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Trash Talk

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BRENDAN MAHONEY

Trash Talk

I'm nineteen and I guess I'm already something of a veteran in the food service industry. I've worked a fistful of jobs where it was my duty to serve people fast and to serve people cheap. When I turned sixteen my parents told me I needed to get a job. Any job. Get a job. They didn't care. The only important thing was that I GET A JOB. Both of my parents were teenagers during the recession in the seventies and I think that was just the approach that their childhoods taught them to take towards minimum wage labor. My mom worked at a Burger King to help pay for college and my father worked a series of odd jobs up into his twenties, which included shoveling shit as a farm-hand, hauling around trees at a lumber mill, and taking care of emotionally damaged children for a summer in a special needs foster home. They raised me in a small town in Southern New Hampshire where my job options were essentially selling people clothes or selling people food. For whatever reason, I ended up picking food and I've stuck with it ever since. I've made a lot of people a lot of food. I've also cleaned up a lot of their trash that they leave after they're done. A lot of their trash. Disposable wrappers, disposable cups, disposable bags, disposable napkins, disposable plates and forks and knives and spoons, disposable gloves, disposable people—at the end of the day, food service is a disposable industry. People are there to eat and leave, very often with little idea or little concern for what they're leaving behind. Spilled salt. Ketchup-mustard-mystery stains. Half-finished meals. Sometimes even extra trash that people dug out of their pockets and tossed onto the plates of half-eaten cheeseburgers as a tip.

My mind ends up wandering a lot, as is common in a job that takes about twenty-four hours to master. After half a dozen hours or so into a shift, I don't even have to think at all. Sometimes I don't want to. But when I do, my mind ends up wandering through the bits and pieces of trash that I find.

Every piece of trash has a story behind it. Where did this napkin come from? We don't have napkins like this here. Did it fall out of someone's pocket? Was it dropped by a child after a mother pulled it from her purse in order to wipe her child's nose? Why did he drop it after his nose was wiped? Did he decide at that moment to throw both his arms around his mother's neck and swing from her like an affectionate capuchin? What will happen next because of it? Garbage might be the absolute easiest thing to detach ourselves from. It's garbage. It has served its purpose loyally, and now the time has come for it to disappear. Bye-bye. But every piece of garbage, just like every person, has a story behind where it's been and a story behind where it's going. Sometimes I like to imagine where it is that trash originated. Sometimes I imagine where it's going. Sometimes I wonder why it was thrown away at all.

Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman's favorite strategy was what's known as attrition warfare. The word *attrition* comes from a Latin root verb that means "to rub against," so in Latin *attrition warfare* might be paraphrased roughly as "the warfare of rubbing against." In English it might be paraphrased roughly as "feeding a nation through a paper shredder." It's an all-out style of warfare that basically boils down to treating your enemy like a mistake you made on the SAT. It's the same tactic we used in Vietnam, where we napalmed jungles out of helicopters and killed about a million North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians before the war was over.

In the American Civil War though, General Tecumseh Sherman did this by conducting Sherman's March to the Sea. He and his army marched through Georgia, from Atlanta to Savannah. Sherman's troops passed the time on the three-hundred-mile march to the port city by playing cards, growing beards, and destroying anything they thought might be remotely beneficial to the Confederate economy. Roads, telegraph poles, and entire towns were rubbed into the ground. There weren't strategic geographic targets for the North and the South to fight over in the Civil War, so the only target for each nation was the other nation. The war itself was not, as many wars are, the result of an imperial conquest to expand national borders. It was an ideological war. It was a war over who was right and who was wrong. Eleven southern states declared that they were their own sovereign nation and twenty-three northern states disagreed. To battle, then. It was more a matter of endurance than it was a matter of geography. Sherman's bright idea for cutting down on Southern soldiers' endurance was apparently to cake the whole region's sky with the black, acrid smoke of its burning towns and cities so as to give every one of those soldiers asthma. Sherman knowingly began his march without enough supplies to last the whole trek and encouraged his men to "live off the land," which is to say raid and pillage the stores of food kept by the native Georgians

that they encountered. His men heated railroad tracks and then bent them out of position so that trains running along them would be derailed. Sherman didn't just want to win this war. He wanted to render the South incapable of winning. It truly was a bloody, messy conflict.

The last two summers, I worked at a family-owned amusement park making food. The scope of this place was massive compared to everywhere else I'd worked. There were something like two dozen restaurants across the park where you could buy food. They had a greasy Italian stand, a greasy seafood stand complete with greasy alcoholic beverages, a greasy fried dough stand, a greasy grilled cheese stand, a greasy café, and a few good old greasy American burger joints. All the food was overpriced and everybody in the park had already paid something like thirty dollars to get in, but they bought the food anyways because the park didn't allow you to bring in any outside food, and what else were you going to do when your eight-year-old started crying because you wouldn't buy her a hot dog? Plus, the park was essentially selling you the luxury experience of excess. Its motto was "Just for Fun!" You didn't *need* to eat two bags of cotton candy and then ride the teacups till you blew chunks over the side, but everyone should stop worrying so much and blow off steam every once in a while. It's Just for Fun!

This place was really massive. It was like a small town by itself. I think it must have employed some five or ten thousand people between everyone they needed to operate rides, to operate games, to make the food, to deliver all the stock, to maintain all the various shrubbery, to repair the electronics, to do all the office work, and to clean up after everyone else. The trash this place put out must have been formidable. I never saw all of it at once; I don't think anyone did. It would have been an attraction all by itself if they ever piled it up into one mountainous stack. *Hey kids! Come on down to the newest ride, Mystery Mountain! What's it made out of? Nobody knows! Grab a harness and start climbing! Make sure you have your tetanus shots first! And remember, it's Just for Fun!* In order to avoid that, they had each stand throw their trash in a separate dumpster and then, in the dead of night after the park had closed, the maintenance crews came and emptied them all out. I would find all sorts of things while I cleaned tables there. Your standard issue crumb-covered trays. Your toys that you won at Skee-Ball and then forgot about. Your park maps and your water bottles and occasionally your spare change. Into the trash bag they go. Into the dumpster it goes. Into the air it goes as exhaust shooting from the chimney sitting atop the Just for Fun! Factory.

I go to college in Western New York and during the school year I work at the dining hall. The work is mindless and the pay is shit but the hours are

really flexible and my commute is all of thirty seconds. I sign myself up for about five hours a week just so that I have some petty cash to spend. My shifts are usually during off hours like Saturday mornings or late at night so that I don't have to deal with too many rushes. Most days I end up tooling around the bakery looking for cookie dough to sneak or talking with the guy who only understands broken Spanglish over at the grill. I don't particularly enjoy serving college students food. It makes me wonder what all the people living in the town my university is in must think of us. We don't give a very good impression over the counter. A lot of the students I serve never look at me once and they talk to me like they're telling Siri how to make them a spinach wrap. And the trash here is almost no different. There are no trays and there are perhaps fewer people who will leave all of their trash just sitting out on their table, but how many people do you know who will sweep the crumbs off the table and wipe it down with a wet napkin (in other words, truly clean up their mess) before leaving? No one I know does.

One time I was working at the grill with the Spanglish guy and we ended up having to empty out the grease trap in the fryer. A grease trap is basically where all the various bits and pieces of food get stuck once the grease is filtered through it, along with a good couple inches of stale, murky grease. So this guy and I had to empty this out because it was getting full, which involved going out back in the middle of February in T-shirts and jeans. Neither of us wanted to be out there, so we rushed as quickly as we could. When we got out back, I learned where all the waste from this place was going. Not only was there this massive, industrial-sized baby landfill of a dumpster, there was also this enormous steel vault where all these greasy remnants got dumped and sat for a couple months until they were drained by who knows what company to who knows where. It was freezing, and we ended up pouring the grease too fast into this tiny funnel, and we spilled it all over our shoes. I stopped working at the grill after that.

The American Civil War officially ended on April 9, 1865. Four years and three weeks after it began. Over six hundred thousand American soldiers died in that period of time—the most American lives lost in any war to date. If it were an arcade game, U+C would be having one hell of a run at the top of the leader board. Right above “WWII” and “ASS.” The killing streak ended when Union Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant beat Confederacy General Robert E. Lee's army to the Appomattox courthouse where Lee was planning on regrouping his forces, and General Grant surrounded him. Lee was outnumbered and outmaneuvered. He had no choice but to surrender. *Freeze, Robert. Hands where I can see 'em.* Fighting would continue until June of that year, but Lee was the South's commanding general and with him captured the

war was over that day in April. The South actually worked pretty hard for its silver medal over the four years of fighting. They were at a huge disadvantage when the war began. It was just like the story of David and Goliath except not at all. The South's only real advantage was the international leverage that their cash crop, cotton, gave them. This cotton was harvested by black slaves. Slavery was, by the time of Lee's surrender, illegal in the Union and soon to be illegal across the once-again-united United States.

I hear a lot of debate today about whether or not the Civil War was fought over slavery—which is weird because, living in New Hampshire, I usually don't hear a lot of debate about anything. But I guess it makes sense if you know what Northern New England is like for the people living there. Once you get out of the suburbs of Boston into the upper half of NH, Vermont, and Maine, the average population density is something like five to ten people per square mile. My family drives up north pretty often to visit mountains or watch leaves change or do other activities you might see on the cover of an L.L. Bean catalog, and we always end up running across some hill-people of the Appalachian genus. When I was a kid and my knowledge of Southern states could be traced exclusively back to cartoons, I always thought it felt like as we went further and further north, the people came from further and further in the deep south. And, even now that my geographical knowledge base has moved beyond *Foghorn Leghorn* reruns, I think I see some truth to this—New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine are all about the Civil War South's principles of small government. New Hampshire has no sales tax or income tax. Vermont's gun laws are some of the most lax in America. Maine's state police are so unobtrusive that they've never caught a single serial killer, despite Maine being one of the states where I most feel like I might be murdered. At my small-town high school there was a group of kids who were into what I almost want to call "Redneck Couture." In school they all wore ripped flannel cut-offs and loose-fitting jeans with holes in them—not because they were too poor to buy clothes from stores other than Walmart and Goodwill but because they had enough money to dress however they wanted and they chose this style. In the morning they all tore into the parking lot in dumpy mud-covered trucks with Confederate flags whipping out the back—not because they could only save up enough money for a secondhand hunk of rust but because their parents had told them to pick out a car for their sixteenth birthday and they said they wanted the one with *MURICA* stenciled on the side.

So I heard a lot of debate in high school, and even now from those who I still keep in contact with, about if the Confederacy was fighting for states' rights or slavery. The kids at my high school who had the Confederate flag as belt buckles thought it was states' rights. And there's some truth to what they thought. The Democrat who ran against Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Stephen

Douglas, cited state sovereignty as his number one concern for the nation. Abraham Lincoln himself was, arguably, ambivalent about free black Americans. He was a member of the African Recolonization Society, which advocated not only freeing slaves but getting them out of America. He wanted to free Africans from slavery and free America from Africans. So yeah, the American Civil War was probably about states' rights. But what you can't ignore is the fact that all those states' righters were protesting for their right to slavery in the first place. It was written into the declarations of secession for many of the Confederate states that this decision was motivated by slavery. When people argue over whether the Civil War was a battle over small government or slavery, I think they both hold a piece of the puzzle. It didn't matter what was being fought over that day in Appomattox, though. The war could have been about which *Cooking Light* recipe made the best key lime pie. General Lee was captured and the war was won.

The first real job I ever had was at McDonald's. It was an independently owned franchise right next to a major highway exit. It had all the business that a major fast food chain would get with the resources of a family-owned diner. I worked there the summer of my junior year, which ended up being a more or less traumatic experience. The thing about McDonald's is you have to think about it at a theoretical level or else you'll never survive. As a customer or as an employee. You need to view your meal as a hamburger in the abstract, totally separate from the factory farms and the slaughterhouse floors and the flash-freezing and the tears of the teenagers doomed to drop out of high school that serve as your seasoning. And these fries, to you these fries are the idea of french fries more than they are starch sticks mashed out of a machine and then sprayed with a liquid sugar compound so that they'll look golden brown after they're fried instead of the dull grey that they normally would be. Yum. This soggy scrap of a chicken's ass that has been sitting in its watery heating tray is not being plopped down onto this bun by my own two hands for actual human consumption. No, it will simply get launched out into the ether. The first McChicken in space. Even the trash becomes conceptual. The gloves that I put on and then throw away after each order aren't made of a limited resource that I and everyone around me is consuming like we're all competitors in a petrochemical pie-eating contest. These are all just images and sounds and words drifting free of their meaning, and maybe in some ways none of this is actually happening at all. That'll get you through a day or two at McDonald's. But you can't out-think the sweet 'n' sour scent of a trash bin forever. Especially the trash bins outside in the parking lot. Those are the worst. The sun beats down all day as trash accumulates in and around them. Like the most vile smelling salts, the hot stench of the last few bites of

hamburger meat decomposing and liquidizing on top of the mustard that has begun a slow and revolting confluence with the artificially-flavored berry and banana smoothie at the bottom of a soggy apple pie tin will force you back to reality. As you jostle all of this out with the last hour's trash inside a grey plastic bin and hurl each leaky bag into the dumpster, the stench will stain your skin, your uniform, your memories.

There is an area of ocean somewhere between California and Japan known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The ocean currents in the Pacific swirl around and around, and I guess it's been creating this massive island of trash for decades. Conservative estimates place its area somewhere around the size of Texas. The wildest conjectures estimate that it could be twice the size of the continental United States. It's difficult to tell exactly how much of this trash has come from land pollution and how much has been hurled off shipping vessels, but scientists are generally willing to hypothesize that the trash is all from humans. No marine life has, to their knowledge, developed the technology to produce empty cans of Coca-Cola in any significant amount. If you've ever seen pictures of a turtle with its shell all warped from some little rubber band or plastic strip, it might just have been swimming through the Great Pacific Garbage Patch for a little too long. And have you ever seen those labels on packages of seaweed sold as snack foods saying that there's a chance this seaweed contains trace amounts of pelagic plastics? Could be the Great Pacific Garbage Patch yet again. And scientists have found evidence of a Great Atlantic Garbage Patch, and a Great Indian Garbage Patch as well. Trash piles the size of continents slowly swirling in widening gyres like dirty sinks swirling around clogged drains.

The American Civil War ended on April 9. President Abraham Lincoln's brains were blown free and clear of his body on April 14. At least he got to hear about the surrender of General Lee first. Maybe it was the last thing that went through his mind before the bullet did. Andrew Johnson, who had been Vice President for just a month before Lincoln was assassinated, became President. In politics, as in theater, it's often difficult to follow a great act. Lincoln was known and admired during his presidency as a moderate politician. Had he been alive for more than a week past the end of the Civil War, he might have enacted policies designed to integrate the Confederacy back into the fold of the United States and repair the damage done by the Union army during the Civil War. And that's what Johnson, as the President during the Reconstruction Era, tried to do. The difference between Lincoln and Johnson, though, was that people liked Lincoln. Johnson didn't have the charisma or wisdom to effectively rule the country the way Lincoln had. Congress actually impeached him and they almost kicked him out of office

on a technicality. They got within one vote. For a good decade after the end of the Civil War, the U.S. Congress was united in thinking two things: that Andrew Johnson was the worst and that the South had to pay. The Congress was controlled by Radical Republicans who treated the citizens of the South as war criminals rather than fellow countrymen that they had only recently finished murdering by the cannonful. They kicked all the Southern representatives out of Congress, and they didn't let anyone from the South vote in federal elections for about a decade. Congress also ratified what are known as the Reconstruction Amendments, which abolished slavery for good in the South and in theory granted black Americans equal civil and voting rights. Then one day, the North up and left. They disbanded the military gangs that had functioned as governments for the Southern states. They stopped enforcing their shiny new constitutional amendments. They left behind a fragile pile of Band-Aids that did little to heal the nuanced socioeconomic conflicts that had caused the war in the first place. They left behind a region that was still damaged and bloodied by their own hands. They left behind people who were just as racist and now even more angry, with a shattered economy and broken homes, to peacefully coexist with the men and women whom they had involuntarily freed. They left illiterate freemen in a world of hostility and Ku Klux Klans and Jim Crows. They couldn't handle—or couldn't even perceive—their duty of racial integration and economic repair for the damage they caused. They won the war but found themselves unable to deal with the consequences.

The Confederacy was the number one meal and the Union had a hankering for it. The Union pulled up to the drive-thru window and ordered one sloppy, self-inflicting victory with a side of fries, please. In the parking lot it dipped its meal in the Fancy Ketchup that the cashier had stuffed in its paper bag. Then it cruised by a trash can on the grass and tossed the greasy remnants in its general direction before peeling back onto the major highway entrance right next to the restaurant.

Today, eight out of the eleven original Confederate states are ranked thirtieth or lower out of the fifty states for education. Petitions still surface every so often in these states to re-secede from the United States. In September 2015, a city in Alabama discussed banning the wearing of short shorts at a town hall meeting. Just three months earlier, a twenty-one-year-old in South Carolina discussed igniting a race war. He decided to start with a church in Charleston, where he killed nine black churchgoers. His personal website was later unearthed, and he was found posing in picture after picture with the Confederate flag emblazoned on jackets or on the hood of his car.

As a child it was my weekly chore to take the garbage out to the curb every Thursday. I was paid five dollars a week, but if my parents hadn't had a monopoly on my allowance I probably would have asked for more money.

It was hardly worth the five dollars for me to wake up a half hour early every Thursday morning, empty out all the trashes in the kitchen and bathrooms and bedrooms and offices in my house, carry them all down to my basement, cram them into these little trash cans, and then carry those trash cans all the way down to the end of my driveway along with all the bins for all the recycling as well. The trash smelled bad and it got on my clothes right before the school bus picked me up. I wanted nothing to do with it. I remember being only vaguely interested in what happened to the trash after I brought it down to the curb. Every so often I would take a trip to the town dump to get rid of the weird stuff like computers and mattresses, and I never saw any trash there either. The town dump was really more of a very, very run-down secondhand shop. Anything the trash men considered worth saving was kept in a storage unit for anyone who also decided it was salvageable. There was a dumpster or two of recycling. But never any trash. Did we burn it? Did it fuel our street lamps at night? What do we do with our trash?

For anyone who is still curious at this point, I believe our most sophisticated solution to date is digging a hole in the ground for said trash and then burying it.

A fast food restaurant is a bit like an allegory for the rest of the world. We walk in, we pay, we eat, we leave, and we try to not think about what comes next. But the allegory is flawed. There are some key differences between a fast food restaurant and the rest of the world. No one is being paid to pick up after us in the rest of the world.