

Saint Anthony's Italian Festival

The Italian festival was all last week,
and I went nearly every day.
A huge festival taking up all of Wilmington's Little Italy
with bandstands and amusement rides,
raffles, chances, gambling wheels,
food vendors of all kinds,
and little specialty booths offering up
a variety of wines, beers, and cocktails.

One booth in particular
served up a plastic cup of fresh shaved Italian lemon ice
with a shot of either Rum, Gin or Vodka.
Cheap Rum or Gin, no.
Cheap Vodka, a natural.

On rotation at the booze and lemon ice stand
was a smiling little Roman Catholic Senior citizen,
just under 5 feet tall, still aproned from
helping out in the Church kitchen.
Probably known in the neighborhood
for her canned tomatoes,
and a definite Non-Drinker herself, as in,
inexperienced with industry measuring standards.

Using a stainless steel ice cream scooper,
she would gingerly scoop one serving of lemon ice
into a clear plastic 12 ounce cup,
then fill it up
and top it off
with the Vodka!
For 3 dollars!

The June sun was warm on my face.
The band Sicilian.
I had come to the festival
with a 20 and a 10 in my pocket,
and the Vodka flowed like Kool-Aid.

Typically, one must consume alcoholic beverages
in between the entrance and exits of clearly defined,
sectioned-off drinking areas, and, of course, between the cops,
keeping the peace at either end with walkie talkies,
pepper spray, guns and bully clubs.

I found I could transfer

the quickly melted heavy duty cocktail
into a large empty Pepsi cup,
then walk freely, hither and yon,
among the 12 blocks of Italian American fun
in Wilmington, Delaware,
without any hassles at all!

Rock and Roll...

Beautiful tan teenage girls
working the canolli stand,
squeezing the hanging canvas icing sack
slowly downward with one hand,
sugary white ricotta, oozing from the chrome nozzle,
filling to overflowing
the buttery flaky fresh pastry pipes,
gently held in the other hand.

My God.

Married women in loose sundresses,
some braless, letting their hair down,
laughing and dancing with their children
while the band jams to a Springsteen thing.

Husbands on the sidelines in perfect Khakis,
concerned with *battery life* and *zoom*.

Gold chain frat boys with MTV hair,
bleached white tank tops and rubbery biceps.
Usually wandering in packs of 3 or 4.
Usually angry. Usually chewing gum.

Barbara Graziano's. Carmella Malachary's.
Lisa and Ann Marie Sabatino's.
Parades of sweet, young Italian Catholic flesh
in belly shirts and blue jeans,
dancing up a Macarana like it was 1999!

My Pepsi cup trick,
and the superb bartending skill of Mrs. Manganella
behind the booze and lemon ice stand,
made for one truly festive
Italian Festival!
The only time it got a little hairy
was when my 30 dollars worth of Vodka and lemon ice

had long been spent, I wanted more to drink,
and I was on the prowl.

Peroni's were only \$2.50,
and we're all Italian, right?
I got a million friends in this town!
So what if I have to listen to
 ...blah blah blah and the kids,
 so we planned the cruise for blah.
 ...and I told him blah, it's not a Jeep,
 it's a Tahoe. Blah.
 ...blah gained 7 cents per share
 in the 4th quarter blah fucking blah blah.
 ...mutual fund blah.
 ...stock option blah.
 ...portfolio diversification blah.

A couple nods, "uh-huh really how interesting no shit,"
maybe a pat on their shoulder and I'm off.

Ran into Bonnie, now married,
my old roommate from the Vicky days:2
Peroni.
Jack Somethingorother, the guy from the museum:1
Peroni.
The chic I drew nude,
when I was splitting from my 2nd wife:1
Peroni.
Blah blah blah, the dude from MBNA,
whose chic I drew nude
when I was splitting from my 2nd wife:3
Peroni.

Now, maybe it was all that diuretic lemon ice
in the hot sun, or skimping on eats the last couple days,
or maybe one of the Peroni's was funky.
All I know, is in one swooping flash,
I had what can only be described as...

an Epiphany.

The calm of self-awareness met head on
with the terror of self-awareness.

My Peroni ker-ploo-weed to the holy pavement in a loud ker-plash
like the sound of a glass bottle falling out of my hand
and smashing to the ground.
Hitchcockian. Dickensian.

Made me feel like an asshole.
I realized it had not gone unnoticed.
I also realized I was now officially
shit-faced beyond belief.
My crashing bottle caught the attention
of the surrounding festival goers.
It also caught the attention of the dyke cop
standing by the nearest exit.

2 things were certain:

1. I had to get out of there. Now.
2. I had to piss like a monkey. Now.

I was not hanging out in my room,
stereo blasting Iggy Pop, bathroom 3 steps to the right.
No. This was not some party where I could just slip out
back and get lost for a couple hours. No.

I was dead center of the 3rd largest festival in the Northeast.
I had beer all over my feet.
My pores were sweating cheap Vodka.
My eyes were rolling, focusing and unfocusing,
independent of my will.
Lemon ice. 95 degrees.
Noticed by the authorities.
I could feel the tilt and rotation
of the Earth.
And I had to piss.

It was the 12th round,
and I was going down.

I did not bother to excuse myself
from whoever it was that got me that last one.
Port-O-Potties were to my right,
past the Church steps,
at the end of the dining area.

The dining area.
Whole families seated together
at benches and wooden picnic tables.
Paper plates and plastic trays piled high with
dripping cheese steaks, onion rings, sausage and peppers,
spaghetti and meatballs, pizza, stromboli, calzone, deep-fried
olives stuffed with blue cheese, buffalo wings, vinegar drenched
french fries, cold shrimp, corn-on-the-cob, mussels marinara,
steamed clams, steamed crabs, fried calamari and smelts.

O! How would this end?

The shit-coffin that is the Port-O-Pottie
has always given me troubles...
A pig roast in South Carolina when I was in high school,
intestinally challenged by the onset of ulcerated colitis,
diverticulitis, and chronic cramps.
Undercooked pork. Out-in-the-sun-for-too-long potato salad.
Cheap flat beer, unrobed Klansmen I'm sure,
and not a sheet of Charmin to be had...

A construction site somewhere in North Jersey
during a very hard Reagan winter.
The steel toilet seats in the Job Johnnys
were frozen, I swear.
Ass would stick and rip...

Where was I?
Oh, the Italian Festival. Right.

I flailed my Vodka-sloshed brain against the fiberglass panel
that would be the wall to steady myself upon,
unzipped my carpenter pants
and exploded my piss.

Now, perhaps I didn't quite have a hold of it.
Maybe some jit from my earlier arousal at the canolli stand
had dried and sewn my dick-hole shut.
Streams of kidney processed neon yellow
gushed forth from my hand
like a country club sprinkler system gone awry.
Like a cartoon pussycat bad guy,
shot full of holes by the deputy while
drinking a full glass of water.
I could not shut off the flow.

Didn't even think about my asshole,
which, in this near Biblical downpour,
sought to join in the party,
which, as it is, it did.
Hot non-solid spent fuel was jettisoned.
The Campbell's condensed consistency,
where typically,
one's clothing or bedding
or anything else that got in the way
would be removed, rolled into a ball,
shoved into a lawn and leaf garbage bag,

and either burned or discarded
behind the local K-Mart.

I was Frankenstein's Monster
emerging from the steaming Port-O-Lab.
Arms out in front,
pants piss-streaked from pockets to knees,
dragging my swampy Chuck Taylors,
leaving a trail of loose bile
leaking from unseen origins.

Lines of patient Port-O-Patrons parted before me
like I was a maddened Moses at an Italian Red Sea,
the Egyptians right on my ass.
Of course, the dyke cop met my eye.

It had to happen, just this way.
It was Fate, let's just say.
The God's threw the dice,
and all bets were off.

Now, I am not a fighter,
especially at an Italian Festival,
especially in the family section,
inebriated and erupting vile fluids.

(*RUN AWAY*) my brain relayed to my legs.
(*TAKE THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE*)
(*RUN*) (*NOW*)
Hence, I flee.
What's the worst that could happen to me?

The worst that could happen to me is:

1. I'd get caught by the dyke cop. (Not likely)
2. I'd smash into a pack of frat boys and they'd kill me.
3. I could trip over a tent post and knock my teeth out.
4. My heart would explode. (Quite possibly)
5. I'd be side-swiped by a Tahoe.

Now, this part is still a little fuzzy.
I know I was out of the family section and
heading in the direction of the amusement rides
when I realized, to my dismay,
I hadn't stopped shitting my pants.

I moved through the crowd like an Immortal.
No knocking sodas out of hands.

No crashing into baby strollers or gambling stands.
No accidental elbowing the soft bare shoulders
of Lisa or Ann Marie's.
Just the swish swish swish of my legs in motion,
driving me forward.

I honestly do not know if the dyke cop
or any other uniform followed me.
I did not look back.

(GET TO THE CAR) my brain relayed next.
(GET TO THE FUCKING CAR)

Right. Car. Car keys. In my pocket! Got 'em!
A little wet, but I got 'em.
Right. Car. Car. My '86 Mercury Topaz.
2 hubcaps. Shady registration. Creative tags.
Beer bottle collection I keep in the back seat.
Looking back now, I guess the state I was in
was somewhat less than balanced.
I didn't think I could walk the 12 blocks or so
back to my apartment building,
but I knew I could drive there.
Now, where did I park the fucker?

Fuck.
(FUCK)

The Italian Festival brings hundreds of thousands
from all corners of the East coast for one full week,
and the tiny quiet streets of our Little Italy,
normally lined with Lincolns, Ford Expeditions
and ridiculous Humvees, become a warzone
for every square inch of possible fender room.

Chairs are set out.
Orange construction cones.
Plastic yellow caution ribbon.
Old men sitting on their front porches
guarding the space in front of their homes
with rifles, I shit you not.
Where did I park the fucker?

Can you imagine the Midnight Movie cliché
"We're lost on this island and have passed
this same rock formation 3 times,"
Midnight Movie cliché I now found myself in?

Circling through bank parking lots,
dark alleyways, driveways.

Italian Grandmothers, rosaries in hand,
shaking their heads while blessing themselves.
Junior high girls,
rolling their big Bonnie Bell bedaubed sneering eyes.
Children yanked by the arm out of my leperous way.
The old porch guardians cocking their rifles.

Then, I remembered the prayer.
The childhood prayer we all learned in Catholic school
to the Patron Saint for the Return of Lost Things,
our own Saint Anthony!

"Saint Anthony, dressed in brown,
something is lost and must be found."

How many times
had I heard my mother use that prayer
looking for her lighter, her cigarette case, her highball?
She seemed to always find what she was looking for
after saying it, and always offered a thank you
for Saint Anthony's miraculous intervention.

But it was I who was lost.
I began yelling at myself,
"You stupid fuck, Henry!"
"You stupid fuck, Henry!"
And that is not the worst of it.

Here's the worst of it...

Stumbling around at least an hour looking for my car,
swearing profanities and screaming at myself,
I cause a group of Yuppies enroute to the festival
to part on either side of the sidewalk to allow my passage.
But this was no ordinary pack of plastic and cell phones here.
My peripheral vision and auditory receptors were locked on.

I knew that voice.
I internalized that form.
That full thigh walk.
That sway of salon shampooed hair.
I was well aware, like a just born chicken
knows the shadow of a hawk, and to instinctually fear it.
I felt the knot in my stomach clench into a fist

and punch me right in the balls.

I had pushed myself through an entourage which included
my 2nd wife,
her girlfriend Ally McBeal,
the Blah Blahs,
the Stocks and Bonds,
and a Protestant work ethic or two.
It had been well over a year since the divorce,
but I still hadn't gotten the taste of cold metal out of my
mouth.
A mistake of a 6-month-marriage if there ever was one.
Alas.

I was noticed, shall we say.
Heard my Christian name spoken, as it were.
Grasped what their collective gasp was in response to.

I began to cry, hiccup and fart,
all at once, all aware of all the terrible things
I had done all my life,
this Italian Festival intoxication being just one more entry
in my hefty catalog of sin.

I give up. I gave in.
I allowed gravity's pull
to bring the lead weight
of my fate where it may,
be it the very doorway of Hell.

Instead, the universe brought me
downhill to the dry cleaners on Union Street,
face to face with an '86 Mercury Topaz.
2 hubcaps. Shady registration. Creative tags.

My Car! My car...

My key slid into that lock like this moment
was meant to be from the very beginning of time.

I tell you, when I opened that door,
eased my soggy ass into that seat
and heard that puppy turn over,
I believed in God.
I believed in Country.
I believed all was right with the world.

I pulled away slowly,
and smiling, said a little prayer.

Thank you, thank you, thank you,
my dearest Saint Anthony.

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