The Most Important Meal of the Day

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by

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I had breakfast this morning with Edgar Sherman. He always takes somebody to breakfast, and he usually takes me. I put up hay in the summer and I can't do much until the dew is off the ground, so I'm around early. If he can't find anyone, he doesn't eat. Every time I've eaten with him he goes through the same routine. He drives up in his '58 Ford pickup and asks, "What are you doing for breakfast?" If I don't want any I tell him I already ate, otherwise I just get in. Then he doesn't say a word—doesn't even look at me.

We eat at the Mallard Cafe. They bring his coffee without even asking. After he sips his coffee he starts to talk. He looks at me too, but the more he talks, the less he looks at me. The waitress always asks what he wants, and he always tells her "the usual." I think she'd bring him the usual even if he ordered something different, but she asks anyway.

Edgar likes telling stories. Most people never listen to him, and that's why I figure I knew more about the situation than anybody. Some people didn't even know there was a situation, but I knew almost as much about it as Edgar.

Edgar was a farmer until he retired and moved into town ten years ago. He always wears overalls and you can almost tell what day of the week it is by checking how dirty they are. They're always clean on Sundays. His face is usually covered by a two or three day growth of white bristles. His skin is dry and wrinkled, and sags a little under his eyes.

His ancestors were farmers too, clear back to his great-grandparents. One of the first times he took me to breakfast he practically shouted, "Yes sir, one hundred and twenty years that farm has been run by Shermans. Passed down father to son through four generations. First man to ever farm that land was Isaac Gates Sherman, and it's been farmed by Shermans ever since. Most folks don't know their ancestors' names four generations back, let alone what they were doing. By Gawd, I probably know more stories about my great-grandpa than you do about your dad."
That's what I liked about listening to Edgar, the way he could talk about the way things used to be. Edgar tells about the drought of 1937 just like a kid tells about a six-pound catfish he caught two days ago. He even tells the stories about Isaac Gates Sherman as though he was standing right beside him when they happened. He knows something about every Sherman that ever lived on the farm, and there have been a lot of them too. Isaac Gates Sherman could have repopulated the earth quicker than Noah did.

Most stories are about the men in the family, especially the eldest sons. The eldest sons always got two things. They got the farm when they grew up, and they got Gates for a middle name. Nehemiah Gates is the subject of the best stories. Nehemiah was Isaac's first son and he was the first Sherman born and raised in Montgomery County.

One morning Edgar started talking even before he got his coffee. "Nehemiah was the only one of the Sherman family that fought in the War Between the States. Isaac was too old by then, and all the other boys was still young. But Nehemiah joined up with the calvary."

The waitress showed up with Edgar's coffee. He took a sip without noticing her. "Anyway, he hadn't been gone for more than three months and he found himself down in Tennessee. It was there that he met his first black man. The black man was battered up a little and in a ditch next to a road. He said his name was Thomas. No last name, just Thomas. Thomas said it was just a mix up that he got dragged down to Tennessee and that his home was in Philadelphia. Nehemiah didn't know what to do—the first black man he'd ever seen, and he wasn't even a slave."

The waitress brought us breakfast. Edgar didn't look at her. He just started eating as though the food had been sitting there all along. "Well, old Thomas tells Nehemiah that he was a wealthy man, and if Nehemiah would help him get back to Philadelphia he'd pay him a reward. So Nehemiah gives Thomas some food and a blanket, and the next day he takes him to this place where they smuggle blacks up north. That was the last Nehemiah heard from Thomas the rest of the war. Nehemiah didn't hardly even think about Thomas again until the summer of 1870 when he'd gone out east on some business. Nehemiah stopped in Philadelphia and asked around trying to
find Thomas. It turned out there was a black man who owned a bank and he went by the name of Thomas. Sure enough, Thomas was rich. Only when Nehemiah went to see him, Thomas threw him right out on his ear. He said he'd never seen Nehemiah before and had never been in Tennessee."

Edgar had finished eating and he went out to the truck. Whenever his story was longer than breakfast he'd have me drive him around while he finished the story. "So old Nehemiah got madder than hell." He went out and charged everything he could to Thomas at every restaurant, saloon, and hotel in Philadelphia that would give him credit. Nehemiah had run up about $2,000 worth of bills before he came home.

It wasn't too long before Nehemiah got a letter from Thomas telling him that he was going to have to pay for everything. Thomas remembered Nehemiah fine now. So you know what happened then?" A smile spread across Edgar's face. "Isaac Gates writes Thomas a letter and says that that can't be true because Nehemiah was killed in the war. Got stabbed in the back by a black man in Tennessee. But if Thomas wants to, he can come out to Montgomery County and collect it out of Nehemiah's estate. Then Isaac signed it, his five sons signed it, and four son-in-laws signed it." Edgar laughed to himself. "They never heard no more about it from Thomas."

There were some Shermans that Edgar never talked about. His wife died about twenty years ago and he never mentions her. Edgar had a son named Luke that he doesn't talk about much either. I figure he doesn't tell stories about Luke because it makes him think of Luke's wife, Louise. I never knew Louise, but from what Edgar has told me, she makes the women's penitentiary seem like a convent. Edgar never mentions her name without cussing.

Louise still had a few boy friends after she married, and that didn't set too good with Luke. After three years, Louise packed her bags, took the baby, and went to Chicago. She's never been back since. The youngest Sherman, Luke's boy, is around twenty-three years old now. He doesn't go by Sherman though, he goes by his mother's maiden name, Farrel—Conrad Farrel.
Luke's real name was Francis Gates, but nobody called him that. I don't think most people even knew his real name. Anyway Edgar gave Luke the farm, and Luke bought Edgar a place in town. That worked fine until four years ago when Luke was killed in a car wreck. I suppose you could say that Luke was, in a way, responsible for the situation. It was him dying that took the farm out of the family.

After Luke died, Louise rented the farm out. Cal White was the guy who rented it, but everyone still called it the Sherman place. Edgar went out there two or three times a week and told Cal how bad the weeds were and how sorry the corn looked. He used to complain to Cal, "What a sad looking bunch of sows. If your best sow had been in my herd, she'd have gone to town for bacon."

But Cal bought a place of his own in Missouri and now a man from Chicago has moved in. "If he ain't a Sherman, he doesn't belong here. And as far as I'm concerned, he ain't a Sherman." That's the situation that had Edgar so upset. Edgar was madder than sin. The situation was bad enough, having someone besides a Sherman run the place, but to make matters worse, the man's name was Conrad Farrel.

Edgar never really knew Conrad, but he was as bitter towards him as he was towards Louise. He didn't think of him as a grandson, but as Louise's kid.

A lady who was a friend of Louise told me about Conrad. He was a strange one, I'll guarantee. He could have been in a crowd of one hundred people, and I bet I could have picked him out. From what this lady told me, he'd stick out like a sore thumb no matter what crowd he was in. His hair went clear down to his shoulders, and it was cut straight across like a dutch-boy's. He had a moustache and goatee, and she said he had a nose as big as a fist, but the really strange thing about him was his mind, at least if everything I've heard is true. He never graduated from high school, but he didn't flunk out or anything. He got mad and quit. They even asked him to come back and he told them to forget it. And after he quit he became a teacher at college. When we go to Des Moines for the fair other farmers kid us that if Iowa gave its bottom two rows of counties to Missouri, it would raise the average I.Q. of both states twenty points. I bet with Conrad living here he's raised the average I.Q. of the county twenty points.
This morning after breakfast, Edgar had me drive him around town. After a while he told me to drive out to the Sherman place. Edgar was fit enough to drive, but whenever he went somewhere he'd have somebody drive for him. He usually told stories, but this morning he just stared out the window. Edgar and I were finally going to meet Conrad.

We went to the house first. It was in pretty bad shape, especially after Cal had lived there. He'd kept three coon hounds in a spare bedroom, his kids raised rabbits in the heat registers, and his wife kept chickens in the wash room. There's nothing that smells worse than chickens.

The house was in bad shape anyway. It was three stories high and had been built by Isaac Gates back in the 1850's. The floor in the living room was wooden and the boards had warped so that the floor sloped down to one corner of the room. The ceiling was stained from rain that had leaked in, and the plaster on the walls was coming off. But it had been quite a house in its day—in Isaac Gates' day. This was the house that Nehemiah returned to after the war. Edgar had been born right upstairs from where I stood. Nearly every significant event in the last one hundred and twenty years of the Sherman family history had taken place in or around this house. But there was no sign of Conrad. Edgar went outside and I followed him to the barn.

The barn had been built by Isaac Gates shortly after he finished the house. The years of weather had taken their toll on the barn too. This barn was for the draft horses that once worked the farm. Most of the doors were too small for a tractor to get in. Cal hadn't used the barn for much, and there had been more barn swallows and pigeons in the barn than anything else since Luke died. The floor was buried by an accumulation of cattle manure from Lord knows how many years. The shingles on the roof were covered by moss, and you could barely see the fences around the barn because of the jimsonweed, ragweed, and mustard weed that had taken over the barn lot.

When we got inside I saw Conrad first thing. It had to be Conrad. Like I said, I could have picked him out in a crowd of one hundred people in a second. He still had his beard, but he'd cut his hair off. He'd shaved his head as clean as a bowling ball. He was perched up on a rafter with his legs
crossed and his eyes closed, humming something to himself. Edgar looked at him for a while and then he said, “I was hoping you’d shave before you came, but that wasn’t what I had in mind.” Conrad opened his eyes and looked at Edgar. He closed them again for about a minute, and then he climbed down to where we were standing.

“I presume you are the famous Edgar Sherman.”

“And I presume you are that infamous son of that rip named Louise.” Edgar always called her a rip. He called Louise a rip, and old cows ready for market he called rips. I guess it meant Rest In Peace, because he didn’t care if they lived or breathed.

“That is correct. Conrad Farrel at your disposal.”

“I wish I could dispose of you.” Edgar cleared his throat and spit. “What brings you here anyway?”

“Destiny.”

“Then destiny can take you back to wherever the hell you’ve been.” Edgar didn’t really know what to say. He was always uneasy when he talked to strangers. Con was kind of pudgy. Edgar examined him and said, “I’m sorry to see you’ve got Dunlop’s disease.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what Dunlop’s disease is.”

“Here you’ve been at college for years and you don’t even know what Dunlop’s disease is.”

“What’s even more dreadful is that I’ve got the disease and I don’t know where it affects me.”

“Dunlop’s disease is where your belly dun lops over your belt.” I’ve heard Edgar tell that one a dozen times.

Conrad took a pen out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth like a pipe. “My mother has told me so little about you, but what she has told me seems to be true.”

“And did she tell you that I was a gem, that I was the salt of the earth?”

“Not in so many words.” Conrad didn’t seem upset by the situation.

“I understand that you’ve been at college in Chicago.”

“We all make mistakes.”

“Were you studying or teaching?” Edgar didn’t really care.

“A little of both.” Conrad seemed bored with the conversation.
"Then why the hell don't you go back?" Edgar sounded pretty angry now. Conrad stayed calm.

"I suppose you could say the university and I developed a personality conflict."

"Then why don't you find a different university?"

"I don't think I belong at a university."

"I don't think you belong here." Edgar was angry. "What made you leave college anyway?"

"I don't think you'd understand."

"I'm too simple minded, am I?"

"It's not that you can't understand, I guess it's just that I can't explain." I was standing about twenty feet away, but Conrad hadn't looked at me once. "I suppose my pen is as responsible as anything." He turned and looked up into the loft. "I was writing a thesis. It was excellent, if I do say so myself. I had written nearly four hundred pages, all with this one pen." He waved the pen in the air and put it back in his mouth. "And one day this letter arrives in the mail from a Calvin White. He had been renting the farm but was about to move out. I began to write a reply and the pen ran out of ink — went bone dry. A little ironic don't you think? Writing four hundred pages of manuscript and then running out of ink while I wrote a four sentence letter to Calvin White."

Edgar looked as though he was sorry he brought the matter up. "After the pen ran dry, I couldn't finish my thesis. I bought several new pens, but none of them had the exact same flavor as this one. I suppose this sounds strange to you."

"Oh no. Why should it sound strange?" Edgar spit again.

"It was similar to painting three walls of a room one shade, running out of paint, and then having to finish with a different color. The department demanded that I complete my thesis, but I refused. I told them I'd have to do it over with a new pen, or submit the thesis incomplete. I ended up turning the thesis in unfinished, and they rejected it. Then they sent me a letter suggesting that I buy a new pen with plenty of ink, and start over. I rejected their letter." Edgar was getting interested now.

"Well the university accused me of being childish and immature. I suggested that they were impatient and insensitive. The semester was nearing an end and I decided to leave my mark on the university." Both Edgar and I were
listening intently now. He could tell a story as well as Edgar.

“All the grades are processed through a computer and I taught a course in computer maintenance. One evening I had a group of my students join me in the computer building that processed the grades. I took the computers apart and showed them what usually went wrong and how to fix it. I showed them several trouble spots, and as they watched intently, I adjusted the print out mechanism so that when a student was supposed to receive an ‘A,’ he got an ‘F,’ and vice versa. I knew it would be interesting, but I underestimated the impact.” Edgar was smiling a little bit now, and Conrad was starting to smile as he went on.

“The surprising thing is, nobody caught it. They processed the grade cards, printed up the records, and mailed the grades without anyone noticing that they were reversed. When students found out they got an ‘F’ in a class where they expected an ‘A’ they were prepared to burn the school to the ground.”

Edgar broke out laughing so hard, he had to lean against a post for support. When he regained his composure he asked Conrad, “What’s your name son?”

“Conrad Farrel.”

“No, your middle name.”

“Gates sir, Conrad Gates.”

“I should have known.” Edgar exploded with laughter again and he ran outside onto the side of a hill. Both Conrad and I followed. “Well Conrad Gates, you sure screwed old Thomas.”

“I don’t think I understand.” Conrad probably hadn’t heard of Thomas or Nehemiah.

Edgar didn’t say anything. He just looked around the landscape. After a little bit he turned to Conrad. “What are you doing for breakfast tomorrow?”

Artwork by
Cathy Ammarell