

There's No Chicken in Chicken

by

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“What’s on your bucket list?”

“Bucket list?” I asked, stalling for time.

“Yeah, the list of things that you would like to do before you ‘kick the bucket.’”

I nodded. “I know what a bucket list is; I’m just thinking.”

“Are there places where you’d like to travel?”

At the time, my student teacher and I were looking at a magnificent photo taken from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacan. Just on the computer monitor, the view was fantastic. When using the projector, the picture made me nostalgic for a place that I had never been. We had already discussed our sudden desires to go there, and my student teacher had stated that Teotihuacan was now on her bucket list.

“There are lots of places that I would like to go, but I’m hesitant about putting them on my list. The only certain thing on my list is to get published.”

She nodded in agreement, “That’s on mine too.” Her look turned quizzical. “But why don’t you have places on your list?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be enough for me to just say that I want to visit such and such a place. I’d have to have a goal like ‘I want to eat a croissant at the top of the Eiffel Tower.’”

“‘I want to eat a croissant ...?’”

“Or something like that,” I cut her off before she could make too much fun of me.

“Basically, I wouldn’t just want to go to a place, but do something there as well.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It sets up the possibility for failure that’s outside of my control. My expectations would be so great for the event that, should I not be able to do it, that one fact might ruin my entire experience. For example, there is no chicken in Chicken.”

“There’s no chicken in chicken? Is that a Zen thing?”

“No, it was a lesson I learned while working in Chicken, Alaska. It was probably one of the saddest experiences that I witnessed while I worked there.”

I had become a rather proficient grill cook and now found myself primarily working there with Charity rather than in the gift shop. I had earlier in life sworn that I would never work in food service, but there I was. Sue complained that I sliced the tomatoes too thick; Greg said that I cut them too thin. I had learned that while Susan would often come behind the counter to check on things, Greg would only notice the thickness of tomato slices when he ordered a burger (and an unhealthy amount of Tabasco sauce). I had thus learned to slice the tomatoes thinly as the norm, but to keep one thickly-cut tomato to put on burgers while Greg was present. Everyone was happy.

I was getting good at making burgers as, aside from the massive amount of pre-made sandwiches required for the tour buses, burgers were the main fare in Chicken. That’s right: burgers, not chicken. On only two occasions during my summer there did Susan decide to get a

large order of chicken for a special barbecue. The first was for the Fourth of July. The second was later in the month due to the first barbecue's success. It was over a week after that second barbecue that a man decked out in chicken regalia stepped into the café.

That in itself was nothing new. Tourists ate up the "Chicken, AK" merchandise with a fury. They guffawed at the "I got laid in Chicken, AK" t-shirts (I would even get one for Father Jim). They immediately attached the rainbow-striped "Chicken, AK" suspenders to their pants. They would don the "Chicken, AK" hats. And they would even request to be served drinks in their "Chicken, AK" mugs. This man had all of it, and came in grinning from ear to ear.

I truly believe that I have never seen a grown man happier. He was a child unwrapping a favorite Christmas present, a teenager with his first car. He was star-struck and enamored, and I couldn't help but grin along with him. I even swallowed my normal "Alaskan gruffness" that I usually effected when customers came in.

"What'll you have?" I asked in the friendly manner that this man's presence inspired. He was probably in his late twenties, but the grin he flashed reminded me of nothing as much as a child in a candy store.

He saddled up to the counter as though it was a saloon bar in the Old West. "Let me tell you: I want chicken."

The room seemed to immediately darken. Nate, the fourteen year old who was not old enough to work by the grill but did anyway, suddenly froze. I could feel his terror-struck eyes heating the back of my neck. People usually looked at the menu before they commented that there wasn't any chicken on the menu. The man's earlier enthusiasm made my traditional reply

(about us not being cannibals and that no one expects people in St. Peter, Minnesota, to eat St. Peter) die in my throat.

He could tell that something was wrong. I had paused too long, thinking back to all of the chicken we had sold the week before. I was wondering if any of it might have survived in a frozen form, but I didn't think so.

"Don't you have chicken in Chicken?" The innocence of his question nearly broke my heart.

I swallowed and replied, "We have chicken salad sandwiches." While I hoped that would be enough, I somehow knew that it wouldn't be. Who could blame him? The chicken salad came in a pre-mixed plastic container with the rest of our Wednesday supplies. It was usually reserved only for tour buses and that particular demographic who seemed to prefer them.

"You don't have any other kind of chicken?"

"We just don't have chicken here other than the chicken salad. We once had barbecue chicken, but that was over a week ago." I regretted saying that the moment it left my mouth. His eyes had lit up for the first part of the sentence, only to die again.

Deflated, he sadly decided, "I'll take the chicken salad."

I quickly made the sandwich, trying to put as much chicken in it as I could. I even gave him a larger than normal scoop of Susan's special recipe potato salad that he had requested over the bag of chips. Still, a part of me was a little irritated. Why should I feel guilty for providing something that we didn't have? We exchanged sandwich for money, and he sulked over to one of the booths.

"What's his deal?" Nate whispered next to my ear.

I shrugged my shoulders in response, watching as he stared at the sandwich for a while and then slowly began to eat it. The sight saddened me enough that I quickly busied myself with other tasks. It was late afternoon, and the café's traffic was in a lull. I was actually grateful when Susan limped in.

"Susan? Do we have any of that chicken left from last week?" I kept my voice low.

She shook her head. "We ate the last of it a few days ago, why?"

I tried to surreptitiously point out the dejected man, but failed to do so without him noticing. He gave a weak smile that Susan could immediately interpret.

"What happened?" her question had the air of accusation around it.

"He wanted 'chicken in Chicken.'"

"You gave him the St. Peter line?"

"I didn't have the heart."

"Did you tell him about the chicken salad?"

"I did. He's eating it."

At this point a woman entered the café, took a quick look around, and immediately headed for the man in question. She had walked in not nearly as happy as he did, but as a person who is appreciating someone else's happiness. Seeing the look on his face and the stoop in his posture, her face quickly gave a look of concern. There was a brief conversation between them that ended with him holding up his half-finished sandwich. The woman looked over to us and the three of us immediately pretended to be doing something else. She walked over to the counter.

She smiled pleasantly. "Can I speak to someone in charge?"

That phrase always sends shivers down my spine. It doesn't matter how politely someone says it; it always means trouble. Susan seemed to stiffen a bit at the question, but she immediately limped forward.

"Hi," she said pleasantly yet in a tone that somehow suggested that I was in trouble. "I'm Susan; this is my café."

"Hi, Susan." The woman's voice lowered and her posture suggested that she was about to let us in on a secret. Gesturing with her eyes, she indicated the sad-faced man. "My husband has been looking forward to this trip for several years."

She stopped herself and made a motion to indicate that she was starting over. "Shortly after we married, we looked at a world map and picked out places that we would like to visit together. For some reason, the map had this town, Chicken, listed on it. My husband thought the name was hilarious and told me that he wanted to come here and have chicken in Chicken.

"I liked the idea of going to Alaska, but this has been his focus ever since he saw the map. While we saved for the trip, he talked about having chicken here. Nearly the entire drive up, he's been talking about how he's looking forward to it. Is there any chance that you have chicken here in Chicken?"

"We just don't serve it here, or at least, not often," was Susan's response.

"There is chicken in the chicken salad," I tried to politely suggest.

She looked back at her husband and then back at us again. Her aura of conspiracy heightened, and I felt myself leaning in as she emphatically whispered, "He HATES chicken salad."

Susan's hand went to her mouth. I, too, was struck silent. I heard Nate whisper, "Oh, man."

I looked back at her husband and watched as he grimaced through another bite. Pity unlike anything I had yet experienced welled up within me. I turned to Susan and saw tears begin to well in her eyes. She immediately hobbled around the refrigerators and over to the man where his wife joined them.

Susan would end up giving them the chicken salad sandwich and meals for both of them on the house. I believe that she even threw in a souvenir. The man seemed to appreciate the gesture and his wife was certainly happy, but I never saw the pure enthusiasm return to his countenance. Despite Susan's generosity, the man's dream had been crushed. Though I had yet to read the poem, I witnessed a version of Langston Hughes's "A Dream Deferred" that day, and in this case, the dream shriveled up within the man.

"I don't want to have the same kind of disappointment. It seemed to break him. Now, I don't doubt that he recovered from his experience and has probably even started to look back on it with a sense of humor; however, there are still experiences from my past where an event didn't meet my expectations – and some of those continue to sting."

My student teacher stopped herself from asking about those other experiences; I'm certain she was afraid that I'd go into another story. Instead, she seemed to think about what I said before saying, "You can't let that hold you back, though. Otherwise, we would never want to try anything. Disappointments are just a part of the risk."

I nodded sagely, "You are wise, young Padawan, but you are not a Jedi yet."

She just shook her head at me. “So, there’s no chicken in Chicken. What a letdown.”

I shrugged. “Ironically, they now serve chicken in Chicken. I’ve seen it on the websites that some of the people from Chicken have posted. Someday, I plan to go back there and have some.

“Come to think of it, I suppose it’s on my bucket list.”