



LEMON BUDINO AT THE SWARTHMORE INN

Jason Fagone's suspicious hour

Story and Photos by Kevin Ryan

It was painfully quiet as the waiter gathered the empty soufflé bowls, and Fagone looked itchy, one hand on the crumb-dappled table and one hand scavenging at the grey beneath his eyes, “So did you get what you needed from me?” In other words, could he go now?

I’d been ordering food and drink for an hour just to keep him at the table, and there was nothing left. But I had seen it coming. After landing in Philly, I texted him, told him I’d like to get as much time as possible for the profile. Let’s get some lunch, he replied. Get the leg in the door—the whole damn leg in the door. It was Monday, and my next flight wasn’t until Friday morning, so I had three full days to travel around Maryland. It was a longshot, but it would make a hell of a story if I could wrangle Fagone into coming along. After all, that’s the kind of guy he is in his writing.

The train from Philly to Swarthmore would take at least an hour, and there was, supposedly, a massive snowstorm heading for the East Coast—it was all anyone could talk about. So I shelled out the \$40 for an Uber to the Swarthmore train station. The sunlight was blinding as I got out of the car. A few minutes later, Fagone rounded the corner in an Army-green jacket built like an expensive sleeping bag. He walked with his head mostly downward. A stroll, an amble, a long-legged

gait—the gait of a man who eschewed a basketball career to be a heavy reader. His pendulum legs swung drab-brown pants, vining down to a pair of unworn Adidas Gazelles. There was a sizeable gash below his right ear, a line of dried blood slanting down. He had another cut across his throat, punctuated by a nick on his Adam’s apple.

I followed him the hundred feet to Broad Table Tavern, the plastic-new restaurant of the Inn at Swarthmore. No music playing. He leaned into the reception stand, nodding at the two aproned hostesses: “Heard the latest on the blizzard?”

“A foot, maybe two, is what I heard,” said the one with menus. “If we’re going to get it, I want to get it, you know? The more feet, the better.” She led us around the unpeopled room, to the booth farthest from the door. Fagone slumped backwards, facing the restaurant. From my seat, I could see patio and a roundabout, sunlight and Fagone. He offered to pay for the meal. “That’s okay,” I said. “Care of the Mayborn.” Start with a few drinks. That’d fix us up. He told the waiter he was ready to order, as in “let’s get this over with,” eyes darting so much you couldn’t see any color. I ordered the whipped ricotta, the Broad Table Tavern cheeseburger, and a glass of Sterling Pig Big Gunz Double IPA. Fagone ordered mushroom soup and simple greens. Oh, and a Diet

Coke.

“This is for the publication that gets passed around at the conference?” Somehow, he displayed expressions indicative of both anxiety and boredom, both at the same time.

To be fair, the setting had the feel of a prank. Every time one of us was about to dive into a deep moment, the overfriendly waiter interrupted. With his mustache and suspenders, he had a circus feel. The kind of guy who slams things that don’t need to be slammed. I liked the guy. It’s just that he could appear out of nowhere.

“You like your beer?” the waiter asked, eyes barely open.

“Oh, this is great, man.” I asked Fagone if he wanted a beer. He pursed his lips, pinch-faced like an ostrich, “No,” then returned to his story. For the first time, he was enthusiastic, and it was nice to see him excited, but he’d already said it all in (Ch. 4 of) his first book, *Horsemen of the Esophagus*—a Pynchonesque leap into the world of competitive eating.

Occasionally, he asked me questions, with the gentle sincerity of someone who is used to conducting and can’t stand having the light reversed. Either that, or he was trying to edge the time along—but we didn’t have time. I had no idea when he was going to bail, and so far, I had nothing. Nothing personal. Nothing real. Nothing he hadn’t said or



written before.

Boy I need to get you another beer, huh?

"In just a bit," I replied. It's not like Fagone is afraid to express himself, especially his contempt. Just look at his Twitter feed: Every few days he's calling somebody a Nazi. Coincidentally, the day of our interview he tweeted about one of the Mayborn Conference's sponsors: "New *Texas Monthly* editor managed to lose an enormous amount of talent in a very short time. Pissed away the franchise."

Between sips of his Diet Coke, he spoke about the characters from *Horsemen*, "So have you heard about what happened to 'El Wingador' since the book?" Bill "El Wingador" Simmons is the faded underdog of *Horsemen of the Esophagus*. "He went to prison." Fagone talked about other people's troubles. El Wingador had begun his career as a life coach. Fagone talked about his characters. His hand moved like wayward ringlets, bobbing. He laughed occasionally, and his laugh is charming. He was working on *Horsemen* when he began dating his now-wife. Nothing new about any of that.

Ready for dat beer?

"Ah, I guess so," I told the waiter, then turned to Fagone, "You mind if I drink a beer?"

"No, go for it." He stared off for a moment. "Every project is really different. You have to find your way into it kinda from scratch. The one I'm working on now, number three, it's different, still." At the mention of his newest book, he leaned into the table, then burst through into ebullience, he was going off-script: "This book has different demands, and I think if you approach it with a formula, you do an injustice to the fact that the material is different and has its own demands—I don't know—I don't know how other writers do it, really, I mean I definitely

felt like I was teaching myself how to do it as I was doing it, and looking back on it, I wish I had—from a distance of some years now, I wish I'd told the younger version of myself to chill the fuck out, 'it's gonna be all right'—because I felt like, 'This is my one chance!'—I felt like a Hollywood starlet, 'you're only gonna have one shot!' 'If this doesn't work out, my dream is going to die!' Because the truth is that book didn't sell, but I had a chance to write another one, then another one—because I had the ability to find good ideas," the tension in his shoulders had lessened, "and I understand why I was afraid, I just wish I had had more belief in it—but it's a scary thing, at first." He smacked at the last of his soup. "As long as you can stay curious and keep looking for that idea that will open into a book, you have a good chance of finding it, people are too cynical about writing a book, like you have to have powerful connections to really sell an idea, I don't think that's true, I think a lot of it rests on the idea, the idea is the coin of the realm, publishers need new voices and they need ideas—they must have them, in order to survive, so there's no editor that can't afford to look at a writer who's never written a book before." The intensity, the way he darted through his sentences. Then, his fervor vanished. It was like he could turn his personality on and off at will.

How bout a little something sweet?

Fagone ordered lemon budino and a coffee. "I'll have the same."

I sipped at the last froth of beer foam as Fagone talked about Lillian Ross' *Picture*. "She wrote it in the days before there was a Hollywood public relations apparatus. Magazine writers today would never get access to John Huston like she got access to them, because you have to go through a publicist, you have to arrange your interview with Charlize Theron, and you have an hour at some hotel bar."

I pointed at the dessert, "What's this stuff called?"

"Lemon budino."

Should I warm up your coffees for yeh? No thank you.

His eyes wandered as he connected loose ideas, as if searching for something he'd lost. "There's a writer on my block who's really good, and he has a much bigger Twitter following than me, which I was so irritated when I heard. Like, I'm not even the most well-known writer on my own block. I'm defeated by this guy," a deep, hammy groan. "I saw a YouTube video where he was singing and playing piano . . . In his preaching, he also works in jazz standards. Like

he's irritatingly talented," laughing, "it's really out of control. 'We have to move!'" He grinned, face down, shielding his mouth between bites of lemon budino, I was doubled over in laughter. "My wife would make fun of me: 'How many Twitter followers does Andy have today?'" After a moment, with a tilt, "he's a really good dude. His daughter babysits our kid."

The writer, Andy Crouch, was the editor at *Christianity Today*. Crouch has written nine books and earned degrees from Cornell and Boston University. "I really only know Jason as a neighbor—he seems like a great guy but I don't have any insight to offer on his life or work."

You like your lemon budino? Yes, we replied. Spoons digging at the few remnants that still clung. Radiated light pattered in around Fagone. After a few minutes, the waiter strode off with the last of our plates. "So did you get what you needed from me? For your profile? What exactly do you need?"

I clenched. This is basically my Japan, I said. It was a reference to Fagone's own career as a journalist, for his first book *Horsemen of the Esophagus*, Fagone flew to Japan so that he could spend time with Takeru Kobayashi, the greatest competitive eater in the world. He would observe Kobayashi, he would trail along, learn each technique, each habit, each secret. That would guarantee his story. "I know you're a busy guy. If this is all the time you can spare, that's fine. I just need to get some pictures of you." A drought overtook the space between us. Fagone sighed into the exhaustion of a sleepless worker being told to extend their shift. His face sank. As soon as I brought out the camera, he excused himself to the bathroom. Sitting there, alone, I felt stupid for having ever strived for more than this.

As I stared at crumbs on the table, a passage from *Horsemen* came to mind. In it, Fagone mocks "Coondog" O'Karma, who'd just met his hero Takeru Kobayashi, a renowned competitive eater: "A middle-aged man, having laid out a small child's fantasy—I'm gonna go meet the hot dog man and we're gonna arm-wrestle and then we'll be best friends forever—saw his fantasy granted, serving not to reinforce the fantasy's essential absurdity, but to imbue it with the force of a higher calling. Destiny and all that. Karma."

Fagone was gone for fifteen minutes, and when he finally returned the blood stains on his neck and face were still there—he hadn't washed the blood off. We walked in circles around the campus of Swarthmore College. Twenty-five minutes of sighing empty words. He talked about the new book for a while, but reminded me I could find everything he's talked about online. With each question I asked, he grew more impatient, more bored. Eventually, he mumbled something about having a daughter and how his wife is a software designer

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JASON FAGONE

so he really, really needed to go, but thank you for reading his work, then paced off like a sped-up clock. Within minutes he was back on Twitter.

It was a 40-minute Uber ride back to my friend Parker's place in Philly. Parker and I hadn't seen each other in eight years. He took me to El Bar, a cozy dive under the elevated rail. The commotion was constant, karaoke and shots, and it wasn't until about midnight that I caught a glimpse outside. Galvanic white flurried down. I rushed past the doorman, PBR in hand. The snowfall had subdued the streets and the cars. All at once, snow streamed down, streaming down so much and so quickly that it made a soft clap as it landed.

Later that night, as I lay in the dark on the couch, snowlight pouring in, under the steeple shadow of Christ Church—Benjamin Franklin snug in his tomb—I thought about the interview, thought, was Jason Fagone an asshole? At times, he was charming, he even brought a copy of *Ingenious*. But, he showed up for lunch a few blocks from his house then talked for an hour and expected that to be enough. As if, in that hour, he'd given me plenty of material to write a good feature. Was his brilliance so profound I only needed a lunchtime chat with the man? Meanwhile, he has demanded far more of the people in his stories, only to expose their shortcomings. Or maybe he assumed I had to write a bloodless fluff piece and I wouldn't call him out. And why hadn't he washed off the blood stains while he was in the bathroom? Despite my confusion, I didn't leave with a sense of mystery about Fagone, just a suspicion that he'd rather have spent that time on Twitter.

Overnight, the snow capped Philadelphia. Gazing out the window the next morning, I saw a whitescape. As I gathered my things, metallic dryness hit my mouth: I'd left my debit card at the Tavern in Swarthmore. Trains were canceled. I had no money. I said goodbye to Parker, handed him Fagone's *Ingenious*. "Jason Fajgone? He's the guy you interviewed?" raising his arm, "real tall? Kind of awkward?" That's him. "We used to work at the same co-working space."

The blizzarding snow kept a steady down-spun tilt, as I fought sidewalk down Market St., lugging my pale-blue 50's era suitcase and my swollen backpack. I'd lost my watch, my hat, and my debit card. I had \$2.50 in cash, and fifteen bucks on a Christmas giftcard. At some point, my phone died. Snow belted down like chipped paint from the ice of a vaulted sky. Bullish machinery sludged along piles of snow with giant plows. With every step, I fought the wind and its treacheries. Bitter ice wind, fangs and needles of a bastardly wind. In search of a Wells Fargo. Closed: Too much snow. They even locked the Liberty Bell. I cringed worse than I shivered: I would have to go back to Swarthmore. I hid beneath my green snowcoat. Eventually I found an Uber. The driver, a middle-aged man wearing a beret, leaned across the passenger seat and opened the door, letting out warmth and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*: "Beautiful fuckin day, eh?"

STAFF PICKS

MOST POWERFUL WORDS



Tyler Hicks
"I cannot fix on the hour, or the sport, or the look or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." - Jane Austen



Rita Unogwo
Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble." - Yehuda Berg



Jade Byers
"Real eyes realize real lies"
 -Tupac Shakur RIP



Amanda Talbot
"If you live for people's acceptance, you'll die from their rejection." Lecrae



Angela Roe
"He must become greater; I must become less." - John 3:30, The Bible



Leah E Waters
"To a great mind, nothing is little." – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*

Sherlock Holmes saved my life, among many others I presume. When reality was a disappointing alternative to *The Game* and its players in Doyle's adventures, I would spend most of my days under a tree somewhere with nothing but Holmes and my imagination for company.



Kevin Ryan
"May my heart always be open to little birds who are the secret of living whatever they sing is better to know and if men should not hear them men are old." – e.e. cummings

I bought a bird feeder for my back porch after I read this stanza. And when I write I leave the door open, even if only just a little.



Jesika Fisher
"We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?"
 - The Doctor, Doctor Who

What's the point of a writer, if not to tell a story that's remembered and felt long after someone reads it? Having the ability to create such an impact that it resonates beyond one's lifetime and shapes the lives of generations of people is a testament to the power of words. I can think of no greater legacy.



Luissana Cardenas
"I became a Journalist to be as close as possible to the heart of the world." Henry R. Luce

I like this quote because it says what really means to be a journalism for me. That is the first reason why I decided to be a journalist.

I'm regrettably quick to forget this truth, one that I aim to make the cornerstone of my life. In a world like ours, where all are guilty, especially me, of an utterly worthless pursuit—seeking the approval of men, money, accolades—this verse gently redirects my heart and mind. The God of the universe, Maker of all creation, the One Who Holds All Things Together, is the only righteous pursuit—my sole source of strength and my portion forever.