

The Top Door Jam

By Kenn Hartmann

Betty told everyone I was Farmer Torbensen's grandson, perhaps to protect me, maybe for expediency. Betty is as curious as anyone why I'd cruise from Chicago to this forgotten corner bar. 'Just to kick the top door jam,' requires explanation about a good-hearted local hell-raiser named Adolf Torbensen; my old man didn't call him Mister, he called him Farmer. That's what led me to this cool joint. Preacher will soon be here; 'Betty, another beer please.' I called Preacher earlier, maybe from Scandinavia where my cell phone still worked. I told him to meet me at County's J & C north of Iola. Schmidts Corner. My old man came here in the turbulent sixties. 'Now it's the turbulent 0-nines,' says Betty in low-key bartender banter. Nothings changed. OK, so the bar burned down years ago & rebuilt, so what? There's no evidence from here that an ephemeral 50's Malt Shop Diner ever existed across the road. Betty currently owns BJ's Schmidts Corner bar, regales me with stories & she uncovers a vintage b&w aerial photo of the place as it was when my old man dropped me at the ephemeral Malt Shop Diner while he strolled cross the way for a quick one. We camped on Farmer Torbensen's land, a wooded patch of pine, oak & birch on North Lake, ostensibly to commune with nature & fish. My old man wanted me to read Aldo Leopold. 'Hell no, I'd rather read Abbie Hoffman.' My old man believed it to be hallowed camp ground for more than dragonflies, chipmunks & pileated woodpeckers. I had a headache & lay outside my pup tent, maybe I was 13 poking



Betty at BJ's

ing at a campfire. I could see Farmer Torbensen as he strode lanky-legged tall saunter from the house in which he was born in 1877. He leaps over the wooden fence. Jesus, he's 88 years old & leaps over the gate in one bound. He jumps on my chest & pins me to the ground with his knees on my shoulders & pokes me unmercifully. As he holds me down, he says, 'when I was your age an Indian family camped here & caught snapping turtles & cooked them in boiling pots.' He had a tipi hanging in his barn as proof, no doubt sacred land.

My cell phone's out of service so I borrow Betty's phone. 'It's stuck on loud speaker,' she says. I call Preacher who should have been here by now. Lorie answers. She's up at Tomahawk bike rally being the quintessential editor's wife. 'Where's Preacher?' Turns out he's at J & C in Marathon



Farmer Torbensen

County & I'm at J & C in Waupaca County. 'Lorie, help me! Help me!' I'm imitating Cleavon Little in Blazing Saddles when the townsfolk find out the sheriff isn't what's expected (somewhere a church bell tolls for whom, wha?). Maybe I'm saying, 'Hep me, Hep me.' Lorie thinks it funny & the more she laughs the more I beg, 'come get me, get me.' She tells Laura the Potter in the next booth; in fact I drink potent ale from one of Laura's original mud-slung creations as I write these words, a skaldic mead. Later around a campfire on Preacher's sprawling estate, Lorie tells her daughter, 'there he goes again talking in that voice.' That voice is this voice. I hand the phone back to Betty. Another barroom patron named Jerry shows up at BJ's. His parents owned the bar in the sixties. Jerry says, 'Torbensen wore straw hats & did Norwegian jig steps with girls to whatever juke box tune played & we gave him a fifth of whiskey at closing for the long walk home.' Preacher finally shows. Thank god, because otherwise I'm getting drunk & going to sleep in the woods. Instead we hit the road for the Writer's Ride. Visions come true. On a fixed-fairing Harley Road Glide courtesy of Eaglerider.com. The FRP Writer's Ride, Preacher's like Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, 'I'm just jamming, you ain't got to stick around if you don't want to.' Forget guitars, take a motorcycle; shake it up with autumn leaves, be wary of deer & bear, ride with purpose. Unlike my usual Waltz through Hell with Devils of Eternity. Onward! To Rosholt! To Tomahawk, where the smoke of a thousand campfires drifts into a spectral night sky & someone fires a jet engine just to make me feel at home.

Apparently FRP fans know my third paragraph has nothing to do with the rest of the story according to a faithful FRP reader at Bubba's Big-Ass Party. When the dog awoke me on the couch outside the corporate offices of FRP in Stevens Point on Sunday, I ran back into the almost mystical forest out back of Preacher's place, a haunted trail in morning mist, ala' Aldo Leopold. I ran back there as a tribute to DJ a member of Wisconsin's 32nd brigade in Iraq – his journey, his quest, his service to people like me who are not worthy. DJ's most amazing gesture. Thank you, DJ, my brother. Thank you for your service & for sending me into the woods where creatures stirred unseen in the mist.

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A quote by Jay Leno:

'With hurricanes, tornados, fires out of control, mud slides, flooding, severe thunderstorms tearing up the country from one end to another; and with the threat of bird flu and terrorist attacks, 'Are we sure this is a good time to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance?'

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