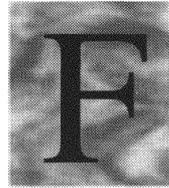


Stocking

Jubal Tiner



Fast Eddie Canton hated doing the beans. All beans — green beans, red beans, Spanish beans, kidney, lima, chili, string, or three bean salad.

He hated the cans, he hated the boxes, he hated their prices. His stomach revolted at the thought of ever eating such monstrous malfunctions of nature. Bean stock time made him positively mean. To Fast Eddie, beans— at their very best — were fucking boring.

His blue '75 Camaro was already parked in the lot of Thriftway when I pulled in past the portable lighted sign which flashed "God Bless Our Troops." I hopped out of my parents' Dodge, which they let me drive to work in the winter because the heater worked, and pulled my collar to the cold, rushing through the electric eye on the automatic door and into the antiseptic grocery store.

Fast Eddie, often just called "Fast," was in the stockroom. He threw me my smock.

"It's a bad day for the world," he said. "Today we lose a troop of Marines, and tonight we get to stock the beans."

I laughed. "Becoming a poet, are we?"

"A fledgling, of course," grinned Eddie. "It goes well with my peace-nik attitude, don't you think?"

"You need a guitar," I added, pitching my coat onto the stack of paper goods in the corner and slipping into the smock. Eddie and I had



decided to grow our hair long, get a couple of peace sign tattoos, and see if we couldn't organize a store-wide walkout on St. Patrick's Day as a protest to the war. Neither of us had ever had green beer before.

Eddie grabbed the first trolley of beans and headed up to the door. "Man, it's bad enough that I've got to stay up all damned night just to earn minimum wage, and they don't even have the decency to let me stock the tampons or something. No, they got to give me the stinking, lousy, rotten..."

I hopped onto the trolley, grabbed the price gun, and stuck three price clips across the forehead of the wildly gesticulating Fast Eddie.

"Limas, right?" I finished for him.

"I take it you don't want the bean scream, tonight?"

I shrugged.

"So how did I do?" asked Eddie, indicating his forehead. I quickly added the tags.

"Sixty-eight cents," I said. "Either real cheap or a penny too short."

"It is not — I mean not — my night."

We ran into Hanover and Katch coming through the canvas doors from the floor.

"Let me guess, Fast — judging by the fact that I can hear you bitching all the way out in the parking lot, you're stuck with, uh, oh, well, it's a long shot...beans for the night!" said Hanover with forced idiocy.

"Eat it," said Fast.

"And gwow up big and stwong, coz I eated my gween bweans," Hanover shouted back, sucking his thumb. He and Katch laughed uproariously, shucked coats and donned smocks.

"He hopes you get dog and cat food," I yelled for Eddie, who was busy degrading the boxes of beans with expletives I'd never heard. I figured he was making them up as he went along.

"No, no," yelled Katch. "Cereal for the dough boys!"

"That son of a bitch," said Fast Eddie. Cereal was the gravy route for the night's stocking. Easy boxes, light, and big. Plus, you always had to accidentally slit open a box or two of Captain Crunch, and then were forced to eat it because you couldn't stand not putting together the secret code laser headset at the bottom of the box.

"Ah, Katch is such an ass-kisser," I said.

Hanover was stock-shift manager, and he worked out the stock schedules. Usually the head manager was in the store for part of the night, but he had a wife and kids and wanted to be home with them. So Hanover was in charge as soon as he left, and he never let us forget it. Hanover was 28, and the grocery business was turning into a , using the word loosely, career for him, and he made it his duty to trash the high school guys he worked with by scheduling them for the worst details. Except Katch. But from where Katch's nose was, we all wondered if he knew what sunlight looked like.

“Sacrificial Bread!” shouted Fast, squeezing a loaf of Roman Meal into a round little ball and throwing it back at me. I pitched the crushed sack of bread over the meat counter where the butcher would grind it in with the first batch of beef the next morning and laugh to himself while he did it.

“Beans, beans, the magical fruit. The more you stock, the more you’re screwed. Beans are gonna drive me outa this place, Fuller.”

“Aw, you love it and you know it,” I said.

“Are you kidding?” Eddie exclaimed. “Spending my sleep time here, or time I could be out cruising, or at Sarah’s place?”

“Crusin’ for some bruisin’.”

Eddie grinned. He and Sarah were tight. I figured them for marriage. He grabbed the stock knife and split the top of the first box of beans with a firm and assured hand, smiling to himself. Yeah, he and Sarah were the real article. She was crazy about him. You could see it in her eyes. And there was a lot more to him than the regular high school lay.

“Lay’em out and stack’em yack’em.”

We worked in tandem into the night, a machine — splitting, stooping, lifting, stacking. The rows of cans began to fill the shelves, a fortress of metal, paper, and various fleshies of the earth around us. Time was suspended, wrapped through rising cylinders and spun through the daze of rote action.

“Break!” The call rang out from Katch, working the fruit and vegetable aisle at the south end of the store. “We’re watching the war.”

Fast Eddie kicked back in the aisle and stared at the walls of the beans surrounding him.

“Are you gonna watch?” I asked.

“The war?” he said.

I nodded.

“What’s to watch — if you’ve seen one scud drop, you’ve seen ‘em all. The only difference is in degree.”

I laughed, sitting down among the empty boxes and the long trolley still sulking with its pregnant load of legumes. I closed my eyes, listening to the distant hum of the buffer as the head manager, Ralston, finished the wax job before heading home to his wife and kids. I wondered if there wasn’t more glory in life than waxing the Thriftway floors at thirty.

“Think Ralston likes his job?” said Eddie idly, thinking my thoughts.

“Pitifully,” I said. Eddie pulled a Snickers bar from his pocket, peeled back the paper, and downed it.

“Wife and kids,” he mused. “It’d be alright.”

I smiled.

“Fast Eddie Canton — Homemaker of the Year.”

“Fuck you,” he said, laughing.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “All blow and no go.” He was silent. The hum of the buffer died. We sat in the stillness for a moment or two. I listened to my breathing, the late-night blood beginning its cycle through my veins, ringing loud in my ears, pushing out the vessels in my forearms, raising the bluish tubes in my hands to the skin’s surface like Braille.

“‘Bout time to get back at it,” I said. “I can hear the beans pouting.”

“Fork’em,” groaned Eddie, getting up from the floor.

The machine began again, mindless mechanization working over Van Kamps, Hunts, and Food Club, organizing into rows, columns, groups, regiments — straightening, synchronizing, marching them off in drab identical dress towards the crest of the aisle. I must have placed at least three cans before I realized the lights had gone out.



“Shit,” I heard Eddie mutter before cans of beans cascaded down on my head, the rumble of falling, clinking, crashing cans rolled down the aisle back to where we had started.

I tried to move out of the way and slid hard to the floor on one rolling can. Flat on my back with the wind knocked out of me, I watched the lights flick back on.

“What the...” started Eddie, looking wildly around.

Then he saw them. Among the mounds of cans lying in the aisle around us were half a dozen grapefruit. Recognition flashed across Eddie’s face, then he shouted at the top of his lungs.

“FOOD WAR!”

Eddie grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

“We gotta move,” he shouted, grabbing the splitter and hefting a box full of beans to his shoulder. My breath was back, and I laughed.

“Move or get beaned,” I said.

“Shock and Shell beats stock and sell,” he said, quickly moving up the aisle.

“The battlefield poet strikes again. If we’re drafted you can be a priest. You know, last rites and all that poetical stuff.”

Fast reached the end of the aisle and whipped to his left, split the box, and slung its contents in the direction Hanover and Katch would come. Cans of beans clattered to the floor, rolling crazily on the new polish.

“Let’s stock,” I said quietly. The two of us had no questions. Everything on the late shift was an inevitable ritual. It concurred with Nature’s fascination with entropy; it was a mathematical equation; Boys + Food + endless hours of pumping blood and boredom= Boom! Boom! Boom! The four of us left two hours for clean-up afterwards, carried out the “remains” with us to dispose of in the public dumpsters in

the city park, and Hanover chocked up the lost food to a margin of error in shipping. Since only so much of certain items could be taken, our first priority was for counterattack and Katch’s second offensive was to stockpile ammunition.

“Mustard...mayo...tomato sauce...” I rattled off, five jars of each into the shopping cart Fast had commandeered.

He shouted to the empty aisles.

“We’ve tapped Mustard/Mayo/ and Sauce!”

The shout came back. Katch’s voice. “Fruit and milk are ours!”

“Quick,” said Eddie. “Ultimate weapon time!”

Katch’s voice again. “Cole Slaw is ours!”

Eddie shoved the cart towards me and I jumped to meet it headlong, catching hold as he accelerated around the corner. The double aisle of frozen food loomed ahead. I grabbed the 10 pizzas we were allowed, along with the twenty triplet packs of Gerber’s sample selection, just as Hanover and Katch appeared at the top of the aisle.

“Get’em!” Hanover shouted.

“Dammit,” said Fast, shoving the cart into gear, the scream of his tennis shoes tortuous on the newly polished floor. I jumped to the side and pulled the cart, and suddenly we were the most careening nightmare of a grocer let loose to run amuck through the wilds of frozen foods and spaghetti sauce.

Fast nearly lost it around a second corner and Hanover and Katch were gaining, but I managed to snag a bottle of bleach and spill it in front of the enemy. Katch landed on top of Hanover and they slid into a display case of Chip’s Ahoy. When they unburied themselves, Eddie and I were already over the glass meat counter with our supplies.

“A fine mess you’ve made back there, I must say,” droned Eddie in his best cockney accent,



using the lid of an olive jar as an eyeglass, as Hanover and Katch retreated. He popped one of the olives in his mouth. "Let 'em come," he said, unscrewing the cap of the first economy size jar of Grey Poupon.

"Nothing but the best to 'muster these boys with," I added, noticing the brand selection before the lights went out again.

"Buncha faggots," he muttered under his breath. "Always fuckin' around in the dark."

Fast turned on the range the butcher kept behind the grinder and the coils on the stove top began to glow. I could see Eddie's clenched-jawed face in the red glow from my position beneath the glass case of the meat display counter. The night closed in, possessed me, the red glowing eye reflection of Fast Eddie Canton, as he stood stalking in front of the range as the coils turned orange...crimson — blood red.

"Where's the grease?" he whispered. I told him and I could see his shadow move to set the large cans of grease on the glowing coils. In the now dimmed glow, his figure moved toward me.

"We didn't get any beer, did we?" he suddenly asked.

"No. I could never decide whether to drink it or shoot it, so I gave up the last time. Sorry buddy, no suds."

"No sweat," he said, his voice cracking. He repeated it. "No sweat."

I saw Hanover poised above us with a bucket of cole slaw in mid-throw as the lights came on.

"Duck!" was all Fast could get out before the green and white mixture splattered on the display case like bugs on a summer windshield. I countered with a bottle of Poupon, the yellow suspension wiping across Hanover's chest and face, his tongue whirling wildly around his chin, sucking in the mixture with an aggravated shout. I saw Katch falter as Hanover staggered

back. Fast put the shot at Katch with the second salvo of mustard. Ducking most, Katch turned and ran, yellow dandruff flaking his hair. Hanover had disappeared. Fast touched his finger to his tongue and signaled a one in the last flash of light, and I heard his hiss rush in volume with the darkness.

"One for the real stockboys," he said, the adrenalin oozing through his invisible grin, like manacotti cheese through leaves of baked lasagna.

"Grease it," I said, grabbing a broom. Fast wrapped his hands in the butcher's towels and reached for the glowing kettles of grease. I hopped the counter, and as he poured the melted grease onto the floor, I swept it across as large an area as I could.

Fast grinned in the stove glow after I had hopped back over. "Slick," he said.

"We'll save the broom," I said. "It'll come in handy in Phase Two."

"You got it," he said. "Let's assemble."

Fast and I went straight to work, putting into action battle plans made a month in advance. We'd decided to let Hanover and Katch initiate the next war, and when they did, we'd be ready. During breaks or times when they were across the store, Fast and I had fashioned the pieces of our battle plan into a smooth-running framework, going over the steps each night as we stocked. We'd also developed what we believed to be the ultimate weapon—light, aerodynamic, and disgustingly messy.

"Frozen sausage pizza topped with Gerber's Yummy Yams and Tantalizing Tomatoes. Talk about a fling," said Fast.

"Pass the tomatoes," I whispered, unwrapping a large pizza and applying ample helpings of baby food in a ring around the edges with a big glob in the middle. "Number one is armed and ready to fire," I said with mock intensity.



“Kick ass,” he said. “Lay’em out.” We stacked our weaponry on one of the butcher’s carts, readying ourselves.

“They’ll be back any minute,” I said. “We’d better hurry.”

Greed spread upon Fast Eddy’s face as he eyed our tray full of flying baby Italian nightmares. Slowly his fire faded to doubt in the glow from the stove.

“Do you think they’ll match The Sling?”

“Sure, buddy,” I smiled. “We’ll see them and raise the ante— but we’ve got to get the buffer.”

“We’ll get it,” he said, grit in his voice.

The next barrage came, laced with more cole slaw, ham salad, mac and cheese, and stewed tomatoes. We rallied with the rest of our mustard, mayo, and most of our spaghetti sauce before Hanover and Katch slid through the grease on the floor to soggily regroup somewhere else in the store. Fast and I still remained unhit.

“This is it, buddy. Operation David.”

“Goliath is goin’ down,” I returned, hopping over the counter, careful of the grease. Eddie handed me my broom and two trash can lid shields, then came through the entrance of the meat department pushing the tray full of Pizza Baby Food Bombs or PFBF’s. We struck a course for the top of Aisle 17, where the buffer sat like a tank, gleaming in the moon half-light shining through the huge front windows. Loading the buffer with artillery, we transformed it, and ourselves, from shadows to fighting machines.

“Ready?” I asked breathlessly.

Fast went over the critical plans. “The Sling will be in its usual position. Once we drop the lights, you won’t be able to judge the distance, so take it easy.”

“You’re on.”

He concluded with a simple “Move out.”

The buffer was an ancient model, more like a bread truck than something you would use to polish floors. It was big, hard, and semi- self-propelled. Two people could ride on it if they positioned themselves correctly, ducking down, which Eddie and I did. The rumble of the buffer was the snarl of the sleeping grizzly awakened. Fast and I heaved it around the corner of the aisle and sent her with one giant shove toward Hanover, Katch, and The Sling, which lurked on Aisle 1.

Instantly the lights went on. I heard the “splosh-splosh” against the front of the buffer. We raised our trash can lids for extra protection, huddling against the metal. Fast stuck his head up quickly.

“Grapefruit! From The Sling!”

The Sling was a giant piece of innertube that Hanover had gotten from a blown tire on his father’s tractor. For the past several skirmishes, he and Katch had effectively mown down Fast and I using the innertube strung between two support pillars like a huge slingshot, firing anything from water balloons to watermelons.

Again a “splosh” as a grapefruit exploded against the upper corner of the buffer, a near-miss sending pink pulp and juices flying over our crouched heads. I could hear Hanover swearing up and down. Looking over the top of the buffer, I saw Katch hurriedly loading a batch of red and black orbs into The Sling.

“Here come the tomatoes.”

Hanover was known for “accidentally” misplacing bags of tomatoes for several weeks, conveniently rediscovering the rotten vegetables just in time for an offensive. It was amazing he didn’t get caught and fired.

Rapid-fire explosions smattered the front of the buffer. I saw several tomatoes fly overhead and smash into shelves, spraying their milky-



red insides over everything from check-out counters and magazines to the Coors display cases featuring buxom babes in bathing suits.

“Yuck!” I laughed crazily. It was the perfect insanity— rotten tomato flesh spewing like vomit on cans and registers and the latest swim-suit issue.

Hanover’s shots died suddenly. I readied the broom, holding it like Babe Ruth playing tee-ball. Fast raised himself high, standing on the end of the buffer. He grabbed the first PFBF and flung it, shouting “LEFT!” I swung out and up on the left side of the buffer, raising my body into the swing. The grease-filled end of the broom exploded into the face of a very startled Katch.

“Four!” shouted Eddie, dodging a tomato and flinging a pizza in the general direction of Hanover. Sudeenly the crash of glass exploded in my ears.

“Holy shit!” shouted Eddie, ducking down as Katch wiped grease from his face. I heard glass shatter again against the front of the buffer and saw a jar of peanut butter go flying past us to smash and explode against the counter of Checkout Lane Five.

“The fucker’s shooting jars at us,” Fast shouted in disbelief. Sudcdenly pissed, he stood up. I tried to pull him back down, but he wouldn’t budge. He was yelling at the top of his voice.

“Hey, asshole! Just what in the name if Christ do you think you’re doing?”

“Pizza, Fast!” He passed one down just in time for me to score a direct hit on Katch, who was scrambling towards the back of the buffer. Katch didn’t flinch and just kept coming on, looking like a baby tomcat that’d been thrown in a lake full of mayonnaise and spaghetti sauce. Fear was in his eyes. When I threw the next pizza at him, I realized he was staying behind

the buffer for protection against the jars Hanover was crazily hurtling at us.

“LIGHTS!” shouted Fast.

I slung the broom out from the other side of the buffer, just missing a jar of Skippy Thick and Crunchy, and aimed at the bank of light switches on the wall about ten feet from The Sling. I could see Hanover mouth something obscene just before the lights went out, and the tank rumbled on toward him in the sudden blinding darkness.

The crunch of breaking glass and the unmistakable squish of smashing fruit mixed with the awkward crash of Hanover’s dive away from the oncoming buffer and the fading footsteps of Fast Eddie off to my right.

Suddenly the buffer slowed and strained, its motor beginning a long rise in pitch which soon reached scream proportions as it pushed against the elasticity of The Sling; and David was in the Lion’s Den, his stone raised in defiance, his aim true. I reached for the splitter resting on the buffer and lifted it. In the whine of the buffer’s engine, it became a sword, a bayonet, the jaw-bone of an ass. With a downward stroke, I split The Sling, barely hearing its rubbery backlash, as the two severed pieces complied with their natural order of expansion and contraction, this last time destroying the purpose for which they had been fashioned. The buffer lurched forward and I jumped off it, shutting its power down and listening to it bump into the wall beside the vegetable rack filled with carrots and cabbages.

Quick scuffling sounds broke the silence, then nothing...only heavy breathing. I heard Eddie’s strained voice.

“Lights...”

I flicked the switches.

Fast was on top of Hanover, sitting on his stomach and pinning Hanover’s arms to the ground with his knees, the remains of a PFBF in



Hanover's face and chest. The last PBFB was on the floor by Fast Eddie's knee. There was a terror I'd never seen in Hanover's eyes.

A peanut butter jar was held aloft in the shaking hand of Fast Eddie Canton.

"You son of a bitch."

"I wasn't..." started Hanover, but he was overridden.

"You son of a bitch," Eddie repeated, a broken record, spinning top, springs loose and wires snapped. He kept whirring around and around, you son of a bitch, the same face, rumpled hair, twisted lip, insane eyes. He whispered it to Hanover, and brought the peanut butter jar down hard.

It shattered on the tile floor just beside Hanover's face — exactly where Fast Eddie had aimed it. He withdrew his bleeding hand from the jagged glass.

Hanover's face was terror in shame, and I watched the wetness in his crotch spread through the fabric of his slacks. Fast Eddie suddenly laughed. He reached back into the smashed jar and dug, a curious chuckle gurgling through his body. Fast spread the peanut butter he had dipped up with his fingers over Hanover's face, as if he were applying lotion to the back of a bronzed goddess. He stared down at Hanover and grinned.

"I quit, you mother fucker."

I started in disbelief.

"What?"

Fast Eddie's gaze never left Hanover's face. He spoke quietly, evenly.

"The world is unsafe with YOU in it." The emphasis on "you" echoed throughout the store, magnifying, pluralizing.

Katch was at my side.

"We beat you," said Fast Eddie, gripping Hanover's face. "We'll always beat you. So find some other boy to take your shit." He lifted himself and stood in defiance over Hanover's crumpled, terrorized form.

"So long, asshole." Then he turned and came to me. I gave him the high five — we connected.

"I'm enlisting," he said simply. He grinned and began to walk past when I saw Hanover raise the final PBFB.

"FAST!" I shouted.

He was still smiling when the pizza hit him full in the back, sending shrapnel of baby food like flesh in all directions. His smile froze; a light was in his eyes...not terror, amazement...nothing.

Then he winked at me.

Fast Eddie turned slowly and laughed at Hanover, who was standing straight, thrusting out his chin, chest, and body — peanut butter face, soaked crotch and all.

Eddie took off his smock and pitched it at Hanover's feet. Then he pushed past Katch and I, stalked into the electric eye and through the automatic doors, the red stains on his back camouflaging him from my sight.

