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An Audience of One

John Cody Bennett

On December 31, 2010, I employed a few strategically-timed elbows to facilitate my entrance into Snake and Jake's Christmas Club Lounge where I soon reconnected with a couple of old friends from Shreveport and, as a toast to the new year, raised a plastic cup of Prosecco as high as I could until it bumped against a ceiling tile and wet us all. Of course, it was an accident and could've happened to anybody, and in my defense, I was already quite tipsy from a shift at Broussard's, plus the tiles had likely sagged a bit since my last visit. Anyway, it got me a laugh.

My friends had claimed a table at the back of the bar, but they apologized to me, as there were only two chairs. This was their first stay in the city, and they were not yet bold enough to save seats and guard them: understandable. *Well, next time, here's what you do*, I told them. *Toss Alex's purse right there in the chair, and just say that your friend's in the bathroom. That'll work.*

They thanked me for that advice, and for inviting them down, and I tried hard to keep from yawning as they narrated their day and recounted the many sights they had seen. I couldn't help it. Normally, after an evening shift, my adrenaline would still be pumping, but the crush of

this holiday season had worn me out. I was a front waiter at a high-end restaurant, an English tutor at a Catholic school, and a contributor to *Quarter Rat* magazine. I was stretched pretty thin.

My friends, on the other hand, didn't appear to have anything too exciting to show for themselves. We'd all graduated from Centenary College only a few months ago, and yet here I was the only one on an upward trajectory. Robbie was in the tech or marketing department of a company on the outskirts of Bossier City—I wish I could recall its name and its products, but I can't—and Alex was still at her mom's screen-printing shop, helping with T-shirt designs and managing the store. It made sense that they'd want to know more about my life in New Orleans, but I was surprised and somewhat amused by the number of questions they asked me, not about writing or restaurant work, but about my tutoring gig: *Do you teach the kids the Oxford comma? Do they diagram sentences or memorize definitions like we used to do? Do they even read now?*

Yes. Yes. Yes. Not so much, I answered. I was reminded again to always have handy a captivating anecdote or heady explanation. You simply never know what will interest the listener.

At last there was an empty chair, and Alex offered it to me. *Oh, James, I forgot to tell you we invited Beau,* she said and pointed to her phone. *He's here now, he just texted. You'll love him.*

Beau LeBlanc was a native New Orleanian whom my friends had met in Jackson Square on one of their morning tours. They had shared beignets with him at Café du Monde and then strolled together along the New Orleans Moonwalk, discussing the history of the Mississippi and commenting upon the beauty of the Crescent City Connection that spanned to Algiers. Beau, I soon learned from Robbie, was a bit of flirt: he had complimented Alex's bangs and given her his card. A film industry regular, talent scout, friend of Brad Pitt's, and the inspiration for a character in David Simon's *Treme*, although he wouldn't tell them which one, Beau was on the hunt for a new face for the role of Sharon Kincaid in Terence Malick's upcoming adaptation of *The Moviegoer*. He was a misshapen man-chunk, top-heavy, with spindly legs and a puffed-out chest, tall, red-headed, a tad overweight, with a shit-eating grin, wacky eyes, and an all-too-affable demeanor that told all women of good sense *do not let me buy you a drink, nobody is this happy.*

Alex, though, had been star-struck, and with Robbie's permission she had asked Beau to join us at Snake and Jake's for our New Year's celebration. It was to be expected. She had caught the acting-bug as Ophelia in our high school production of *Hamlet*, and to this day, although my memory of the majority of the performance is a bit hazy, I can still recall *his cockle bat and staff and his sandal shoon*, as well as her emphatic pronouncement: *Oh, you are keen, my lord. Keen!*

I wanted to believe that Alex had enough sense to pass on the Sharon Kincaid role, but of course I couldn't be sure. She was probably already picturing herself at the Oscars, even though it should have been obvious to all that Malick's *Moviegoer* could not succeed in the domestic

market. She needed to brush up on her French and Italian and prepare herself for international critics, which any film industry regular worth his salt would have told her. My skepticism grew.

Are you sure you're the inspiration for a character in David Simon's Treme? I asked Beau just as soon as he arrived. He embraced Alex, slapped Robbie on the back, and then stared at me.

Absolutely, said Beau. *Of course, I'm sure. He told me himself. David Simon. He told me.*

I admit I didn't quite know what to say in response, so taken aback was I by the certainty in Beau's voice and his clear-cut answer. It was the same at Broussard's: any front waiter bold enough could bluff the majority of the *hoi-polloi* and rest easy that his expertise on Malbecs and Pinot Noirs and Müller-Thurgaus and Albariños, acquired surreptitiously from a quick pre-shift skimming of the descriptions on the menu, would not be disputed or called into question. A soft slurring of one's words, or mumbling when taking an order, could also do the trick, and if a dissertation on Château-Grillet's granite hillsides was so important, they'd just ask someone else.

Well, okay then, I said to Beau. *It's what I wanted to know. All good. I just wanted to check.*

Only much later, and with the force of a missed opportunity, did it occur to me concerning the name in question that there was something decidedly unorthodox in Beau's chosen pronunciation. *Salmon*, I swear I heard him say. Not *Simon*. *Salmon*. I could have kicked myself.

Excuse me, mister, said Beau to some boob in the corner. *I have a few injuries from a stint in Iraq. My legs are not so good, and I just need to sit down. May I borrow your chair? May I?*

Well, sure enough, Beau got his chair. *What a con-man!* I thought. *What a story!* I felt sorry for Mr. Boob: in the light of day, probably, he would have demanded that Beau roll up his pants, show his prosthesis, perhaps even produce his ID or something, I don't know. It was sad.

Still, all for Alex, I bridled my temper while Beau quizzed her about her acting skills, and she apprised him of her star turn as Ophelia, rambling on and on until Robbie tapped her wrist.

Oh, Robbie, hold on, I'm going to tell him, I haven't forgotten you, said Alex to her boyfriend with only a hint of self-consciousness. She announced then that Robbie, too, had had a little acting experience and might also be interested in a part in this Terrence Malick film. He had played Lysander to her Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I could have mentioned that in the same production I'd portrayed Snug the Joiner and had enlivened that role beyond all expectations with homages here and there to the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields. But I wondered if this additional note would be remarked upon or appreciated by my friends or simply ignored.

You know what I like to imagine? said Beau. *I like to imagine a world in which every aspiring actress with a dream comes to me to forge her path to fame, to success, and to pleasure.*

He then gave Alex a couple of dollars and asked her to order him a Prosecco at the bar.

My legs, Beau said and shrugged helplessly. *I hate to be a burden, but you see how it is.*

I questioned Beau about his Iraq years and deliberately misstated the name of the nation's capital to see if he'd correct me. I also mixed up Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, referred to the Shiites as a Christian sect, and opined on the many similarities between Arabic and Cajun French. Robbie was confused, but Beau didn't react, and I don't believe he was just being polite.

He sighed as Alex returned and passed him his drink. *I'm sorry, I never talk about my service*, Beau said solemnly. *Only occasionally with beautiful women. Intimate friends. Lovers.*

The bar was abuzz with Tulane and Loyola students who had returned early from Winter Break. They had spent a week at home in their childhood bedrooms, and after a few evenings with their parents had been reminded in stark terms of why they'd left in the first place. Diligent students, these, they had hurried back to campus to resume their studies, and now here they were.

A freshman with a thick mop of hair ordered a Ramos Gin Fizz at the bar and was told to fuck off. Then, when another jokester tried paying for his Schlitz with a handful of nickels and dimes, the bartender tossed back his coins and ad-libbed a profane soliloquy on the stupidity of undergraduate students. I, for one, was grateful for this outburst. In this day and age, it's nice to visit an establishment that still has standards and uses righteous anger to keep customers in line.

Beau, however, was a breed of sly bird whose wings even an irate bartender couldn't clip. His relatives in St. Bernard parish were connected in some vague and indeterminate way to the Carlos Marcello crime family, and even now, almost 30 years after the syndicate's alleged dissolution, in many of the city's most famous bars and restaurants, if Beau but provided the secret signal he could receive on the house a snifter of Amaro del Capo as recognition of his family's elite status. I asked Beau if this secret signal was best described as a passcode, a handshake, or a nonverbal sign, but he soon grew annoyed with this line of inquiry and cut me off. The secret signal, Beau said, was not to be abused: it wasn't a parlor trick, and it required significant training to demonstrate correctly. I suspect for this reason that the Marcello clan's secret signal was indeed a nonverbal sign, although I admit freely that I am no expert in the field.

You know the family still has a bit of pull in this city, said Beau, *especially in the areas of food and drink. I mean, we probably pay every waiter his tips and wages in this town, indirectly.*

I seriously doubted that, but also I adamantly refused to discuss finances with a stranger.

Behind us a couple of students started to sing "Auld Lang Syne," albeit a bit out of tune.

Beau put down his glass of Prosecco. *I bet for the majority here in this bar, this song means nothing*, he said to Alex, loud enough now to be noticed. *Do you believe they can even comprehend the lyrics? It's mournful, you know? It's not a celebration. A new year? No, no, no.*

I was beginning to grow concerned, for although I sensed a scam, the precise nature of Beau's duplicity, as well as his intentions, had managed to evade my deductive powers and had left me puzzled. I simply did not understand this guy's game, or what he could want. Certainly, he was no veteran; no talent scout; no scion of St. Bernard toughs. And yet, he seemed sincere: he had not demanded money, or cigarettes, and he'd made no sexual advances—he only wanted to hear himself talk, apparently, and to spin tale after tale reminding us of his own importance.

To be an actor in any film I represent, said Beau, is to return for a brief moment to the sublimity of youth. Dreams! he growled and waved his hand. *Imagination! The thrill of lights and a camera and the idea of oneself as a character in a story: the meaning it provides! The purpose!*

He sipped his Prosecco; his hand shook. Beads of sweat had collected on his forehead.

We also have some pretty good food, Beau continued. I mean, on the set. Personally, I like the gumbo, but the red beans are great, too, and you can't go wrong with an oyster po'boy.

Robbie sat up suddenly in his chair, and I detected in his face a question of some urgency.

You mean y'all pay for the actors to eat? Robbie asked. They don't have to bring a lunch?

Confused, Beau blinked at him and drew back in distaste. What a question! What an idea!

Of course, they eat, said Beau. They eat. They eat their fill. No one goes hungry. No one.

Annoyed, he turned to Alex.

A Malick film is quite a production, Beau said. Would you be willing to travel for this project? A brief foray into a northern parish, perhaps West Feliciana, or maybe Chippendale?

Sure, Alex replied. Shreveport's more north than that. I'd do Feliciana. I'd go wherever.

Now, you just hold on a second, I said to Beau, as I could not allow this tomfoolery to persist unchallenged. Alex, you know good and well that there is no Chippendale parish in this state, and there never has been. How could you have forgotten Mrs. Earle's 8th grade Louisiana history class? We memorized the parishes. We were tested on them. Chippendale? Oh, my God!

Except there absolutely is a Chippendale parish, said Beau matter-of-factly. It's next to Sherman parish, which is next to Ball. I was there filming the other day, and it is quite a place.

To be honest, at this point, I couldn't tell if Beau was pulling my chain or was just out of his mind. Then, I had a frightening thought: what if it was me? What if actually I was the one who'd gone crazy? Could there be a Ball parish, and I had forgotten it? Surely not! But what if?

Remember, this all happened before smartphones were ubiquitous in society, so I couldn't just Google the answer to prove my point. I also figured the odds weren't high that the bartender or one of the Tulane or Loyola students would carry on their person a pocket-sized map of Louisiana's parishes, and so I couldn't go ask them either, or at least I didn't think so. Instead, I tried prodding Robbie into supporting my cause, but he merely looked away from me and lowered his eyes. Maybe he was afraid to confess his own ignorance of our state's geography, I don't know. I'm just glad Mrs. Earle wasn't there to quiz us. She would've been so disappointed.

But now Beau was beginning to wax eloquent about his visit to Chippendale. He told us that when he first drove into Craighead, the parish seat, he noticed at once a group of elderly men at a coffee shop and stopped to speak with them. He asked about points of interest in the vicinity of the town, and the old men informed him without hesitation that the most notable sight in this area was an abandoned Conagra pullet house that was said to be haunted. If you went inside that

place, the old men continued, best prepare to be shocked. For a decade or more, the clucking and cackling of vestigial pullets had lingered in the walls, and if you dared spend the night in those spooky environs, well, then you could expect from the evil spirits in that pullet house a fundamental transformation of your palette, as a basket of crispy Popeyes or KFC or Cane's would no longer taste pleasurable, but instead, in a tragic reversal, would induce only nausea.

The old men then abruptly pivoted to a discussion of the 150th anniversary of the election of Abraham Lincoln, which had occurred only a week before on November 6th. Honest Abe, one of the old-timers said, was a great leader, probably the best of the presidents, surely he was. This opening salvo engendered a debate, and pretty soon the other old men were racking their brains and attempting to rank from best to worst all of the presidents they could remember, and also their first ladies. A couple of them argued for Calvin Coolidge as the most underrated president, but then Beau cut in to remind them of Chester Alan Arthur and lectured for a while on the Pendleton Reform Act of 1883. He was now beginning to lecture us too, and I had had enough.

Stop, stop, stop, I said. This is the most ridiculous mess of assertions I have ever heard. Everybody knows that the most underrated president of all time is none other than James Knox Polk. Think about it for a moment, and use your head: in one term, four years, he gets the annexation of Texas done, the settling of the Oregon country, and the Mexican Cession — boom! Now, those right there are actual accomplishments, not just a bunch of fancy words and flimflam.

It was perhaps one of the two or three most powerful speeches I have ever given: I delivered it from the heart and allowed my deepest convictions to spring to the fore. I didn't even mention that Polk was also the only House Speaker to ever become president, but I could have. Chester Alan Arthur, what a joke! What a foolish thing to say! An accidental president: come on!

Unfortunately, neither Beau nor my friends expressed any interest in my defense of the presidency of James K. Polk. I was an audience of one, and there was now no escaping that fact.

He was the greatest man of his time, said Beau, indeed perhaps of the entire 19th century. Like FDR, LBJ, JFK, we should know him by his acronym: CAA! Chester Alan Arthur — CAA!

Oh, you are keen, my lord! Keen! I said and shot a look at Alex. I don't think she even knew what I was talking about, but I let it go. Sometimes, it's just best to smile and say nothing.

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