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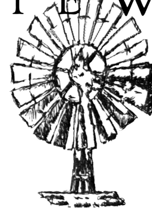

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Unwritten Laws

by Kevin Collins

My first trips to Candlestick were with Grandpa. Grandpa had been a terrorist in the old country, but he mended his ways over here and became a bootlegger. After repeal, he went legit, bought a bar on Castro Street, and put his kids through college. Then he got old and started taking his grandson to baseball games. He never really lost his brogue, and it would get especially pronounced when he was wry: he'd add a syllable, a sort of "dh" produced by a roll of the tongue. When I was 8 or 9, late in the season, he pointed out a batter in the on-deck circle, Ollie Brown, and told me that they'd just brought him in. I asked from where.

"The trees-dh."

I wrestled with that one. One of my baseball cards, Lew Krause's, used the phrase "beating the bushes" for minor-league prospects, and my little mind set to work on connecting the bushes to the trees. I never quite got Grandpa's racism at the time. It was different from the racism of indigenous Americans—less vicious but less explainable than our racism—but it was racism just the same. Of course, it wasn't remarkable that I didn't get Grandpa's racism: it didn't strike me as odd that the stands around me were full of Whites, Latins, and Asians, but that the thousands of Black fans in the park were all in the grandstand beyond the right-field fence. They had a separate entrance, separate bathrooms, separate concession stands. When a homerun went over the right-field fence, only Blacks could get the souvenir ball. Mays, Cepeda, Felipe Alou, and other righties sent occasional shots over that fence, but most of their homers went elsewhere; the patron saint of the right-field Blacks was Willie McCovey. He was—as I am—all left. He didn't have to raise an arm to show you his left-handedness: you could see it in the way he stood. And when he came to bat, that grandstand would practically empty as kids and even adults lined the fence to catch the home run balls that came with alarming regularity, often over the heads of the fans, into the stands they'd just vacated. Everyone but the Blacks was denied those souvenir balls, and everyone but the Blacks paid six bucks for reserved seats. The Blacks paid seventy-five cents. Segregation wasn't strictly enforced at Candlestick as it was in some other big-league parks, but the difference of $5.25 in the price of a ticket got the job done pretty well.

After Grandpa died, I'd buy an occasional six-dollar seat with my paper-route money, and there was one summer when I didn't see the Giants at all. Later, I'd get every so often on a summer weekday the season tickets that my dad's firm held: Section 10, Row 5, Seats 9,10,11, and 12. Sometimes I'd bring three friends, be a high-roller for a day. More often, I'd sell the four seats for twenty bucks, buy a single seat elsewhere, and pocket the fourteen dollar difference.

But nearly half of the 300-or-so games I saw at Candlestick were during my two years as a vendor. I'd stalk the stands in a starched white linen shirt, a beige change apron, and a round, white paper hat, selling whatever I was assigned by the Stevens brothers. Racks of sodas with cellophane seared over the mouths of their waxed-cardboard cups. Peanuts. Programs. Almost invariably on those cold San Francisco summer days that Mark Twain sneered at, ice cream, with a flat splintery wooden spoon for every customer. For double headers, and at practically no other time (that was my good and bad luck), I tended to get hot dogs. Except for beer, which I couldn't have sold for another seven years anyway, hot dogs were easily the biggest money makers, but they also demanded more work than the other concessions. They weren't like the hermetically-sealed ballpark dogs you see today. I'd strap over my shoulders a huge tin crate—vendors called it a can—with a tub of Sterno at the bottom of it to keep warm the quart or so of water in which

the wieners sat. Most of the space in the can was taken up by buns, five or six twelve-packs in cellophane. There was a pot near the top of the can for mustard and for the plastic stick used to slap the mustard onto the dog.

I got pretty good at making hot dogs, but to some of the older vendors, it was an art form; a couple of them looked like Buddy Rich, later in his career, when he'd become the center of his own band, when he'd moved the drum kit to the front of the band, the front of the stage, and made himself the visual center of the act, attacking his cymbals and cowbells by frenzied rote, as though he could do it in his sleep but chose to do it awake because it was not something to be missed. The hot dog vendor's two sticks were a two-tined fork and the mustard stick. The real pros I learned from could have the hot dog halfway down the customer's throat before the poor soul would catch his breath from the shock of watching it being assembled. The right hand flicks lightly with the fork to open a pack of buns then jabs more sharply down into the simmering pot of dogs while the left hand snaps out a napkin, grabs a bun with it, and opens the bun just in time for it to receive the wiener. Then the same right hand that wields the fork pulls the mustard stick from its yellow-brown puddle—mustard stick poised between the middle and ring fingers—slaps it across the dog and exchanges the masterpiece for sixty cents, usually without the vendor even having to look down at the whole process.

I tended to look. I never got very good at the process, not like those guys, anyway. I hung on for only two years. They wanted union dues when I turned sixteen, and my football coaches got fed up with my missing summer practice. Besides, I was a southpaw, and the hot dog cans were made, like everything else, for righties. I wonder, with a few more years, if I would have compensated the way that lefty golfers do, especially on power strokes, with right-handed clubs or the way that lefties do playing right-handed bass guitars. But I didn't stick around to find out.

My vending years were just past the prime of Mays, smackdab in the primes of McCovey and Marichal, just when Jim Ray Hart started to see that he wasn't great—the question was in doubt for a while—and when Bobby Bonds started to wonder if maybe he was. Some days, popcorn or program days, I'd let the customers find me and I'd concentrate on the green, on the black, white, and orange, on the blue, or on the gray, or on the startling blue at 1:00 P.M. that would turn gray in wind-blown streaks by 3:30.

My vending years were during the renovation of the park for football. The 49ers were moving in, so management enclosed the stadium and replaced the Blacks-only right-field grandstand with football-only seats that would fold away in the summer, ending forever at Candlestick both segregation and the seventy-five cent ticket. The enclosure was also supposed to soften the legendary winds that blew off the bay and into the park, but it had the opposite effect, creating micro-climates seen nowhere else in the world, creating unpredictable gusts that would blow infants out of mothers' arms and blow off not only hats and jackets but, in one case I heard of, a shoe.

For the whole two years, I was one of the three or four youngest guys. They stopped hiring snotnoses for a while just after I got the job. And some of the older guys, guys who were trying to feed kids on a vendor's commissions, would make it pretty clear that they didn't like it when I got hot dogs while they were stuck with peanuts or sodas for a double-header. I'd get a lot of bad looks and an occasional comment when the assignments came out and even during the games.

There was a tacit truce between games of a double-header, though. Between games, usually without any advance planning, vendors would gather together in the mezzanine, forget their animosities like lions and zebras at the watering hole, and set up little stores: a beer guy would find a hot dog guy, and a peanut guy, a soda guy, an ice cream guy, and a souvenir guy would join up, but never

two vendors of the same product.

There were a few spots on the mezzanine where between-games stores would always appear, but usually the location was up to the hot dog guy. He had to keep a respectful distance from the counters, the permanent stores selling the same products, and he had to pick a spot where there would be traffic, where fans would go to stretch their legs.

The hot dog guy was always the center of these ephemeral little stores, and he was usually flanked by a soda guy and a beer guy. The hot dog guy was the center of the store because the hot dogs drew the fans to the store, where they might incidentally pick up a soda or a bobbin'-head doll for the kids. But the hot dog guy was also the center of the store because of that two-tined fork.

A vendor's very mobility during the game was a sort of protection against pickpockets, but between games, vendors were fair game. I'd come up twenty dollars short a couple of times—a whole day's work or more—without even knowing I'd been robbed. One time, one of those popcorn days dedicated more to indolence and baseball than to mobility and commerce, it dawned on me that someone was feeling my hip. I looked down and saw that some fellow in a Dodgers' cap had his hand in one of my apron pockets. Luckily, it was an empty pocket. I looked him in his Dodger-blue eyes. He managed an embarrassed "I tried" shrug, and he disappeared into the crowd.

At an impromptu between-games store, though, vendors weren't protected by mobility. Their numbers offered some protection: shoulder-to-shoulder, only the two outside guys were fully exposed. But the chief deterrent against pickpockets was the hot dog fork. Though I'd seen the fork in violent action a couple times—one crook actually made off with a fork sticking a half-inch into the back of his hand—its greatest deterrent value was in its reputation. Vendors told stories of the fork, and judging from the relative freedom that hot dog guys had from pickpockets, the bad guys told stories too. Smart ones wouldn't mess with a hot dog vendor if they could dip the same five bucks out of the apron of a defenseless peanut guy.

And the unwritten law at a between-games store is that the hot dog fork protects all of the store's vendors, at least those within arm's length of the hot dog guy.

1971 was a year that the Giants made the playoffs. It was shortly after the league had introduced divisions, and they won the West before losing in the playoffs to Roberto Clemente, Willie Stargell, and Pirates. On a cool July Sunday that year, in the bottom of the ninth of the opening game of a twin-bill with the Phillies, I hauled my hot dog can to the mezzanine to scout out a spot to set up a store. Before the first game ended, I was joined by Manuel Flores and Danny the Queer Peanut Vendor. Manuel had graduated two years before me from our K-8 school. He was selling souvenirs that day, and his souvenirs shout (which I think he'd stolen from an older vendor who had just died) was "Groovy Souvies!"

Danny was probably not much older then than I am today, but people seemed to age faster in 1971, and he struck me as being both too old and too small to be hauling peanuts around. But he got peanuts every day. Most vendors faced some pre-game hopes and fears: one of the Stevens brothers—usually Jack—would call out your name and your commodity before you'd get a clear idea of how the day would go. Not Danny. He'd just cut in line ahead of the others—no one seemed to mind—pick up a day's worth of peanut tickets and his first load, and sit in the stands as the park filled up. When he was working, he would call out "peanuts" in almost a whisper. A whisper was about all he had.

I was just getting a fairly solid idea of what "Queer" meant, and even then, Danny didn't strike me as particularly Queer, though he was certainly a bit queer. The vendor scuttlebutt had it that he'd once asked another vendor to tie his apron in the back for him, and the name stuck. Everyone called him Danny the Queer Peanut Vendor—even a guy

who, looking back, was likely as gay as daisies in springtime—but no one called him that to his face. No one said much at all to his face.

Manuel, Danny, and I made a few sales before the first game ended, but our store wasn't complete until the other vendors came out, with the fans, after a Giants' ninth-inning rally fell just short.

Our beer guy was Red. Red was named for the color of his face, which looked even redder for the curly snow-white hair atop it. He was one of the oldest vendors, and he was always hustling, calling out his rhythmic shout in a basso profundo: "Hey beer! Cold beer! Bottle o' beer! Gotta have beer!" (Red was almost always assigned beer—if not with quite the regularity that Danny the Queer got peanuts—and he'd curse a blue basso-profundo streak if he got anything but beer or hot dogs.) "Hello, boys," he said, turning his back to us as Danny took a step away from me to let Red slide between us. The twins—Gino, inconsolable with ice cream on a cool day, and Marco, even glummer if possible since the program vendors who'd usually switch to peanuts in the third inning had to hang onto their unprofitable programs longer for double headers—arrived together and split up, each staking out an end of the store, setting up just behind Manuel and Danny respectively so that fans couldn't get behind us.

Everyone and his mom wanted a hot dog and a beer between those two games. Red was popping the lids off as many as three bottles at a time and overturning them into cups, taking dollars—a beer cost a dollar—without having to fuss with change. I was feeling a bit more left-handed even than usual that day, but I was holding my own. Manuel and Danny made few sales and Gino and Marco almost none despite the growing crowd around the store.

An irritated voice came from behind the crowd: "You guys, like, got a soda guy?"

"No!" boomed Red, "Get back here."

It was Dick, and he pushed his way through the crowd, turning his back as he went, and squeezed in between Manuel and me.

On the first day I'd ever been assigned hot dogs—in September of the previous year—Dick wondered aloud and bitterly from behind his peanut can how many hot dogs this twerp could sell. He never quite said anything after that—not anything I could hear—but his luck seemed to be about as bad on double-header days as mine was good, and he usually made it clear through a look or a sigh that my need for baseball cards or licorice sticks or comic books was starving his wife and kids or making him miss payments on the GTO or depriving him of reefer or French magazines. He was about thirty, long, tall, and straight. He had a long, straight nose; long, tall, black sideburns; and crocodile skin like the kid at school who had picked at his chicken pox.

The word I'd heard most frequently from Dick in the time we'd worked together was his name, Dick, and he seemed especially loud and proud when he said it. I'd overheard in snatches of his conversation expressions like "That's the way Dick sees it" and "Better not mess with Dick," and I once heard him being introduced to a new vendor who hadn't heard his name right.

"I'm sorry: Did he say your name was Rick?"

"No, not Rick, DICK," as though his D was all that separated mankind from the apes.

It was another unwritten law at between-games stores that the hot dog guy needed a little more space than anyone else for stabbing bun wrappers and slapping on mustard and the rest of the Buddy Rich routine, but Dick was crowding me, maybe on purpose, and sighing when we bumped elbows.

A lady ordered two hot dogs just as I was finding my rhythm, and she cried "No" when I slapped the mustard on the first of them. I looked up at her.

"I want mayonnaise."

"We don't have mayonnaise, Lady. You can have it with mustard, or you can have it dry."

"What do you mean you don't have mayon-

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naise?"

Dick intervened. "Who the hell puts mayonnaise on a hot dog?"

The lady said she'd take one with mustard and the other dry, and I felt an odd sort of gratitude toward Dick. Then we bumped elbows again, and he said, "Come on!"

I flipped open my extra bun compartment with the fork, and I saw that I was running low. I should have stocked up in the top of the ninth. I was more concerned about what Red, Manuel, and especially Dick would think of me than I was about any lost commissions that might result.

Dick got annoyed with a customer. "A twenty? You're going to buy a twenty-five-cent soda with a twenty? I got a bunch of quarters here, Mister. I can't break a twenty. Hey, Red? You break a twenty?"

"Yeah, pro'ly," Red boomed.

They met behind me to make their exchange as I slathered mustard on another hot dog, and I noticed out of the corner of my eye a hand reaching into Dick's change apron.

Not without thinking—I thought about it for a second or two longer than I should have—I brought the fork down onto the intruding hand and nailed it squarely with both tines. The mustard stick, between my middle and ring fingers, went along for the ride, and the mustard splattered both the thief and a couple of my customers.

The pickpocket whelped at a high pitch and turned to run. He was a kid no older than me, a skinny Filipino. Manuel reached out to grab him, but the souvenir can is packed with dangling pennants and fragile dolls, so he couldn't commit to much of an effort. We looked at each other, and he nodded and grinned.

I looked up to my customers and waited for them to praise me or chasten me.

"Two," said a fat man, "lots of mustard."

"What?"

"Two dogs, lots of mustard."

I looked down at my fork and saw that a tiny chunk of red meat adorned one of the tines.

I looked over to Danny, who whispered "peanuts" as a gust took the paper hat off his head and straight up into the sky.

"Hey! Two dogs, lots of mustard, will ya!"

I wiped the fork off on my change apron and danced up two dogs with lots of mustard.

"A dollar twenty."

Dick settled back into his spot and bitterly counted out the nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents change for his customer. Gino and Marco gave up even before the crowd broke around our store, and I saw them out of the corner of my eye—each with a splintery wooden spoon—sharing one of Gino's ice creams as I slapped mustard on another dog, softly and wearily now, but using a lot of elbow, like Buddy Rich with the brushes.

The P.A. announcer began to call the line-ups for the second game, and the crowd started to thin. At the precise instant that the store became unprofitable, Red set out for the greener pastures of the stands.

Manuel tapped me on the shoulder, and when I looked at him, he extended his hand to me. When I took it, he twisted the handshake into the "Soul Brothers' Shake" with the interlocking thumbs. "Mighty, mighty Wildcats," he said, referring to the mascot for his year at our school. The mascot changed every year; it was always some sort of fearsome feline, but while Manuel's year was the Wildcats, my year was the mighty, mighty Panthers. Still, I got Manuel's point. He released my hand and headed up the ramp to the upper deck.

Dick had opened one of his sodas, a Seven-up, and was drinking it. I flipped open my bun compartment with the fork and saw that I had just one bun left. Then I looked into the opaque quart of water and saw that I had just one wiener too. The commissaries counted buns but always just estimated wieners, and it happened almost never that the quantities were the same. I hadn't eaten all day, and everything in nature suggested that I eat the last hot dog myself. Something just outside of nature, though, argued against it. I wiped the fork against my change apron again and headed for the commissary above section four to reload.

"Hey," said Dick, and I stopped to look at him. "Smooth."

He had seen my work.

"I'm Dick."

"I'm......Kevin."