

High Noon at Starbucks

My world had just inverted. Days before boarding the plane to the northern hemisphere I'd flipped from The World of the Well to the underworld of Having Cancer. Not apparently life-threatening cancer but something that would need to be watched and would at some unspecified time require treatment. A retiree with a full life in Melbourne, I'd just landed in retirement's Mecca, Port Glades, Florida, a place where people *really* knew how to retire; to kick back, slow right down, laze in the sun, roam the area's innumerable golf courses and socialize in its oak-lined club houses. I was sociable enough, but I knew no one. I was here because my wife had taken a job in Mojitosville, north eastern Florida, for two years. Now even the notion of 'a full retirement' had inverted – having been busily retired at home, here I was utterly becalmed. I looked forward to the Floridian summer after the endless Melbourne winter; but Florida's humid heat had a power of penetrative enervation I'd never known and I was most inclined to venture outdoors late in the day when the blaze had gone off the day and the alligators who flourished in the nearby ponds came out to predate.

The A4A, the large arterial road that ran past our manicured gated community, had no public transport and as yet I had no car. An imitation Gilded Age bicycle came with our rented house but its seat was too high, I had no tools to adjust it, and I was currently hypersensitive just where the seat met my person. The house was large, luxurious and would have been just right for a family. My wife worked a sixty hour week so it was just me during waking hours, shifting camp from room to room. I'd never done solitude well. A nervous wreck in Nirvana?

I planned to join the golf club that was the hub of social life in our estate and to resume my career as an atrocious but aspirational golfer. I thought I'd break the ice and the solitude with a beer in the clubhouse first, so I ordered a Samuel Adams at the bar and said "hi" to the prosperous looking white haired, tanned gent in a shiny blue golf shirt on the bar stool to my right. He was a real hoot:

"Well, Iah'll *be*. You're Australian? Iah've never bin there, but I guess you have!"

"Your logic, sir, is impeccable!", I managed, sucking hard at my beer. "I'm Nathan."

"Well, Nathan, mah name's Jim. Iah ran mah own automobile business in Georgia for forty years then moved here to reward mahself. Mah first wife, Jen, was a great gal, but she died of cancer. Now mah second wife Suzie's doing a great job for me."

This good news infused my system rather in the manner of a toxin. I excused myself for a minute, adjourned to the Gents where I pissed blood courtesy of my recent prostate biopsy, and departed the building via a side entrance. The blood was apparently to be expected, though I hadn't been forewarned, and I tried to ease the sudden spike of cancer anxiety by reminding myself that my PSA score – the blood test for prostate cancer – was still only 4. At that level the disease was unlikely to have spread and the biopsy seemed to confirm that I was some way off the metastatic disease that killed my father and grandfather. Down here, I reckoned, a healthy prostate would be hard to find, so I was in good company and urology would be, so to speak, cutting edge.

After a couple of weeks I started to acculturate. There was a television in virtually every room of the house, including the bathrooms, and a gigantic one in the living room which doubled in mysterious ways as a radio. My wife had explained how remote control units could be coordinated to access thematized radio stations which ran on a sort of endless loop, 24/7. One of these was the Frank Sinatra Station which in fact only played a Sinatra number every six or so songs but had the virtue of

compelling comparison between Sinatra and many other crooners who were sandwiched between his appearances. Indeed Ol' Blue Eyes towered over his contemporaries, but why? What was so different? And didn't he often sing flat? These questions began to colonize my mind. I'd track them on Google during the day and would re-hash them with my wife when she got home from her twelve hours at work.

"You know, Sinatra really is head and shoulders above the other crooners, but I can't figure out why. His voice has a big turning circle, like an old American car."

She listened patiently if abstractedly for several evenings but then came clean.

"Frankly I don't care. I've never liked him and he was a thug anyway."

"Well yes", I replied, seizing on what looked like an opening, "but part of his cultural fascination is how a great artist – and he *does* seem to have been that – can be so beholden to the mob. Family and friends say the links weren't deep, that the mob owned a lot of the places where those singers had to perform. Mia Farrow who was married to him defends him over that. But then she says that when Woody Allen, her next husband, ran off with one of her adopted daughters, Sinatra offered to have the mob break both Woody's legs."

"It's a pity they didn't", she observed, reiterating her moral contempt for one of my admittedly tarnished cultural heroes.

"So, how are you feeling?" she inquired, segueing into genuine concern for my medical and emotional state.

"Like my spleen has been perforated by an airborne meatloaf" I said.

"Did you make that up?"

"No, it was Woody. One of his early stand-ups."

"Jesus! I'm trying to be sympathetic!"

Not feeling like another encounter with Jim I set out one blazing day for a shopping strip I'd seen just across the A4A. It was a ten minute walk to the first place that caught my eye, "Highlight Reel Sports", a second-hand sporting goods store next to a Starbucks. The sports shop was a barn-like affair with thundering air conditioning that made a nice change from the furnace outside, though the refrigerated air came laced with the odour of 'pre-loved' sports gear and dusty equipment. I'd often loitered in Australian sports stores, swinging shiny new cricket bats, tossing glossy cricket balls or new Aussie Rules footballs from hand to hand; but here the gear seemed quite alien: baseball bats in serried ranks, gridiron helmets and protective padding, scarred basketballs, footwear that bore no relation to any sport I'd played. I turned to see what else might be there and was relieved to see familiar tackle in another corner: tennis rackets – a sport I played quite well – and, in an area nearby, golf clubs by the dozen.

Back home my best club had been a 'hybrid', so-called because its shape combines blade iron and driver. It seemed to fit the contours of my swing. And one of the first sets of clubs I saw in "Highlight Reel Sports" was a kit of hybrid irons. Cleveland too – a very reputable brand!

I approached a shop assistant who had been eyeing me hopefully for some minutes and asked him about the age and quality of the clubs and whether I might be able to take them to the course to try them out on the driving range. He was a colossal slab of a man, built like the proverbial Australian brick shithouse. His sandy wavy hair was roughly parted above a wide red face criss-crossed with delicate capillaries and dotted with sun spots. He stood well over six feet and had a massive wedge of a torso. Tree trunk-like thighs bulged from faded check shorts. The straight-up-and-down effect ended abruptly just below where his legs bowed out so far that with feet together he could have wedged a basketball between his knees, each of which brandished a long shiny white surgical scar. Networks of varicose veins snaked from thigh to his sandaled feet.

He said that Cleveland was a good brand, that “we don’t sell rubbish”, and that if I wanted to try them out I could buy them, road test them at the range and get a full refund if I didn’t like them, provided I returned them within three days. After this was agreed he inquired

“You from Australia?”

“Yes”, I said, “you’ve picked the accent straight off.”

“I was there about ten years ago with a school basketball team. It’s one *helluva* place!”

“What parts did you visit?”

“We started up in Queensland which is very like Florida. Then we went down to Sydney. Stayed near Kings Cross. Now *there’s a place! Holy shit!* I’ve never seen anything like it! There were hookers on every corner. There was a big college just nearby and a lot of the hookers were students. You couldn’t walk a block without getting the eye and some of those gals were somethin’ else!”

Woody’s story “The Whore of Mensa” flashed into my mind, where intellectually famished husbands hire female graduate students to meet them in secret locations to discuss Proust, Yeats, Pounds, Melville and other giants.

“How did you know they were students?” I inquired.

“Everyone said so. It was common knowledge and you could see it. They weren’t your usual hooker.”

“So where did you go after Sydney?”

“We took the team to Candeberra, to a place called the Institute of Sport. We played a game there against some kids from ‘round the country.”

“And how did that go?” I asked.

“Well, we lost the game but we won the fight. There was a huge brawl late in the game. Kids on the floor, throwing punches. We had to get in and break it up. Security guards came running in and it was on the front page of the paper next day!”

“Jeez”, I said, “what a *disaster!*”

And then that man said one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard anyone say, anywhere, any time.

“Nope. When you’re a small school all publicity’s good publicity.”

I paid for the clubs and a bag and left, saying that I hoped not to see him again soon because it would mean that I liked the clubs.

In fact I did like them and I practiced the irons at the range for a few weeks before returning to “Highlight Reel Sports” to buy a driver and a putter.

“So, it’s the Australian. Like the clubs?”

“Yes, very good. They seem to suit my swing. Any Cleveland drivers?”

“Matter of fact yes”, he said making his way over to the golf section.

“I told you about those gals in Kings Cross, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. I have to say though that I taught university in Melbourne for forty years and I really doubt that many of my female students were working in the sex trade.”

“Well maybe Melbourne and Sydney are different. I didn’t see any hookers in Camdenberra.”

“Tell you what I’ll do”, I said, getting my credit card out to pay for the new-used driver, “I’ll send a bulk email to my former female students asking how many of them worked as prostitutes during their degrees.”

“Now *there’s* a plan!” he said, grinning as he took the card.

I’d been meeting some nice folk at the club house but the Starbucks next to the sports shop had its own particular appeal. A group of retirees, drop-outs and drop-ins gathered there, some spending hours in the u-shaped configuration of arm chairs and sofas at the front of the establishment. It being summer vacation, most of the staff were college and high school kids. Behind the service desk was a sliding window for the drive-thru section. Once I’d seen a Sheriff’s car with SHERIFF: PSA emblazoned on each side pull up at the window. I later found that this PSA meant Public Service Assistant, a junior law enforcement position. There was much debate about the value of the PSA prostate test at the time. Some wanted it scrapped, others to see it used more selectively, still others to have it mandated. I emailed my urologist in Melbourne describing the car and saying that in Florida you got arrested if you didn’t have the test regularly. “Send me a photo and I’ll believe it” he replied.

This was northern Florida, a Republican stronghold with a church on every corner. I kept bumping into apparently otherwise normal people who were intending to vote for Trump. The Starbucks incumbents included Frank, a retired Baptist minister: short and rotund, he had glossy brown hair that belied his age, and good humoured blue eyes behind surprisingly garish red-framed glasses. A sensitive man, he was more sympathetic than his conservative pronouncements tended to suggest. So was Molly, a warm woman, perhaps in her seventies, a mother of three who had worked in real estate. Carefully attired, her slightly unruly grey hair and pinkish complexion gave the impression that she had dozed off with her hair drier at full blast. She didn’t seem shy but didn’t say a lot, apparently preferring to listen. She had an odd habit of turning her head down and to one side, withdrawing her eyes from her surroundings, and laughing quite heartily to herself, often for no apparent reason. Max

was an old businessman with a multi-coloured cane, a deep rasping voice, thin wisps of white hair and a sun-battered red complexion. He acted the curmudgeon but was gruffly companionable, funny and loved to bait people like me with outrageous right wing claims. And then there was Bob, a short, plump, friendly man despite a somewhat sour facial mien. His red Trump baseball cap proclaimed: TRUMP: MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, and his steel rim glasses could steam up when the talk got political, as it often did.

I'd pop in for an hour in the early afternoon. What I came to think of as The Discourse of the Starbuck Right could be downright terrifying.

One of the more occasional drop-ins, who worked as a medical aid, believed that Michelle Obama was a transsexual, claiming that no photos of her and her children had ever been seen in which the youngest daughter was less and four years of age. Another, a fireman who delivered furniture on weekends to make extra cash, said when I asked him how he might vote:

“Well, Iah'm old school, like mah Dad. Iah work hard. Real hard. And Iah don't see why Iah have to pay taxes to keep people who have killed other folk alive in prison. Iah don't really follow politics, but Iah just have a feelin' Trump would be the kinda guy who'd do something 'bout that. Iah mean, if there's any doubt whether someone killed someone else, you wouldn't kill them. But when you know for sure that they did it Iah say do the same to him so mah taxes don't go to keeping him alive in prison for the rest of his life.”

A couple of aged veterans completed the cohort of regular Right attendees. The Left was less populous but was spearheaded by the articulate, bombastic Ron, a retired lawyer who taught the Constitution at a local community college, knew his American history, and was blessedly exempt from doubt about anything. He'd lean forward in his fraying collarless t-shirt, ample belly spilling over on to his running shorts and give it to the Right with both barrels, his baseball cap bobbing time to the drubbing. He would grill them, demand to know what exactly they had just said had to do anything, tell them what was “actually” in the Constitution, and did not hesitate to denounce them as “knuckleheads”, “bible-bashing slow learners”, and so on. Since when the others saw him coming they'd groan “*here he comes!*” I assumed that the Right couldn't stand him. Not so. The whole group were actually friends, despite real political antipathies. When you got this far down life's road, it seemed, friendship and companionship trumped (so to speak) all else.

It was harder to read Warren, the other mainstay of the Left. Straight long white hair brushed back, t-shirts cut off at the shoulders, jeans and a grizzled grey-blue-eyed face, he might have been a retired Pro Wrestler in miniature. He'd run a successful plumbing business and when in the mood was the most reflective and nuanced of the group. But his mood varied enormously from day to day and on a bad one he could be silent or monosyllabic for hours. The first time I met him a fine Sinatra rendition of “Autumn Leaves” had just begun on the café's music loop. After it I ventured:

“Are you a Sinatra fan?”

“No. Never liked him. Overrated.”

I tried another tack:

“I see you here a lot. Seems like this is your office?”

“Living room, more like it.”

I wondered what was beneath that impassive exterior.

I arrived early this day, around noon, and ordered a bagel and Perrier Water. I wondered whether the striking young woman at the cash register might have been subliminally sweet, but she seemed functionally surly. Her glossy straight black hair lapped at her shoulders but was sculpted to a little grove of vertical spikes atop her head. There was anger in those jet brown eyes. She served me with what felt like disdain. What had I done? Welshed on coffee, Starbuck's stock-in-trade? Stared at her ear and nose studs? Been a man of my age?

The Right and Left were already hard at it. Former Democrat Congressman Anthony Wiener, best known for sexting photos of his enbriefed private parts to women who were not his wife, had been at it again. But this time he'd risen to a new low: a photo to a woman – a Trump supporter! – showed him in bed with his young son. His wife, Huma Abedin, a long-time senior Hilary Clinton aid, had just announced their separation. Following his Leader, Bob was inclined to see all of this as a reflection on the Clinton campaign, but Ron was having none of it.

"It's got *nothing to do with it!* The man is a creep, a *jerk!* *That's all!*"

"Well", replied Bob, "I think it does have something to do with it. Abedin's mother believes in Sharia Law."

"*So what?!?*" exploded his now scarlet interlocutor. "*So what?!?* All sorts of people in this country believe in all sorts of things but that doesn't mean they become law. Congress makes the laws and it's not about to enshrine Sharia Law for the American public. Just *read the Constitution, knucklehead!*"

Bob took a tug at the peak of his Trump cap and considered his next move. I looked across at Warren and could see that he was absolutely fuming, eyes narrowed, shaking his head slowly in disbelief.

Just then the attendant from "Highlight Reel Sports" strode in.

"*Not him!?*" snarled Warren.

The colossus paused, looked at me and announced gaily:

"There's the Australian! I was just telling him the other day about when me and the team stayed near Kings Cross and there were hookers on every corner, and a lot of them were college students. A big college was just nearby."

Warren struggled to his feet, threw his iphone down on his armchair, and shouted:

"What would *you* know, you *big oaf?!?* If I hear that story *one more time* I'll take you out with one of your fucking baseball bats! How would *you* know whether a prostitute was a college student or not?! You *wouldn't have a clue!*"

"*Everybody* knew. You haven't been there", said the other. "And beside, the regulars dressed up more. The college girls wore t-shirts with no bra so you could see their nipples standing out."

Now it was on for old and not so old. Warren launched himself arthritically at the man monolith who was about to throttle him when the young woman who had served me jumped out from behind the counter and addressed the assembled clientele at the top of her lungs:

“You *pathetic meatheads!* Is it any wonder we’ve got a sociopath running for President!? This testosterone-driven culture isn’t fit for a *dog!* Just *look at you!* – a pair of grown men arguing about whether college students are hookers and have their nipples poking through t-shirts! What would a pair of sexist losers like you know *anyway!*? Well I’m a college student and I can tell you – I don’t earn extra cash on street corners! I earn it *here*, serving cretins from the fossil records like *you!* But if you want college student nipples, *I’ll show you nipples!*”

And with that she flung off her Starbucks apron and black t-shirt, unhooked her bra and stood, pink nipples pert in the refrigerated air, glowering at the now becalmed combatants.

Just then a Sheriff’s car pulled in at the take-out point and the kid manning the window called out:

“Scuse me officer, but we seem to have a public affray in here. Better get in here *quick!*”

A minute later an officer rushed in, took one look at the girl and yelled “*What the?! You’re coming with me young lady!*”, wrapped his officer’s jacket around her and bundled her out of the door.

Stunned silence ensued. Eventually Max broke the ice: “Well that’s the best thing that’s happened to my hormones in decades!”

A delighted Bob observed “that young lady just restored my faith in American youth!”

Frank chuckled: “Iah thought Iad’s seen everything in forty-five years in thah ministry, but apparently *not!*”

Bob sat stock still looking like a bulldog that had swallowed a wasp.

Molly sat, head averted and eyes almost closed, her round belly undulating with silent laughter.

A few weeks later when I’d finally got a car I pulled in at the Winn Dixie supermarket carpark a couple of kilometres up the A4A from the Starbucks. And there is was – the Sheriff’s PSA car!

I’d just snapped it on my iphone when an officer walked up and inquired with more than a touch of menace: “Mind telling me what you’re doin’ takin’ photographs of mah car?”

It was the same officer who had removed the girl from Starbucks. Feeling a bit rattled I explained:

“Well, there’s a prostate cancer test called PSA. I’ve got a touch of prostate cancer myself and I’m going to send the photo of your car to my specialist in Australia with a note telling him how carefully prostate testing is policed in Florida.”

“Iah’m sorry to hear that”, he said, “but that’s quite funny. Go right ahead.”

“Thanks for your understanding”, I responded. “And by the way – I was in Starbucks the other day when you removed that young woman who had bared her breasts. Do you mind my asking what happened to her?”

“She got very tough treatment. *Very* tough.”

“You mean she’s been charged with indecent exposure or something like that?”

“Well no”, he said a little sheepishly, “not quite *that* tough. She’s the Sheriff’s daughter.”