

Expletive Pizza

Mary and I were on foot, exploring the old town of Canterbury, above which we lived, on the mountain called Storm King, which overlooked a bend in the Hudson just North of the US Military Academy at West Point. The little town was only 50 miles from Manhattan, but, having lost its West bank rail connection to the city, it was a bridge too far to be a bedroom community for urban commuters. Instead, it sported innumerable bars and small factories, and served commuters to West Point and nearby Stewart Air Force Base.

Barely noticed among the clapboard homes and creaking shops and bars, a tiny simulacrum of West Point worked its magic on young boys in what was known as the “upper village.” This was the New York Military Academy, whose high school program “builds character within a highly structured and challenging 24/7 military environment.” Not far from NYMA, a side-street pizza restaurant sold excellent New York style pizza, and when my wife and I strolled past, the aromas drew us in.

It was early for lunch, but as former Manhattan dwellers, we couldn’t resist the prospect of “real pizza,” usually only available in the city at unidentified pizza dives scattered like parmesan over the whole island. We sat in a dingy booth with a carved-up wooden table and sipped high-syruped Coke while our order baked in a stone oven. There were two other customers at a table near the door, where the summer sun colorized the worn linoleum, pocked with flat pats of black and hardened gum.

Our pie arrived and we were not disappointed. The mozzarella might have been brought up from the city, from a Real Italian Delicatessen that imported Real Cheese from the mother country. The sauce was excellent,

and the crust thin and crisp with just enough doughiness to qualify as bread. As we ate, the church bell at St. Thomas of Canterbury tolled noon, and the couple by the door looked up, finished their meal and left.

A few minutes later, roughly the time it takes a band of ravenous high school freshmen to cover the half-dozen blocks from NYMA, the restaurant was filled with boys, yelling, laughing, swatting one another, clamoring to get their orders taken during their highly structured and challenging lunch hour. They all wore grey uniforms, with the same black line down the pant legs as the plebes at West Point, and crisp officer caps with shields above the visors. These they doffed as soon as they were inside, loosening or removing their neckties, pulling off their jackets, reorganizing themselves into maximum disarray with an insouciance born of weeks, or months, of experience.

Mary and I enjoyed, genuinely empathized with, this transformation, and we tried to remember those childhood moments of sudden release from the bonds of academia, the first day of an extended vacation, the ineffable joy of that last day of school. Around us, the boys gradually settled into cliques and clusters, jamming the booths and tables beyond any plausible maximum allowable capacity. While the physical motion of several dozen 13-year-olds diminished, the sound level increased in inverse proportion.

The restaurant filled with a din we hadn't experienced before. The boys' cries and exultations began to display hierarchical maneuvers, each cluster of kids vying with its neighboring clusters for social rank based on the frequency of utterance of four-letter words. From the booth next to us, a diminutive cadet who looked 12 if he was a day out of eighth grade said, "I fuckin' hate that fuckin' fuck-head, don't you?" His companions crowed their concurrence in a flurry of confirmational fucks. The big table in the center of the room erupted with a brief chant of "fuck the navy, fuck the air force, fuck the marines," to which another table responded simply, "fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!" Then everyone cheered, and a rhythmic chorus of "fuck" went round the room for a few moments.

Soon it quieted down as the pizzas began to arrive at the tables. The jubilant waves of monosyllabic expletives subsided into the sounds of speed-eating and Coke slurping, over a gentle susurrations of "fucking good," and "mmm, fuck," and an occasional proforma "fuck you, plebe."

Our pizza was long gone, but we enjoyed the atavistic transformation of little soldiers into fountains of freshly minted testosterone too much to leave. Besides, we didn't relish their likely response to a pair of adults, one of whom was an attractive woman, further firing up their manly cohort.

We hadn't long to wait. The church bell had struck twice since their arrival, and when it tolled the three-quarter hour, the entire population of the restaurant stood up as one, hastily reconfigured their uniforms, still jostling and swatting one another with cries and mutterings of fuck this and fuck that, and within 60 seconds the restaurant was as empty as a deserted foxhole.

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