

THREE SIDES

By Peter J. Stavros

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author JANET COLSON writes:*

In Three Sides, the act of reading a menu triggers memories and stirs up emotions that have been suppressed. Three is a magic number, and this is a magical short play that encapsulates the themes and delicious simplicity of the narrative in its title. There is marvelous economy of storytelling through the back and forth of the father and son, with repeating elements building to an inevitable conclusion. The uber-realistic dialogue reveals the inextricable connections we have with our food and our narratives - and each food tells its own story, from blueberry pancakes to melting ice cream. The tone is perfect; it's wistful and bittersweet, striking a balance of humor without becoming arch and delivering sentiment without sentimentality.

This is a story about relationships. It's about aging and looking into the future. The chasm between how things are and how we remember them. Saying one thing and meaning another. And the challenge of translating the past into a present in which every word takes on a new meaning.

Love this -

SON:

So how's everything going at the home, Dad?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Huh?

SON:

The ... home.

(Softer, almost in a whisper)

The rest home, you know.

(Normal voice)

Uh ... Birchwood. How is it?

FATHER:

Oh, it's fine, just fine. Yeah.

(Goes back to his menu)

And my favorite -

FATHER:

Every August, the church picnic at Camden Park - three dozen deviled eggs she'd bring, and they were gone in no time. Curtis from the donut shop ate about six himself, and then once his boys showed up ... you could forget about it. His oldest boy, the good looking one, has cancer.

THREE SIDES

Characters:

Father: Male, early 70's

Son: Male, early 40's

Waitress: Female

Setting:

Curtain rises on a booth in a restaurant. FATHER and SON sit across from each other, staring at their menus.

SON:

I think you're going to like this place, Dad.

FATHER:

Yeah?

SON:

Supposed to have real good barbeque - got four-and-a-half stars.

FATHER:

I like Hank's. They give you three sides.

SON:

This place has sides.

(Pointing on his menu, opened to FATHER)

Look at this column on the right, all the sides.

FATHER:

Yeah but Hank's gives you three sides with their dinner platters.

(Squinting, running a finger down his menu)

This place ... only two.

SON:

You can order as many sides as you like, Dad - this is my treat.

FATHER:

No, no, two's good. That's fine.

(There's a pause as FATHER and SON return to their menus.)

SON:

So how's everything going at the home, Dad?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Huh?

SON:

The ... home.

(Softer, almost in a whisper)

The rest home, you know.

(Normal voice)

Uh ... Birchwood. How is it?

FATHER:

Oh, it's fine, just fine. Yeah.

(Goes back to his menu)

SON:

You making any friends out there yet?

FATHER:

Huh? Oh, uh-huh. Yeah, it's fine.

(There's a pause as SON watches FATHER study his menu.)

SON:

You know, Maggie and the kids can't wait to visit you - as soon as the kids get back from sleepaway camp. Maggie drove them down today.

FATHER:

(Smiling)

Ah, sleepaway camp. I remember those days. Remember how afraid you were at sleepaway camp?

SON:

No ... I don't know.

FATHER:

That one time - ha, the only time - you swore you kept hearing a rustling under your bed, thought it was a possum. Couldn't sleep. Wouldn't turn off the light. Finally, the camp counselor called, middle of the night, your mother and I had to pick you up, clear out in the next county.

(Chuckling)

That was the last of you and sleepaway camp. Remember that? We stopped at Lefty's Diner on the way home. You were starving. You liked their blueberry pancakes.

SON:

Still do.

FATHER:

Still do. They really load you up. And sides. Two or three, do you know?

SON:

Huh?

FATHER:

How many sides does Lefty's Diner give you?

SON:

A couple, I don't know.

FATHER:

Sausage, biscuit, a fried egg - three I think.

SON:

Could be.

FATHER:

Yeah ...

(Returning to his menu)

like Hank's.

SON:

Dad, we'll go to Hank's if you want. I don't care. Just thought we'd try something different for a change.

FATHER:

Why no, this place is fine. Not going to get up now that we've already sat down, gotten our menus and waters.

(FATHER takes a sip of his water.)

SON:

Dad, it's no problem.

(FATHER just waves his hand and returns to his menu. SON looks at his menu, then back up at FATHER.)

SON:

You eating alright? How's the food?

FATHER:

(Looking up from his menu)

Food?

SON:

At Birchwood.

FATHER:

It's not bad. They serve a nice Salisbury steak on Thursdays. Haven't had that in years. Your mother used to make that on Sundays. So that's a little different, to have it on Thursday. But it's fine. They give you plenty. Really fill up your plate.

(Back to the menu)

Oh, fried okra. I might get that for one of my sides.

(Pause)

One of my two sides.

SON:

I'll buy you three sides, Dad - honest.

FATHER:

No, no, two's enough.

(Pause)

SON:

So are you keeping busy?

FATHER:

I can't hear you, Son.

SON:

(Louder, with emphasis)

Busy. Is there plenty for you to do?

FATHER:

Oh yes. I get a paper every morning, right outside my door. *USA Today*. You know, I subscribed to that when it first came out - how many years ago? It was, what, fifty cents then. Now ... two dollars maybe. Of course, I don't have to pay for it, the paper's just there right outside my door when I get up in the morning. I take it to the courtyard to read. There's some old man out there, a real mover and shaker, always asking for the Business Section. I give it to him when I'm done, what the heck.

SON:

You meet anyone else?

FATHER:

Hmm?

SON:

Besides the old man?

FATHER:

I see people. A lot of them are in bad shape though, poor folks, don't really do much, just sit there, looking at the TV. One guy just croaked. I take my walks - four or five a

day, depending on the weather, the humidity. They have a nice walking track, cushiony. Not sure what they call the surface. Like a sponge.

(Pause)

So where's Maggie and the kids?

SON:

Sleepaway camp. I told you. She was dropping them off.

FATHER:

Oh, that's right, that's right.

(Laughing)

Gosh, did you hate sleepaway camp, couldn't stand to sleep away from home. Suppose that says something about how your mother and I raised you.

(Contemplating)

Don't know if that's good or bad.

WAITRESS:

(Walking up to the booth)

Are you gentlemen ready to order?

SON:

Dad, do you know what you want?

FATHER:

Oh, I don't care. I'm sure it's all good.

(To WAITRESS)

Young lady, how many sides come with your dinner platters?

WAITRESS:

You get two sides -

(Leaning in, pointing at FATHER's menu)

Any two from this list here.

FATHER:

Just two?

SON:

Dad ...

WAITRESS:

Yes sir.

FATHER:

You know Hank's gives you three sides.

SON:

(Sighing)

Uh ... Dad.

(To WAITRESS)

If we can have just a little more time.

WAITRESS:

Sure thing.

(Walking off)

I'll be back to check on you.

SON:

Thanks.

(To FATHER)

Dad, why don't we just go to Hank's.

FATHER:

Gosh no. What? No, we're here already. This place seems fine. They have stewed apples. Your mother used to make stewed apples. In the summer, she'd serve a spoonful over a scoop of vanilla ice cream, the heat of those stewed apples melted right through. You had to eat it quick, or else you'd be left with a bowl of mush. Ice cream soup, you called it.

SON:

So that's it?

FATHER:

What's that?

SON:

Your sides - fried okra and stewed apples.

FATHER:

Oh, I don't know. I haven't decided yet. It's a long list.

SON:

Do you want a third side?

FATHER:

(Puzzled)

A third side? But you only get two sides - the waitress just said. Didn't you hear her?

SON:

We can go to Hank's. Is that what you want? Hank's?

(Putting his menu down)
Let's go to Hank's. We got time. When do you have to be back?

FATHER:

Be back where?

SON:

At the home. Birchwood.

FATHER:

They don't care. I'm not as bad off as the others. I can pretty much come and go as I please.

SON:

(Hesitant)

I'm not sure that's true.

FATHER:

We can't leave before Maggie and the kids get here.

SON:

They're not coming - sleepaway camp.

FATHER:

Yes, that's right. You told me.

(Frustrated)

I can't keep it all straight sometimes.

(Back to his menu)

Look at these sides. Macaroni and cheese. Potato salad. Lima beans. Deviled eggs. Remember your mother's deviled eggs?

SON:

Uh-huh.

FATHER:

Every August, the church picnic at Camden Park - three dozen deviled eggs she'd bring, and they were gone in no time. Curtis from the donut shop ate about six himself, and then once his boys showed up ... you could forget about it. His oldest boy, the good looking one, has cancer.

SON:

So deviled eggs?

FATHER:

What?

SON:

Fried okra, stewed apples, and deviled eggs. Your three sides.

FATHER:

(Confused)

But ... you only get two sides here. This isn't Hank's.

SON:

Dad, you can have as many sides as you want. I told you, it's my treat. I haven't seen you in a while, since, well ... we moved you in. It's just been kinda crazy with us lately.

FATHER:

I understand. Don't worry about it. How's work?

SON:

It's fine. Same old.

FATHER:

These government cuts aren't going to affect you, are they? I've been reading about them.

SON:

No, it'll be okay.

FATHER:

If you need any money - you know, for the kids, school supplies, hot meals on the table.

SON:

We're fine, Dad. Thanks.

FATHER:

Where is Maggie anyway?

SON:

She left me, Dad.

FATHER:

Huh? Oh ... sleepaway camp with the kids. I remember.

SON:

No. I mean, yes, she took the kids to sleepaway camp. But she's not coming back home.

FATHER:

Oh.

(Looking down)

Oh. Well ... these things ... people sometimes ... you never know what might ...

SON:

Dad, that's okay. I'm fine. We're all fine. We're trying to work through this.

FATHER:

I see. Well, if you ever need any -

SON:

Thanks, Dad.

FATHER:

You know, for hot meals on the table.

(Pause)

SON:

(Running a hand over his face, sighs)

So what do you say, Hank's?

FATHER:

What?

SON:

Let's just go to Hank's.

FATHER:

But we're already here. We already sat down. We got our menus and waters. We can't just leave.

SON:

Sure we can. Let's go where we can get three sides with our dinner platters. I don't know what I was thinking bringing us here.

FATHER:

It's nice enough, this place, but if you figure -

SON:

Yeah, let's go.

FATHER:

Where?

SON:

Hank's. I'd rather go to Hank's.

FATHER:

Hank's? Okay then, if you say so.

SON:

(Faint smile)

I say so, Dad.

(FATHER and SON get up from the booth and walk out of the restaurant, SON with his arm on FATHER's shoulder.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I get a lot of ideas for my writing from conversations I have (so be careful what you say around me!). "Three Sides" started that way when, while on a trip to North Carolina with my dad, I took him to a new barbeque restaurant that I thought he'd like. But he was dead set on going to the same barbeque restaurant we always went to, mainly because you got three sides with your meal there (whereas you only got two sides at the other place). Rather than argue with him about it, I wrote this play (adding in a side of drama). Among my literary influences, especially when it comes to playwriting, is Sam Shepard, and what I really admire is how, in his plays, he was able to portray such a wide arc of emotions through his dialogue.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. "Room 310," and "Ten Something in the Morning" from Volume 2 of Fleas on the Dog, are from his forthcoming chapbook, Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore, which will be released this May by Etchings Press (<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros. His story **Room 310** is published in this issue (Fiction).*

EDITOR'S BIO: Janet Colson is a playwright/director/pole dancer in Lansing, Michigan. Her hybrid piece, *Storycatcher*, is pending publication in the upcoming issue of *The Champagne Room*. She is a collaborator for Ixion Wheel's *rUSt*, a theatre piece that has been postponed due to coronavirus. Janet has just completed *ZA-92*, a short play about putting on a show during a zombie apocalypse. She is currently working on a play about coming out in quarantine. Janet received her MFA in creative writing at Goddard College last June. Her play **Coming Down** and her **poetry** are published in this issue.