

# Grilled Cheese Sandwich with Pickles and Fries

Julie pulled a pair of glasses out of a fabric case in her purse when the lights came down for the movie to start. I didn't know she wore glasses. She wiped them clean on the hem of her skirt. What movie was this we were seeing? This was a long time ago. Did we even go to a movie together? She was always breaking dates. Hard to imagine we ever actually made it to a movie together. I finally got fed up and stopped trying to see her. She had dropped by the bar where I worked and told me she had a poem she'd written about me, she'd get it and bring it by in a few days, but she never came back. My heart closed on her like a door shutting locked, the key lost or thrown away.

I don't know if Leon was lost or thrown away. He was the only man my mother ever loved. I know this only because she told me one day, during a drive not more than a year or so before Julie and the poem. She told me Leon had been a friend to her and my father back when they were younger than I could ever imagine them having been, even after I saw the photographs, the black-and-white glossies and the color slides. My mother had loved him and that was why I was named after him. I don't think he's my father. I didn't ask. When my own son came along a few years later and sometimes so resembled my father and my brother in mannerisms and expressions, I for the most part no longer had any suspicions about my parentage. I don't know what my mother told my father as to why she wanted to name me Leon. "I like the name"? That might do.

I don't know if Leon wore glasses. My son wears glasses and so do I. So do my mother, my brother, my father, and the mother of my son, whom I first met a few weeks after Julie never came back and who never said anything to me about my underwear, not that I can recall. She never said to me what I said to myself about one particular pair of my underwear one evening not long after she and I split up, when I was getting ready for a date or maybe not, maybe I was just considering how I might like to go on a date and how nice it might be to have sex again and I said to myself, "Change your fruity underwear, your puce- or fuschia-colored underpants, get them off and get these macho, muy butch and manly black jockey low-riser underwears on, this is the most important thing to do before a date, trust me, it is, if she sees you in your pansy panties," and I don't remember what happened after that but I do remember there was no sex to be had in my life then. None whatsoever, not even with

the woman walking down the sidewalk with a lollipop in her mouth, saying hi to strangers. Who was she? This was downtown and I was on my lunch break. This unknown woman with the lollipop was wearing dark sunglasses and probably a blouse and jeans, I don't clearly remember. She had dark hair and was petite. She seemed happy to the point of goofiness, what with the lollipop and all, so right away I figured she was one of the routine downtown crazies, maybe a whore but maybe not. I didn't say anything to her. Don't talk to strangers. No telling what might happen. Could be opening a chasm to talk to a stranger, a falling into a black hole.

What falls into black holes? I may have asked my son that, or he may have asked me. He would have been about six years old when this happened, around the time I started working downtown. He knew all about black holes. He asked me one day, when we were walking to our favorite downtown diner for grilled cheese sandwiches and milkshakes, "Daddy, does anything travel faster than light?"

I started to tell him the story of the tachyon but he interrupted me by saying, "What about the inside of a black hole?"

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "There's this thing called the event horizon and once light gets past it, it can't get back out because it's fallen into the black hole, and that must mean that the inside of a black hole moves faster than light."

This is the best I remember of what he told me that day as we were on our way to get grilled cheese sandwiches and chocolate shakes, but the echo in my memory tells me what he said was more profound than I've been able to reproduce. I do remember it was one of the most profound things I've heard anyone of any age say.

I said to him, "Nothing falls into black holes. All matter is energy—"("I know," he said—) "—and as soon as the energy reaches the event horizon, it bounces back off because it has been compressed to a point tending to infinity. That's where we get quasars."

"Daddy, you don't know that," he said, and I said, "You're right, but I know this is the front door to the diner and we go in and get grilled cheese sandwiches and milkshakes," and he said, "Chilled grease sandwiches! Shilk-makes! Yay!"

Music played over the PA system in the diner. Love songs. Piped-in music, broadcast music, programmed music, telephone music, everywhere you go when you might have a moment free, if there's not a television turned on for you to watch, there's music for you to hear. Love songs. Several generations now of people in wealthy, developed nations constantly exposed to love songs. Churning the market for love. Hard for marriages to withstand the barrage.

My son and I sat in a booth. The waitress took our order, her uniform a light blue blouse and a dark blue miniskirt. The skirt, her legs, my son across the table from me, love songs on the PA system, sex everywhere, everywhere, not a thought to think.

"Civilization is a secondary sexual characteristic," I said to my son.

“What are you talking about, Daddy?” he said.

“It’s like this,” I said. “The guy who figured out how to make fire got all the babes. Ever since then, everything we make and do—stone tools, basket-weaving, pottery...” and I went on like that for the time it took for our lunch to arrive. When it did, the waitress setting down our plates of grilled cheese sandwiches with pickles and fries and our tall glasses of chocolate milkshakes, my son said, “Whatever you say, Daddy. Let’s eat!”

I said, “Yeah, let’s! Goodness, gracious, great God Almighty, I’m hungry!”

Though only a fool or a madman speaks openly and seriously about the nature of God, here I am, coach, ready to play. Having no lollipops, underwear nondescript, I ate my sandwich and refrained from telling my son, my captive audience, that the information accumulation evidenced by the development of deoxyribonucleic acid is the universal counterpart to the second law of thermodynamics and is the meaning of life. To believe this is to believe something as impossible to verify as virgin birth or bodily resurrection or attaining nirvana, and none of it will pay the check at the diner, even if all of it, material and ideal and all hues between, turns out to be a baroque-complex expression of one particular species’ secondary sexual characteristics. The waitress looked good but I don’t attempt to pick up women in the company of my son, not then and not now. And she looked to be closer to his age than to mine.

Would my son remember this lunch? This sandwich, these fries, those milkshakes, that waitress’s miniskirt, the guy who figured out how to make fire, the law of entropy, the event horizon and the speed of light? When I see him again, will I remember to ask? It was a long time ago. Many lifetimes are shorter. Much shorter. Mine has been long enough for me to feel myself closer to the end than to the beginning.

I remember telling my son this a few years ago, when he was in high school. We were driving around in the city one autumn evening, bored with our toys and with ourselves, looking out of our car at all the other people going by, some likely as bored and boring as we were, all of us so deeply entangled in a web of counter-entropic secondary sexual characteristics that we might as well be raindrops buffeted in a thunderstorm.

Is memory a secondary sexual characteristic? Is it an emanation of a counter-entropic force? Shared memories tie us together. Call it the “remember when” function. One loss I didn’t foresee when my wife and I split up was that there would be a large part of my life with whom there would no longer be anyone to share memories. Something at the tail end of a dream I had later was this idea that shared memories are part of what binds us together, that a sense of history, a common history, is a human need.

Now we have so much history we can’t keep track of it. We have so much history that is so appalling, we can hardly stand to face it. Who is all this history for?

What is the meaning of all this memory?

The standard form of a scientific paper begins with a theoretical question, which is followed by the description of an experimental technique designed to gather observations pertinent to the question. Only then are the observations themselves described. Finally, there is a discussion section in which sometimes a great deal of energy is expended rationalizing the failure of the observations to accord entirely with a favored theory, and in which proposals are made for other experiments that might give more satisfactory results.

Did Jesus Christ see his life and death as the fulfillment of a debt to God arising from the Hebraic abrogation of the ancient sacrifice of the first fruits? To attempt to answer this question we must review and analyze all the available writings—the raw historical memory—and compile the points for, against, and immaterial to our question. Without the man himself, be he divine or not, to question directly, no firm and incontrovertible answer is possible. One may as well be inquiring into virgin birth, the hypostases of the archons, or the existence of the tachyon. A more satisfactory result may be to say that since Abraham, whatever his reasons, stayed his hand when about to slaughter Isaac, Jesus had to die in a manner that at the crucial moment seemed to him to be an utter abandonment by his God. He was not the first or last to feel this way, not by a long shot.

Did unrestricted submarine warfare signify the moral collapse of the West? Is it too late for this question to have any useful meaning? Few in the West questioned the machine-gunning by Europeans of spear-wielding Africans in the decades before the First World War. A century later, few in the West, a place become sodden with love songs, could sanction war and warring without crippling hand-wringing, could barely fight wars despite all the resources—secondary sexual characteristics—put into war machinery and techniques, and seemed no longer to be able to win wars except by accident.

What are the functions of memory? What are the uses of history? What is inside a black hole? How could I have been madly in love with Julie for two years and not have known she sometimes wore glasses?