



**Northern New England Review**

**VOLUME 43 | 2023**



*Andrew Miller*

## **IT WAS THE RACCOONS**

I've always wondered why people can get so angry about killing animals. We eat meat, don't we? And some folks get bothered about lots more than pigs, chickens, and cows. They'll get into a dither if you build a road or drain a swamp and wipe out a few woodland critters.

However, a conversation I overheard last summer made me think differently.

That conversation took place at the "Men's Breakfast" in a small restaurant in Downeast Maine. My wife and I aren't Mainers; we were born and raised in Kentucky. Since we teach during the winter, we can spend our summers on the Maine coast. After we arrived last May, Stuart Fedder, who lives next door, invited me to join him and other men for their weekly gathering at the Captain's Café. It's a homey little restaurant known for its fish chowder, lobster rolls, steamed lobster, and traditional breakfasts. They mainly serve fishermen and townspeople.

The breakfast eaters are 20 or so older men, many retired, who have known each other for years. They sit around a line of tables in a small room off the main dining area. These get-togethers are uneventful; the same people come each week and talk about the same things. They discuss the price of lobsters, boat repair issues, the number of tourists in town, and the weather. The men avoid politics except when it comes to Town Meetings. They are pleasant enough, although they still treated me like an outsider.

They have an unusual way of settling the check. The servers provide a single bill that includes everyone's meal. Each man estimates how much he owes and tosses his contribution on the table. One fellow determines if the accumulated cash matches what's needed. On the first pass, it usually does not, so a call goes out for more. The men dig back into their wallets, and eventually, everyone's breakfast, including tip, is covered.

Occasionally, someone will bring a guest, usually a relative or friend from out of town. Right before Labor Day, my neighbor Stuart brought his son-in-law, who was visiting from Pennsylvania. Jason was short and slim with sideburns like out of the 60s. He shook hands with everyone, answered questions about what he did for a living and how he liked Maine. It was obvious that the men lumped Jason with me as being from "away." I had always thought of Pennsylvania as more northern than southern and was surprised they didn't claim kinship with him, especially since his in-laws are deeply rooted here.

Stuart and Jason took seats opposite me. We were near the head of the table, close to windows that looked out over the street. Stuart handed a menu to Jason.

"Now, this is on me," he said.

Jason touched his father-in-law's arm and smiled.

Stuart dropped his menu without looking at it and asked Marty, who sat next to me, about work on the golf course. The Coastal Country Club was built in the early 20th century, and there's a long-term plan to redo the greens, sand traps, and fairways. The owner wants to modernize everything, make the course more challenging. Jason followed the conversation but kept quiet. Likely he did not play golf, although his father-in-law played several times a week.

Two ladies started taking orders, working their way down both sides of the table. I selected bacon, eggs, and an English muffin. Marty ordered a three-egg cheese omelet, a sausage biscuit, and a bowl of oatmeal. His doctor told him the oats would lower his bad cholesterol. Stuart wanted scrambled eggs, sausage, and a grilled muffin, a specialty at Captain's Café. These are made by halving and buttering day-old muffins, then caramelizing the cut sections on the grill. Some men complain they are the cook's way of foisting off day-old leavings, but others counter that once fried, they are superior to those straight from the oven. That tired discussion was aired again—mainly for Jason's benefit—although he didn't seem interested. He pulled out his phone, scanned emails, and added cream to his coffee.

Our food began to arrive, and the chatter slowed. Stuart and Jason spoke in low tones about buying lobsters for a family get-together. After they agreed on logistics, Stuart asked Wilson how his grapes were doing. Wilson, who's hard of hearing, used to run a bank in Vermont. Now he has severe arthritis and can't take more than a few steps without a walker. Despite his mobility problems, he's very active. I regularly see him taking refuse to the recycling center or shopping in town. He's also an avid golfer and zooms around the course in an electric cart. He navigates to his ball using the walker. He has a slight tremor in his right hand, and a small puddle of coffee always accumulates in his saucer.

Wilson spread a lump of raspberry jam over his toast. "Raccoons got every last one." He took a big bite, then a long drink of coffee.

Several years ago, two neighbors built a gazebo for him, and the vines reached the top this summer. He spends a lot of time tending to them, clippers and other tools stowed in a little basket slung over the walker. He also cares for a bed of gladiolas along the driveway.

"Well, that's a crock," said Stuart.

"I've been nursing them for years." He set his coffee cup down with a bang. A dab of jam clung to his upper lip.

"You need a have-a-heart trap," said Carter, who sat at the head of the table, back to the windows. "I've got three. You're welcome to them." Carter is a very big guy, over six feet tall, and weighs 250, maybe more. He always orders two breakfasts: a stack of pancakes or waffles, then a plate of eggs, toast, sausage, or ham. The others were always after him to ante up for two meals. Even so, Carter was a bit of a celebrity for being able to consume so much with so little effort. Those sitting next to him felt inadequate if their plates weren't heaped with food.

Wilson said he had ordered two traps online, but the raccoons ate everything before they arrived.

Carter shrugged. A server, likely in her late twenties and quite pretty, set a plate of pancakes in front of him. He elevated each with his knife, spread butter, and drizzled on syrup. He sliced

out a wedge, stabbed it with his fork.

“Once you catch them—then what?”

Wilson stared at his plate while he pondered the question. Carter assumed that Wilson hadn't heard and started to repeat himself, but Wilson interrupted. “Tote them to the gravel pit south of town.”

Carter shook his head. “Bad idea. They'll migrate back to your place.”

Jason picked up his muffin. “What do you mean?”

Carter ignored Jason and spun his plate to bring the uncut pancakes closer. “I got into that last year. Took a couple of raccoons down by the shore. Next day, they were back.”

Jason spoke up again, his voice louder. “How do you know they were the same raccoons? Maybe they were new ones, moving into the territory—”

Carter dribbled more syrup on his pancakes and glanced at Stuart. “Looked the same to me.” He turned to Wilson. “I quit transporting them.”

Jason leaned forward. “What do you do with them?”

Carter waved his hand like he was shooing a fly off the table. “Just let them set.”

“What do you mean—'let them set?'”

Carter cleared his throat. “Wait till they die, then truck them to the landfill.”

“How long does that take?”

“To get to the landfill?”

“For the raccoons to die.”

“A week or so.”

Marty rapped a spoon against his glass to get Wilson's attention. “Hey, Wilson,” he called, “shoot them. That's what I do.” Jason turned to Marty. “While they're still in the trap?”

“Sure.”

Carter took a long drink of tomato juice. “Once, a big one flipped the trap over and got stuck upside down. He didn't last long.” He slid the empty pancake plate away and hauled in his second breakfast: scrambled eggs, fried ham, and whole wheat

toast. He stared at the ham. "I can tell they're dead when flies start buzzing around."

The conversation stopped while a server worked her way down the table, refilling coffee cups. She had two pots, one for decaf and one for regular. This server was old and had a tired-looking, wind-blown face. She probably used to work on a lobster boat. The good-looking one was at the other end of the table figuring the bill. While the older one poured, I wondered how guys from back home—those who hunted along the upper Kentucky or Green rivers—would react to this discussion. For them, shooting raccoons would have been the first step, quickly followed by butchering and eating.

Jason leaned forward. His face had taken on a reddish cast. "Now let me get this straight." He pointed his fork at Carter. "You let the raccoons starve to death—"

Stuart laid a hand on Jason's arm. "Now, son—"

Jason brushed the older man's hand away. He focused on Marty. "And you shoot them while they're in the trap." His voice was getting louder and drowned out the others. He tossed his fork on the table. "Think someday you'll graduate to 'ducks in a barrel?'" Marty looked to the left and right. He started to speak, then stopped.

Jason glared at the two men. "Tell me again—what are those traps called?" Suddenly, the room was quiet. The only sounds were a light clatter of dishes in the kitchen, muffled voices from the main dining area.

Carter exchanged glances with Marty. "Just a damn minute—"

Stuart lifted his hand as though to shield his son-in-law. "Now, let's all take it easy."

The two servers backed against the wall. The good-looking one started for the kitchen. Jason pushed his chair back and stood up. His eyes swept the table. It seemed like he paused on my face longer than the others. Maybe he expected me to say something. Stuart tugged at Jason's sleeve. He had thrown his shoulders forward like he was going into a fighting stance. Carter stood up. His Adam's

apple bobbed up and down. Two little veins bulged out on the left side of his head. Stuart jumped to his feet and draped one arm over his son-in-law's shoulder. "Come on...."

Jason grabbed his wallet. He slipped out a pair of twenties. "Let me buy you guys breakfast." He dropped the bills. One landed on his eggs, the other fluttered to a stop next to Carter's juice glass. Jason strode toward the door. Carter started to follow, but Marty gripped the big man's arm. "Leave it alone, Carter, leave it alone. The kid's gone."

Stuart set a couple of ten-dollar bills next to his plate. A few seconds later, he was on the street, running after Stuart. The others got to their feet and pulled out their wallets. Wilson had a tired look on his face as he tucked two fives and three ones under his plate. Maybe he blamed himself for starting the conversation. A flicker of jam was still on his upper lip; most of the original smear had either been licked off or wiped away. After a few minutes, all the men were gone. The café owner set the check in front of me. I collected and counted the cash. There was a lot more than needed. The servers would divvy up fifty dollars.

I skipped the next two Men's Breakfasts. Just too busy packing, I told my wife. It's a 1,200-mile trip to Louisville and takes four days. I went to town several times but never ran into Carter or any of the others.

Now I'm back in Kentucky. Many months and hundreds of miles from the Men's Breakfast. But that conversation still haunts me. It was the raccoons.

The other day, I learned a new word: gibbet. It was from a book by Bill McKibben that my granddaughter said I should read. The subtitle "A Graying American Looks Back..." made her think of me. A gibbet is an instrument of public execution, such as a guillotine, iron cage, executioner's block, impalement stake, or hanging gallows. According to McKibben, in 1775, a slave to John Codman was hanged, tarred, then displayed in an iron gibbet for several years. Twenty years later, Paul Revere casually referred to that site during his midnight ride. Gibbetting was also a method

of execution. The accused was set on an impalement stake or inside a tiny cage to die of exposure, thirst, and starvation. Jesus was gibbeted.

I can't stop thinking about those raccoons. Spending days and days in a tiny cage—maybe stuck upside down—gradually dying of thirst and hunger, wallowing in their feces and urine. Or watching a man approach with a gun, knowing you were about to be shot. What a way to die.

Why not just drive a few miles and turn them loose?

I should have come to the kid's defense. Or tried to defuse the conversation. But it's too late now. Anyway, we'll go back next summer. My wife likes it there.