**High Noon at Starbucks**

One blazing day soon after we got to Florida I set out for Highlight Reel Sports, a second-hand sports store next to the local Starbucks. It was a great barn of a place with a thundering air conditioning system: the arctic blast – a welcome change from the tropical furnace outside -- came laced with the odour of pre-loved sports gear. Back home, I’d often loitered in sports stores like this, miming a serve with a graphite tennis racquet, tossing a glossy cricket ball, or hand-balling a pristine Sherrin to myself. But here everything was alien: baseball bats in serried ranks, gridiron helmets and protective padding, scarred basketballs, footwear that bore no relation to any sport I’d seen. So I was relieved to discover familiar tackle in one corner: golf clubs. My game. My favoured kind of club had been a ‘hybrid’, so-called because its shape combines blade iron and driver. And the first clubs I saw in Highlight Reel Sports were hybrid irons. Cleveland too – a reputable brand!

I went up to the guy behind the counter, a colossus, well over six feet, a veritable slab of a man. His sandy wavy hair was roughly parted above a broad red face criss-crossed with delicate capillaries and dotted with sun-spots. Varicose veins snaked from his tree-trunk-like thighs down to sandaled feet, traversing knees striated by long shiny-white surgical scars. The slab fanned out at the bowed knees. There was room enough for a basketball between them.

I asked about the clubs. Were they any good? Sure, he told me. Highlight Reel Sports does not sell garbage, Sir, Cleveland’s a great brand. Could I try them out? Sure I could. Buy them, road-test them at the range, and get a full refund if not satisfied -- provided they come back within three days.

He paused.

“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!”

“True. What parts did you visit?”

“We started up in Queensland. 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!”.

“How did you know they were students?”

“Everyone said they were. You could see it. You could see their nipples through their t-shirts. They weren’t your usual hooker.”

“The Whore of Mensa” came to mind but I refrained from that allusion.

“So where did you go after Sydney?”

“We took the team to Candenberra, 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?”

“Well, we lost the game but we won the fight. There was a huge brawl. 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!”

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

I paid for the clubs and a bag, saying that I hoped not to see him again, ‘because, Sir’, I hastened to add, ‘it would mean that I liked the clubs.’

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I’d sold our little publishing business in Melbourne and was about to retire there when my wife was offered a job in northern Florida. What better place to retire then northern Florida? We were to live in Port Glades, one of the wealthiest postcodes in the country and a retirement Mecca, 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 a sociable man. People in the estate were fast with friendly greetings. But that seemed to be about it. I’d never known anything like this climate’s power of penetrative enervation. I’d generally venture outdoors in the afternoon when the blaze had gone off the day and the alligators who flourished in the nearby ponds came out to predate. Route A4A, the provincial highway that ran past the manicured grounds of our gated community, had no public transport and I had no car. An imitation Gilded Age bicycle came with our rented house but its seat was too high and I had no tools to adjust it. 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. I was a nervous wreck in Nirvana.

Once I had my set of Clevelands I joined the golf club. Well within walking distance, it was the hub of social life. Before my first round I thought I’d break the ice with a beer in the clubhouse. I ordered a Samuel Adams at the bar, and said “Hi” to the prosperous looking white haired, tanned guy in a shiny blue golf shirt on the stool to my right.

“Well, Iah’ll *be*. You’re Australian? Iah’ve never bin there. But I guess you have?”

“You guessed right, Sir!”, I said, sucking 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 lifted my spirits like traffic infringement notice.

I began 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 showed me how to access theme 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 inviting comparison between Sinatra and other crooners. 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 hour working days.

“You know,” I tried to explain, “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.

“I really 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 for more analysis, “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 was married to him. She defends him over that. But then she says that when Woody Allen eloped with one of her adopted daughters Sinatra offered to have the mob break both his legs.”

“A pity they didn’t”, she said.

“So, how are you feeling?”

“As flat as a night carter’s hat”, I replied, smiling wanly at the laconic inventiveness of that Aussie locution.

“I’m just trying to be sympathetic”, said she.

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The best company in the vicinity was a group of retirees, drop-outs and drop-ins who gathered each day at the Starbucks. They’d spend hours in the u-shaped configuration of arm chairs and sofas at the front of the establishment. .It being the 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 window. I emailed my urologist in Melbourne to say that they policed the prostate PSA test here like nowhere else. Turned out that this PSA stood for Public Service Assistant, a junior law enforcement position.

This was northern Florida, a Republican stronghold with a church on every corner. I kept bumping into seemingly normal people who were intending to vote for Trump. The Starbucks regulars 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. He was a more sympathetic man than his conservative pronouncements might 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 under her hair drier. 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, her round tummy wobbling, often for no discernible reason. Then there was Max, 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 with outrageous right wing claims. And Bob, a short, plump feisty man whose red baseball cap proclaimed: TRUMP: MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. His steel rim glasses steamed up when the talk got political, as it often did.

I’d pop in for an hour or so. After witnessing The Discourse of the Starbucks Right the world would never be the same. One of the occasional drop-ins, who worked as a medical aid, believed that Michelle Obama was a transsexual. No photos of her and her children had ever been seen, he contended, in which the youngest daughter was less than 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 armed services veterans completed the cohort of regular Right attendees.

The less populous Left 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 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 in 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 denounce them as “knuckleheads”, “bible-bashing slow learners”, and so on. When the others saw him coming they’d groan, “*here he comes!*”; yet they seemed actually to enjoy his company. Conjoined by loneliness, distaste for the costly, opulent, ‘snowbird’ culture across the highway, the appeal of one another’s craggy eccentricities, the group rumbled on until the morning after the election. An occasional visitor, a committed Trumpian, dropped by to share the result with Ron. So heated was the sharing that they adjourned to the car park to settle things by fist. Ron spent the evening in the county jail and was permanently banned from Starbucks.

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 of the group. But his mood bounced about 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. 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.”

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One day I arrived early, around noon, and ordered a bagel and Perrier Water. The young woman at the cash register had glossy black hair that cascaded over her shoulders but which was crowned by a grove of vertical spikes on the top of her head. She glared at me with her jet brown eyes. What was my crime? Welshed on coffee, Starbucks’s stock-in-trade? Stared at her ear and nose studs? Being a man? A man aged sixty-five?

Right and Left were already hard at it. Anthony Wiener, a sometime Democrat Congressman, and his wife, Huma Adebdin, a senior aid to Hilary Clinton, had just announced their separation. Weiner was already been in trouble for sexting photos of his private parts to women who were not his wife. He had been at it again. But this time he’d risen to a new low: he’d taken a selfie, in his customary state of arousal, albeit on this occasion in his briefs, with their young son next to him in the frame, and sent it to a lady Trump supporter. Bob was inclined to see all of this as a reflection of the moral iniquity of the Clinton campaign. Ron was not having that.

Ron: “It’s got *nothing to do with the Clinton campaign!* The man is a creep, a jerk! That’s all!”

Bob: “Well, 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 MAGA cap and considered his next move. I looked across at Warren. He was absolutely fuming, eyes narrowed, shaking his head slowly in disbelief.

Just then Mr. Colossus from Highlight Reel Sports strode in.

“Not *him*!” snarled Warren.

The colossus paused, looked at me, and announced,

“Hey! Here’s my Australian buddy!”

He turned to the rest.

“I was just telling this guy the other day about when me and the team stayed near King’s Cross and there were these hookers on every corner, and a lot of them were college students. There was a big college just nearby.”

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

“What would you know, you big lunk? 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!”

“Everybodyknew. You haven’t been there. And besides, the regular ones dressed up more. The college girls wore t-shirts with no bra so you could see their nipples standing out.”

Now the temperature went up a notch. Warren had 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 fossils 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 silent combatants.

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At that moment the Sheriff’s car pulled in at the take-out point and the kid manning the window broke called out,

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

A minute later a police officer rushed in, took one look at the girl and yelled,

“*What the?!* You’re coming with me young lady!”

He wrapped his jacket around her shoulders and bundled her out of the door.

There was another passage of dead air. Bob, though he glowered appalled disapproval, clearly felt called upon to witness with care the outrage that was unfolding before him.

Eventually Max broke the ice,

“Well, that’s the best thing that’s happened to my hormones in decades. 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!*”

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

Next week I asked the kid who’d asked the police to intercede what had happened to the girl who’d been taken into custody.

“Not much”, he said, “she’s the Sheriff’s daughter.”