On a Stick

Kevin Zalewski

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol37/iss1/7
Eighteen years ago, Frank traded in his corner office as a bank manager for the greasy kitchen of a food truck fry cook. He never looked back. Frank liked the seat in his cramped cab better than the seat in his cramped cubicle. Frank had no mortgage, no car payment, no pension. All Frank needed was enough money to pay for a tank full of unleaded gasoline, a fryer full of restaurant-quality peanut oil, and a freezer full of the best darned homemade corn dogs and thick-cut french fries.

Frank sat behind the wheel and inhaled the smell, meaty and golden brown, that permeated the vehicle, permanently lodged in the food truck's sun visors and streaming from the air vents. He turned on the defroster to fight against the chill November air. Frank was on his way to Cincinnati. It was about 1:30 in the afternoon, and Frank had been driving for almost six hours when he saw the sign for Meyers. The town lay thirty-two miles off the highway. He rubbed the knot out of his neck and flicked on his right blinker.

Frank guessed that Meyers had a population of about two hundred as he pulled into the parking lot of the only church in town. The church was small—just one room, Frank suspected—but easy to
spot. Its white walls and steeple blazed against the sky, higher than any other building around. Perhaps Frank should have felt guilty doing his money-changing at the Lord’s house, but he didn’t. He always said, “The best place to be is a spitting distance from the local chapel. Come hell or high water, the Lord will protect the walls of His edifice—and perhaps its parking lot as well.” Besides, it was a Tuesday; Frank knew it didn’t matter if these people were Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, or Seventh-day Adventist—nobody holds mass on a Tuesday.

Sure enough, before Frank even had the awning up, a man with a wide, balding forehead and a pair of bootcut jeans was already approaching the truck. The man asked if Frank was lost as his wide eyes looked up and down the tower of a truck coated in brightly colored paint. But Frank responded that he wasn’t lost as long as he was somewhere where folks enjoyed delicious deep-fried food. The buttery scent of the food truck wafted to the man’s nose. He smiled, shook Frank’s hand, and ran door-to-door telling his neighbors to grab their wallets and purses.

And they did. By dinnertime, half the town had gathered with chairs and tables collected from people’s homes and from the storage closet inside the little church. Children played while the adults drank beer and pop. The men told stories that were partly true, and the women told tales that were mostly lies. The oldest man in town, who everyone called Old Man Walters, had never had a corn dog before. After he took his first bite, a smile spread across his wrinkled face, and his cheeks turned a rosy red. Frank made plenty of money, and when Bobby, the young son of the balding man Frank had first spoken to, asked to see the inside of the truck, Frank showed him the
bubbling oil in the deep fryer and let him stick his head in the big freezer and showed him the pull-out cot. Bobby grinned widely and was impressed. He told Frank that he wanted to grow up to be a fry cook too. Frank laughed hard and heavy and did not miss forcing a smile and pretending that a man in a suit with a six-figure income was being reasonable.

When the town had had their fill of homemade corn dogs and thick-cut french fries, they put the chairs and tables away, gathered their children, and returned to their homes. The stragglers stayed and shook Frank’s hand, thanking him for coming and for frying the best corn dog to ever come to Ohio. Frank thanked them back, found the pastor among them, and asked if he could leave the truck overnight in the parking lot. The pastor told him that he could but that they were expecting some bad weather. Certainly he could find someone in town to put Frank up for the night. Frank told the priest that he was grateful for the offer but that he’d cast off the shackles of mammon and that a man’s dwelling ought to be his temple and that he slept better in his own cot anyhow. The pastor said that he understood, and Frank tucked in for the night.

When Frank woke up, the snow was halfway up the wheel of the truck and still falling. But Frank wasn’t in any hurry. He smiled and turned on the deep fryers. He’d be on his way once they had the roads clear; now it was time to feed some fine people.

At lunchtime, a few townsfolk came by to get a quick bite. But by dinnertime, most of the town had gathered around the truck in their puffy coats and their fluffy mittens. When Frank passed the corn dogs out the window, they steamed in the frigid air. The townspeople ate happily and were not so worried. They congregated
in the parking lot as they waited and filled the pews, laughing and talking together as they sat eating and shielding themselves from the cold. Every time someone opened the church doors, a gust of frigid wind rushed through the chapel. But nobody complained; they simply held their coats a little tighter and took another bite of piping hot corn dog and savored the breaded meat warming their throats and stomachs as it slid downward.

Bobby came to the window and asked for two corn dogs, and when Frank told him he couldn’t eat that much, Bobby replied that one of them was for his dad. But Frank knew that Bobby’s father had already ordered—he had been one of the first and had eaten his fill. Frank just chuckled to himself and handed Bobby the corn dogs, one in each hand. The boy ran off, his feet moving in quick, small steps so that he could push through the layers of fallen snow.

As the people of Meyers ate their dinner, a pine tree—many miles away, straining under heavy snow and leaning from the driving wind—wrested free from the frozen ground and fell onto a power line. The lights of Meyers went out. And Frank’s food truck glowed as if it were a single candle in an empty room. And the people of Meyers slowly began to huddle in closer to the food truck and closer to one another. And for a moment all were afraid of the sudden darkness. And for a moment all were in awe of the beaming lights. And it was like watching a death. And it was like watching a birth. And the remaining townsfolk shuffled from their darkened homes and joined the rest. And then, under the glow of the solitary lights of the food truck, the people of Meyers commenced eating.

The snow continued for days. Eventually, it got so cold that the people’s trucks and cars would not start, whether because of frozen
gasoline or frozen pistons or frozen starters they could not be sure. They tried and tried to get the vehicles to run, but eventually the mechanics and the handymen had to give up and leave the useless husks to be buried beneath the cascade of white. The men would shovel and plow all day, only to awake and find the snow piled just as high. After a couple of days, they had men working through the night, taking shifts, and still they could not keep up with it. When the first group of men working the night shift came back in from the cold, they realized that Old Man Walters was not with them. He had been working some distance from the rest of his group, and when the slowly drifting flakes had suddenly become a swirling surge of snow, they had lost sight of him and had not seen him since. The men had intended to go out searching for Old Man Walters with flashlights and hunting dogs. But the flashlights could not pierce the whirling white, and the dogs pulled against their leashes, dug their heels in by the door, snapped their jaws at their masters, and would not go into that storm. So the men said a prayer for Old Man Walters, asking that God watch over him while they could not.

The town’s small grocer, who had been awaiting a new grocery shipment on the day the snow had begun falling, was quickly running out of food and wasn’t sure how long his stock would last. The roast chickens and canned chili went first, then the bread and sliced deli meat, until the little grocer had little left besides raw vegetables and cottage cheese.

But Frank’s supply was holding, his freezer packed with delicious dogs waiting to be dunked in bubbling oil. That is, until the air vent on Frank’s freezer froze over and Frank was forced to move the corn dogs to the snow pile outside his door. Thankfully, Frank’s generator
Inscape

seemed immune to whatever ailment had afflicted the cars and trucks. Though they could not understand it, the lights stayed lit and the oil kept bubbling. The people kept coming too, in greater numbers now that the food supply had dwindled. The people came to the window, paid, and said, “God bless you!” and “What would we do without you!” But Frank brushed these away and silently thanked God that he was not denying another home loan.

It seemed natural to address God near the food truck or outside the church, for the two had become as one in the minds of the townspeople. The bright colors of the truck had long since been encased in snow, and it looked to be the very same shade of white as the painted walls of the church. When they prayed in the church, the smell of beef and cornbread—manna from heaven—filled their nostrils, and they imagined that heaven must smell just so. When they took their corn dogs from the window, they held them between their mittens and bowed their heads to eat.

It was on Tuesday when the corn dogs ran out. For a moment Frank was concerned. But the people of Meyers were not. Some of them had raised livestock: fed, watered, and bred animals for just such a moment. They would not go hungry. Their supply was not limitless—this was not a ranching town—but they could last a few days. The men slaughtered the animals and Frank cut the meat into strips, breaded it, and deep-fried it. Bobby stood nearby and shouted encouragement, excited to see them at work. They could feed the entire town a meal from a single cow. And when they had no more cows, they ate the pigs; and when they had no more pigs, they ate the chickens; and when they had no more chickens, they ate the horses. Some of them could not bear to give their cats or their dogs
to the men with the butcher's knives. But some of them could, and the people of Meyers ate another meal. And with each new menu item, the people of Meyers exclaimed that it was better than the last and that they hoped he'd never leave. The snow that had built up on the sides of the food truck had turned to ice. At night the lights beamed white and brilliant through the glacial crystal.

It was Sunday when the animals ran out. Frank had just finished frying the last morsels of Mrs. Johnson's cat, Snowball, when he turned to the meat pile to discover only a bloody patch of snow. Frank walked back behind the window and raised his voice to shakily announce to the town that there was no more meat. For a moment the people of Meyers were filled with dread. And Frank was as well. Some cried. Some shouted. But many just sat in the fallen snow and stared at the little wooden sticks still in their hands.

But then Bobby's father walked up holding three dead rats by the tails. He had found them in his basement and figured they were hiding out from the cold. He was certain there were more in the church because of the gnaw marks on the corners of the hymnals. If they could catch enough, they could last another day or two. Certainly help would arrive.

Frank looked at the rats and knew that the townsfolk of Meyers would do better than survive. They would eat well. He skinned the rats, cut the meat into strips, sprinkled some of his signature seasoning on each strip, skewered each on a wooden stick, slathered them in batter, and deep-fried them on low so that the stringy meat would get soft and tender. Then he handed the first one to little Bobby, who said that it tasted just as good as any corn dog he had ever had. The townsfolk sent up a cheer and set about pulling up the floorboards.
of the church, hunting for future fair food. Frank beamed with pride upon his people. For a moment he considered selling deep-fried rat on the streets of Cincinnati but suspected that city types would never accept a food so exotic from a source so familiar.

Somehow the snow was still falling the next morning when they found Old Man Walters leaned against a tree, affixed there by the ice. They brought him to the church and said they would bury him as soon as they could get through the frozen ground. Frank could not bear to look at the body, for he knew that it would not take long for Meyers to run out of rats. And when the rats ran out, it would not take long for Meyers to get hungry.

The next day, Frank handed out the last deep-fried rat for lunch. For a while, some of the men continued to prowl through the exposed crawlspace hunting the rodents. Every time one of them came to a heap of torn-up floorboards or a removed pew that had been piled at the side of the church, he would shine his flashlight between the slats, hoping that one of the thinner rats had wedged itself within. But eventually, the hunters realized that there were no more rats to be found. And they would haul themselves out of the muddy excavation and curse under their breath and not bother to wipe their feet as the men had done when they first began to foray beneath the church. Back then, the church had always been well cleaned, but now the air was filled with dust and the lingering smell of dead rats, killed on holy ground. The grime stuck to the walls and the single stained glass window seemed to let in less light than it had before. The cross at the front of the church leaned at an angle from when Bobby had bumped it while chasing after a plump-rumped but quick-footed little meal. No one had bothered
to right it—if, indeed, anyone had noticed, for it seemed to fit there, hanging askew.

When at last all had given up on finding any more rodent morsels, the people of Meyers sat upon the ground or upon the pews that remained upright or in the mud of the crawlspace and did not say much to one another. The men sat and shivered, and the women sat and wept, and the children sat in silence. All listened to the sounds of their bellies rumbling and felt the cold creep through their bodies. It began in the head for some and the feet for others, but for most, a chill began in their stomachs and crept outward until their entire persons felt empty and immovable. For the first time in a long time, Frank wished he was sitting behind his desk, organizing his pencils, and waiting for someone to put money in or take money out. And the people of Meyers went to bed hungry and woke often to the rumblings of their own stomachs.

And Old Man Walters sat frozen so very near the spot where the corn dogs and the rats had once waited to be fried.

No one could remember who had first suggested eating Old Man Walters. Perhaps every one of them believed it might have been himself or herself who had first said it aloud. Eventually they would all accept that Old Man Walters’s spirit, before passing to the afterlife, had spoken to the heart of every man, woman, and child individually. They would all accept that it was all right and that the person, whoever it was, that had suggested it first, was only acting as a mouthpiece from the beyond. But someone proposed that if Frank could make rat taste good—and that since Old Man Walters was making no use of the flesh on his bones—well, it only seemed reasonable. And all agreed.
Frank suspected it would come to this. He had planned to refuse, to scream in horror, to pound his fist on the counter and damn them all to hell. But when he looked into their pleading eyes, he could not seem to summon the righteous anger. His eyes found little Bobby, who looked longingly at the fry cook as he licked snow off his icy mittens. Frank allowed his eyes to fall upon the frozen Old Man Walters, and, with a burdened soul, he answered the people of Meyers.

So Frank did with Old Man Walters just as he’d done with the rats, only he added an extra shake of his special seasoning because it seemed right somehow. And he asked God to make it not taste however he imagined it might taste otherwise, and then he dropped the first battered piece of Old Man Walters on a stick in the oil. And the smell of meat and cornbread filled the church once again. And the townsfolk ate solemnly until Bobby shouted that this tasted better than the rat! The people of Meyers couldn’t help but laugh, and they nodded their heads in agreement.

And the people of Meyers gathered around Frank’s glistening white food truck as the darkened church loomed beside it, only visible by the light of the truck. And the people of Meyers put their arms around each other to keep warm and waited their turn to receive a deep-fried piece of Old Man Walters with both hands. Bobby smiled a toothy smile, and Frank was glad to be a fry cook.

And the roof of the church strained under the heavy load as the snow kept falling.