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Onion Sandwiches

BY BARRY PHILLIPS

My great-aunt Mary died about a fourth of a century ago, and except for an occasional browse through the family photo album, I hadn't much thought about her for years. Not, that is, until last night when I was sittin' in a corner booth at the He Ain't Here bar in Manor, Texas, tryin' to decide if I should spend the night with Camille North, R.N., who had just finished her evenin' shift on the pediatric neurology floor at St. David's hospital in Austin.

For you Yankees, Manor is a wide spot on U.S. 290 with nothin' to recommend it but so-so barbecue and mediocre quarter-horse racin', but it happened to be where Camille lived, and where she had agreed to meet me. My name's Jake Mahoney, and I'm a jobber for National Medical Electronics, which means I spend most of my time on the road sellin' monitors and probes and overpriced computer programs to every hospital I can wheedle an account with between Santa Fe and Baton Rouge. Bein' as hospitals are where I mostly hang out, and nurses are mostly who I hang out with—professionally, that is—my social life on the road naturally gravitates toward those angels of mercy.

'Course they can sometimes be mercy-less, as evidenced by the fact that I'm single again for the third time since college, cut loose like an unwanted stray calf only four months ago, and the spot on my hide where the brand was burned off ain't healed yet, if you know what I mean.

But despite the fresh and painful scars from that recent flashfire of human intercourse, there I was sittin' in the He Ain't Here, lightly strokin' a soft warm female hand that was wrapped around a cold beer mug full of Michelob Light, tryin' to decide if I should, on the one hand, beat it on back alone to Room 844 at the Riverside Holiday Inn, or on the other hand, back my bull-headed butt up to the fire one more time. So naturally, Aunt Mary and her onion sandwiches came to mind.

"Jake, why are you looking at your hands that way?" Camille asked, reaching over to massage a fingertip in little wet circles around my palm.

I guess my mental decidin' between the "one hand" and the "other hand" vis a vis Camille was an

idea that had worked its way out of my brain and down my arms, because when she mentioned it, I became aware I had my palms up in front of me, shiftin' my gaze from one to the other and back again.

Now, I'm nothin' if not quick on the uptake, though, so I said, "I was just wonderin' what it is about touchin' somebody else's skin that feels so good to your fingertips." And I reached out and drew a soft line from one side of her mouth to the other. Camille didn't pull away. She turned her head and caught my finger with her teeth.

"Oh, my God," I said, still thinking of Aunt Mary. "You are a truly magnificent onion sandwich, you are. Do you suppose there's a People's Drug Store anywhere around here?"

Now most people you've just met, when you say somethin' totally incomprehensible, will just let it go as if you hadn't said it, and that's just what Camille did. But I knew those onion sandwiches had a rightful place in this discussion.

My Aunt Mary was near old as God when I was just ten. She lived alone in an ancient townhouse in downtown Alexandria, Virginia, survivin' on Social Security, the good will of her children, and onion sandwiches. Her doctor claimed that last item was gonna kill her, on account of her stomach ulcers, but she claimed it was the onion sandwiches that made life worth livin'.

I dunno where she got a taste for onions. Grew up a farm girl, so I suppose she had learned to eat 'em fresh and juicy and she swore they tasted sweet to her. I thought that was about the dumbest thing you could say about onions, but I loved my Aunt Mary, so I took her word for it. She'd eat onion sandwiches until her ulcer couldn't stand another bite, then leave 'em off until the pain subsided enough to not seem so important any more, leastways not as important as enjoyin' the taste of more onions.

And you gotta remember, this was in the days before Tagamet, so when those onions went to work on her stomach, the best she could do was pour down Maalox and hang on. Durn near every time I visited

her, she'd have those sandwiches for lunch. She'd sit there eatin' 'em and smilin' and actin' like heaven itself had set her dinner table. And about an hour later she'd hand me a dollar and say, "Boy, you run down to the People's Drug Store on the corner and get me the biggest bottle of Maalox they got. Go on, now. Aunt Mary's gonna pay for them onions tonight!"

On one occasion I worked up the temerity to question her about why she did what I thought was a pretty stupid thing to do: indulge in somethin' you knew in advance was gonna hurt like hell. I never forgot her answer. She took a long swig straight from the Maalox bottle I had just brought from People's Drug, hugged me up against that big old calico-covered bosom and looked off into the corner of the room with a kind of faraway look and a tiny little smile on her face that made me feel she was seein' some place I'd never been.

"When you love somethin', boy," she said, "you don't let the fear of pain stand between you and having it."

So twenty-five years later I'm sittin' at the He Ain't Here, lookin' at the cutest, curviest, warmest, juiciest, sweetest onion sandwich you ever saw and thinkin' about the one hand and the other hand and Room 844 and Aunt Mary and the price of things that make life worth livin'.

Camille leaned across the little table and took my beard in her two hands. She pulled my mouth against hers, gently at first, givin' me the opportunity to stop her gracefully, but when I didn't, she kissed me harder and with her mouth open and with her tongue doing things that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

When she stopped, I took a long breath and let it out real slow. "Well, that decides it," I whispered, mostly to myself, but lookin' straight into Camille's eyes. "Kiss me again. And order another round of Maalox."

"Round of what?" she whispered back, opening her mouth and leaning forward.

"Michelob," I corrected, still quick on the uptake. "Another round of Michelob." ■

Jake the Snake's Dogs

BY MARK SPENCER

Texas, 1962

Jesus H. Christ. That's who Samson thinks he sees for a moment as he barrels down the highway at four-fifteen in the morning after the worst fight he's ever had with Candy. No woman has ever really loved him. His Cadillac's high beams catch a thin, bearded, hollow-eyed figure in baggy clothes holding up a hand, beckoning. But it's just a hitch hiker, a bum.