

Dirt dogs

by [Jeff Plude](#) (April 2019)



In The Bar Le Bouchon, Edouard Manet, 1879

Pete walks into Dirty Joe's and sits midway down the counter and orders three with the works and a Coke.

He looks around. He hasn't been here in a long time, but there's no place like this one, at least for him. It hasn't changed in all the time he's known it, since he was a kid. The counter is white and has a dozen or so swivel stools, each with a red vinyl seat and a silver metal pedestal stuck in the

floor. On the counter there's a miniature jukebox every other stool or so, and four big glass covers with pies under them. Overhead there's a plastic menu board, the kind where you slide the letters and numbers in and out, with an old-fashioned Coca-Cola logo on it: hotdogs are eighty cents. Under it is a big stainless steel coffee dispenser, with the blue pilot lights showing through two small holes at the bottom. Next to that is a big cooler with a sliding glass door for the soda, milk, and beer—Dirty Joe's stays open till four in the morning, just like the handful of bars on the street. There are also four booths behind him with high dark wooden backs and gray-white formica tabletops.

It even seems like the same people work here as he remembers. The dumpy guy with a sparse mustache who's very attentive when he waits on customers. The frumpy woman with long straggly black hair falling limply down her back. Both of them are wearing long white aprons. Dumpy opens the cooler and pulls out one of those small Coke bottles with the watery pale green glass, pops the top and sets it in front of Pete. Pete loves those little bottles. At the end of the counter near the door, Frumpy takes his hotdogs off the grill. She puts them into rolls and dips her long wooden spoon into a ceramic pot and slathers mustard over them. Then she does the same thing in the two other pots filled with onions and the special sauce. Dozens of uncooked hotdogs lay piled up on the grill at the edge of the plate glass window in front. The window says "Old Time Lunch," but none of the locals call the place that—that's part of the charm. The white rectangular boxes for takeout orders are stacked behind the grill on wooden shelves all the way to the ceiling.

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Pete has to go to the bathroom so he gets up and walks through the narrow back room where some of the supplies are kept. He follows the exposed pipes on the ceiling, which extend from the dining room right into the bathroom because the wall separating the two only goes up so far.

When he gets back to his seat, his three with the works are waiting for him on a small white plate. He can't wait to bite into them. Nowhere else has he ever had a hotdog like a dirt dog, which is what everybody around here calls them because the special sauce is dark brown and grainy like wet dirt. Not at the ballpark. Not at the racetrack. Not at a roadside stand or diner. The guy who ran the place was George Theo-something. Pete tried to remember exactly what his last name was, he knew it was Greek—Theophilatos maybe, that's what it sounded like when his father said it. George's father was Dirty Joe, who started the business right after World War I, at least that's what Pete's father used to say. Eighty years later and a new millennium and it's still going.

Pete's father liked to tell a story about Dirty Joe's and his Uncle Leo, the youngest brother of Pete's grandfather Potvin. When he was discharged after World War II, Uncle Leo came into town on a Greyhound at the bus station. He lay in his foxhole in the Ardennes dreaming of dirt dogs. The first thing he did when he got off the bus was walk across the street and down a block to Dirty Joe's. Dirty Joe was behind the counter. "Give me a dozen with the works," Uncle Leo said. "To go?" Dirty Joe asked. But Uncle Leo said, "No, for here." Dirty Joe didn't

say anything. Uncle Leo had his uniform on. Dirty Joe probably thought that he'd risked his life for this country, he can order a dozen with the works whether he eats them or not. "And put extra everything on them," Uncle Leo said. "Mustard, onions, sauce. The works." And Uncle Leo ate them one right after the other and ordered a dozen more. Dirty Joe let him have the next dozen free. That was the least he could do, maybe he was battle fatigued and half crazy, saw his best buddy get blown in half. So Uncle Leo ate another dozen. Some of the customers mentioned it to the people coming in for takeout orders. And a small crowd began to gather around. Well, Uncle Leo ate forty-six or fifty-four or sixty-one or sixty-seven hotdogs—it seemed that everybody lost count, including Uncle Leo. And he wasn't a fat guy either. He was slim and he stayed that way the rest of his life and he lived till he was seventy-five. Bought a yacht and moved downstate along the Hudson River, which he'd grown up on, just like all the rest of the Potvin family. And Pete and his younger brother and his parents went to visit him and his wife one time and Pete's father mentioned Dirty Joe's and the dozens of dirtdogs he'd eaten right after he came home from the war, it was the first thing he did right after he got off the bus, and even he couldn't remember how many he ate, and Uncle Leo was sipping a highball on his yacht and the ice cubes were clinking and the boat creaking, and he said, "Holy Ch-t!" and his glassy-eyed smile lit up his whole bald browned Canuck head.

That's how Dirty Joe's got to be a thing in the Potvin family. Whenever there was a funeral and all the relatives came from out of town, they always made a big trip to Dirty Joe's. They'd order two-hundred something dirtdogs for maybe twenty people, and there wouldn't be one dirtdog left. One of Pete's cousins committed suicide on Memorial Day weekend, she was only around forty, went out in the woods and sat under a tree

and swallowed some pills. She was a nurse. But her mother, Pete's Aunt Darlene, his father's younger sister, a good-sized woman who worked at a textile mill and whose second husband had died not too long before that, looked a little better once they brought in the white takeout boxes and even better after they opened them up and dived in. And soon everybody was around the table in the kitchen and smiling and laughing.

Pete's father liked to cook and he tried to replicate the sauce once. It tasted a little like Dirty Joe's, but not enough to pass a blindfold test. Joe wouldn't tell anybody how the sauce was made and neither would his son George. It's strong but good. When Pete used to be at one of the bars down the street, he'd smell it occasionally on somebody's breath—no amount of alcohol or mouthwash could wash it away. Only time.

Now Pete was finishing off his last dirt dog and he looks up and who comes in and sits a couple stools away from him but Marie Deyette. He'd just gotten divorced and had been thinking about Marie lately. It was weird how they'd met, seemed like it was meant to be really. He'd gone to a party in the next town, a rival high school, to meet his girlfriend, but she showed up late and he ended up hitting it off with Marie instead and they made a date and that was it, it was love at first sight and touch. They'd gone out with each other through college but a couple of years after they graduated he told her he wanted his freedom. She cried, didn't want hers. So he got the precious freedom that he craved above all things at the time and proudly demanded. But ever since then, except for a few fleeting times where he felt like he was being let out for exercise in a prison yard, he'd lived in solitary confinement.

And now Marie's sitting in Dirty Joe's. But she's not alone.

She's with Greg Bonski, who was a little taller than Pete, but Pete was a little stockier. He was the guy Marie went out with briefly in high school—they went to the same school and were in the same class—right before she and Pete got together. Like Pete, he'd been a running back in high school, but Pete hadn't lost most of his hair in the drainpipe of middle age. Baldy's father had owned a big car dealership in town, and Marie's father had worked there.

She looked at Pete but didn't say anything. She probably didn't want to rock the boat. That's okay, he'd start the rocking and he'd capsize it if he had to, maybe even if he didn't have to. She had long dark wavy hair and she was still sexy, had on a tight nice pair of jeans and a stylish purplish sweater, and she had this big smile that lit up her whole gorgeous olive-toned face.

Then Baldy goes to the bathroom—first he asks the waiter where it is. Of course he wouldn't know where it was because he'd probably never been in here before, they were here because of Marie. But before the waiter can answer him Marie tells him. That's how she was, always super attentive and conscientious, though he never quite appreciated that fully when they were together.

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Pete moves fast—he knows he doesn't have much time. He says hi and asks how she's doing and what's been going on. She says she lives outside Burlington, where Baldy runs a ski resort, they'd gotten married after she and Pete broke up but had no kids. Neither does he. Pete tells her he lives in San Francisco. People are always impressed by that, whether they know any better or not. "Let's go," he says. "What?" she says. But not in a way that says no, but tell me more, it was only one word but that was the feeling he got. "Let's take off," he says. And just like that they ditch their dirt dogs, which she always used to love just like he did and they used to pick up a half dozen before heading home from a night out watching rock bands down the street at Mandy's, jump in Pete's car, which he drove cross-country instead of flying because he loves to drive and think, and they speed up the Northway to Montreal and get a hotel room. After a couple of weeks Marie gets a job and Pete starts freelancing, she's still a legal secretary and he's still a newspaper reporter, and she gets divorced and they get married, and the winters are seven or eight months long but all the French in the air makes them feel like they're a million miles away, and they take road trips up the St. Lawrence to Quebec City and even farther up until the road runs out—it actually stops on the map—and there's nothing but fishing villages and Inuit . . .

"It was nice seeing you Pete," Marie says. Then she and Baldy, her husband, walk out the door and leave. Forever.

Just then Dumpy comes over to Pete and says: "Will that be all, sir?"

Pete takes the pale green check and looks at it for a while without moving to pay his bill. Then he leaves a tip on the

counter and walks up to the register, which is right next to the grill and the front door. Frumpy is waiting for him. As she rings him up, Dumpy comes over and says: "Haven't I seen you in here before?"

"My father and I used to come in here all the time before he died," Pete says, "but I don't live around here anymore . . . I remember you two working here from way back."

"We met here fifteen years ago. Got married a year after we started working here." That would've been about the time Pete dumped Marie. "So what brings you back in town?"

"My mother died," Pete says.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks."

Pete takes the change and starts to open the door. Then he goes back to the register—he almost forgot. "Give me two dozen with the works to go . . . and three more with the works for here."

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Jeff Plude has been a freelance writer for more than twenty years. He is a former daily newspaper reporter and editor, and he has written for the *San Francisco Examiner* (when it was owned by Hearst), *Popular Woodworking*, *Adirondack Life*, and other publications. His poetry has appeared in the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*.

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