



WHERE I DISCOVERED NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES, POSSIBLY

BARBECUE WAS
MY INSPIRATION

by George Singleton

I BECAME A FICTION WRITER, I'm convinced, because of barbecue. Back in 1975 and 1976, when I was a junior and senior at Greenwood High School in South Carolina, a few friends of mine and I would pile into my Opel and leave the parking lot surreptitiously at 11:55 A.M. in order to drive 2.5 miles to Little Pigs Barbecue, eat quickly, and drive back in time to attend our 12:30 English class. This took planning and guile, of course. First off, students weren't allowed to leave campus at lunch. I don't recall for certain, but I think a student received four demerits for leaving campus without a certified note. At ten demerits he received a three-day suspension. So it took our walking right out of the building, acting like we knew what we were doing, then driving off when the assistant principal wasn't on patrol.

Also, it took knowing the owner of Little Pigs Barbecue, my friend Brother's momma, Ms. Scott. She had our orders ready when we arrived. The pitmaster of sorts—he tended the smoker out back—always smiled at us when we scrambled in, and he said something relatively unintelligible like, "Boys messin', comin' here, school, waitin' for y'all, been stokin' fire, ha!" It wasn't unlike dealing with James Brown at a picnic. One of the pitmaster's legs was shorter than the other, and he had scar-burned arms as lean and tense as steel cables. I don't recall his real name, but people called him Slim or Smoky, or something equally germane. Pigman, maybe. Hock, Snout, Chop.

Listen, if any part of the plan backfired, I had a slew of excuses available, the first of which being that my dentist, Dr. McBride, had his office right next door to Little Pigs, and that I'd handed over my note to the woman at the front office—she must've lost it—and that I was getting my teeth cleaned after eating, et cetera. Or—I had a track meet later in the afternoon and I always ran best with a belly full of pulled pork sandwiches topped with coleslaw, drenched in the hot variety of tomato-based sauce. Or—Sir, I graduated last year. I came up with all kinds of lies, and fortunately never had to use any of them.

At the time I didn't know that I wanted to write fiction, though I'd started reading like all get-out, trying to catch up on what I felt like a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old kid was supposed to know before college. There wasn't a bookstore in my hometown—a Waldenbooks opened while I was in college, then closed—and I didn't really have a mentor who could tell me to read anything other than those

godawful classics that start with “Wuthering” and end in “Heights.” Something about barbecue, though, fueled my imagination. I had choices to make: hot, mild, or sweet sauce; how much to order; coleslaw on the bun or on the side? Did I want sliced or pulled pork? What about a combo plate?

The patrons, too, got me to thinking—what other places in South Carolina catered to mill hands, lawyers, men, women, blacks, whites, and runaway high-school students simultaneously? Barbecue, as they say, may have been the great equalizer of my training grounds—crippling choices, strange dialects, and the constant fear of getting caught doing something wrong.

Nothing but inspiration can emanate from this particular recipe.

LAST MONTH I DROVE 3.1 MILES down the 72 bypass in my ex-hometown. I spoke into a Clear Voice Plus Microcassette-corder and listed off the fast food chains I saw on both sides of the road. McDonald’s, Burger King, Hardee’s, Dairy Queen, Sonic, Chick-fil-A, Zaxby’s, Pizza Inn, Pizza Hut, Papa John’s, Little Caesars, KFC, Bojangles’, Captain D’s, et cetera. Outback, Chili’s, Ruby Tuesday, Applebee’s, Moe’s Southwest Grill. Subway, another McDonald’s, Firehouse Subs, Taco Bell, another Bojangles’, Ryan’s, Red Lobster, IHOP, and so on. Huddle House, Waffle House, Cracker Barrel, Shoney’s.

There were forty-four of these places over the distance of a 5K run. That’s an average of one per just over a hundred yards. I don’t want to pick on my ex-hometown—I’m sure it’s this way in other places—but what happened to the locally owned restaurants, places where the cooks used some trial-and-error skills, so that the patrons could incorporate some imagination in their own choices?

“Uhhhhh, I’ll have a cheeseburger,” or “Uhhhhh, I’ll have a slice of pepperoni,” or “Uhhhhh, I’ll have the cold cuts on white bread,” isn’t going to foster any kind of future creativity from ne’er-do-well truants, if you ask me.

The Hash House closed down. So did the Try Me Restaurant, where I ate fried chicken back in the summers of my college days while working as a garbage truck driver. I backtracked down the 72 bypass to Montague Avenue, then took a left toward town. Little

Pigs Barbecue had changed hands, but it’s still open. An indoor contraption has replaced the outside smoker, but at least pre-pattied, frozen barbecue’s not being shuttled in via one of those wholesale food suppliers.

“Wha’chew need, honey?” the woman asked as I stood beneath the ORDER HERE sign.

Oh, man, I had some flashbacks. My buddy Brother Scott now goes by his given name, Jesse, and is a history professor. Fellow part-time truant Paul Borick’s in charge of building projects at Wake Forest University, after a stint as an architect. I have no real clue as to my other old friends’ whereabouts—Charlie, Jeff, Brillo—who piled into the Opel, though I could see them all, elbows on the table, barbecue sauce draining from wrists to elbows.

I didn’t tell this new woman anything about plot and character, that I needed some new ideas, that I might be sitting at a table a little longer than the rest of the patrons—who looked about the same as when I snuck in here back before the world fell apart. 🍷

George Singleton’s latest collection of stories, *Stray Decorum*, due out in September. He’s published two novels and four other collections.

