

IF HE WERE HERE

By Len Waldron

*Wall Street. The Market. The new CEO.
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Gridlock. Rent Increases...escape.*

I dropped my pen and walked out of the steel and glass building uncharacteristically early on that Friday afternoon. I am telling myself, again, that this life is all a good idea. Specifically, that this move has immeasurable benefits to my career and is expanding my consciousness and professional skill set to a level impossible anywhere else. Wall Street...the rapier fight at the top of the mountain.

On this day, at the end of this hellish week, I am soloing to the isolation and anonymity of the million-plus acre Adirondack Wilderness to fish for Atlantic salmon. It is autumn, middle October, and the leaves are peaking. Within the first hour of driving north on the Taconic Parkway, I feel my shoulders begin to relax as I drive with both windows down to mainline the cool fall air. The colors are dramatic and hypnotic; growing hills covered in pumpkin orange with smears of yellow and swatches of wine red and coniferous green; it is beginning to work.

After something that felt like a couple of hours, I pull off in hopes of finding a hot plate of food that hasn't come in a plastic bag from a gas station microwave. In the gloaming is an enormous neon Indian wearing a resplendent war bonnet, the mascot for the



West Taghkanic Diner. The chief's profile lights up the small valley from atop a polished chrome diner with broad blue and red horizontal stripes. Inside is a full stride back in time. I take a seat at the boomerang-patterned Formica counter across from the silver milk machines with enormous chrome handles. I order a bowl of chili and a hot macaroni and cheese entrée. It must be a hit here as I see four more plates with giant piles of macaroni go to other tables. No sides, just mountains of mac.

Perhaps it was the old diner, or the solitary drive; maybe it was the music playing in the restaurant; but I began to think of my grandfather. He has been gone since high school. I wonder often what he would think of my life and of me these days. He was an avid outdoorsman and a good businessman. After World War II, he spent most of his early working years on the road and retained a well seasoned nose for local flavor and gourmet greasy corners. I think he would like this place. He would probably order the fried chicken and laugh at my ridiculous plate of macaroni. Then again, he might order the chili. Coffee for sure, night or day.

He would notice that our waitress had very nice fingernails-he might even tell her so-and have a conversation about

it. He liked people and particularly women, but I think he mostly wanted his coffee filled with a smile from the fresher pot. This attention to detail usually worked. It always made me laugh; old men can get away with anything.

As I worked my way into the mac, he walked through the door. We were the same age, just two haggard men at a crossroad on our way back from somewhere on the way to somewhere else. For him, it's 1948, Leonard V. (he) and Leonard A. (I) belly-up to the same counter. Both of us are 34. He has two sons, has served as an enlisted soldier both theatres of World War II, and is back on the road in the food brokerage and grocery business. I, while much more educated and having served as an Army officer, am an amateur by comparison. He sits down easily and smiles a knowing smile. I wonder about the balance between a survivor of the Great Depression and World War II, and the ambitions of a man in his prime. So I lean over to the stool beside me, that moments before had been vacant, and address him.

"I guess they will let anyone in here these days."

"Shouldn't you be at work?" he replied with a smile.

"Perhaps, but I thought I would head north for some Atlantic salmon."

"It's a little early for them, isn't it."

"Maybe so, I am hoping for 'the first-mover advantage.'"

"The what?"

"Never mind." I laughed. "I just had to get out of the city for awhile."

"How is it treating you?" and then he looked directly into my eyes.

"It's tough, but I work with the best in the world. You have to be on your

game every day. Sometimes it's completely exhausting. How are things with you?"

"Work is good. I am on pace to drive over 50,000 miles this year. Finally bought a Buick. Your grandmother thought it was an extravagance, but I live in it. I miss her terribly, but business is growing and I am learning."

Those words came as a shock, I had never contemplated the possibility of a gap in his wisdom.

"Is it hard to reconcile, being away?" I asked.

"After the Depression and the War, having a nice car and a hot meal feels like I am getting over. But this world and this country are changing along with expectations. I am learning to adjust and so is Edna. She's a quite a woman"

"Have you started a family, yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Things are different in my world."

He laughed, sputtering into his coffee, "I'll bet."

"Very few Ednas around. But I am working on it." I said.

"Ok, ok. I'll leave you alone on that one for awhile."

His fried chicken arrived. Just as I suspected, the waitress with the nice nails filled his coffee from a fresh pot for which he gave her a warm smile and a wink. Unbelievable. I took a moment to look at him. His hair was thinner than mine. It was his wife who gave her sons and grandsons our thick wavy hair. But his shoulders and hands were like mine, except his knuckles and fingers bore the slight scars and size of an earlier life of tough physical work. His laughing eyes

were still the same, both sharp and kind. I was glad to see he had the same easy laugh. His traveling suit, though a bit rumpled from driving, was impeccable as where his shoes.

“How’s the chicken?” I asked.

“Probably better than that mound of whatever it is you have there.”

“Good thing you don’t have to eat it.” I replied. “The chili is good though.”

He seemed to consider my chili for a moment and then asked. “Do you bird hunt much anymore.”

“Not as much as I would like.” I said. “I have a good dog these days. He’s hell on grouse and pheasant, and loves the cold water.”

“How about you?” I asked.

“I just returned from Saskatchewan. Ran some field trial prospects on the prairie chickens up there. I have a few good dogs. You follow on rubber-tired wagons pulled by mules. Good way to work dogs when it’s too hot in the South, almost no fences up there. Ask your Dad about it some day.”

“Sounds like fun.” I smiled. “I think you will do well with those dogs.” (One would go on to win a National Futurity.)

“Hope so.” He said.

“Ted Williams sure likes those Atlantic salmon. What’s so good about them?” he asked.

“Everything, I suppose. Complicated to catch, tough fighters and excellent to eat.”

“Well, that would make a fish popular. Have you tried fly fishing yet?”

“I have, that’s how I’ll be fishing.”

“Did you know I helped feed our family by catching fish in barrel nets during the Great Depression?” he asked.

“Would you believe I know all about it, but would you tell me again?”

There was the smile, patient and happy. He told the old story in the same way. Again I just listened to him draw the picture of the nets and explain how they would clean the fish and ice them down in the bed of their Model A Ford truck and sell the fillets door-to-door. “That’s how I got my start in the grocery business.”

“Well, I have got to get back on the road.” He said. “I have two calls to make before I call it a day. Good luck with the salmon.”

“Let me pay.” I insisted. I was suddenly struck by the fact that I had never done that before.

He paused, “OK” he said.

“Thanks.”

He smiled again at the waitress and strode toward the exit at the center of the diner. I would not see him again, but he would see me again, and as hard as that was, it seemed right.

“Leonard” I said.

He turned at the door.

“Tell your son that his eldest will like wrestling better than football and to not give that beagle dog away after it bites my little brother.”

He paused, smiled, waved slightly, and moved out the door.

I collected the checks, and in a pleasant and complete way was reminded of all that he had taught me, most importantly, that life was to be lived and enjoyed, even when it was hard.

“Nice guy, that one. Sure likes his coffee.” The waitress said.

“He was the best, the very best.”