

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

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Busboy

It would be hard to understand the peculiar nature of the Jersey Shore of 1969, and especially of Seaside Heights, without a glimpse into the lifestyle inside Joey T's, the Seacoast Inn and the other restaurants and clubs like them.

The Seacoast Inn and Joey T's nightclub next door were a bit of North Jersey at the shore. They were like Newark on the ocean.

Having grown up in North Jersey, that world was not completely alien to me. Though I never shared the values that were part of that lifestyle- I didn't get off on clothes or cars- and I wasn't into the money or the tough-guy attitude, but I was fascinated by it. I was interested, without necessarily wanting to be a part of it.

The year before, in 1968, the same year I graduated high school, I had gotten a job as a busboy at the Seacoast Inn. I worked the breakfast and lunch shifts in the diner section of the restaurant. My station was the long narrow front area, that consisted of a breakfast counter, and a series of gold, fake leather booths that lined the windows overlooking the Boulevard. Part of my daily routine as busboy was servicing Joey T's booth.

Anybody who knew Seaside Heights, knew the name, Joey T. Joey T was from East Newark, at that time, the Italian working class section of the city. He owned the Seacoast Inn and the nightclub that had his name, next door. He also owned, though it was difficult to say exactly how many other businesses in town. Rumors circulated about his holdings - which restaurants were his, which wheels and arcades did he own, which rides on the pier?

I knew for certain that he owned the Lincoln Avenue Arcade on the boardwalk- and that huge, block-long arcade would have been enough for most people- but not Joey T.

Joey would arrive at the Seacoast every morning at eleven. Never alone, he was always accompanied by an entourage of shady sycophants, who would join him in a cigar, call the waitress, and spread the day's racing form on the table. Joey and his associates went to Monmouth Park every afternoon. Rain or shine.

At six- three, barrel-chested and bull-necked, Joey T was a commanding presence. And when he nodded at me, with that great stone face, I have to admit it was a rush.

As well as I did eventually get along with Joey, my favorite character in the group was Richie Franco. A friendship of sorts outside the Seacoast had even developed between Richie and me. Richie, unlike the others, wasn't even Italian. He was Spanish- Portuguese, which was an unusual heritage for that scene. But Richie was an unusual guy. First of all, I never did quite get what Richie did for money. He always had it, but he never seemed to do anything to get it. All the other guys owned businesses- restaurants, clubs, rides out on the piers, arcades. And though tales still persisted about the origins of Joey T's initial capital, it wasn't hard to see where the profits came from later. But with Richie, it was all a mystery.

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He was different in other ways too. True, he went to the track, and always drove the latest Cadillac, and talked tough- and I never doubted for a moment was tough- he was much more complicated than that. He was an artist who had lived in the Village. And in a crowd where musical taste began with Sinatra and ended with Jerry Vale, with some Frankie Valli and doo-wop in between, Richie knew his Thelonius Monk and Charles Mingus, Dylan and the Byrds.

Still, though Richie had been hip enough to get stoned with several of the famous Beat poets, he did grow up in Newark, a best friend of Joey T. And I knew enough about that scene to take Richie Franco with all his charisma with a grain of salt. There was something ominous hiding underneath all of that charm. Like Joey T, there were also stories about Richie Franco. Some of them about how he in fact made a living. And what exactly that entailed.

One late morning, a few months after I had started working at the Seacoast, and out of nowhere, Richie surprised me by asking if I wanted to go to the track. I was clearing the table around the racing forms, while Richie was in the midst of solving another problem. Richie always had advice for someone.

"Let me tell you somethin' bird. You gotta torch that fuckin' joint." He started then paused for a sip of coffee. "I'll even sleep in there the night you do it. You know, make it look good." He laughed. "You gotta wake up Anthony. Your manager's robbin' you blind. Your chef's a friggin drunk. I was in there...when was it? Remember Joey. A coupla weeks ago..."

Joey nodded as he lit another cigar. Rolling columns of smoke swept through the rays of noontime sun.

"Christ, he was so shitfaced," Richie went on, "I couldn't get a decent order of clams. You gotta stop bein' a fuckin' victim Anthony." With that he lifted a beefy hand and slapped Anthony on the back of his head.

"Am I right bird?"

"Huh?" At first I hadn't realized that Richie was talking to me. "What?"

"Fuckin kids stoned again. Look at him. Ah. That's alright kid." Richie leaned over and wrapped a ham-hock arm around my shoulder. "This is my buddy. Let me tell you somethin'. This kid gets more than all you greaseballs put together. Chicks love that long hair, don't they bird?"

I felt the warm blood rising in my face.

"Why don't you come to the track with us today kid? We'll go out to eat after."

I didn't want to admit I had never even been to the track.

"Come on bird. It's just gonna be me, Joey and the Midget." He stopped suddenly and looked down at his watch. He leaned an arm over the back of the booth glancing around the restaurant. "Where is that little prick anyway? Joey, you seen the Midget yet?" Richie turned around to Joey. "It's getting late."

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Joey puffed his cigar and shook his head.

In their sudden preoccupation it became apparent that they had forgotten that they had invited me. I was at once relieved and disappointed.

Just then the Midget did come in. He sauntered over to the table, looking completely ridiculous in stiff denim jeans, cowboy boots and a huge ten gallon hat.

"Where the hell you been?" Joey lifted his massive arms. "Chrissakes. We're gonna miss the first race."

"Yeah, I know Joey. Fuckin' piece of shit car." The Midget started in that deep voice that always surprised me. He removed his shades from under his ten gallon hat. "You were right Joey, I shoulda got a Caddy."

"I told you." Joey puffed his cigar

Unlike giving a nickname like "Tiny" to a Giant, the Midget, as everyone called him, actually was very short. Barely five feet tall, he had "earned" his nickname years back in high school in Newark. "Earned" was the right word for it because it was Joey T himself who started calling him The Midget, and being nicknamed by someone like Joey, who already had a reputation as someone with a sure future in organized crime, it was a mark of distinction. So since those high school years, the Midget, whose real name was Jimmy Molinari, became one of Joey T's closest friends. Joey was his protector and benefactor in business. Not that The Midget needed much protection. Because though short in height he was powerful and heavily muscled, and had his own reputation for toughness. He also had a great singing voice and would show his talent at Joey's night club—hence the outrageous outfits he was often seen in. Though personally, I could never figure out a squat and stubby gangster, in a cowboy outfit, singing Sinatra tunes to a jukebox. It was a truly bizarre scene.

And I supposed, just as the lifestyle indigenous to Seaside's Seacoast Inn was fascinating to me, conversely, my thing was interesting to others. I was the only freak they knew. The only surfer and long hair.

So I wasn't surprised that I spent half the summer of '68 dodging the moves and advances of Diane Trentacosta. Diane was none other than Joey T's nineteen year old daughter. Diane ostensibly worked as daytime hostess at the Inn, though I never saw her do anything even remotely resembling work. Instead, she ate black beauties like candy, chain smoked Newport, talked on the phone and chased me around the restaurant.

Not that Diane wasn't nice looking. She was. Really nice looking. But knowing her father, and believing most of the stories told about him, getting involved with his daughter was enough to dampen any sexual notion I might have had. Petite Diane had a personality and tough speech that didn't fit her stature.. She had wavy brown hair and huge, liquid brown eyes. Her oval, cherubic face seemed destined to show future weight gain. But then and there, at nineteen, she had as the waiters from Newark would say, a body that "don't quit."

But she was Joey T's daughter.

Every once in a while she would catch up with me. She would corner me, thrusting that firm body against mine, as Newport smoke encircled

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us. "So, when we goin' out?" She called me Johnny. "You can't run away from me all summah." She insisted in that heavy Newark accent. She would stand on her tip toes and wrap her arms around my neck. My gold polyester busboy's vest would tighten, and admittedly my hormones would ignite, and I would envision a night with the lovely Diane. But then, inevitably, Joey would appear within the mist of that heated fantasy, black cigar in menacing grin, and douse the flame.