

## Burger

On a Tuesday at about noon, I was at my desk at a non-profit children's educational media company when a friend called. He had left the same non-profit children's educational media company a few months before and gone into some audio-related subset of the advertising and marketing world that I didn't understand too well.

"J," he said, "You wanna go to the Bistro? It's my birthday, y'know, it used to be kind of a tradition. We have to hurry, though. I have to be back at work by two."

I took a quick look at my calendar. I also had a two o' clock meeting. Perfect.

"See you there in half an hour," I told him. I hung up the phone and got up from my desk without finishing the email I was writing. In less than a minute I was in the elevator tapping the door with my finger to hurry it open. My mind was suddenly clogged with warm, sweet grease. I had been summoned and could not resist the call; the Pavlovian response was too strong. The Bistro. I could already taste it—not the Bistro, but the Bistro Burger, perhaps the best burger in town. Yes. A Bistro Burger was what I wanted, right then, more than anything in the world. I was on my way.

I took the C downtown. I didn't read, I didn't listen to music, I didn't even sit down. I stood near the door thumping my foot impatiently and burst

out of the car at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, skip-walking up the stairs to the street. A short jog down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue brought me to the wood and brick and ancient neon sign of the Corner Bistro. My friend, let's call him Miles because that's his name, was sitting in the window. I pulled up a stool next to him. We exchanged perfunctory *hey mans* and *'sup*s. My spot was next to the door, which hit my back every time it opened. We shifted one stool to the left, which was worse—that's where the radiator was, under the counter, and it was hot as hell. We ordered our burgers from the barkeep, and I secured a mug of McSorley's Dark, its bitter taste resonant and familiar, not so much from the Bistro but from danker, shabbier rooms much farther east.

Corner Bistro would be a parody of itself if it weren't so good at what it is: the archetypal well-worn West Village tavern. The lunchtime clientele is crusty and smart, retired professors and plumbers who read Proust. The menu is on one of those black felt pegboard signs with movable letters they have by the elevators in medical services buildings. White capitals read: HAMBURGER. CHEESEBURGER. BISTRO BURGER. FRENCH FRIES. GRILLED CHEESE. In fifteen years, I've only ever ordered the Bistro Burger, and only drunk McSorley's dark. Why mess around?

My cell phone rang. Every time it does there's a party in my pants—The phone vibrates and plays Salt and Pepa's "Push It". I took the call outside. It was my vet, calling about Lewis Yang the cat. He was stable, she said, and I could pick him up after five.

Lewis was this cat that my wife Amy and I had found while walking our dog Wednesday. Our dog's name is Wednesday. I think the day of the week was Saturday. So far we have found three cats while walking the dog. Lewis was standing in front of somebody's house meowing with a vet cone on his head. He was easy to grab—friendly and relaxed. Amy picked him up and saw that his side had been shaved to reveal a hole in his skin and muscle the size of a quarter with one long stitch through it. It didn't seem to concern him, but it was alarming to look at. What could the story possibly be? Who would let their cat out with a lampshade on his head and an open wound in his side? Was the owner negligent and stupid or fraught with worry that their cat had escaped? We put up signs. We took him to our vet. We got antibiotics. Eventually, somebody called.

He turned out to be a deli cat that a customer got fixed up after he'd been in a fight. When Amy found out which deli had employed him as a mouser, she went over and told them that because they didn't take care of him, they couldn't have their cat back. They gave Amy a cup of coffee, accepted the situation, and probably got another cat.

So now we had to deal with him, get him healthy, get him fixed, name him, and decide if we should find him a home or keep him. Things went well at first. He tested negative for the major contagious cat diseases so when his side had healed up we let him socialize with Wednesday and our two cats, Wonton and Shumai. He was cheerful and affectionate. He purred almost constantly. We named him Lewis, after Emmanuel Lewis, because he was small and black.

We got him neutered, a simple process for male cats, and once the anesthesia wore off, there seemed to be no ill effects.

The next morning, there were puddles of urine and foam on the floor and furniture in Lewis' room. He looked haggard; his fur was matted and wet. Something was wrong. I watched him for a while. He purred, rubbed up against my legs, acted fairly normal. Then he froze. He began to drool, stare wide-eyed at nothing, and urinate. Then he launched himself into the air, right at the wall. He landed on his feet, on the wall, horizontally, and bounded around the room sideways like a racquetball, like he was in the Matrix, leaping from wall to wall all the way around the room before landing with his feet on the floor. He shook his head, flicking saliva from his mouth in a spray, and resumed purring, as if he hadn't been possessed for the past few minutes. I was terrified, but he wasn't hurt at all. When he did it again twenty minutes later, I thought I knew what was happening—Lewis was experiencing some kind of seizure.

When I was ten, our family dog died. My father told my mother that she could get any dog she wanted as a replacement, as long as it wasn't large, longhaired or purebred. My mom went out and got an Afghan hound puppy from a breeder. Sheba was a bizarre looking creature, something between an Old One from "The Dark Crystal" and a Sneech. Her nose was pointy and she was tall and thin and Greyhound-fast, only she had long black hair. Sheba had strange habits. She would sit on the couch like a person, with her tush on the

cushions and her feet on the floor. She talked. She peed in the house. She was stubborn and untrainable. And she turned out to be epileptic.

Sheba would have grand mal seizures from time to time. They tended to be disturbing, but not dangerous. Her eyes would roll back in her head, she'd lie on her side, flail her limbs around and then lose control of her bladder and bowels. When it passed, she'd shake it off, stand up, and be fine. She'd have her seizures in the living room, on my bed, on the street. Once she had one at the top of a flight of stairs and fell all the way down. She was OK, but that was the kind of situation my family worried about. We got used to handling her episodes. We'd get her to a safe place and sit with her while she was having a fit, then clean up afterwards. Sheba was on Phenobarbital for most of her short life.

So when I saw Lewis get the zombie look followed by bizarre physical behavior in a trance-like state, then return to normalcy a few minutes later, I had a good idea of what was happening. Within an hour I got him to the vet where he had a series of acrobatic seizures that required the vet's assistant to don the falconer's gloves to handle him. By the next morning, Lewis was in ICU at the Animal Medical Center getting intravenous anti-seizure medication at a cost of thousands of dollars. He wasn't even really my cat, and I was visiting him between four and eight in the hospital. I decided against bringing flowers.

I told that vet that I was glad Lewis could come home, and went back inside the Bistro. Miles told me about his new job—his strip-club aficionado co-

workers and the need to analyze branding strategies to come up with deliverables that would entice clients like Lexus to hire his company to give them a sonic identity. Yeah. I was listening, but I was worried about Lewis, and my legs were incredibly hot.

"Dude," I observed, "it's like a sauna over here."

"I *know*," Miles confirmed.

When a table opened up, we pounced on it. I sat with my back to the bar, and in a short time an unseen waiter slid a sturdy plate in front of me. There it was. At last. My burger.

This is how they serve the Bistro Burger: It's open, so you can dress it the way you like. The meat shines glossy black between the darker grill lines, the cheese has just cooled to a matte-yellow skin. The bacon sprawls in a haphazard pile on top all crisp and rippley. The aroma that wafts up is charred, sweet, smoky. There is lettuce and tomato provided, but I ignore it. Lettuce is merely wet filler, and I don't like the gelatinous goo or fruity brightness the tomato adds to the experience. I do make use of the slice of raw onion, balancing it on top of the bacon, and then I squirt the whole cardiac ziggurat with ketchup. When you shut the lid on a Bistro Burger, it's almost spherical—far too tall to get into your mouth. It has to be compressed first and when you squeeze it, the bun crushes the onion and bacon down into the cheese and ketchup and meat juice.

I had finally completed my burger preparations and had just opened my mouth to draw the burger inside when I heard a strange sound from behind me—a sort of whine and whoosh that rose to a piercing shriek.

I bit down. My mouth ran with saliva, my blood picked up speed, my exterior senses went on standby so that I could fully attend to the things happening in my mouth. I chewed and probably moaned a little. The meat was burned on the outside and moist, going to raw on the inside. The cheese delivered its smoothness and tang, the bacon crumbled away to nothing but smokey flavor and the onion bit back. I pulled on the beer to wash it down and cleanse my palate. I smiled the idiotic happy smile of being fed. Then the incongruous sound I had heard before finally registered.

*Hmm, I remember thinking. When did they get a cappuccino maker?*

I turned around to look just as a man fell over backwards on his barstool and hit the floor with a groan and a thud. A collective gasp came from everyone in the bar. He was twitching his limbs and head and holding his right arm straight up with his elbow bent. I watched him flail and diagnosed his problem with the calm detachment of a guy with an episodic cat in the animal hospital—Seizure. I sat there thinking about what I should do. I couldn't stuff this guy in his carrier and rush him to the emergency room at the AMC—he wasn't my pet. While I looked around for something wooden that he could bite down on, two men and woman from the back room had taken charge.

"We're med students from St. Vincent's," announced one of the men.  
"Call 911."

You could feel the relief wash across the room. The young doctor had an excellent plan—call 911. If we had gone to medical school, we might have thought of that ourselves. But we didn't have to. Somebody else was dealing

with the situation. 911 was called. Nobody said anything. The guy on the floor stopped convulsing and lay quiet.

"Hello! Hello! Are you OK?" The med students repeated over and over.

But the guy had passed out. He wasn't OK. He just lay there.

The med students wanted to know, "Which arm was the sling on?"

*Sling?* It lay there on the floor next to the guy.

People at the bar offered helpfully, "His right." "His left."

He was on the floor behind me and to my right. I had to turn my head to see what was going on. When I did that, I felt like I was rubbernecking, craning to see the spectacle. When I faced forward, however, I felt like I was ignoring a human being's misery and misfortune on the floor a foot away, and worse, I was facing my burger.

It was still there, the bun squished down where I had gripped it with my thumbs and fingers, the ketchup and grease running out of the bite I had taken from its edge. One bite. It was worse than not having taken any bites at all, much worse than not coming all the way downtown for a Bistro burger in the first place. One bite. It was enough to get my whole metabolism ready for the massive onslaught of fat and protein that a Bistro burger delivered. It was enough to trigger endorphins in my head and acids in my gut but if it was not followed by a lot of similar bites it was going to hurt me. After one bite I didn't just want the burger, crave the burger. I *needed* the burger now. Was I allowed to eat it with a comatose body next to my chair?

I began to quickly rationalize: The guy wasn't going to die, probably. Med students surrounded him; the ambulance was on its way. My beer was out of the question, sure. That would be wrong, I decided. But my burger? Was it morally acceptable to eat it while waiting for the ambulance?

Miles was far away, somewhere beyond my burger. He had resolved his own moral conflict with a compromise. His burger sat unmolested as he gobbled up fries.

*Good thing that those med students are here*, I thought. Then it occurred to me: *What the hell are med students doing in a bar in the middle of the day?* Me, a New Media consultant, sure, I could manage a beer and still do user interface design for preschoolers. And Miles, whatever he did, it was unlikely that lives depended on him. But young doctors in training? Shouldn't they be at a juiceateria or something? An espresso bar at the very least?

I thought of a way to be helpful. I would move, so that when the ambulance guys showed, I wouldn't be in their way. *Good plan*, I congratulated myself. *Way proactive*. With tremendous compassion, I stood up and indicated to Miles that I was coming for the bench upon which he was sitting. He shifted over, and I sat between him and the woman at the next table. We were now all in a row watching the action on the floor. The poor guy had become some kind of grotesque dinner theater. This had not been my plan when I moved, but now I couldn't move back. I sat, and mumbled things like "wow" and "hmm!" to Miles. My burger and beer were safely on the far side of the table, one losing

heat, the other gaining it in a tepid race to reach room temperature. We only had about fifteen minutes left before we had to go back to our respective offices.

The couple next to me hadn't ordered yet. While this saved them the moral dilemma I suffered, I could see that they had problems of their own. They were hungry, and they had to decide if they should wait it out, try to place an order in the middle of the crisis, or leave. The agile waiter settled it for them by leaning over the guy on the floor and taking their order which they delivered in very discreet and sympathetic tones.

Not so the gentleman who slid in to the table next to Miles. He had a big square head with battleship-grey hair and looked like an ex-cop. "What the hell is going on here? Is he dead? Heart attack? What?" he demanded.

"Seizure," somebody told him. "Ambulance on the way."

"So meanwhile nobody can eat? C'mon!" He tried to get the waiter's attention. "Hey! Hey! People are getting hungry over here!"

I snuck a bite of my burger during the commotion. I figured I could get away with this minor infraction under the cover of this guy's egregious rudeness. But it only reminded me of what I was missing.

The man on the floor was coming to. He tried to sit up, but groaned in pain. The med students were on it. "Just lie down sir. Don't try to get up. You hit your head. The ambulance is coming. What is your name, sir?"

"Where...? Who...?" asked the man on the floor.

"You're OK, sir. You're OK," said the med students, but nobody believed them—especially the guy who clearly wasn't.

As the attention in the bar was on the med students handling the situation, Miles and I gulped huge bites of our food and sucked down big swallows of beer. The couple to my left looked on forlornly, then looked away. They were worse off than us—they couldn't watch us eat, they couldn't watch the scene on the floor and they couldn't leave.

The paramedics arrived and heaved the man onto a stretcher. An oxygen mask was strapped onto his face and six people peppered him with questions as he was lifted into the air. "What's your name, sir?" "Are you OK?" "Do you have any relatives we can call?" "A doorman? A friend? A roommate? Someone you work with? Are you OK?"

I was able to move back to my seat. With three minutes to spare, we were finally in the clear to enjoy the remains of our burgers. The couple was finally served. I envied the unbridled enjoyment with which they chewed their meat. I wished Miles a happy birthday.

We paid and left. Planned on doing it again soon. We've met for a few lunches since then, but we haven't been back to the Bistro.

Lewis is now on Phenobarbital twice a day. He hasn't had another seizure; it's been over six months. The doctors' best guess as to what started his convulsions was a bad reaction to the Ketamine/Ace Promizone he was given as an anesthetic when we had his testicles removed.

So we're keeping the cat.