

Henry the Dwarf

Back in the day, the current site of Leandro's Ristorante, dishers of expensive plates of fettuchine vongole and veal milanese, was a take-out fish and chip stand. It was owned and operated by a dwarf, a tough, bitter, mean old son-of-a-bitch by the name of Henry. Henry, what kind of a name is that for a dwarf? Who calls their dwarf kid Henry? A dwarf should be called Pete or Sam. Sam, in particular, in my opinion, is a fine name for a dwarf. But Henry? Henry is the name of a king, Henry the Fifth comes to mind for some reason, Shakespeare's hero. But Crescent Beach's Henry was only the king of his crummy fish and chip operation.

Henry would take your order with resentment, as if you were bothering him, as if he was busy and had better things to do. Every single order he ever took was a pain in his dwarfy little behind. The food was terrible. Crescent Beachers almost never touched his stuff. You had to be desperate. The fish batter was oily and the fries were soggy. You'd end up feeding half of it to the sea gulls. Why you'd even buy it I don't know. Maybe hope against hope that Henry had heated his fryers to the right temperature for once. Henry's fish and chips were strictly for day trippers and tourists. If you had to have fish and chips you had to go to White Rock, a place called Pequod's. Pequod's did fish and chips right. Not only was everything fresh and crisp, but they didn't stint on the portion. If you ordered one piece you'd get two, two pieces and you got three, and so on. And these were sizable pieces, not pieces halved like in some cheap marketing gimmick. The only trouble with Pequod's was that it was a fifteen minute trip away. When you're living at the beach and you have a craving for fish and chips, the last thing you want to do is to get in your car and drive to another beach fifteen minutes away to get your fish and chips. I think Henry knew this and figured he had a captive market. "They want that White Rock stuff, let them get it."

What an ornery little bastard! Look, I'm probably being too hard on the guy. What were his options in life? The circus or fish and chips. Personally, I wish he'd gone with the circus option, that way we could have had decent fish and chips served with a smile or at least with more than one packet of ketchup. Over all the summers that I'd

had Henry's fish and chips he'd always only give you one lousy packet of ketchup. One packet was good for maybe two or three fries, if you could squeeze that much out without getting it all over yourself. You needed five or six packets, but you had to ask for extra. You'd stand there with your one packet and your paper container of greasy stuff (that was already leaking through the bottom) and he'd turn his back on you, get busy suddenly with something under the counter. "Excuse me, could I have a couple more ketchups, please?" But he'd pretend that he hadn't heard you and take the next guy's order.

One day, I guess I was fifteen or sixteen, I found myself, against my better judgement, ordering fish and chips from Henry.

"Excuse me, could I have a couple more ketchups, please?"

"I already gave you a bunch," he said, turning to face me, glowering, angry, like I was asking for a charity donation.

"I only got one."

"I thought I gave you more."

Like I was lying? Like I was trying to get something for nothing?

"No, I only got the one, just the one."

His dwarf face now flushing red.

"You need more you can come back."

"What?"

"Help yourself to a napkin, take as many as you want."

"How about just one more ketchup? If it's no problem."

"What do you want another one for?"

Huh?! What?! Was he serious?

"I got a lot of chips here. I like a little ketchup on my chips."

"A little? There's plenty of ketchup in there, you just gotta squeeze it out."

"Yeah, I will, but I know I'll need more."

"I already told ya, ya need more, ya come back."

He crossed his arms over his chest. I was a giant compared to Henry. I felt like vaulting over the counter and punting him. I'd been subjected to his miserable ketchup cheapness for as long as I could remember and I wasn't going to put up with it any longer.

"How long have I been coming here for fish and chips?"

"Never seen ya before, buddy."

"Never seen me, huh? Maybe I grew up tall and you can't see that high up."

“What’d you say?”

“I said where’s my ketchup?”

“You think just because you’re some spoiled rich kid who spends his summers down here that I got to cater to you hand and foot, is that it?”

“I just want some ketchup.”

“I know who you are and I don’t care what you want.”

“Oh yeah?”

I leaned over the counter and reached my hand down to the shelf where I knew he kept the packets.

“Hey! Whatta think you’re doin’? Get outta there! You can’t steal from me!”

I grabbed a fistful of packets and held them up, shaking them in front of his face.

“This is for all the times you never gave me an extra one, you cheap little bastard!”

“Who you callin’ little?”

“Who do you think?”

“Why you! Either you put them ketchups back or I call the cops! I’ll press charges!”

“Yeah? You go ahead, you call the cops, I’ll be right over there on that log eating your crummy fish and chips, but at least I won’t have to taste it because everything will be covered in ketchup!”

I have to tell you, I was really starting to enjoy myself, sweet revenge! when all of a sudden Henry swung his stumpy little body over the counter and made a dash for me. I didn’t know what to do, I was a lot bigger than him, I must have outweighed him by fifty pounds, yet I was lean and getting fairly muscular, so I wasn’t afraid of a dwarf, even a charging dwarf, but what do you do in a circumstance like that? So I started laughing, it seemed like the only possible response. What was I supposed to do? Slug him, knock him down? How would that look? Tall, fit teenager pounds defenseless dwarf into ground? So I was laughing but old Henry was coming at me like a bowling ball.

So I put down my fish and chips and prepared for whatever he was going to do. There was no telling what a mean, angry, motivated dwarf could do to you. Well, he ran up to me in that stumpy funny way that dwarfs run, and got right in my knee. Okay, that’s a cheap

shot, but it's about right, maybe he was waist high to me. So he's looking up at me from my waist, and he's flushed red as a stoplight, and I'm wondering what he's going to say when all of a sudden he hits me with a straight right below the belt! It hurt like hell! The guy had a wicked right, dwarf or not. I doubled over and stumbled back, cursing loudly. Jesus H. Christ! Holy shit! Man, did that hurt! When he hit me I dropped the packets. When I had recovered a bit I saw him picking them up. Little bastard! I grabbed him around the legs and lifted him up and over my shoulder.

"Let go of me you overgrown son-of-a-bitch!"

He was pounding on my back, but I couldn't feel a thing. I carried him kicking and screaming down the beach and out into the water.

"This is assault! I'll have you up on charges, you goddamned juvenile delinquent!"

"You know where fish comes from, Henry?"

"I can't swim!"

"They come from the ocean!"

"I can't swim!"

"Too bad, Henry! Sink or swim!"

I tossed him in. He landed in about three feet of water. Even a dwarf couldn't drown. He flopped around, staggered, and finally found his feet.

"You'll regret this! I'll have you thrown in jail!"

I was on the beach, looking back at him. "Next time I politely ask for an extra ketchup or two, give it to me!"

"You'll regret this!"

"Ah!" I waved him off and made my way up the beach. In the heat of the moment I hadn't noticed that a crowd of about twenty people had witnessed pretty much the whole thing.

No one said a word to me.

A sea gull was picking at my fish and chips. He didn't seem very impressed with it either.

That was a long time ago, one of my finer Crescent Beach moments, throwing old Henry into the salt chuck. I don't know how much longer Henry operated the business. I never saw him again, not that I stayed away on purpose. No, like everyone else, I started working summer jobs and said goodbye to the many pleasures of beach life.

Now his old stand is an Italian restaurant. You can order a bottle of Amarone for about eighty bucks. Fish is on the menu and they do a nice steak frites. I know, I've had both, and the Amarone, too.