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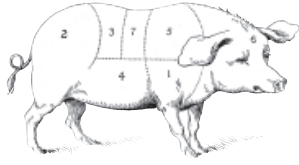
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Thin Blue Smoke



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Prologue
SMOKE MEAT

The name of the place is LaVerne Williams' Genuine BBQ and City Grocery, but everyone calls it Smoke Meat, because – even though 'LaVerne Williams' Genuine BBQ and City Grocery' is handpainted in red letters on the restaurant's front window – outside, over the front door, painted right on the bricks, are the words 'SMOKE MEAT' in big white capital letters about two feet tall.

Smoke Meat is a block away from the *Kansas City Star*, on the southwest corner of 17th and Walnut. It's a favorite of reporters and editors at the paper, especially the copy desk, which has a tradition of taking its new staffers there for lunch on their first day on the job. The punchline of this initiation rite comes when it's time to pay, and all the veteran copy editors pretend as if they assumed all along the new hire was picking up the tab.

Cochran Rooney's first-day Smoke Meat lunch got off to a shaky start.

Rooney was a short stocky redhead with close-cropped hair, a goatee, and a silver earring in his right ear. He came to the *Star* after having been 'downsized' from his previous position as a copy editor at the *Topeka Capital Journal*. He stepped up to the counter first as if he was a long-time regular at Smoke Meat.

Behind the counter a tall skinny black man with a graying Afro stepped up to the cash register. He wore a white apron over a black T-shirt.

'What'll it be?' he asked Rooney.

'How about a regular sausage sandwich with fries and a diet Coke,' said Rooney. 'And how about a D for your sign?'

Rooney snorted and turned and smirked at his new coworkers as if he were letting them in on a joke. None of them let on that they had any idea what he was talking about. But the guy at the cash register knew exactly what Rooney meant. His eyes narrowed.

'What did you say?' he asked Rooney.

'You need a D for your sign outside,' said Rooney. 'It says "smoke meat". Shouldn't it say "smoked meat"? Smoke*d*, with a D?' He wasn't smirking anymore and appeared to have developed a severe blinking disorder.

'You work over there at the *Star*, don't you?' asked the guy behind the counter.

Rooney gave a quick little nod.

‘I knew it. Every once in a while one of you smartass writers from the newspaper comes over here and tells me I need to fix my sign. Just because you know about words doesn’t mean you know everything. You don’t know *shit*. My *son* painted that sign the way it is. And it’s staying the way it is.’

Rooney choked out an apology, but the guy behind the counter wasn’t having any of it.

‘And we don’t serve fries here,’ he said. He turned to take the next order.

Rooney was quiet while he ate.

On the way back up 17th Street to the *Star*, Rooney walked a bit behind the group smoking a cigarette.

Later that day one of the senior copy editors stopped by Rooney’s cube. He leaned in and pointed at Rooney’s com-

puter screen. ‘I think you need a D there at the end of that word,’ he said.

Hanging on the wall by the restaurant’s front door are some framed yellowed newspaper clippings. One is a story about LaVerne Williams, a promising young outfielder for the Kansas City Athletics. The article is dated April 9, 1967 and includes a photo of a tall skinny black kid in a baggy cotton baseball uniform, holding his bat over his right shoulder. He looks intently into the camera.

Another framed clipping is an obituary for a Raymond Williams. It reads:

On February 28, 1986, Raymond L.Williams passed into the loving arms of his beloved savior Jesus Christ. He was 19 years old. He leaves to mourn his passing his grieving parents, LaVerne E. and Angela R. Williams, his maternal grandmother, Alberta H. Newton, and many aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends.

Raymond died due to a cardiac irregularity while playing varsity basketball for Prairie View A&M University. Raymond was loved by all who knew him. He graduated with honors from Central High School and was selected to the All-Missouri basketball team. He received a scholarship to Prairie View Agriculture and Mining University in Prairie View, Texas, and planned to attend seminary and enter the ministry upon matriculation from his undergraduate studies. Funeral services will be held at New Jerusalem Baptist Church at noon on March 4, the Rev. Orville P. Harris officiating.

Two of the framed articles are favorable reviews of the restaurant’s food – both from 1982. One praises the ribs and pulled pork. The other includes the restaurant in a list of

‘Recommended Joints’ in Kansas City, awarding it three ‘rib bones’ on the basis of its ‘tangy sauce and smoky brisket’.

The last frame contains a plain white sheet of paper on

which twelve lines of verse have been typed:
‘Peace’ by Ronald Ross
Now slowly sinks the day-long labouring Sun
Behind the tranquil trees and old church-tower;
And we who watch him know our day is done;
For us too comes the evening – and the hour.
Golden the river brims beneath the west,
And holy peace to all the world is given;
The songless stockdove preens her ruddied breast;
The blue smoke windeth like a prayer to heaven.
Underneath the typed lines is a handwritten note:
To LW from FG
(The stockdove is songless because she’s afraid you’ll put her on the menu!)

1
A New Life

The day Raymond Williams painted the words ‘SMOKE MEAT’ above the front door of his father’s barbecue restaurant, A.B. Clayton’s second stepfather was arrested for bigamy, after it was discovered he had another wife and three young children up in St Joe.
When the detectives arrived at A.B.’s house and announced their intentions, A.B.’s mother became agitated and began throwing wild punches at her husband and also at the police who had come to take him away. A.B. was fifteen years old. When the fracas spilled out onto the front porch A.B. slipped out the back door, walked down to the corner of 23rd and Chelsea and stood there wondering what to do. A preacher he saw on TV once said to pray when your heart is troubled. But A.B. Clayton didn’t know how to pray so he lit up a cigarette instead.
As he stood there, a squad car drove past. His stepfather was in the back seat bleeding from the nose. A.B. flicked his cigarette out into the street and started walking. He wondered what the next guy would be like.
17th and Walnut is a good four miles from 23rd and Chelsea, but A.B. didn’t notice how far or how long he’d walked or even where he was going. At one point he just happened to look up and there was Raymond Williams on a ladder, putting the final touches on the K. He smoked a cigarette and watched Ray start in on the E.
Ray looked down at A.B. ‘Hey.’
A.B. returned the ‘Hey’. He figured that the kid on the ladder was about his same age, but a lot taller.
LaVerne Williams came out to inspect his son’s work.
‘Lookin’ good there, boy. You almost finished?’

‘About halfway,’ said Ray.
‘Well, there’s plenty to do inside when you’re done. Don’t be up there all day.’
LaVerne looked over at A.B. ‘May I help you, son?’ he said, sizing up the smallish white kid with dirty blond hair, wondering what it was that had made him so sad.
‘Probably not,’ mumbled A.B. looking away. He dropped his cigarette butt to the sidewalk and stepped on it. ‘I need a new life.’
‘I don’t have one to give,’ said LaVerne. ‘But how about a job?’
A.B. agreed without a second thought, surprising himself. ‘When do I start?’
‘How about now?’ said LaVerne. ‘We got a lot of cleanup to do before we open. Then we’re going to need some help in the kitchen.’
A.B. followed LaVerne into the restaurant, went to work, and has worked there ever since. During that time, A.B has been absorbed into the Williams family. Before Raymond died, he and A.B. were especially close, even as the gap widened separating A.B.’s smoky greasy world in the back of the restaurant from Ray’s shining academic and athletic achievements.
A.B. is now supervisor of the kitchen crew and the primary operator of the restaurant’s smoke pit. People like the barbecue at Smoke Meat and he’s the one who makes most of it. LaVerne Williams depends on him and trusts him. He

was one of the six pallbearers at Raymond’s funeral. The other five were members of the Prairie View A&M basketball team. They towered over A.B. – a scrawny white birch in a grove of black oaks.
When Angela Williams asked A.B. to help carry her son Raymond’s casket, he said that of course he’d be honored, but thought maybe he’d have to pass.
‘But why, A.B.?’ asked Angela. ‘You and Ray were like brothers.’
‘Yes, ma’am,’ he said. ‘We were. But I don’t have a suit or a tie. I wouldn’t look right. I don’t want to embarrass you.’
So Angela Williams brought A.B. over to Michael’s Fine Clothes for Men and bought him his first-ever suit, a white shirt, a tie, and a nice pair of shoes.
After the funeral and the following meal at New Jerusalem Baptist Church, A.B. didn’t know what to do or where to go so he drove to his mother’s house. She was sitting on the front porch in an old recliner drinking a quart bottle of beer from a paper bag.
‘I hardly recognized you all dressed up like that,’ she said, taking a big hit from the quart. ‘What’s the occasion?’
‘I was at Ray’s funeral, Ma. I told you.’

‘Oh, that’s right. That colored kid at the restaurant. How’d he die, again? I forget.’
A.B. turned away, walked down to the corner of 23rd and Chelsea and lit up a cigarette.

2
As Seen on TV

After the lunch rush, LaVerne Williams sometimes takes a nap on the tattered teal-blue couch in the small windowless office in the back of the restaurant. Though LaVerne is a clean and tidy man, his office is a cluttered mess, in part because the space also serves as overflow storage for nonperishables. Bulk cartons of elbow macaroni, cases of vinegar, and #10 cans of tomato sauce, applesauce, and peaches are stacked around the perimeter of the room, except along the wall where the couch is. Having exhausted himself imposing order on all other aspects of his life, LaVerne Williams has neither the energy nor the impulse to clean his office. It is the one place where things are left just as they are.
The couch was the first piece of furniture he and Angela bought for their apartment after they got married, almost forty years ago. When they moved to their first house, the couch ended up in the rec room in the basement, then, eventually, Raymond and LaVerne hauled it over to the restaurant. In spite of the fact that it is too short by at least a foot for LaVerne to comfortably stretch out on, he has never indicated any desire for a newer or longer couch.
On the wall over the couch is a framed team photo of the 1967 Kansas City Athletics. Next to it is a framed picture of the old Municipal Stadium at 22nd and Brooklyn, where the

Athletics played, before Charlie O. Finley moved the team to Oakland in 1968.
On the gray metal desk in the middle of the room is a beige computer with a grimy keyboard and a fingerprintsmudged monitor screen. None of the restaurant’s employees can say for sure that the computer actually works. Functioning as a paperweight, perched atop a pile of pink and yellow invoices, is a bottle of deep red barbecue sauce. The label says, ‘LaVerneWilliams’ Genuine BBQ Sauce KANSAS CITY STYLE as featured on the *Morty Pavlich Show*.’
On the way back from filming a show in Branson in 1991, TV personality Morty Pavlich and his production crew stopped in Kansas City for some barbecue before flying on to Chicago. The show’s soundman was a baseball trivia buff and, during deliberations over which barbecue restaurant the crew would visit, he was flipping through the yellow

pages and saw the listing for LaVerne Williams' Genuine BBQ and City Grocery. The soundman figured it must be the same LaVerne Williams who played for the Athletics in Kansas City back in the late sixties and he convinced the group to pass up the better-known joints, Bryant's and Gates, for a visit to LaVerne's place.

A.B. Clayton was working the counter that day and was the one who took Morty Pavlich's order – ribs with two sides, greens and red potatoes. A.B. recognized him immediately. Sometimes when he got home late, A.B. drank beer in his underwear in front of the TV and watched the *Morty Pavlich Show* if there was nothing else on.

When Morty Pavlich and his crew sat down, A.B. scurried back to the office to tell LaVerne.

'It's Morty Pavlich!' he whispered loudly to his boss, who was counting boxes of paper napkins, and making notes on a clipboard.

'It's *what*?' said LaVerne vaguely, without looking up.

'It's Morty Pavlich! He's here! He's out front eating.'

'Morty Pavlich, the guy on TV, is *here*?' LaVerne asked, half smiling.

A.B. restated the facts and the two men went out to have a look. There was Morty Pavlich, gnawing contently on a rib bone.

LaVerne went over and introduced himself. Morty Pavlich was gracious and seemed delighted to meet LaVerne, but inasmuch as his fingers were covered in sauce, he didn't shake hands. The soundman wanted to know if LaVerne had in fact played for the Athletics. When LaVerne confirmed this, the soundman asked for an autograph.

LaVerne wouldn't let Morty Pavlich and his crew pay for lunch. As the group was leaving, A.B. rounded up the other employees and they applauded from behind the counter as if they were an audience at an actual *Morty Pavlich Show*.

A.B. watched the *Morty Pavlich Show* every night after that. On a Wednesday two weeks after his visit to the restaurant, Morty Pavlich mentioned the visit during the broadcast, specifically saying how good the sauce was. A.B was so excited when he told LaVerne about it he got choked up.

LaVerne had previously contemplated bottling and retailing his barbecue sauce, and this latest development seemed to present a perfect marketing opportunity. A few weeks later he signed a contract with a bottler in St Louis to distribute LaVerne Williams' Genuine BBQ Sauce KANSAS CITY STYLE as featured on the *Morty Pavlich Show*. When the first shipment arrived at the restaurant, LaVerne right away sent a bottle to Morty Pavlich with a thank-you note.

Three months later, LaVerne received in the mail an autographed photo of Morty Pavlich. No note. Just the picture.

About a week after that, LaVerne received a certified

letter from a law firm representing the *Morty Pavlich Show*,

informing LaVerne that he must cease and desist the distribution and/or sale of any and all products using the name Morty Pavlich in packaging or promotion, and that all existing such products must be immediately destroyed.
A.B. swore and cursed continuously as he and LaVerne heaved crates of the barbecue sauce into the dumpster behind the restaurant. In his rage, A.B. miscalculated the distance to the top of the dumpster and one of the crates bounced off the edge and landed on his foot. He couldn't work the next day and hobbled around for a week after that. Whenever anybody asked him about his foot he snorted and mumbled, '*Damn* that Morty Pavlich.'
LaVerne didn't say much about the whole affair, so it was hard to tell if he was angry or embarrassed.
In spite of this disappointment, on the wall of the restaurant, opposite the wall where Raymond's obituary is displayed, and among photographs of Kansas City Chiefs, and Royals, local politicians, and radio personalities, is the autographed photo of Morty Pavlich.