalks outside with complete strangers, for which you’ll have only yourself to blame.

Not long after our Miller’s feast Dan was attacked by a Macedonian sheepdog in the employ of our kind boarders, the Dixon family. The beast was called “Mack,” and according to the Dixons his bloodline can be traced to an ancient warrior class of canines owned by Alexander the Great, so he is predictably fierce and noble. The Dixons, Dan, and I were having cocktails on the patio when Mack approached Dan, gave his crotch a snort, and instantly sensed something was amiss. A terrifying, primeval wail echoed from deep within that hellhound, and he lit into Dan like lightning, all fangs and flying snot. It was a sight to behold, and the rest of us took it in with much hilarity. Tossing his drink in the air, Dan screamed like a schoolgirl and turned to run, which is when Mack caught him on the ass with his bear-trap jaws. Luckily, Señor Dixon is a retired physician and was able to staunch the bleeding. Still, after much griping from Dan, we were obliged to leave the following morning.

So ended our culinary odyssey through the great state of Tennessee. I’d soon return to the northeast Babylon of New York City and Dan to his bootlegger’s camp on the toxic banks of Lake Erie. We were both nearly ten pounds heavier. For the first time in my life I craved salad greens. Though I’d failed miserably on the tchotchke front—with the notable exception of my Grimace glass—I had surprisingly few regrets. Indeed, I felt incredibly grateful to have eaten so well and so abundantly in such a short time.

On our last night, as the crickets chirped outside and Dan, braying across the room, slept the sleep of the recently mauled, I lay awake for a long time thinking of the past week. Epicurus wrote that we should look for someone to eat and drink with before looking for something to eat and drink. I suppose there’s some truth in that.