

Brad and the Fig Tree

Outside the restaurant I work, a man straddles the partition between the patio floor and the general walkway, right up in a fig tree. Only a few tables are sat on the patio—it is, after all, another sweltering July in Carrboro—but each stares at him openly, and then at one another. The man doesn't seem to notice his audience or else pretends not to. Us working stare as well, pointing and giggling from afar as we congregate around the bar's service well.

Of course, the man has good reason to climb, as the figs are just now beginning to ripen. A pale purple tint has developed beneath the green skins of the early bloomers, while the earliest early bloomers have turned purple entirely, and subsequently been plucked by foraging Carrboroites. This is why the man climbs with total abandon of social grace: the graceful have already pillaged all ripe low-hanging fruit.

Nevertheless, I find myself shedding any shade of cynicism towards the overzealous man. Indeed, it brings me joy to see the tree gleaned by passersby. It also brings me joy to see that allowances are always left for tomorrow's harvest. Despite seeming picked clean at the moment, the remaining green fruits will ripen for the patient in coming weeks. And even in this season of desperation, the tree is never ravished entirely nor otherwise vandalized. Carrboro is simply amped by the prospect of sunkissed produce along its familiar walkways.

I'm amped too, but perhaps for a more privileged reason: about a third of the tree's reach can only be accessed from within the restaurant's patio.

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After the shift, Brad and Chase smoke cigarettes together on the patio. Brad sips a watery bourbon Manhattan on the rocks while Chase, having drunk enough in a past life, presses a cappuccino to his lips in spite of the hour. They're two punk rockers from Denver reminiscing about the shitty good-old-days, when they worked semi-fine dining gigs in the 1990s. The pair ran in similar circles, but their paths only finally crossed here in Carrboro. Now they're two ships which, having passed in the night, subsequently found themselves wrecked and marooned a few thousand nights later. I meet them with a glass of Chablis.

I always feel like a third wheel when they talk old shop, but the pair of them do well enough to address at least a portion of their recollections to me. It makes me feel like I'm not entirely outside their world, perhaps even the recipient of a hot-potato torch passed. Sometimes I can even get a word in edgewise. But mostly I just listen.

After another cigarette, Chase deduces that my presence outside must mean that I've finished my end-of-night paperwork, so he excuses himself to run the numbers upstairs. Brad changes the subject by making his way to the patio's corner.

Alright, let's see what we got here, he says, examining the fig tree's lowest branches. He stands on the bench of tables 808 and 703 to comb the leaves, but the closest streetlamp's errant

light gives him little to work with. I notice that he left his phone behind and decide to bring it to him.

This might help, I say, passing it off.

Good call, Brad responds upon igniting its forward flashlight. He finds a few ripe figs by the additional light, but quickly realizes the ripest dwell higher and deeper in the branches. This is the angle that excited me earlier. Hoisting himself up upon the concrete wall that separates the patio from the parking lot, he finally finds his perch and, at last, really begins to scour.

Brad culls and tugs every accessible fruit before making a final call. If it comes off gently, he stacks it in his makeshift cache. If not, he lets it be.

Now, the green ones can be good too, he explains, *but you really want to get those Goldilocks-zoners. No reason to pluck the thing clean.* Spotting a fat one just within reach, he barely has to stretch to release it from the tree. He sticks his hand down to me and presents a paragon fig. *Pop it now, brother! It's bleeding nectar—the wasps will be after it in no time.*

I throw it back and its saccharine juices dance on my pallet until green notes meet them like a conductor throwing his arms downward. *It's like God made a tree to grow Pedro Ximénez sherry.* Brad would usually feign a laugh, but he's not listening. He turned 50 a few weeks ago; I think he just reverted back to 17. It's just him and the tree.

It's funny, he says, digging deeper into the leaves, *I'm terrified of spiders, but I've gone through two or three webs doing this. It's like it doesn't even matter.* He pauses. *Except that one's now on my head.* He spastically ruffles his slicked-down gray hair and we both laugh.

You know what figs always remind me of? I ask.

Yonis? he responds, flashlight fixed on dangling fruit just out of reach.

No. Well yes, actually; sort of. There's a bit in Herman Hesse's Siddhartha where this to-be Buddha totally abandons his ascetic lifestyle. He meets a courtesan named Kamala, who teaches him the art of love, and then enters a world of debauchery. In an archetypal fashion, Hesse presents Kamala as the embodiment of sensuous worldly pleasure; lust and desire. And you know what she's got? She's got lips like fresh-cut figs. Isn't that something?

Brad pauses. *I remember that line. Siddhartha is one of my favorite books.*

Mine too. I read it every couple of years, on the advice of this dude I used to work with at a sports bar in Massachusetts. Come to think of it, I'm probably overdue. Anyway, it always reminds me that even missteps are steps forward. I sip my Chablis. *Sometimes you just need to hear that.*

Brad lowers himself from the concrete wall with a groan, collecting his harvest into a solitary but bountiful handful. *Totally.*