

A KILLING FAIR

Chapter 1 A Square Meal

Name something edible, anything remotely edible, and you're likely to find it impaled on a stick at the Minnesota State Fair.

There's the usual ho-hum stuff that you can get anywhere on a stick, such as hot dogs and ice cream and caramel apples. But beyond that, the State Fair choices include such delicacies as butterscotch cake on a stick (gooey and crumbly), dill pickles on a stick (both fresh and deep-fried) and Reuben sandwiches on a stick (messy—how do they keep the sauerkraut juice from running down your arm?).

The list goes on and on *ad infinitum* (and *ad nauseam* for some of the more adventurous diners who get on rides that whirl them in circles immediately after sticking it to themselves).

This is why I was surprised—yea, amazed—when Don O'Rourke sent Al and me to the Minnesota State Fair on a hot and humid Wednesday morning in late August to cover the introduction of a new food product on a stick. I simply could not imagine what pliable comestible was left to stab a stick into.

Don O'Rourke is city editor of the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*. Al is Alan Jeffrey, the paper's best photographer and my best friend. I'm Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch, and I think of myself as the paper's best reporter, whether anybody else does or not. In order for Don to send us on this assignment, he was either expecting the impaled goody to be very unusual or he was anticipating an extremely slow news day. It being late August, I suspected the latter.

Both the temperature and the relative humidity had already reached 80 at 9:45 a.m. when we stepped out of the *Daily Dispatch's* air-conditioned Ford Focus onto the sun-baked asphalt in the Giraffe Parking Lot at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. The unveiling of the new gustatory delight was scheduled for 10 a.m. on the Heritage Square stage. We had arranged for a quick preview by Lorrie Gardner, the fair's public relations director.

"What do you suppose this new wonder on a stick is?" Al asked.

"Must be pretty special to rate an introductory dog and pony show," I said.

"Maybe they've figured out a way to serve soup on a stick."

"You can stick that idea where the sun don't shine," I said.

It was only a four-minute walk to Heritage Square, but perspiration was dripping from my nose onto my light brown moustache and the armpits of my short-sleeved white shirt were soaked by the time we got there. I was glad that I'd left my coat and tie draped over my desk chair in the newsroom.

Al had also stripped down for the weather, but a shoulder-slung camera bag left dark wet spots everywhere it pressed against his light blue shirt. I saw him wiping moisture from his forehead and his dark brown beard as we walked.

The fair wouldn't open officially until the following day, but the grounds were bustling with vendors, exhibitors and thrill ride providers setting up for action.

At Heritage Square, which is an aging music stage located north of the Midway at the western end of the fairgrounds, about fifty people were standing around waiting to watch the introduction of the new stick-impaled wonder. Apparently they'd

been drawn to the scene by the sight of people moving on the stage.

Beside the steps leading up to the stage, Lorrie Gardner was facing away from us, talking to a blond television reporter named Trish Valentine, who always seemed to be reporting live from wherever Al and I were sent. We never complained about the competition because seeing Trish was always a pleasure. She had a heart-shaped face that looked darling on TV and a well-rounded figure that she displayed generously, especially on hot summer days. On this muggy morning, her sleeveless electric pink blouse was open deep into her cleavage and her snug white skirt with its visible bikini panty line ended above mid-thigh.

Lorrie, a tall, slender brunette, looked patriotic in a red tank top that stopped half way down her back, a pair of blue shorts that barely covered the cheeky territory south of the border and white boots that came to mid-calf. Part of a tramp stamp that looked like the crown of a devil's head peeked out over the top of her shorts. I wondered what her boss, who was a suit-and-tie guy all the way to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, would say about the appropriateness of this ensemble.

Oh, well, not my problem. I was busy enjoying the view.

"Hi, Lorrie. Hi, Trish," I said. Lorrie turned toward us, gave us a come-hither wave with her right hand and we fell in beside Trish. I scanned the small crowd and saw no other reporters. I wasn't surprised. What could be newsworthy here?

"Hope you guys are ready for an exciting presentation," Lorrie said. "You won't believe your eyes when you see it."

"What is it?" I asked. "A whole roast pig on a stick?"

"Oh, good idea. I'll have to write that one down for next year. With an apple in its mouth. Probably take both hands to hold it. But, no, it's nothing that exotic. Well, it's exotic in its own way. You'll have a great time taking pictures, Al."

Knowing from past interviews that Lorrie could bubble on all morning without answering my question, I asked again, "What is it?"

"Will I need a wide-angle lens," Al asked. This brought a snicker from Trish.

"No, no, nothing like that," Lorrie said. "Although it is a good size chunk of food for presentation on a stick. Probably bigger than any edible item on a stick we're presently offering. Bigger than anything we've ever offered I'll bet."

"I'll put you on a stick if you don't stop babbling and tell us what it is," I said.

"Ooh, you big old nasty man," Lorrie said with a twitch of her hips that indicated where she anticipated the stick might go. "Okay, ready? Here it comes. Ta-dah!"

She whipped three copies of a press release out of a folder she was holding in her left hand and passed them to us. "It's called Square Meal on a Stick."

Sure enough, it was. The illustration on the press release showed a substantial stick with a large cube-shaped block of something brown on the end.

"It's brown," Al said. "What the hell is in it?"

"A square meal," Ellie said. "In the center is a cube of filet mignon so tender it will melt in your mouth. Around that is a thick layer of mashed potato embedded with small bits of veggie, probably broccoli. The beautiful golden brown you're seeing is from deep-frying the entire cube."

"So you're eating almost raw steak and deep-fried mashed potato skooshed with broccoli," I said. "And you really think people will buy this?"

"People eat rare beef sandwiches and mashed potatoes all the time," she said. "The only difference here is that the mashed potatoes are french-fried, which is another American favorite. Besides, it's the State Fair. People here will buy any crazy thing you put on a stick—but please don't put that in the paper."

"You're right about that," I said. "Who dreamed up this particular crazy

thing?”

“A very highly respected St. Paul restaurant owner,” Lorrie said. “None other than Vinnie Luciano, owner of King Vinnie’s Steakhouse.” King Vinnie’s had been an institution on St. Paul’s lower West Side for thirty-some years. Vinnie Luciano’s shtick was to greet his customers wearing a gold crown, which sat above the gray fringe of hair on his balding head, and welcome them as his royal guests. Pictures of Vinnie wearing his crown with all of Minnesota’s big-name athletes and big shot politicians decorated the dining room walls. The Lions, the Jaycees and the Rotary Club all met at King Vinnie’s, and the annual Minnesota Twins fan appreciation dinner was held there.

“Makes you wonder whether Vinnie is starting to lose it,” Al said. “This thing looks as big as my daughter’s softball.” His daughter was an ace pitcher for her high school team.

“That’s about right,” Lorrie said. “Only remember that it’s square. It’s a square meal being introduced at Heritage Square by Minnesota’s best known square dance caller, the one-and-only Scott Hall.”

“I can see the headline,” I said. “Everything’s on the square at the Minnesota State Fair.”

“Ooh, I like it,” Lorrie said. “Will it make page one?”

“Not for me to say,” I said. “You have to bribe somebody else for that.”

“Who needs bribin?” said a loud male voice behind me. I turned and found myself chin to heavy black eyebrows with King Vinnie Luciano, complete with glistening gold crown. At six-foot-one and 190 pounds, I was six inches taller but thirty pounds lighter than Vinnie, who had me on girth by a broad margin. “Who needs bribin?” he asked again.

“My city editor,” I said. “Lorrie wants to see a picture of your ungodly concoction on page one.”

“What do you mean ungodly?” Vinnie said. “This is a meal made in heaven.”

“I’ll leave that to the clergy,” I said. “As far as eating that thing, I’d have a hard time getting past saying grace.”

“Grace would love it,” Vinnie said. “It’s delicious. I must have ate thirty of ’em while we were goin’ through the test stage.”

This triggered my grammarian reflex, and I was starting to say “have *eaten*, not have *ate*,” when Lorrie grabbed Vinnie’s arm and aimed him toward the stage.

The square dance caller, Scott Hall, was a tall, slender man in his early forties. His hair was dark brown and so was the neatly trimmed moustache that graced his upper lip. He was already on the stage, a statuesque figure dressed in full red-and-white western square dance regalia, complete with a red bolo tie and a white ten-gallon hat. I don’t know how he stayed cool but I didn’t see a drop of sweat on his grinning face.

Al hauled out his camera, I pulled a small notebook out of my shirt pocket, Trish Valentine’s cameraman appeared from somewhere behind us and we all stood poised for the great media moment.

Lorrie took the microphone, waved to the minuscule media-moment audience and introduced Scott and Vinnie. Behind the trio at the mike, about a dozen men and women wearing everything from square dance outfits to sun tops and shorts were scattered about the stage like window dressing.

Lorrie explained the importance of the occasion and handed the microphone to Scott Hall, repeating what she’d said to me about a square meal being introduced by a square dance caller on the Heritage Square stage. This drew a polite ripple of laughter.

The caller took the mike, popped off a couple of one-liners with the word square in the punch line, which also drew a polite ripple of laughter, and announced that it was time to introduce the main character—King Vinnie Luciano’s fabulous new square meal.

Right on cue, Fairchild, the Minnesota State Fair’s official mascot, appeared at the foot of the stairs. Fairchild is a six-foot-tall happy-go-lucky gopher with an oversized plastic head that has a perpetual buck-toothed grin painted on its face. He wears a green-and-white striped sport coat, a black bow tie and a green-and-white straw boater. Carrying the Square Meal on a Stick high in the air for all to see, Fairchild bounced up the stairs onto the stage and handed the stick to Scott Hall.

Scott’s smile faded to a look of surprise, probably at the size of the package, but he quickly regained his grinning composure. He thanked Fairchild and Fairchild bowed, bounced back down the stairs and disappeared through the crowd, which had now grown to maybe a hundred curious souls.

“And now we come to the moment of truth, which is in the eating,” Scott Hall said. “It’s appropriate for me as a square dance caller to introduce this wonderful square morsel, but it’s the creator of this magnificent looking concoction who should have the honor of taking the first bite.” He passed the stick to Vinnie and stepped back to let Vinnie have the microphone.

Vinnie smiled his acceptance and thanked Scott in a thunderous voice. Vinnie raised the stick at arm’s length above his head and posed like an obese Statue of Liberty as he shouted, “Here’s to square meals and square dancing.” He waved the fried cube in circles before taking a substantial bite off the top and bowing, with arms spread, to the crowd.

As Vinnie chewed, the smile left his face. “Tastes kind of bitter,” he said in a low voice. A tiny crumb of potato poked out at the corner of his mouth.

Forcing the smile to return, Vinnie took another bite, chewed and swallowed. He frowned. “Might be stale cooking oil,” he said. “This ain’t right.” He shook his head and his eyes opened so wide that the whites were visible all the way around.

Vinnie opened his mouth to suck in some air and grasped his throat with his left hand. His legs wobbled and his knees buckled. He sat down hard on the stage, gasping. “Can’t breathe,” he said in a whisper. The Square Meal on a Stick fell from his right hand and landed in his lap.

“Oh, god, a heart attack,” Al whispered beside me.

Vinnie’s body began to jerk and twist. He flopped onto his back and the crown popped off his head and rolled to the edge of the stage. The convulsions grew more violent and went on for a moment before he arched his back, leaving only his heels and head touching the floor of the stage. This launched the Square Meal on a Stick into the air, where it performed a somersault before plopping onto the quivering belly of its stricken inventor.

As we all stared in silence, Vinnie’s convulsions continued for maybe another minute before his body went limp and he dropped flat on his back on the floor. Another twitch, then another, then nothing. Vinnie lay motionless with his partially-eaten concoction standing at a forty-five-degree angle on the down slope of the mound above his belt. There wasn’t a whisper of sound from the mouths of the onlookers watching this bizarre performance.

Scott Hall was the first to find his tongue. “Is there a doctor in the crowd?” he shouted into the mike. “Please, is there a doctor anywhere around?”

“Here,” said a female voice in the back of the crowd. A middle-aged woman with flaming red hair began pushing her way toward the stage as dozens of stunned

people started to babble about what they'd just seen.

The doctor climbed the stairs and knelt beside the fallen restaurateur. She stared into Vinnie's open eyes as her hand went to his throat to feel for a pulse.

On the ground around the stage, dozens of cell phones appeared. Some of their owners were taking pictures, others were texting, tweeting and punching in numbers.

I hollered at Lorrie to call 911 and she said she'd already done so. Al was clicking off pictures and the Channel 4 cameraman had moved to the edge of the stage to film the action close up.

The doctor rose to her feet and turned to Scott Hall, who still held the microphone. When she spoke softly to Hall, her voice was carried by the sound system. "This man is dead," she said. "There's nothing I can do." With that, all hell broke loose in the crowd as some people pushed their way closer to see the body and others pushed away in fear and revulsion. The onlookers onstage began leaping off the edge and the musicians grabbed their instruments and bailed out over the side. I heard a siren in the distance heralding the approach of an ambulance. It would be King Vinnie Luciano's transportation to the morgue.