

*When people hear about a "lost chapter," they wonder how such a thing can exist: "Did you just forget about it or what?" In this case, I didn't forget about it, but I did feel it was slowing down the action and was maybe a little out of character given the way Rickey and G-man had evolved from first draft to finished novel (they were originally much bigger stoners and ne'er-do-wells). This would have taken place somewhere between chapters 25 and 27.*

G-man was in the front yard on Marengo Street trying to cut down a clump of weeds with a pair of kitchen shears. This was not a pleasant way to spend a tropical August morning, especially just after a rain when the vegetation was damp and soggy, but he'd been seeing roaches in the kitchen and had decided to try cutting this patch of weeds. He figured it probably wouldn't help; he wasn't supposed to have to do this anyway, but the landlord's yard guy hadn't been by for a month; the shears weren't working very well; and Rickey was still in bed. His mood, already far from its best, failed to improve when he saw Lenny parking in front of the house.

He straightened up, half-minced blades of grass in his hair and clinging to his bare chest. "Probably you tried to call," he said. "I bet there's a message on the machine right now."

"Sorry," said Lenny. "I would've called first, but I just this minute decided to stop by."

"Kinda like one of those annoying neighbors on a TV sitcom."

"Hey, sorry if I came at a bad time. I'll only stay a minute. I was thinking - " Lenny turned his head and stared at the two cars in the driveway. "What the hell is that?"

"What the hell is what?"

"The purple thing."

"That's my new car. Sweet, huh? It's a 1976 Mercury station wagon. Runs good, and I figure we can use the extra hauling power."

"But Rickey already has the biggest car I've ever seen. Until now, I mean."

"You never know. We might both have to haul stuff at the same time. I even kinda like the color. K&B purple, or pretty close."

"You know, you guys ought to think about this," said Lenny. "You're making decent money now. And you're business owners. You could get credit, you know? Get a loan, get a nice car."

"Why?"

"Well, these two you have are just so ... huge. And old. I mean, you want to have something dependable."

"These are dependable. What, do you think we're stupid or something? We got a friend who's a real good mechanic. We had him check out these cars before we bought them. You know what he said?" G-man shot a pointed glance at Lenny's car. "He said the engines weren't full of complicated electronic crap like

they are today, and next time the streets flood, we'll be driving through the water while all the Lexus drivers are scrambling for dry ground."

"Yeah, but you know what happens when your Lexus breaks down?"

"What?"

"They come get you, they tow your car for free, and they give you another Lexus to drive while it's being fixed."

G-man shrugged. "You wanna know the truth, I wouldn't drive one of those things if they threw in dinner at Commander's every time it broke down. It's OK for you. I had one, people would just think I was dealing crack on the side."

"See, that's the attitude you need to get away from. You guys are gonna be successful. Nobody's gonna think you're dealing crack if you want to drive a nice car."

"Well, I don't," said G-man shortly. He put down the kitchen shears and swiped the back of his hand across his forehead, nearly dislodging his shades. "What are you doing here, anyway? Did you actually want something?"

"Yeah, but I was kind of hoping you wouldn't make me stand out here in the ninety-five-degree weather."

"He hassles me about my car, then he invites himself in," G-man said to the harsh and cloudless sky. "OK, whatever. I'm sick of trying to deal with these weeds anyway."

Inside the house, Rickey was curled up on the sofa sipping a cup of coffee. "Hey, Lenny," he said, then noticed G-man's state of green-streaked dishevelment. "What are you doing? Are those our good kitchen shears?"

"Don't even start," said G-man, and disappeared into the back of the house. A moment later they heard the shower running.

"Maybe it's my imagination," said Lenny, "but he seems a little unhappy with me."

"He's just in a pissy mood. He gets that way a couple times a year. It won't last long. You want some coffee?"

"No thanks, I already had some. Look, I wasn't going to bring this up again - "

"Uh-oh. I always hate to hear that."

"Well, you remember I told you we were holding interviews for a sommelier position at Lenny's? I hired one, this young lady from Napa Valley who practically grew up on a vineyard. She's terrific - I couldn't turn her down. But there was one other candidate I hated to let go, a real sharp young French guy, and I thought I'd take one more shot at convincing you - "

"Lenny, the menu's ready to go. The liquor list is printed up. Come on. We just passed the health department inspection yesterday - don't give me something new to stress about. I told you a million times, we're not doing wine."

"But - "

"Look, we already compromised on the beer. We respect beer drinkers. But not doing wine is part of our whole deal. I thought you finally got that through your head."

"I tried. I really did. But it's just so, so - "

"So what?"

"I don't want to be insulting," Lenny said, "but the only word that comes to mind is idiotic."

"Why? Why is it idiotic?"

"Because you're gonna alienate the very people you want as customers. You can't just force your own tastes on everybody. Most people who are serious about food like to drink wine with it. They're gonna say, 'Who are these punks to tell me I can't have my vino?'"

"How serious can they be about it if they call it vino?"

"You know what I mean. Come on, Rickey. This guy, Daniel, he could put together a nice little list for you, he could do all the ordering, you have plenty of room for a cellar - "

Rickey made a horrible face. "A cellar! A nice little list! That kinda talk is exactly the reason why I don't want to do it. Can't you just see me in the dining room, asking some party how they enjoyed their dinner, and they're like, 'Oh, it went so well with the wine, a charming varietal with a high, young, thin, green finish' - "

"So what you're saying is you're afraid of the competition?"

"What competition?"

"You think the wine would overshadow your food instead of complementing it?"

"Fuck no, I'm not saying that - "

"Then you admit that it could complement the food?"

"Yeah," said Rickey, completely pissed now. "I suppose it could, if that's how you like to eat. But it's not going to, because we're not having it."

"Rickey, no matter what you think, I'm not picking on you. I'm just trying to make you understand that you're going to catch a lot of shit for this, and I don't see the point. Seems to me it's mostly based on prejudice and stubbornness, and neither of those is going to get you far in the restaurant business."

"I think stubbornness can get you pretty far."

"Not this kind of stubbornness. Not sheer useless pig-headedness in the face of what makes sense. You know who's really gonna suffer because of your refusal to sell wine?"

"I know you're about to tell me."

"Your wait staff, that's who. They're the ones who'll have to listen to the customers bitching about it. They'll lose out

on their tips, too - a few cocktails aren't going to run up the ticket the way a bottle or two of wine would."

"Then they can work somewhere else."

"If you're dead set against selling wine, what about letting people bring their own and charging a nice high corkage fee?"

"I don't want a bunch of wine drinkers at my restaurant!" Rickey said rather desperately. "I don't want all that paraphernalia. I don't want to deal with the glassware, I don't want my servers constantly fucking around with corkscrews and wine buckets, I don't want to see my diners swirling their drinks around like some kinda goddamn science experiment. I can't help it! I just don't want them!"

"See? Like I said. Prejudice and stubbornness."

"I don't care. It's part of the concept. I don't want to say vision - I spent a good part of the kitchen staff meeting trying to avoid that word - but part of the fun of dining at Liquor is supposed to be that it's not like other restaurants. We'll already be doing something nobody else in the city is doing - serving fine food into the early-morning hours. That right there should be enough to tell you that you shouldn't come in with the usual expectations. It's about liquor. We'll have liquor pairings, liquor recommendations on the menu - "

"And a deal with a cab company, I hope."

"Yeah, Mister Smart Guy, I've already talked to Bye You Taxi. We're gonna have them on call."

"That's good. Look, I really don't mean to piss you off. I just want your restaurant to be as good as possible."

"Let us do it the way we want, and it will be. But get this wine bug out your ass - I don't feel like talking about it any more." Still a little annoyed, Rickey had an idea. "Hey, you want some cake?"

"What kind of cake?"

"We got a nice flat of blackberries and made this spice cake with some of 'em. Cream cheese frosting. Sorta like carrot cake, but a lot better."

"Sure."

Rickey went into the kitchen, fixed himself another cup of coffee, and put a slice of cake on a plate. A smudge of the cream cheese frosting got on the plate's rim, and out of habit, he wiped it away with a damp paper towel. "Bone ape tit," he said back in the living room, handing the plate to Lenny.

"Ape tit, huh?"

"Yeah, you know, one time when I was working at the Peychaud Grill, a customer brought their cookbook to have the chef sign it or whatever. Paco was like, 'How do you spell bon appetit? Does it have one P or two?' and Shake said, 'Dude,

it's gotta be two Ps, cause if you only put one, it'd be a monkey mammary.' Cracked me up. I always remembered it."

"You guys need to do a cookbook eventually," said Lenny, chewing. "Say, this cake is really good. What's in it, some blackberry brandy?"

"No. We didn't think this one needed any liquor."

"It's got kind of an herbal underflavor."

"Huh. Just the blackberries, I guess. You want another piece?"

"Well, I shouldn't, but it's so good."

Rickey put on a Kermit Ruffins CD and went back into the kitchen. Instead of cutting a second piece of cake, he busied himself washing dishes. They'd been stacking up, and it took about twenty minutes. When he returned to the living room, Lenny was slumped down in the sofa cushions, snoring quietly.

"Have a nice nap, dickhead," said Rickey. "That'll teach you to harass me about wine five days before we open."

Damp-haired and in fresh clothes, G-man came back into the room. He saw Lenny passed out on the couch and the empty plate on the coffee table. "What'd you do?" he asked in horror. "Did you give him a piece of the blackberry cake?"

"You're damn right I did. He was bugging me."

"But there's, like, a quarter-ounce of hash in that cake."

"I know that, dude. I helped you make it, remember? He was giving me shit about selling wine again. I didn't appreciate it."

"He's gonna be really mad when he wakes up."

"Nah, he'll be mellow. If he suspects anything, we'll just say we tried to wake him up and he told us to leave him alone. We'll say, 'Hey, Lenny, you must be working too hard.'"

G-man laughed. "He probably is, you know? He needs to chill out for a while."

"Yeah. We're doing him a favor, really."

"We're doing a lot of people a favor. Whichever place he was supposed to be tonight, Lenny's or Crescent, they'd be thanking us if they knew."

"That's the spirit," said Rickey. "We're helping everybody out. We ought to get the Loving Cup."

"What Loving Cup?"

"The one they give away in the paper every year. Like if you fed a bunch of orphans or something."

"I can see the headline. 'TWO SLACKERS DRUG FAMOUS CHEF WITHOUT CONSENT, RECEIVE ACCOLADE.'"

"I hope he's not taping this. You never know with Lenny."

"Maybe we should pat him down, check for a wire."

"Go for it, dude."

"I'm not touching him. You do it."

"I'm not gonna do it."

A shrill ringing sound came from Lenny's pants pocket. Startled, Rickey and G-man stepped back from the couch. Rickey's knee brushed the cake plate and sent it to the floor, where it smashed into five or six pieces. None of this noise had any effect on Lenny.

"It's his cell phone," said G-man.

"I know. Reach in there and get it so we can turn it off."

"Dude! No way!"

"You wanna listen to that all day?"

"I'd rather listen to that than stick my hand in Lenny's pants."

"Yeah, I see what you mean," said Rickey. "Let's just let him nap in peace, then. How about we go get a po-boy at Parasol's?"

"Good idea. Hey, let's bring him back one. Then he can't be mad at us."

As they left the house, G-man sneaked a look back at Lenny, now drooling slightly onto the arm of the couch. The sight made him feel better about a lot of things that had been bothering him. He smiled to himself and pulled the front door shut behind him.