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Journal Entry by Steven Dubin

A Whizbang Guy

Just when I thought 2020 had pretty much run its course, throwing crap everyone's way, my friend Dennis died the day after Christmas.

The last time I heard from Dennis was on December 17. He alerted me to an article by Gina Kolata, a science writer for the *New York Times*. It reported breakthroughs in the treatment of metastasized prostate cancer, discussing the type of therapies I am focusing on at present. Dennis sent the reference despite suspecting that many other people had already mentioned it to me. They had not.

I have known Dennis since around 1980. We were co-book review editors on a journal at the University of Chicago.

How do I characterize his origins? His mother was born in Oklahoma Territory in the early years of the 20th century. As newlyweds, his parents were sharecroppers, picking cotton. Dennis used the word hardscrabble to describe their life. In this instance, you know it is not a euphemism. Or an exaggeration.

Dennis was born in Whizbang, Oklahoma. It is now a ghost town. He grew up in the arid Texas Panhandle.

Dennis never lost his affection for the cooking and the vernacular wit and wisdom of that part of the country.

One of Dennis's feet always remained firmly planted in the clay and sandy soil of the High Plains. His other foot led him throughout the globe. And, eventually, to an elite graduate education. He was down-home and ivory tower in equal measure.

A few months ago, Dennis shared a remembrance with me that he had written about his family. Here is one my favorite passages:

“Granny was a hard, hard woman who lived to be about 90, the last few years of her life with us . . . Mom finally put her foot down when she grew too feeble to hit the coffee can spitting out her tobacco juice and putting toothpaste in her hair instead of Brylcreem. And I remember both mortifying and causing my parents to suppress guffaws when I proudly stepped into the room saying, ‘Look, I found the marbles you said Grandma has lost.’”

After I posted my memories of riding through the Kansas City stockyards with my grandfather, Dennis related a similar story about a school trip when he and his classmates trekked to the big city of Amarillo. He, too, watched in horror as cattle went from, in his words, “beast to burger.”

After Dennis completed his Ph.D., he snagged THE BEST JOB EVER. At least I thought so. I imagine some of our colleagues scoffed at it. Dennis became the chief restaurant critic for *Chicago Magazine*. If you know anything about Chicago, you realize that this was a very big deal. Over more than two decades, Dennis perfected a writing style that was inventive. Clever. And in-the-know. I'm certain that his monthly feature was the first thing that many readers turned to. Dennis's reviews could launch a restaurant's success. Validate its reputation. Or even deflate its renown.

One of the perks of knowing Dennis was being invited out to dinner with him and his wife Susan. The magazine provided an expense account that covered several people sampling a broad range of a restaurant's fare. Generally, this was a foursome. Sometimes, more. The invitation always came with responsibilities. It meant *being forced* to eat appetizers. Main courses. And desserts. This was tough work.

Plates were generally shared around the table so that everyone could weigh in (an unfortunate term) with their opinions. The tab would mount and mount. But our meals were freebies. For someone scraping by on a graduate student's budget, or an assistant professor's meager salary, ordering whatever you desired in pricey upscale places was one helluva rush. Talk about aspirational living.

What was basically fun for the guests was research for Dennis. He attached a tiny microphone to his tie, connected to a tape recorder. When the tape was finished, he hurried to the men's room to flip it over. Or put in a new one. While everyone else chattered away, Dennis mumbled his impressions into his chest.

I once joined Dennis and Susan at a restaurant in tony suburban Lake Forest, IL. When the server took our order, Dennis told her that it was a "very special occasion" for us. And that we would be ordering a "great deal" of food. She surveyed us one by one, and then gave us a look like, "WTF?" We did, in fact, order a great deal of food.

On another occasion Dennis and Susan treated me to an Italian meal at a restaurant on Third Street in Greenwich Village. Il Mulino. Most people would pass it by. I certainly had, many times. It is impossible to see inside this place. Heavy curtains cover the front windows. Aside from its name being inscribed on an awning, there is no other visible signage. No need. The restaurant is reliably filled by a cadre of loyal patrons.

Il Mulino features cooking from the Abruzzo region. I looked online at the current menu, and here is the price range: Antipasti: \$21-\$29; Pastas: \$30-\$50; Fish: \$49-\$75; Meat: \$40-\$60. I retain vague memories of starting off with cocktails. Sampling several wines with dinner. Stuffing ourselves with course after delicious course. And then being treated to nonstop pours of house-made *grappa*. Our bill totaled well over 400 bucks. And that was quite a few years ago.

Our unsurpassed shared experience was making a circuit of New York delis and Jewish restaurants one weekend. (It was a comparative study so that Dennis could write in an informed

way about Chicago delis.) Friday night we went to Sammie's Roumanian Steakhouse. On Chrystie, the Lower East Side. Junkies were thick in the park across the street. Limos were lined up outside, waiting for diners to finish their meals.

The place was as tacky as the basement recreation room of a Long Island split-level. It featured a man seated near the entrance playing schmaltzy songs on an electronic piano keyboard. And providing off-color humor. (Example: an Asian woman walked in and he quipped, "She must have a real *yen* for Jewish food." Yes, he did!)

And speaking of schmaltz. When you order chopped liver—as you must—the server brings all the components to the table. A mound of ground-up liver. Sliced hardboiled eggs. Grated radish. Chopped onions. Gribenes. You heard me right. Gribenes, the delectable cracklings that remain after rendering chicken fat, or schmaltz. Delightful flashbacks to Bubbe's cooking. The server dumps everything into a large mixing bowl. Then strafes the concoction from above with multiple passes of schmaltz. It oozes out of a standard restaurant syrup dispenser and binds all the elements together. Delicious. But deadly.

Sammie's menu does not include prices. Servers are extremely attentive and seduce you into thinking you are in their home. So, of course, you are encouraged to eat up. And consume the bottle of chilled vodka that's plopped upon your table. We had an extraordinary, multi-course meal. Again, gratis for me. We needn't have eaten again for days. But duty called.

On Saturday we hit Second Avenue Deli and Katz's Deli. In between we made an afternoon visit to elderly relatives of Susan's on Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn as a "palette cleanser." We were, of course, again plied with food.

I am getting indigestion writing about this.

On Sunday, we topped off the excursion with a meal at the Stage Delicatessen. As you might imagine, I don't believe any of use ate such food again for a very long time.

[Fast forward to the early days of the pandemic. The doorman buzzes me. I have a food delivery, he says. But I haven't ordered anything. I ignore it. The doorman buzzes again, insistent that I come down. Dennis and Susan had sent me a generous sampling of fare from Katz's Deli. A few weeks later, they did it again. They were imagining I was not able to get out at all. And that I was starving. I did not disabuse them of that thought.]

I remember staying with Dennis and Susan once in Chicago's Hyde Park. Their home has always been filled with multiple pets: cats, dawgs, assorted reptiles, fish, etc. One of my favorites was South, or Southside. She was a sweet young pit bull they found on the street. Abandoned in one of the rough neighborhoods west of the university. They had no idea what her history was. Or her temperament. But they took her in. Southside found her place with their young son, Daniel. They also took in a beautiful mixed-breed Siamese kitten. Throughout that cat's life, South carried him around by the scruff of his neck. At this time they were resident heads in a building that had been converted into a dorm and students passed through their apartment daily.

I recall staying with them on another occasion and listening as Dennis would ask Daniel each morning what he wanted to take to school for his lunch. The fixins were leftovers from some of the fanciest restaurants in the city. Daniel would dictate his wishes with a culinary vocabulary more sophisticated than most adults.

The last time I saw Dennis and Susan, we ate at Manny's Coffee Shop. It is the quintessential Jewish cafeteria, just south of Chicago's Loop. It is one of my favorite places in the world. How nice to think back, and that was the final time I would see him.

Dennis prepared Christmas dinner. When Susan checked on him the next day, Dennis was dead. Seated at his desk. For fuck's sake.

2020 has been a year of misery and loss. And another small part of my history has vanished. Dennis's allotment of words, which he used to the utmost, ran out. Much too soon. That's all he wrote.

Happy Trails, Good Buddy!