

More than fifteen years after his death, Hunter Thompson is probably best remembered for the way he lived: high-powered drugs, high-powered handguns, with a smoldering Dunhill in a cigarette holder clamped between his teeth. Thompson was the original outlaw journalist, a category that no longer exists. But more than anything, Thompson was a magazine writer. His stories affected an entire generation of writers, including me. By the time I finally met him, Thompson was in decline, just days as it turned out from his death. The reality of the man was sadder than expected, as it usually is. But to this day I admire his writing. I still have his pack of Dunhills in the top drawer of my desk.

“WHEN THE FUN STOPPED”

Weekly Standard, March 7, 2005

I feel like I’ve known Hunter S. Thompson for most of my life. I first encountered him in 1981, when I was twelve. A family friend had moved out after a long stay in the guest room, and I decided to find out what he’d left behind. On the nightstand I found a copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I liked the cover art, so I read it. It changed my life.

The book made me want to drop everything (specifically, the sixth grade) and take up journalism. It made me want to travel the world with a pen and notebook, having adventures, recording my observations, and speaking fearlessly on behalf of truth as a sworn guardian of the First Amendment. But mostly, it made me want to do drugs.

In the first chapter, Thompson famously describes the stash he’s accumulated for his weekend road trip to Vegas: “two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-

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powered blotter acid, a saltshaker half-full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of uppers, downers, laughers, screamers.” This is in addition to “a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of beer, a pint of raw ether, and two dozen amyls.”

I resolved to try it all, down to the ether, which I finally located midway through tenth grade in a head shop on the West Side of Manhattan. (It gave me double vision and a headache.) Tracking down and taking everything on Thompson’s list became a kind of mission, a pharmacological scavenger hunt that preoccupied me through high school.

At this point, I should add the customary disclaimer about how drugs are bad, a lie and a trap and a destroyer of lives. That’s all true, but not in my case. For me, the whole experience was interesting and fun. I had a great time.

On the other hand, I grew out of it. By the time I got to college, mind expansion had lost its appeal. I switched to beer.

One night in freshman year, I drove to Providence to see Hunter Thompson debate G. Gordon Liddy in a lecture hall at Brown. Thompson showed up slobbering, then got even drunker. He took swigs from a bottle of whiskey and yelled incoherently about Richard Nixon. But booze wasn’t the basic problem. Dead sober, Thompson still would have embarrassed himself. He didn’t have much to say.

Later I learned that every childhood hero disappoints you if you get close enough. But that night at Brown, I was stunned, and totally disillusioned. Thompson wasn’t anything like I’d imagined.

It was eighteen years before I saw him again. Last month,

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a friend invited my wife and me to New Orleans to have dinner with Hunter Thompson. We met at Arnaud's in the French Quarter. Thompson couldn't make it to the second floor dining room because of a bad leg, so we sat at the bar. He didn't say much, and when he did he spoke in a faint, slurry voice. He smiled a lot. He could not have been nicer.

I wasn't shocked this time, just sad. For a while, Thompson was the funniest writer in America. His sentences were tight and precise and perfectly balanced. Now he seemed almost unable to communicate with words.

After an hour or so, I got up to leave. Rather than shake my hand, Thompson leaned forward and pulled me in, hugging me so hard and for so long that his lapel pin left an imprint on my check. Then he handed me his pack of Dunhills, Superior Mild, with one left in the box. I couldn't tell if he wanted me to smoke the cigarette, or if he was passing it on as a keepsake. I put the pack in my pocket. It's sitting on my desk as I type.

The night after Hunter Thompson killed himself I got into bed with my copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I finished it at dawn. I'm happy to say I wasn't disappointed. It was as good as I remembered.

Even by the standards of boys, I was an unusually lazy child. Indolence was effectively my religion. Before the age of nineteen, I can't remember a single moment in which I enjoyed working at anything. That changed in a single summer. I went to work on the second shift at a baked bean factory in Maine. Suddenly labor made sense. Work gives order and meaning to your life. Accomplishment makes you feel good, even when it's just eight hours of adding barbecue flavor to cast iron pots. I loved the whole thing, though to this day I still can't eat baked beans.

“EAT, MEMORY: BEAN THERE”

New York Times, March 26, 2006

I bet we were the only people in my neighborhood growing up who ate B&M baked beans. We lived in La Jolla, California, thirty miles north of the Mexican border, where the only beans you saw were refried or served in salad. B&M beans came in a can, suspended in molasses with a chunk of salt pork. They seemed like the sort of thing you'd eat by the woodstove if you were snowbound in the mountains. They were a little heavy for La Jolla.

That was doubtless the appeal for my father, who came from New England and ate things like shepherd's pie, rhubarb, and other mysterious foods that baffled guacamole-stuffed Southern California natives like my brother and me. But we ate the beans anyway, partly out of respect for my father, but also because they were delicious. In the summers, on the way from the Boston airport to vacation in Maine, we'd salute as we drove past the

immense brick B&M plant in Portland. I remember wondering who worked there.

One summer during college, I found out. My roommate and I were living in Portland, though not very successfully. I'd applied to Denny's; he'd put his name in for a bartending job. Neither of us heard back. We sold car insurance door-to-door for a day. Finally we tried a temp agency. The next afternoon we found ourselves wearing white uniforms and hairnets and reporting for duty at the Burnham & Morrill baked-bean factory.

B&M was a strict union shop, closed to all but members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International, local 334, and possibly their sons and nephews. But for some reason that summer the union allowed an exemption for temporary help. We went to work on the second shift at \$6.60 an hour.

The B&M plant was built in 1913 and, from what I could tell, hadn't been updated since. Outside, the building was dominated by a towering brick smokestack that belched bean fumes into the salty Portland air. Inside, it was a time capsule. True to advertising, B&M's beans (white pea and red kidney) were cooked as they had always been, in enormous cast-iron pots that were lowered into brick ovens. The pots hung from chains and moved across the plant floor on steel rails suspended from the ceiling.

It looked to me as if someone must have bribed the safety inspectors. Each bean pot was the size of a Fiat. They whipped across the floor at surprisingly high speeds, often pushed by workers who looked as if they could have used a nap. (When

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your shift starts at four in the afternoon, there's ample time to drink before work.) Occasionally a pot would slip the rails and come crashing down. I saw it happen once. The impact sounded like a massive explosion. During our next smoke break, one of my gossiping coworkers claimed that the Burnham & Morrill plant had the highest rate of work-related injuries in all of Pet Inc., then the corporate parent. I believed him.

Most of my jobs were safe enough. One week I scraped charred beans from the insides of the ovens. The next I ran a machine that stacked cans onto pallets. For two weeks after that, I extracted the hot cans in which B&M baked its brown bread. They were made in enormous pressure cookers that looked like missile silos and were called reefers, for some mysterious reason. By the end, I got curious about the bread and tasted some. Surprisingly, it was pretty good.

By July I'd been assigned to a pot-saucing station, mixing ingredients for 16- and 18-ounce containers of barbecue-flavored pea beans. For each pot we combined 21 gallons of hot water with 4.3 ounces of mustard slurry, a portion of ground bacon, and 8 ounces of liquid hickory-smoke flavor. I was the liquid-hickory man.

Until that day, I'd naively imagined that food ingredients resembled food. Not so with barbecue sauce (that is, liquid-hickory flavor). The flavor came in white plastic fifty-gallon drums, shipped from a chemical plant in New Jersey. I learned right away that you didn't want to get the flavoring on your skin. It was the consistency of oil-based deck sealant and harder to remove. Within an hour every one of my fingers was dyed a deep

yellow, the color of nicotine stains. I looked like a wino with a bad Pall Mall habit.

But at least I wasn't bored. The women on the pork line clearly were. I walked by them several times a day as they stood silently at a conveyor belt, dropping pieces of salt pork into cans of beans, one piece per can, eight hours a day. The monotony was enough to make you hope for a falling bean pot.

One day toward the end of my short career at the plant, a supervisor sent me to a storeroom on the third floor. Inside there was a pile of hundreds of bean cans, all of them full. Apparently some of these cans had bad seams. It was impossible to know exactly which ones were defective, but the company wasn't taking chances. Leaky seams meant spoiled product, maybe even botulism. You couldn't just throw them away, for fear that someone would retrieve them from the trash, eat them, get sick, and sue. They had to be destroyed. My job was simple: puncture every can.

The assignment came with a special tool, fabricated in the millwright's shop. It looked like a framing hammer with a steel spike welded to the end. It made a satisfying sound as it pierced the cans.

I had a great time for the first hour. Then I came to a bad can. I should have known what it was. It looked different than the others, misshapen and bulging in the middle. If you've ever shot a can of shaving cream with a BB gun, you know what happened next. A plume of fermented beans burst forth like a geyser. The liquid was brown and bubbling and smelled like sewer gas. It hit me directly in the face, spraying into my eyes

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and mouth, and running down the inside of my collar. I felt like screaming, but there were people watching, so I just kept whacking cans. My uniform stuck to me for the rest of the night.

On my final day of work, I stopped by the company store to pick up some beans, which B&M sold to employees at cost. Cheap beans were considered a key perk of the job, and in fact they were. The labels were often flawed and the cans dented, but the beans were fine, and incredibly inexpensive. For three dollars, I bought a case of pork-free pea beans in sauce. I threw it on the backseat of my car and drove off.

Last year I was rooting through a cabinet in the laundry room of our summer house looking for Fourth of July fireworks. There, next to a leaky container of Tide, were the beans. I'd bought them fully intending to cook them for dinner. Tastes change over time, though. I worked there in 1989. I haven't had a baked bean since.
