

Jack's Jitney: Portland

I rented a room in a hostel inside a hotel that offered a triple-decker bunk bed, a rooftop bar, and an enthusiastic mission statement about “redefining and resurrecting history.” Located in Portland, Oregon’s Old Chinatown District, the neighborhood felt a bit like Lord of The Flies: Hipster Edition. I was debuting my documentary *Jack’s Jitney: Government Camp* at a film festival out there but as my Alaskan Airlines flight touched down I could not manage to muster excitement for it. This is rare, as usually I can manage to muster excitement about mustard but when I thought about this trip it was only picturing eating oriental food gratuitously that got me going. Delicately sliced salmon sitting atop some beautifully pieced together concoction, shredded beef flopping amongst butter-soaked day-old rice, I might even fuck around and try sake. I don’t drink often but occasionally and unfortunately I get hankerings to be blind, fuck you drunk. The mind is a terrible thing. Hit an Uber at the airport and maneuvered downtown towards the flat skyline. My mind wandered back home to Colorado, where the kids I coach in mogul skiing were gearing up for their competition at Arapahoe Basin. Skipping it to come here had triggered an avalanche of logistical issues and guilt. Parents of the kids were going to change travel plans when I said I couldn’t make it and then they ended up going out there anyway. It was one thing to have the parents barking at me but I hated missing the kids making memories.

Checked in and got the tour, for forty bucks I got an XL twin bed with a night light, an outlet, and a curtain to square me away from the world. Good value. To get to my requested top bunk I had to climb up an almost vertical wooden ladder that had a sign demanding I keep four points of contact at all times. Felt like I was staying in a tree fort up there. Within the first five minutes of being there I lost the key to my room so I procured a new one and asked for a recommendation on a sushi spot. The young lovely front desk lady pointed me towards a little place just around the corner. I walked the streets for a bit stretching my legs and smoking a joint.

It was dummy early for dinner, the sun had just begun to drift down to the horizon, so I wasn't concerned with getting a table. Everything was iced over after a recent storm, the frozen-over sheen clinging to everything making the world shine and glint in the sun. I had underdressed in the name of fashion, shivering as a chilling wind curled down the front of my button-up. All was validated though when I got a compliment from a man with missing front teeth. "I'll trade you a bus pass for a cigarette." He offered at first.

"Just take it." I handed one over.

"I like your jacket flannel thing, I like the cut of it." And the homeless man pointed to the frayed hem.

"Appreciate it." We knocked knuckles and I went on walking. Portland is so many things New York claims to be but lost twenty-five years ago. Brutish and brash, with a punk scene still thriving, the outfits I saw were denim or leather or denim and leather. Ubiquitously and unquestionably the citizens were cool. Tents of every color cloak sidewalk corners but even homeless people need somewhere to sleep. Where would you like them to go? Ghettoize them into a forgotten city section where the worst feed on the most vulnerable? Make the city inhospitable through divided benches, spiked underpasses, and old-fashioned law enforcement intimidation? Let's just leave them the fuck alone is Portland's answer. A strangely libertarian idea for the bluest city in the nation. If the sight of people living low disgusts you then don't fucking come. America is a big place with every type of person and culture you could meet in a lifetime, just go somewhere else. Nobody is trying to best themselves here, they're trying to better themselves and help others do better. No bureaucratic slog towards a vanilla utopia, instead a colorful clusterfuck of hard-willed folks.

"Evening ma'am, it's just me could I sit at the bar right there?" Already angling towards it I saw the restaurant's hostess hesitate and check eyes with the uniformed man behind the counter. Something seemed up. But he nodded at her and two of the three place settings were cleared.

Curious, I sat down and smiled at the man. "Sorry to cause a stir sir," I said to that man behind the counter. "is this not the bar?"

"It's our tasting table. But it's fine we don't have any reservations for it tonight."

"And you're the chef?"

"I am. We do curated dinners for people who book an experience."

"Well feel free to take me on a ride." He laughed but he didn't bite and instead busied himself with polishing knives. The liquor menu was kind enough to include blurbs for their sake and I felt confident in the Tropic Lilly I ordered until the chef looked at me like I had grown a third head and admitted to not even knowing that was on his menu. All I know about sake is from my parents and all I remember is that they ordered it cold and it came in those cool little serving bottles with little cups. My dad would get hammered and claim sake doesn't affect him. Family traditions. I ordered a bottle and insisted to the chef that I was on vacation and could handle it. When the waiter came around he patiently explained to me that I was a fucking idiot and that the bottle I was ordering was about the size of a soda jug. I ordered a glass.

"Did you ever get a food menu?"

"I did not." That aggravated him and he sought out the waiter. The sake came, it was cloudy and fruity and delicious. Sake rules. I managed to crack the chef and get him to start talking to me. "What's that word everybody's getting when they walk in?" I asked after I ordered Salmon Belly with Grapefruit.

"Irasshaimase. It means welcome but only works if you're greeting them into a sushi restaurant. There's not really a word for it in English." Watching him prepare owned my fascination, he never rushed and each piece of fish was so perfectly arranged it was like they had known they were destined for greatness from the moment they had been ripped from the ocean. With long stainless steel tweezers and the steady hand of a grizzled gunslinger, he placed little balls of caviar and drizzled layers of sauces with the chaotic precision of Jackson Pollock.

"You want another when your dinner comes? Food's almost ready." The waiter had come back to check-in.

"Sure." And I ordered a glass off the menu's Oregon Small-Batch sake section.

"You want another piece of advice?"

"Yes."

"Sake is best left to the Japanese, order one of those."

"Got it." And I tried to order something classic.

"Ever eat something so good it makes you blush?" I asked after I sucked salmon belly off the large black soup spoon it was served on.

"No." Was all he said but he giggled when he said it. Grapefruit juice sparkled off the fish making the salmon moist and zesty. It was all I could do to not rail down all four spoons in rapid succession. I turned a second one towards the ceiling and gummed down another bite. So tender you hardly had to chew it, the fish evaporated inside my mouth amid a slew of flavors. Frankly, it's one of the best things I've eaten in my entire fucking life.

"Is it possible to educate ignorance though?" Our conversation had turned.

"Yeah, you educate them and then they're not ignorant anymore." Like the food they make, sushi chefs are succinct and extremely poignant in their speech. "Unless they been smoking too much of the ganja and then the short-term memory goes and they just forget. That's okay though."

"I, of course, would know nothing about that."

"Yeah, I smelled it on you when you walked in here." And we shared another laugh. I ordered a miso soup for a tweener course and it was so cloudy I couldn't see past the top layer until I tapped my spoon into it and watched the clouds ripple across the bowl. If your miso is clear don't eat it that's some weak watery bullshit. Next was a round of sushi rolls and another sake. New flavor again, but no Oregon small batch.

"I mean you could sell a working version of Super Smash Bros Melee for at least a honey online."

"Probably got over a grand of old games sitting at home." As he spoke he scorched tuna with a butane torch turning the pinkish skin into an ashy color.

"I would think video games would be good for a chef. Good for finger dexterity and all that."

"Not really, it's not big with us."

"Surgeons play to practice keeping their hands steady." I got my plate with my sushi and it was as fresh and as delicious as everything else. The B Side 6 Roll in particular kicked with heat that normally wouldn't be my thing but worked here wonderfully. "Is there like a purity of food thing where if it's real high-grade sushi you're not supposed to dip it in soy sauce?"

"Depends. When I'm doing the tasting Omakase thing you don't even get soy sauce."

"You just put the right amount on for them beforehand? As part of your thing?"

"No. No soy sauce. I give it to you and it's ready to go. Just pop it into your mouth and eat it." He rubbed his fingers together for emphasis.

"Grab it with your fingers toss it in the air and catch it in your mouth like a fucking seal."

"Exactly."

"I'm always worried I'm drowning my rolls."

"Eat it however you'd like." I had one more sake, thanked him for the meal, and grabbed a selfie before dipping. Two blocks away was Voodoo Donuts where for dessert I bought the Captain Crunch donut, the M&M one, and the Oreo that has caramel glaze on the top. I only managed to stuff down one and fell asleep with the other two spreading grease onto my bare chest.

The next day was the festival and I occupied my nerves walking along the waterfront. Sightseeing boats and cargo ships churned underneath a draw bridge. In addition to being a gateway to the Pacific, Portland's popularity was boosted by being at the end of what was then known as "Great Plank Road" that connected the seaport to the farming community in the Tualatin Valley. Also, Portland would have been named Boston if a coin toss had gone a different way. Two dudes flipped for it because they each wanted to name it after their hometown. The

dichotomy between sister cities Boston East and Boston West would have provided material to bad comedians for generations. All this I learned on Wikipedia as I smoked away a hangover and got drizzled on by a cold Pacific Northwest rain. What a time to be alive.

The festival was held at the Clinton Street Theater, an absolute treasure of a fucking movie theater. One of the owners was working the concession stand and we talked throughout the long day of screening. She had braces on her teeth but that didn't stop her from having the biggest smile. "Thanks for talking to me, I'm a little nervous."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know, probably just me." I threw a handful of popcorn down my gullet. It had come already buttered and salted none of that 'add it yourself' nonsense. I had thrown some peanut M&Ms in there too for that sweet and salty combo. "I'm bummed I don't get to see one of your Rocky Horror Picture show screenings while I'm in town." I gestured to the multitude of classic posters from the movie on their walls.

"You should be, they're the best."

"I've actually never been to a live screening. I watched it once on Halloween with my homies and we taught ourselves the audience cues as it went on."

"And? What'd you think?"

"Fucking loved it. Banger of a flick."

"Our screening rules, you'd really like it."

"How can you tell?"

"I can just tell."

"This your theater then?"

"It is." And she served a man the beer he had ordered.

"That's neat."

"Dream come true." The festival started and I got to meet some people and I was named a finalist so I got to answer a few questions on stage. The other finalists went up and answered their questions and I was reminded why I stopped hanging out with artists after I graduated college. Art is inherently selfish, it will almost always matter more to the creator than the audience and that's okay, that's how it should be when you work hard on something, but don't act like you're giving me this unforgettable gift when I sit with it. Painters are cool though, they got that right mix of viciousness and arrogance for me. Or maybe it's just because I don't paint.

I checked out of my hotel the next morning, picked up some more joints and smoked one, got a great fucking haircut, then hammered down some ten-dollar fried rice before going to go stare at the Walmart they were closing due to excessive shoplifting. I don't like seeing things fail, I have a burning yearning for this world to succeed but it's like watching a Miami Marlins game and seeing that new 40,000-seat stadium with eight hundred people in it. Fucking hilarious. Seeing billionaires lose money in real time is objectively hilarious. It's no hate on money or the people who make the most of it, lord knows how much I love the feeling of cash in my hand, but I do have a lot of anger for people living above consequences. In the past year, twenty Walmarts have closed and over 160 have in the past three years, a majority of them just so larger, slightly more convenient ones can open a few miles away. It leaves less room for new stores to open cutting competition down to a minimum. It leaves a continued stain on our infrastructure, making it so you can't recognize Laramie, Wyoming from Dewey, Delaware. They rip the uniqueness from these small towns and then smile at us as blood drips through the creases in their teeth. Stand in an abandoned Walmart parking lot and tell me it's not the saddest fucking feeling you've had in your entire life. Walmart is going to be fine, and the Walton family is going to be fine, but the citizens left behind are the ones forced to make the most of their hollowed-out husk of a town. They're the ones who are going to have to drive through their closed-down Main Streets where Derek's Hardware used to thrive and decide between the few options that remain; there's moving

and swallowing the pain of leaving behind the town where your family lived for generations, punting entirely to the corporations and watch as every restaurant becomes Chilli's, Olive Garden and if they're lucky an Outback Steakhouse. Or, you can stay, fight city hall, and pray you don't become further prey. I was lucky enough to pop out of a white pussy in New York so everybody cares about me and my town. Three extra people get harassed by Elmo in Times Square and there are press conferences broadcast nationwide about saving "what was once a great city". Somewhere my father is yelling about neglecting the consumer, how Walmart has provided people in rural areas a convenient and affordable place to shop and the truth is he's undeniably correct. But where's the long-term thinking? They're the ones not following through on their promises.

I got into my departure flight Uber and my driver asked me why I was going right from Walmart to the airport. I explained why I had wanted to see it and he grinned mischievously at me through the rearview mirror "Yeah I take shit from there all the time." And his voice didn't trail off while admitting to his vices.

"How do you do it?"

"I slide to the self-checkout and put my expensive shit to the side and ring up my bullshit. I spend enough time at the thing until it feels right then I bounce."

"How do you get around the security beeper?"

"I just walk around. My boy works there too so it makes it easier. One time I got out of there with a whole ass tv." I laughed so fucking hard at that and contented myself looking out the window, leaning against it and feeling the cool glass on my forehead. I had drank too much that weekend. First it was nerves about the festival, then it was to drown out how much the festival had sucked. We passed down a street with secondhand bookstores and a Mexican joint that definitely sold 3 tacos for thirty fucking dollars. A bizarre dichotomy. Portland's outskirts are like a collection of small towns. Not neighborhoods but full vibrant towns, they mostly fit into one homogenous circle but they never lack. It made me feel lonely. All these incredible places I've been to; the people I've

gotten to kick it with and the magnificent women who have given me intimate moments, the wonderful meals, drank with bikers and done drugs with diplomats, rode long hours in transit listening to my favorite music, coached kids who astound me daily, ridden horses through the Badlands of South Dakota and skated cobblestone in New Orleans' French Quarter, I'm trying to outwork everybody while trying to get everything I can out of life as well. All it has left me with is orphaned memories. Don't get it twisted I hold it all near and dear but I think now I would trade it all for somebody to share it with or maybe just some more time with my family. I look around here in particular and see people banded together in unison. People chattering on the sidewalk as blunt breezes roll by, maybe I've seen more but they've unearthed much more living in this one place than I ever could moving every six months. Comparison is the theft of joy and I have robbed myself gandering at this greener grass. Sitting alone at that festival, having a stranger video my interview so I could text it to my mother and watching people walk out with their family and friends as I sat waiting for the twelve-hour short film binge to end hollowed something inside. When I had gotten my little finalist certificate I felt like a fifth grader being told I was special but really my problem with that festival has a lot more to do with me than it. During the half-hour lunch break, I had sat just outside the theater smoking a torpedo-sized joint when one of the artists struck up a conversation with me. "Pretty brave." He said remarking on the smoke.

"It's legal here isn't it. There's an ashtray out and everything." Was my reply.

"It is. I think I'm going to go home and get something to eat. I live just around the corner"

"Sounds like a good idea."

"When do you go?"

"Three films in after this break I think."

"Oh shit I don't want to miss it. Maybe I can make it there and back in time."

"It's fine dude, it's a lot of short films." And we both laughed.

"I go at the end, I wonder if anybody will be left." He looked at his phone and looked kind of sad.

"I'll be here. Go home dude, get some food it's okay. That's a lot of fucking shorts." When the final film had played and the lights came on, only six of the fifty-plus people who were there to start were left, including him and me. He thanked me for staying. I didn't tell him that it was because I had nowhere else to go.

What you see is what you get in Portland and that goes a long way with me. If they don't own it or it's not coming out for their community citizens are going to relish in its ruin. I don't think anybody should be burning shit down and I do think it is a bummer that most businesses downtown feel the need to board up their storefronts for safety's sake. Not everybody you meet here is going to be Antifa though. In fact, fucking nobody will be. People are busy, people are working and trying to live full lives in a place surrounded by gorgeous views. Ocean to the west, mountains an hour to the east it's a good life out there. They refuse to believe The Great Lie, mercurial people go out to find like-minded individuals and feel like they belong somewhere. They don't care that you think it's a shit hole or some sort of soft snowflake leftist hellscape, it's too busy saving itself. Shopping local, pushing culture and spanking interloping myopic corporations. They're not a tourist town despite its beauty. I haven't heard of anybody going on vacation out there. It doesn't try to be, it knows it's a city where people either go out of their way to move there or where people just sort of end up there. But people stay because if you're committed to live there they'll treat you like you've been there your whole. And for the people who have been there their whole life, they've seen it all and they don't care to explain it to you. That's why I love Portland. Also the sushi.