

A Good Ol' Boy

A one-person play by Peter Scott-Presland

(The character is a middle-aged man in worn dungarees. He wears a straw hat. He goes to the telephone. Hesitates to ring. Turns away.)

What you being such a damn fool for? 'Sonly a phone call. They said you was to ring. Ain't nothing to be 'shamed of.

Oh I can't. If this was to get out, I'd be the laughing stock of the county. The good ol' boys would never speak to me again, and that's a fact. Time was, they'd ha' strung you up for less than this, and that's the truth.

They promised you a steak dinner. Since when you been able to turn down a offer like that? I s'pose you got steak coming out your ears, you can afford to be so picky.

'Sonly a dinner. You can cook your own dinner. What's so special 'bout a blamed dinner?

But a steak dinner..... Just think. A twelve-ounce prime home-cooked T-bone, fried in butter, with the juices flowing so sweet.....

Are you mad? You gonna throw away your standing in the community jest for a piece of meat? You gotta be out of your head. Forget it. You want meat, you come down Hardee's, have a burger, what's the difference?

(To audience)

You been to Hardee's before? Hardee's on South Memorial Parkway. Established 1966, so it's real old. Finest burgers in the South, and that's a fact. Ain't nothing like a Hardee's half-a-pounder and French fries after you bin fishing down by the county lake. Just drive in up to the window, and there's Mary-Lou just as pretty as a picture in her tartan uniform - that's authentic Scotch tartan too. And she's got her hair all done up, just like when she was Colesville Carnival Queen last fall. Boy, ain't she a sight to warm a man on a cold day? And you-all just tell her what you want, and she's off on them rollers faster'n a groundhog after corn.

Forty-five seconds. That's all it takes. Cos, you, we gotta, like, a training course where they teach you how to do things real fast. So's folks ain't kept hanging around. Course, if it's a real big order, like with slaw or a apple pie, then they lets you have sixty seconds. But that's still real fast, believe me.

Course, I'm getting a mite old for rollers, and any how I ain't much in the beauty stakes like Mary-Lou, so I just clean out round the jakes and that, and maybe grill a few

burgers if one of the regular guys is off sick or something. Right now I'm on my break. You get fifteen minutes every four hours.

And they don't allow no loafers neither. See Miss Pierce? She's the one at the checkout, kinda fierce-looking woman with glasses on a rope. I swear she done got herself a stopwatch, cos jest as soon as you go to the restroom, even, she got Mr. Bragg out of his office and down the hall, just to see what you're doing. What she think I'm doing, diddling with myself? As if I would, cos that's a sin. What she think I am?

Course I remember Mr. Bragg when he was plain old Billy Bragg to one and all and kept the grocery store out in Madison County. Yessir, me and Billy Bragg goes back a long ways, and I won't let him forget it. I tell him, you don't bother me none, Billy Bragg, and I won't bother you none. But that Miss Pierce will keep fussing and spying.

You-all been in our Family Restaurant? That's real pretty too. We got ivy and pot plants all round the windows just as green and cool as if they was real. And on Sundays we got all the families come down for brunch after the meeting at the First Church of Christ in Gilead. The kids all has floats or milkshakes, and the folks talk about the meeting and the preaching, and it's real homey. Almost minds me how it used to be down at Billy Bragg's grocery store.

Now there was a place you'd call homey. And there was nothing you couldn't buy there, from a packet of snuff to a ploughshare. And there's old Billy Bragg, his feet up on the stove and the smell of wood logs burning sweet, and his old hound-dog lying at his feet panting, and you'd say, "How goes it, Billy Bragg?", and he'll say, "Fair to middling, fair to middling." And if he don't say no more, well you'd know his daughters was giving him a hard time, so you hold your peace and you go your ways.

But mostly he'd say something like, "Ol' Pa Potter ain't looking so rosy though." And then you knew he was fine to talk, so you'd pull up a old oil drum, and say, "How come, Billy Bragg?", and he'd tell you 'bout how ol' Ma Potter threw her ol' pickling pot at him, she got so mad with him. And you'd put your feet on the stove too and chaw a plug of tobacco, and then maybe Curtis Maybrick'd come in from the Farm, or the sharecroppers for some oil for their lamps, and before you knows it, there's a whole crowd of the good ol' boys just jawing away.

Then maybe Curtis' woman holler outta the truck, "What you doing in there, Curtis? Come outta there, 'fore I tan your hide." And he'd be outta that door like he'd got firecrackers in his pants. And the two of them would go peeling away from there so fast, they'd leave half their tyres on the road.

Well, the store burnt down, right to the ground. Weren't nothing a soul could do, it burnt so fast. It were just a ol' wood shack. So Billy Bragg collects on his insurance,

sells the land for a trailer park, buys hisself a franchise and goes into Fast Food. And now he's Mr. Bragg to one and all. Sure is a strange ol' world.

Now there's hardly a place in town the good ol' boys can go for a "chaw and a jaw", as we used to say. Mostly they hang out around Curley's truckstop on Hurricane Creek Road. I go down there myself when the pick-up's low on gas. But it ain't the same as it was.

Yessir, we seen a lot of changes round these parts. Nothing was the same after the Munitions came. First it was the trailers, and then it was the freeway. And before you know it, we got a whole new town here. I see they just done made Downtown a Historic District, putting up plaques and all, but that still don't make it a nice place to go. Too many - well, you know. Don't feel safe on the streets at night. Never had much call to go there myself.

Anyhow, where was I? Oh yes, I was telling you about how the munitions set the town eating up the country, and the government was telling us we was growing too much anyhow, so most of the farmers sold up and moved away, or just hang around twiddling their thumbs. Fancy paying folks to sit around all day doing nothing, and leaving good land idle. Don't make no sense to me. I remember when all this weren't nothing but tobacco for miles and miles.

Never owned no land myself. I'm just a ol' farm hand. I meant to get me some land, but the machines done got there first. Back in the Sixties, Mr. Struthers got hisself a combine could do the work of twelve men in half the time, so what's he to do except lay men off? Couldn't get nothing in the way of farm work round these parts, so I took me down to where they was building the freeway. People take the freeway for granted these days, but I tell you, that was some road to build. It was the earth, see. Too soft. Everything sank right in it. And when it dried out it was even worse. The dust! Ain't never got so much dust in my lungs in all my life, no not even in the Great Drought of 53.

Yes, a lot of things done change round here. I can remember when the nigras weren't even allowed in the same part of the bus as we was. Course, you can't call them "nigras" any more, you have to say "blacks" or - what's that word - "African-Americans". African-Americans! They ain't no more African than I am. Course, Governor Wallace fought all that nonsense like a good 'un, but what could he do, with the courts and the Congress and the President and the Feds all against him? It was Government agents shot him. FBI. And that's a fact.

"Desegregation" - bullshit! You-all can buss folks any which way you chose, so there's black folks and white folks and black kids and white kids all mixed up like a Irish stew. But you can't change the way folks feel, in their heart. And you can't change what the good Lord wills. And if the Almighty in His infinite wisdom ordained that the white man

be set over the black man, by virtue of his superior intellect and the labour of his hand - then who are we to argue? Now don't get me wrong, I ain't got nothing against the black man. But black and white are different, and bussing ain't gonna make them the same.

My boy Chester'd just started in school when they did the bussing. I joined the Klan then, but even the Klan couldn't stop it. I kept Chester out of school for a while, but his Ma wanted him to get an education, so I give in. And now he's got all these liberal notions, and lost his faith, and all. I pray for him every night, and that's a fact. Pray he'll find the Lord once more. Sometimes I wish I'd kept him out of school for good. I don't know what his Ma would think now, she could see him. Some of the good ol' boys are still in the Klan, but they don't do much these days. It's more like a - a social club.

Chester, he went to Africa last year, with the Peace Corps. Came back on vacation with a new friend from Africa - from Nairobi! Name of John Olich. They was going to stay out at the Howard Johnson, but I wasn't having no son of mine staying in any motel. I told him, "You stay under your own roof like you always done, son. What for you so uppity all of a sudden?"

"What about John Olich?" he says.

"He can stay too," I says. "What's your problem?"

Then he looks at me real strange, and he brings up something from way back. He says, "Pa, do you remember Wesley Washington?"

"Sure. What of him?"

"And do you remember my birthday party? My seventh birthday party?"

"What of it?" I says.

"You wouldn't allow me for to invite Wesley Washington."

"So?" I says.

"Wesley Washington was black," he says.

"So?" I says.

"John Olichy is black too," he says.

"So?" I says.

"Pa," he says, "How come you wouldn't let me invite Wesley Washington to my seventh birthday party, but now you so hot for John Olichy to come sleep under your own roof?"

"Son," I says. "That's different. John Olichy is a African, but Wesley Washington was a niggra."

And it's not just the nigras, it's the cissy boys too. Got a lot of cissy boys in Colesville since the munitions come. The Military don't allow no cissy boys, so I don't know where they all come from. I s'pose they must work in the kitchens or something. But wherever they come from, the town seems to be full of them these days. Man ain't safe to walk the streets at night with all the cissy boys.

We even get cissy boys here at Hardee's. True. I s'pose you might say that was where all this done started. I said we shouldn't serve the cissy boys, what with all the diseases around, but Billy Bragg says we're not to "discriminate", and anyhow we didn't know they was cissy boys for sure. Billy Bragg done got himself some funny notions since he became Management. If he had his way, the Good Lord couldn't have destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, on the grounds that he was discriminating.

So now we got dozens of them. They go down their cissy boy club - it's called "Seventh Avenue" in the shopping mall, and the sheriff wants it closed down cos it's a health hazard. And then they come on here. I just mop the floors or grill the burgers back in the kitchens, so it don't affect me none, but I asked Mary-Lou how she could bring herself to talk to them, her being so pretty and a carnival queen and all.

"You hush your mouth," she says. "Them's good boys." Imagine her telling me to hush my mouth! Even the young women getting uppity these days.

We didn't speak for two whole days after that. But right now there's only her and me and Miss Pierce on the graveyard shift all week, and it gets kinda lonesome after a while. We would have made up anyhow, but it was a cissy boy kinda brought things to a head.

'Bout three in the morning, Friday it was, this cissy boy comes in for a burger. Mary-Lou says he's kinda regular at the weekend. Never has a car or nothing, cos he lives just by at Five Points, where all the cissy boys live. Anyhow, he comes in and orders a cheeseburgers and French Fries. I'm out in the kitchen, but I can see through, and I can see it's a cissy boy cos he done got a moustache and a leather jacket like all the cissy boys these days.

Now, it so happened I was all set to take a leak when he comes in, and I figured to myself, I ain't hurrying myself for no cissy boy, so I goes to the bathroom anyhow.

Next thing I know, there's Mary-Lou screaming fit to bust, and Miss Pierce hollering for the police. Course, I rushes out the restroom, and there's this niggra beating seven shades of shit out of the cissy boy. Seems the niggra made some kinda crack, 'bout how it was a good job we had plastic plates, and he sure hoped we burnt them up good and well after. And Mary-Lou got mad at him and told him to hush his mouth, and then the niggra got mad and said it was only a lousy cissy boy, and what was she getting so mad at, and then the cissy boy got mad and spat in the niggra's goddam eye.

So the niggra starts hollering how he's been poisoned and he's gonna die of AIDS, and no goddam white trash cissy boy is gonna spit at him.

Course, I didn't know 'bout none of that at the time. Mary-Lou only told me after. All I know is, there's a niggra and a cissy boy rolling round on the floor, and the niggra's giving the cissy a pretty good whipping. Mary-Lou was yelling at me to stop them, but way I see it, what do I care if a niggra and a cissy boy beat shit out of each other. Serve them both right.

But then the niggra pulls a knife on the cissy boy. And then I got mad. Cos there ain't no black man gonna pull a knife on no white man in Alabama, cissy boy or no cissy boy.

Besides, I don't want no cissy boy blood round me, no sir. So I grabbed the niggra by the collar of his baseball jacket - and that took some doing, with him rolling round so much. But I got a hold of him, and I pulled him up off the cissy boy, and slammed him into the counter. I may be a old farmhand, but I done my share of bare-knuckle fighting at the County Fair when I was a kid, and I can still use my fists.

I closed my eyes and I slammed into him just as hard as I could, on account of that knife. The way I figured it, if I didn't get him first he was sure as hell going to get me. So I knocked his arm, hard, and he hit his hand on the till, so he dropped the knife. I kicked it out of the way. That pulled him up short, and he just stood there, panting like a hound-dog at noon, staring at me.

"Get out of here, boy, and don't you come back, or I'll whip your ass some more."

He didn't need no second telling, cos he was out of here and into his truck before you could say, "Knife". Heard him peal off towards Governor's Drive.

Mary-Lou was fussing over the cissy boy, but I could see he wasn't hurt none, just a little cut over his eye. I yelled at Mary-Lou to get back from him, cos she oughta have rubber gloves and some kinda mask, you can't be too careful these days. But she didn't pay no mind to me. Then Miss Pierce started moaning how I'd cracked her checkout,

where the niggra hit his hand. So I just went back in the kitchen. Ain't no pleasing some women.

Mary-Lou done get the cissy boy a coffee, and pretty soon he says he's ready for home. Mary-Lou says he ought to go to the hospital to get that cut fixed, but he says it's only a little cut, and he don't want to claim on his insurance. Mary-Lou reckons that the cissy boy don't want no doctors taking no tests - know what I mean?

Anyhow, the cissy boy goes home, none too steady, and Mary-Lou comes back and says she's sorry for getting mad at me, and how I was a hero, and she kissed me, and I blushed and said, Shucks, think nothing of it.

Couple of days later - Sunday, that's a quiet night - in comes this other niggra, and he's asking to speak to Mr. Carter. So Mary-Lou comes and fetches me from the kitchen. He's a handsome feller, for a niggra, but I ain't never seen him before, and I can't figure out how come he knows my name. Mary-Lou ain't never seen him neither. So we stands there, looking at each other, and I asks him, "What's your business?"

"You saved my friend Tony's life, Mr. Carter," he says to me. "He wanted to thank you, but he's on nights too, down at the base, so I thought I'd drop by and thank you myself."

He's real soft-spoken, this niggra, almost a gentleman you might say, and he's had some schooling. I didn't know where to look.

"Yes, Mr. Carter," he's saying, "If you hadn't intervened, that knife could well have proved fatal. Tony could well be in the morgue right now. He's very grateful, and he hopes you can drop by and share a steak dinner with us one evening, as a mark of our appreciation."

"As a mark of our appreciation" - he used words like they danced in the air.

"Tony is my life partner, and means the world to me, and I'm very grateful too. Let me shake you by the hand."

And he's standing there, with his hand out, expecting me to shake it! I ain't never shaken hands with a niggra in my life - excepting Chester's friend John Olich, and he's a African. And this guy ain't just a niggra, he's a cissy boy niggra and all!

Well, what's a man to do? There's Miss Pierce and Mary-Lou both watching us. Mary-Lou is smiling all over her pretty face, like it's some kind of big joke, and even Miss Pierce got a gooey women's look in her eyes.

And so, I did it. Weren't no way a man could get out of it. I took the niggra's hand in mine. And you know something? It was soft as a baby's, not like a niggra's hand at all. I said something real dumb, 'bout how it was nothing and anybody'd do the same. And Mary-Lou said it was a historical occasion, and how she wished she had a camera so's she could send a picture to the Colesville Courier. And she was cackling like a mule, too, but I couldn't see what was so funny. And the niggra said, "Here's our card. Give us a call when you want to come to dinner."

(He takes out the card)

Our card. Like they was a real married couple or something.

That was three weeks ago. I keep looking at this. And I think of them cissy boys. Funny, he didn't look like a cissy boy at all. And the other one didn't neither, 'cepting he had a leather jacket. Sometimes I'm minded to tear this up and forget the whole thing, but I don't know.... It's a free dinner.... What do you think? You read so much about diseases but those two looked well enough.

But - a niggra cissy boy. Now I seen everything. No, sir, Colesville ain't what it used to be for sure.

I'll be honest, it gets kinda lonesome of an evening too, since my wife died. Sure, I can come down to Hardee's, but who wants to see the same faces you-all see every other day of the week?

I could do with the company, and that's a fact.

And a steak dinner... I ain't eaten real prime steak since I don't know when.

(He goes to the phone)

Just one thing. You-all won't go blabbing about this to no one, will you? I swore Mary-Lou to silence. If the Good Ol' Boys was to hear of this. I'd never be able to walk into Curley's Truckstop ever again.

(He picks up the phone and starts to dial.)

THE END

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