3-1-2001

An Order of Fries

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol21/iss1/13

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Wally put five bucks into his fanny belt and strapped it on. He slipped two more dollars into his pants' pocket, buttoned his plaid red, white and green shirt his father had given him, then tucked it into his black slacks. One, two, three tucks.

Before putting on his Pic-n-Pay green-and-brown shoes—$10.67 with tax—Wally slipped on his favorite black-and-white Star Trek socks. A picture of the Enterprise that zipped along Wally’s ankles ran right in between the heads of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. He'd bought them at a convention three years before, and they only now had small holes in the heels. He was told that they were one of a kind; so he wore them only on special occasions.

Wally sat at the desk in his dorm after dressing, making sure he'd forgotten nothing. He closed his eyes and mentally pictured each item he needed, whispering the name of the item and poking the desk in front of him, poking a different place for each item he named.

“Dorm key.” Poke.
“Bike key.” Poke.
“Money.” Poke.
“Comic Book.” Poke.
Wally opened his eyes. He stayed in his chair, staring at the Star Trek movie collection he'd received for his birthday—$110.95 at Suncoast. A shiny red box held all six original wide-screen editions. His focus settled on the second movie—his favorite—where Spock dies to save the ship. There was no conscious choice about it, about staring, he just did. The movie fit him somehow, on some level he didn't know yet. But it fit him.

He got up and walked out of his room and down the hall, watching his feet as he went. When he came to the elevator, he pushed the button three times and took one step back. The elevator popped open and Wally stepped in. He pushed the first floor button three times and waited to the right of the door. When he arrived, Wally followed the pattern of squares on the carpet to the exit. He stepped outside and went to the fifth slot on the bike rack.

"Wally!" Marianne cried out, stepping out from behind the building. Wally stopped.

"Hey." She smiled.

"Oh. Hi, Moe." Wally glimpsed up and smiled for a moment, then looked back down to his round tummy. He started to count the lines between one button of his shirt and the next.

In that glimpse, though, Wally noted every detail of Marianne. She had a green dress that had small pictures of yellow daisies dancing around each other. The green was faded, like the color of her eyes, and looked tired. White stockings slouched loosely just below her dress line, a sliver of powdered skin showing below the knees. Thick black glasses clenched her nose, and her hair, equally black, was rolled on top of her head, stray strands running free down her neck. All of her dresses were baggy, bigger than necessary, and they played on and off her snow-colored shoulders.

Wally sifted through her smell. He sorted it out, as if he were back at his desk, taking inventory again. Detergents. Poke. Fabric softeners. Poke. And a touch of perfume mixed with soap. Poke. They crafted themselves in his head until he'd memorized their order; then beyond what was on her to what was in her. Wally had an unconscious awareness of strawberries that lay inside, faint and quiet.
When Marianne spoke, Wally found no complexity, no threat in her tone, no guile to be wary of. Hi meant hi, and Wally trusted that. She'd told him, often, as he sat silent across from her at the library, in the cafeteria, in their classes, that she loved being in school, that she loved living alone, and that she didn't miss her family. Wally never asked, she would just come; she would sit and talk while he listened.

“So,” Marianne looked at Wally and smiled, “where you off too?” Wally continued to stare down. “I’m just going to get something to eat, Moe. You know, like usual.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember, you told me.”

A breeze glided between them. Snow clouds paused above.

“Well, I’m kinda hungry too, maybe I’ll see you down there, ’kay?” said Marianne.

“Okay.”

Wally turned and unlocked his bike. Marianne stood behind him, holding her hands behind her back. “Okay, well, I’ll see you there maybe then. ’Kay. Bye.” Wally hopped onto his bike.

“Okay, great, I’ll see you there,” Marianne said.

Wally rode down to the end of the parking lot, turned left, and headed toward Quickies.

He rode into the side entrance. There was a bike rack, and Wally slid his bike into the fifth slot. He hopped off and opened the entrance. It binged as he went inside. Wally stopped then inhaled deeply, holding his breath. He closed his eyes, and a smile filled his face.

He opened his eyes and started to plan.

It was 6:30 p.m. and all the lines were in full dinner rush. The trick was to get in the line that had quick and easy orders. If there was a line with one guy in it and another line with a mother and two children, odds were that the guy would be faster. But if you weren't careful, it could backfire, because some guys are really picky and think they're in a restaurant, so they make what Wally called “special ed” orders. Or a guy might come in and order a huge takeout for a group of people. These were called “dumbo jumbo” orders. Older people were also to be avoided. It took them longer to get to the counter and order than to actually prepare their order. And when they were at the counter, they couldn't see the menu and had to ask, completely eliminating the point of fast food. Outer lines were dangerous.
too, because those were the lines that people would bring faulty orders and ask for catsup or refills, all of which doubled the workload of the cashier.

Wally calculated. There was a promising line just one over from the line closest to him, three guys and a couple. Couples never took too long, because the girl never ordered much, and the guy kept it small, because it cost too much otherwise. But Wally chose the next to last line furthest away from him. He had a special request to make and thought it'd be easier to handle from there. Two girls, an older gentlemen, and a man dressed in a long trenchcoat stood in front of him.

As he waited, Wally thought about his food. He had never mentioned how much he enjoyed eating here to anyone besides Marianne. Actually, he'd never mentioned much of anything about anything to anyone. But he had decided to tell the manager how much he enjoyed the food. The burger, the fries, the coke, it all worked so well together. Wally would often just sit and enjoy the deep aromatic smells that rose from the tray—sauce on the burger, cheese melting on the meat, butter smoothed across fresh toasted bread. And on the side, an order of fries, perfectly completing what was for Wally a symphony of anticipation. To go from what could be to what was at times made Wally delirious with joy. It filled him body and soul, and he was here to let the manager know how much it meant to him.

There was only one more order to go.

“I’d like to see the manager, please,” said the man in the trenchcoat. Wally listened.

“I’m sorry, he’s busy right now. Can I take your order, or will that be all.”

Busy, Wally thought.

The man lifted the left side of his trenchcoat and took out a 12-gauge shotgun.

“I said!” He fired a shot into the roof. The microwave binged and he shot again. “I WANT TO SEE THE MANAGER!”

Wally froze. The man twirled and began shouting. “EVERYBODY DOWN NOW!”

People shot for the door. The girl with the guy dropped her order. Fries and soft drinks spilled everywhere. The two girls who had seated themselves wailed and waved their arms in the air, knocking over their trays. The three guys that had been in line just sat and stared, holding each other. The
gunman shot again, “EVERYBODY SHUT UP AND GET DOWN!” Wally didn’t move. He couldn’t. Consciously, he couldn’t do anything.

The gunman narrowed his eyes and stared at Wally. “I SAID DOWN, FAT BOY!” He knocked Wally in the stomach. Wally doubled over. The gunman slammed the butt of his rifle down on Wally’s head. Wally fell to the floor. “AND YOU!” He began to twitch, talking to the cashier, his voice rising high. “START LOADING THIS BAG AND GET ME THE MANAGER!”

Wally lay folded on the floor, pain causing him to vomit what little he’d had left inside. He held his bruised stomach in his arms as a dull numbness in his head started throbbing. It throbbed and beat then got louder and throbbed some more. As his body started yelling at him, screaming at the pain, wretching from the puke, the gunman’s barking orders started to fade.

Wally was in a different world now.

He thought how he’d say to the manager, “It’s ok, I’ll still eat here, ’cause I really love your place and all it’s given me!” he thought. “The burgers, the fries, I love them so much,” he’d tell him. “I just wish I could have told you, told you before. I just wish . . .” he thought he’d say. And then he thought about it some more; and then thought about it again. He thought about it and thought about it till he could almost hear himself say it. Till it hurt his throat not to.

Then he thought about Marianne. What had he said to her? She had said she was coming. He wished she were here. He wished he could see her, could see her in her baggy dress, see how it hung off her body, slipping past her shoulder. He wanted to tell her something. Tell her what? Tell her he liked to listen to her? Tell her he liked her smell? Tell her he wished he’d told her? Told her with twenty-one years’ worth of words how he’d waited for someone like her? Is that what he wanted to say? Did he really want to tell her?

Yes, he would tell her.

And then Wally thought he started talking, started telling her. He began forming whole dialogues, paragraphs and poems. There were symbols of her hair, eyes and mouth that he envisioned God had created, just so he could compare them to her. There were endless books he’d write of the joy she was capable of bringing. How complex it was. How meaningful. Plays
written and performed by him, for her, about her, that revealed the wholeness of the life they would live together. They would have children, he said, they would give love to each other, raise their children, tell them they loved them. They would understand truth, explain it to one another. “The truth and the light of it all,” he’d say, “was that you have filled me with joy for the rest of my days.” He heard and said all of this, full, content in his intent, and wondered if she would ever be able to hear him. Would he ever be able to let her know that he’d have done it all, would have lived it all, for her.

Then she was there. Wally opened his eyes—she was right outside the binging door.

It was in that brief moment of blurred sight and muffled silence that Wally knew what he had to do. He knew that she had come as promised, to be with him. He knew that her entrance would startle the twitching gunman. He knew that as the gunmen turned to fire, he would lift himself to pull the gun downward, into himself. He knew that every word and poem and passage written, every emotion felt and said by him for her in that brief moment of time, would never be spoken in words she could hear. He knew that only in the silence of his death would he open his heart and speak loudest what he wanted to say.

I love you, he would say.
I love you.

But he didn’t. He couldn’t. Pain and vomit and pain made his body wince. He couldn’t move even to try.

Marianne pushed on the door—bing. The gunman twirled and pulled his shotgun trigger. The gun clicked empty. The gunman shook his head. “WHAT?! NO!” He flew forward as the manager jumped and tackled him from over the counter. They fell and the gunman hit hard against the floor.

Wally closed his eyes. Then he felt his head being lifted into Moe’s arms and placed onto her legs. He opened his eyes.

“Wally?” Marianne was holding him, sitting on the floor, cradling his head and stroking his hair, repeating his name in disbelief as she gazed in confusion.

Wally followed the trail of yellow daffodils up along her dress to her collar bone, then from her neck to her chin, circling his sight around her face to rest on her eyes.
Everyone was hugging and crying and thanking the manager. Wally turned his head toward her gaze. The gunman lay five feet from Wally and Marianne. “Moe,” Wally said. Moe turned away from the commotion. “My socks . . .”

“Yeah, Wally?”

“My socks are for special occasions.”