Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Portions

Richard Klin · Wednesday, March 23rd, 2022

PORTIONS

by Richard Klin

February was the month that made the least sense. By February the newness of winter had long expired, the seasons's few pleasurable attributes replaced with a general weariness over the cold weather; the snow now mostly half-melted, much of it covered in dirt and detritus, purely a hindrance that served only to obstruct the sidewalks and streets.

February's distinctiveness was drawn from the fact that it was so utterly nondistinctive.

The sky, in February, was unvaryingly muted and washed-out, at times sooty. Even the occasional sunny days were evidenced by a metallic cerulean.

This sky perched over the environs of Depot Avenue: the diner, laundromat, Lebanese restaurant, chicken takeout place. Sonic Boom, the pleasantly chaotic record shop. The convenience store, where he occasionally drifted in for a Styrofoam tub of scalding coffee, sometimes augmented—depending on his mood or finances—with the purchase of a lottery ticket, a pack of cigarettes.

Zymurgy, the large, ramshackle used furniture place, had supplied his own modest apartment with table and chairs. Zymurgy's owner was an affable, slightly unkept oddball who was famous—if the word *famous* could really be applied in this context—up and down Depot Avenue. The rumor was that, way back when, he had been some sort of promising scholar. *Zymurgy* had been the last word in his pocket dictionary and he had chosen this as the name for his business for all sorts of complicated reasons, taking shrewd advantage of its unique alphabetical placement.

Seven Seas, on the other end of Depot, was shuttered during the daytime and gave no hint as to its frenetic nighttime incarnation, the various bands loudly occupying its stage, the packed, sweaty enclave with the pungent odors of beer, pot, cigarette smoke, the intensity of illicit offerings gradually increasing in and around Seven Seas' nooks and crannies.

The Coffehouse was a block down from Seven Seas, its couches and chairs no doubt procured from Zymurgy. Both Seven Seas and the Coffeehouse had a symbiotic relationship, the same flyers

and zines popping up in both places, much of the same clientele shuttling back and forth. The Seven Seas and Coffeehouse, it seemed to him, maintained the harmonic equilibrium of Depot Avenue.

Recently, Depot Avenue had successfully repulsed an enemy interloper in the form of a large, garishly lit Mexican restaurant, the mediocre food and cutesy drinks vastly, offensively overpriced.

He and Darcy, on their one and only evening there, had busied themselves by yanking the list of specials from their table's plastic menu holder and—utilizing Darcy's elegant handwriting—filling in the blank, reverse side with inventive specials of their own creation, then reinserting their handiwork back into the holder. A short time later, the adjoining tables as well—thanks to their efforts—now promised free drinks on Wednesdays, all-you-can-eat Fridays, and live music, most of it of the hardcore variety. The Mexican place did not last long. The site remained empty and untouched, a silent admonition not to tamper with the intrinsic nature of Depot Avenue.

The locale of his apartment was supremely advantageous, only a few blocks from Depot proper, yet sequestered from its noise and hullaballoo. Darcy would stay over a few nights during the week, none of it really planned. After an evening's activity, they would collapse into his large, clunky bed, waves of heat emanating from the vintage radiator. In the morning, they would stumble out of bed and then, a short time later, exit the apartment in their black, loose-fitting coats, hair still damp from the shower—a welcome jolt of February cold serving to rouse them from their stupor—both of them looking driven and purposeful, as if they were on their way to some significant activity, rather than heading out to some shit job or temp assignment or whatever.

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This particular February night was bone-chillingly cold. He was grateful, at this far end of Depot, to take refuge in the pizzeria. Here, in the outer reaches of Depot Avenue, the businesses and stores had petered out, the houses reducing in number. Vacant lots, a few of them, began popping up here; the odd chain-link fence. This was where, in fact, Depot Avenue ended—or where it began, depending on one's proximity—turning into Highland Boulevard. The delineation between Depot and Highland seemed of supreme importance to the pizza place, which was formally designated as Highland Pizza and Subs, taking great care to announce its legal autonomy from Depot Avenue. Highland Pizza and Subs was the only business amid these houses, yards, vacant lots. It occupied its own brightly-lit domain and also possessed its own–always uncrowded–parking lot.

Its garish red neon signage, paradoxically, reinforced a sense of melancholia, the illumination unwittingly underscoring the pizza place's lack of distinction or importance. Along with the bright, artificial red were equally garish blue neon representations of pizza slices, which felt obligatory for a pizzeria, as if all potential customers needed a physical representation to properly comprehend what pizza looked like.

The neon lacked sufficient brio to flash off and on. It remained fixed and unchanging in its red and blue, illuminating this little enclave, reflecting on the piles of snow and sections of the parking lot pavement.

There was something of immense poetry to this pizzeria on a frigid February night. Like the very month itself, it too was made exceptional by the utter lack of exceptionality.

Its interior was reasonably warm, sufficient enough to ensure comfort, but not fully able to banish

the winter cold that seeped through the doors. An anemically colored mural of a gondolier amid the canals of Venice took up most of the back wall. As always, he was struck by the contrast between the mural's grandiosity and the reality of Highland Pizza's utilitarian interior: the large steel pizza oven that braced the back wall. The display case of pizza slices and garlic knots. The spigots for dispensing Coke, Dr Pepper, Sprite—cold soda, to him, the last thing you'd want on a winter night.

It also seemed incongruous to come here for anything other than pizza or the occasional sub. But the unchanging display board, with its magnetic letters that seemed permanently affixed, boasted a surprisingly expansive array of food, like calzone, baked ziti, eggplant Parmesan.

The girl, as usual, was working the front counter. He had taken to privately referring to her as the girl. At this stage, the time for formal introductions had come and gone. The girl was admirably unflappable, taking orders, dispensing food and drink, helming the cash register. He had never spotted her out of the confines of Highland Pizza; not at the Coffeehouse or Seven Seas or Sonic Boom or the diner. She existed here and here alone.

They chatted effortlessly, as usual, and within a matter of minutes he was sitting at one of the Formica tables, two bubbling slices in front of him.

He reflexively tapped his front pants pocket. The 600 dollars, of course, was still there, wrapped tortuously tight with rubber bands. The sort of errand he was running tonight was not in his usual realm of activity. He did, though, occasionally serve as deliveryman, all of it low-risk and thoroughly businesslike, a few hours of work for speedy remuneration.

He had heard all the horror stories, of course, but the actual endeavor was devoid of anything high-risk or cloak-and-dagger. The criteria were simple common sense, elementary precautions. Keeping your mouth shut. An absolute avoidance of the underpass near the park. And a slightly circuitous route to his ultimate destination, the little ramshackle house at the end of Plum Street.

The radio was playing softly in the background. He recognized the bombastic, deep-voiced *Get the Led Out*, repeated a few times for emphasis, heralding the nightly bloc of Zeppelin, and he laughed inwardly at the histrionics, but—almost in spite of himself—cocked an ear to listen.

The ennui of a pizzeria on a cold February night.

A husband and wife hurried in to pick up a to-go order, enabling a sweep of bone-chilling cold to puncture the warmth of the interior.

A cab pulled into the parking lot, which elicited notice from both him and the girl. Taxis, in general, were a rarity.

The driver burst in, letting in another Arctic wave, quickly ordering a slice. Cold as a witch's tit in a brass bra, the driver said to nobody in particular, smiling at his own witticism, as the girl busied herself behind the counter.

The second piece of pizza was nearly consumed as he again checked his person for the packet of money. He stretched, conscientiously deposited his paper plates and napkins into the garbage can, and reluctantly began to slip on his coat, resigning himself to the inevitable re-immersion into the cold and the trek to Plum Street.

Taking off? the girl asked. She had materialized from somewhere and now stood in close proximity to his table.

Taking off or shoving off, he answered. I'm not sure which one.

The girl laughed. I guess taking off sounds better than shoving off, she told him. Where are you heading?

I've got to get to the other end of Depot, he said and she looked sympathetic.

Suddenly the cabdriver piped up: I'll take you, he said unexpectedly, emphatically finishing off his slice, shoving his empty paper plate aside and then continuing: Other end of Depot? Sure… What the hell. How does… five bucks sound? Off the books.

There seemed to be no compelling reason not to take advantage of this sudden opportunity, his intrinsic wariness doing battle with the thought of a quick, heated taxi ride through Depot Avenue, as opposed to hiking through blocks and blocks in the freezing weather.

Look at that, the girl said. It all works out.

He and the girl wished each other a good night and he exited Highland Pizza with this off-duty cabbie and took the taxi's back seat, just like a regular, paying customer, the driver positioning himself behind the wheel and quickly blasting out the welcome heat, which wheezed out in noisy, uneven waves. From his vantage point in the still-stationary car, he had an unobstructed view of the entirety of Highland Pizza and Subs, devoid of customers and even its sole employee, the girl, not in evidence at the moment. The neon, red and blue, could be seen in full effect.

The cab pulled out and slowly made its way down Depot Avenue. He surreptitiously fingered the 600 dollars. The driver, suddenly loquacious, launched into a patter devoted to the allurements of driving a cab at odd hours to strange places, the sort of girls one came into contact with.

And he agreed with this cabdriver, how advantageous that must be.

You wouldn't believe the shit that goes down in this cab, the driver said now.

He had no interest whatsoever in the shit that went down in this cab and grunted noncommittally. The lack of response bothered the driver not at all, who continued the narrative:

I was giving this one chick a ride, like… two months ago. I looked back in the rearview mirror and her legs were *spread wide open*. Right in the backseat. Shit. I'll tell you what.

The driver shook his head in wonderment, still amazed, all these months later, at his spectacular turn of luck. Some of these chicks…he went on.

Stories began tumbling out. Chicks who wanted it bad. Puerto Ricans. A girl covered with tattoos.

He'd never had the slightest patience for this sort of braggadocio, the driver interpreting the uncomfortable silence as an implicit signal to continue, the improbable details transcending embellishment and into the realm of unfettered delusion: A threesome he had with two cokehead girls, who insisted he pull over into a vacant lot.

A growing unease took hold, not just at the explicit nature of these stories, but the realization that here he was in this car, driven by someone he didn't know and who seemed borderline psychotic. There was 600 dollars in his pocket. This felt like a strategic blunder, the allure of a warm cab ride overtaking his usual measured judgment.

To his amazement, the driver's tawdry monologue continued apace. Disgust and alarm mixed together, both feelings vying for supremacy, the 600 dollars sitting heavy in his pocket.

They were finally coming upon Depot Avenue's more well-traveled section, although not much—if anything—seemed to be going on right now. The driver, heedless, prattled on.

The cabdriver slowed as he approached the traffic light near the barbershop and little Chinese restaurant, coming to a complete halt as the light turned red.

A surging impulse took hold. Without a moment's hesitation, as if obeying some inner command, he burst the door open and ran faster than he thought was humanly possible, cutting across Depot and into the side streets, hurling full force down the empty sidewalks, on high alert for little patches of ice, the piles of snow off to the side, all of this propelling in front of him in a series of

speedy, jerky motions: a pile of snow zooming into full focus and then passing from view; a garbage can flying by on his left, followed by a little intersection. A darkened restaurant to his right. Another intersection.

He heard nothing; no shouts of protest, no revving engine. There were no indications of pursuit. Perhaps this driver, whoever he was, had no experience with people running out on him, although that seemed improbable. Or the trouble of retrieving five off-the-book dollars was simply too arduous, not worth the effort. And then there was the possibility that he hadn't even noticed, still lost in his concocted, smutty reverie, heedless of the empty back seat.

Gasping for air on this frigid night, he finally allowed himself to stop. The money was secured in his pocket.

It was now bitterly cold. This little incident had placed him a good half hour from the house on Plum Street, but he was quickly able to orient himself. A block or so away was that atrocious deli that seemed like a lab for food poisoning. Faint strains of music emanated from somewhere close by. He recognized the large house at the end of the block, where some of Darcy's friends had lived and had given a few parties. He had the fleeting, fantastical thought that one of these friends would miraculously drive by and, out of pity, offer him a ride. But one didn't hitch a ride to complete an errand like this. And he doubted if they still even still lived there, these friends of Darcy. Now he began walking quickly, suddenly longing for a hat.

He would, of course, complete his errand on Plum Street soon enough. And there still would be time to call Darcy from one of the scattered phone booths on his way back to Depot Avenue, on this cold night in February.

(Image of taxi waiting at night from Peter Heeling via Skitterphoto)

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