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"FLATTENED FAUNA, STOP AND EAT"

Jim Gustafson

Harvey Wilson is a traveling salesman. The kind you don't see much of anymore. He peddles his certified stainless steel pots and pans throughout the Southern states. He pulls into a town, parks his Buick Century at a street corner and plies his trade, door to door, up one side of the street and down the other. Then he moves his Buick one block and does it all over again. When he's visited every home a rural burg, he heads out on the "hard road" to the next village on his route. Along the way, Harvey stops to eat wherever he can. His territory is on the back roads... Out where neon and McDonald's don't exist. One day, our paths happened to cross... Harvey's and mine. As we sat on a park bench in a town so small they never got around to registering a name for it, Harvey began talking. I was tired so I just sat and listened while I sipped on my creme soda. Harvey began yakking and I just let him go on.

"Have you ever been down South? I mean, the Deep South. Where the roads ain't paved and there's real dark nights and animals freeze in your car headlights." I nodded because I knew it well. That was familiar territory to me. Knowing I knew, Harvey went on, "They don't run. They stand their ground 'til you smack 'em with that awful sound. The next time you're down that way, you gotta check out this small cafe. It's a place where I once stopped to dine and I gotta tell you this tale of mine."

I tilted my head and let the straw drop from my lips to let Harvey know

I was listening. He went on talking, not so much to me, but to people maybe he could picture in his over-traveled mind. "When a woodland creature crosses a street and a speeding car eventually meet, you've got the fixin's for a swampland treat at the Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat." "Where?" I inquired. "At the Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat." Harvey said it like this place was common knowledge. Before I could reply, Harvey went on, "Put Bayou Spice and a deep fried batter over anything. It doesn't matter. To make what they call Swamp Gourmet served up hot at this cafe. The Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat." He repeated almost reverently.

I started to interrupt but his eyes began to glaze over and his voice was almost trance-like, "I'll never forget that fateful night when I thought I'd stop and grab a bit. The sign said 'Swamp Cuisine - Piping Hot' as I pulled into the parking lot. A bearded giant, strong and heavy, knelt in front of a banged up Chevy." Harvey shuddered at the recollection... but it didn't stop his story telling. "'Come on in,' he said, 'Eat your fill!' As he pried some critter from his auto's grill."

Harvey turned to me and desperately grabbed at the lapels of my jacket. "Harvey," I said, "What is it? Did something happen to you that night." Harvey's eyes darted aimlessly and he droned out what sounded like a Southern fried mantra, "Grab your chair and lock an' load. Got our menu from the road. Cook that carcass from the street at the Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat."

I feared the long days on the lonely roads had finally gotten to him when Harvey told me what the man in the parking lot said. "Grab a table, lot'sa seatin'. These roadside critters, them's good eatin'. Everything's fresh today, my man! Then he tossed that carcass in a frying' pan," Harvey whimpered.

I was getting worried about my companion but he took a sip of his root beer and it seemed to chase away his anxiety. Suddenly, completely composed as though nothing had happened, Harvey stretched as he continued. "Now, the place was clean with a homey feel so I figured I'd get me a home-cooked meal. Mama, the owner, kept it neat, there at the Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat. Well, I grabbed a table and I sat down and before I could even look around, Billy Bob, this enormous guy, walked on over and caught my eye."

I began to sense trouble again as I saw Harvey's hand tighten on the root beer bottle. Harvey looked and spoke under his breath, "Then Billy Bob pulled up a chair. He's a hulkin' man with an icy star."

"Harvey," I said hoping to break the spell, "did this guy... Billy Bob... Did he speak to you?" Harvey nodded and whispered, "You know, my mama's quite a cook! He bellowed with a killer's look. Round these parts it ain't polite if you don't eat up every bite. Make ma happy! Don't tempt fate! Chow down, buddy! Clean your plate."

I could only imagine what this must have been like for my milquetoast friend. I think I might have run out of there but, Harvey, I could only speculate. I didn't have to consider it for long because Harvey began to rave. "I didn't order, they just brought me food... I wasn't gonna argue cause of Billy Bob's mood. I couldn't leave... There was no retreat so I stuffed myself at the Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat."

I started to ask Harvey a question but he put his hand on my wrist, stared across the park and hypnotically spoke in a monotone. "Grab your chair and lock an' load. Got our menu from the road. Cook that carcass from the street at the

Flattened Fauna... Stop and Eat."

Harvey, bless his heart, had driven one too many miles on rutted, dirt roads. His cork had finally popped, I figured. But again, a draw on his root beer brought him back, smiling and chattering. "Yeah, I had a possum, frog and squirrel and thing that'd make your eyebrows curl! Turtle, skunk, and 'gator steak, weasel, fox and rattlesnake."

That was quite a meal. I was just about to ask how the cook's son reacted to his willingness to sample the menu when Harvey, answered before I could ask. "Billy Bob smiled and Billy Bob grinned, when I finally got my second wind. Then came raccoon, rabbit, rat and mole and MAMA... with a great big bowl."

I was getting so caught up in Harvey's angst, I had almost forgotten Mama was the proprietress. Harvey was now on a roll. "Billy Bob looked and then he sighs, "Mama's brung a real surprise!" "How could you respond to that?" I had to ask. Harvey looked at me like he had flashed back to that very moment in time, "What have we here? You're just too kind! What gourmet treat did you just find?" "We call it 'Stew' and that's because don't really know what it used to wuz. Could be otter! Can't be sure. Let's just call it "Swamp du Jour".

I was trying to picture Harvey in these circumstances. I've never seen him finish a club sandwich and now he was getting an encyclopedia of mammals and reptiles indigenous to the South served up one after another. I had to ask, "Harvey how long did this go on?" He answered wistfully, "I sat for hours and at and ate. Billy Bob smiled as I cleaned my plate. Finally, I told him I could eat no more, as I made my way out the restaurant door."

I was feeling better, realizing Harvey got out of this predicament without meeting violence, save for a sure attack of indigestion. Harvey seemed relieved to have been able to talk about it. I patted his knee reassuringly and asked what happened then. Harvey said matter-of-factly, "Well, a truck pulled in as I walked out and over my shoulder I heard the driver shout, 'Hey, Billy Bob... Turn up the fire! I bagged me a critter with my left front tire."

With that we sat quietly for a few minutes, not saying a word. I was satisfied that by lending a sympathetic ear, I helped Harvey exorcise his demons from that awful cafe. He'd be all right now. After a while Harvey got up and thanked me for listening. He said he was fine and had to go make his rounds. I smiled and shook his hand as he walked to his car. When he got to where it was parked he circled it slowly. Then he paused by the right rear wheel well. Looking around suspiciously, he smiled. I'm no lip reader but from my distant vantage point I believe I could make him out whispering, "Eureka!"