

THE COOK OFF

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Zeke Tustin pulled into the parking lot. It was already full. He thought he had given himself enough time. He could have his chili ready in half an hour. He already had everything cut, measured and prepared. He checked in at the front gate.

“Mr. Tustin, we’ve been expecting you?” said the old man holding a clipboard.

“You have?”

“Yes, we heard quite a bit about you. Can’t wait to try your chili.”

“Where do you want me to set up?”

“Anywhere you like. I’d give yourself enough room though. I’m sure there will be a big crowd around your table.”

Zeke drove down the dirt road and until he saw the dozens of campers and RVs. He pulled in beside one, but gave himself plenty of room. The last thing he wanted to do was to step on another cooker’s toes.

Zeke could be set up in ten minutes. Officially, the cook off did not begin until 9AM. He still had a few minutes. He set up his double tables and connected his two slow cookers to the power inverter he had installed in his van. He also had a small backup generator in case the inverter failed. His cookers were large, but didn’t really use that much power, so he could run something else as well, if he needed to. The tables were set and he put a table cloth over them. He set up his cookers and then his plastic utensils and napkins. He took out his ingredients and was ready to begin. He was a little nervous. He had done small cook offs in fairs and small gatherings, but there were hundreds of people here. He didn’t know how many were cooking and how many were tasting. Rules didn’t specify either way, so they could easily do both.

A man wearing a strange looking suit pulled up next to his table. He got out and immediately introduced himself.

“You must be Zeke Tustin. Everybody around here just calls me Bub.” he said and shook Zeke’s hand. “I didn’t know I was so famous around these parts.”

“Oh, yes. Everyone’s heard of you. I can’t wait to try your chili. If you have any problems, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Call you? I don’t have your number.” said Zeke.

“Just say my name Zeke and I’ll be here in an instant.” said Bub.

“Um, ok.”

Bub gave him a big smile and drove away.

There were several judges watching the tables. When nine o'clock AM rolled around, one of them fired a small starter pistol and everyone immediately went to work.

Making the perfect bowl of chili was much easier than it sounded. You had to have the right ingredients of course, but there was much more to it than that. You had to have enough salt. Not too much, not too little. You had to cook it at just the right temperature. Not too hot, not too cold. It really was a skill learned through painful trial and error. One little mistake and the whole house of cards could come crashing down.

Up to this point, he had been an amateur, but this was now the big leagues. If he placed here, he could be invited to the Texas Chili Cook Off. He would have no problem selling his own chili in stores if that happened. He could get financial backers and advertisers. All the pieces of the puzzle would come together, he just had to place in the top three here in order to make it happen.

He began to prepare his stew. The beans went in first, followed by the seasoned meat he prepared the night before. Then some onions, then some milk and some chicken broth. He added some starch and began to slowly stir. He liked the consistency, but he didn't love it. Just being good wasn't going to cut here. He had to be great. He added some more salt, then some peppers. His secret ingredient was lard. Not too much, just a scoop. He began to slowly stir the pot, while keeping an eye on the time. Everyone had exactly one hour to prepare and cook their chili. When the second shot was fired, that was it. You were supposed to step back and let the public enjoy themselves. The one hour deadline made it much harder. All of his previous cook offs gave him two or three hours. Some didn't even have a time limit. He was twenty minutes into it and so far, he was happy with the results.

Zeke knew his chili was unique. He also knew that every judge was different and were either going to love it or hate it. There really was no in between. He put it together, but someone else would get the final say.

Zeke looked over to his left and saw a man wearing an apron. He was older and had a small crowd around him. Zeke was stunned to see that the man bore a striking resemblance to Adolph Hitler. I mean he looked exactly like him. He didn't really think much of it. He was more focused on his chili. It was cooking in the pot. He had to just sit back and wait. He looked around and saw a man struggling two tables down from him. The man looked oddly familiar to him. He was sure he had seen the man some place before. He just couldn't place him. He was running around, throwing his ingredients into a large metal pot which he had over his cooker. Clearly the stress was beginning to get to him.

Zeke was trying hard to recall how he knew the man. He was almost certain he had seen him on TV. He somehow knew the man's name was *Butterworth*. Then, Zeke remembered hearing something about the name Butterworth and some unsolved murders years ago.

This is great. I've got Hitler on one side of me and a serial killer on the other side. He thought to himself. What could possibly go wrong?

The second shot rang out through the air. Zeke knew that meant you had to sit down and start pouring your chili. The public was eager to get their first taste. In the middle of the cook off circle, there was a giant pot with last year's winner. The rules were pretty simple: unless the judges agreed the new chili was better than the old chili, there were no winners. It sounds crazy, but those were the rules. Cook Offs were becoming overly complicated and rule bound just like everything else. It was worth it though. There was a lot of money at stake here. Taking top prize could mean big bucks down the road. He knew he had to play the game as good if not better than the guy next to him if he wanted top prize. He sat back and waited for the judges to check his pot. He looked around him and was amazed to see a man who bore a striking resemblance to Jeffery Dahmer. Zeke had to do a book report on him when he was in high school and was very familiar with his image. The guy was a dead ringer for Dahmer. This was getting just a little too weird. The man smiled as the public entered the large circle. Dahmer took out some bowls and filled them up for his hungry customers.

Zeke's first customers of the day were a husband and wife team. They literally ran up to his table as if their lives depended on it.

"Two bowls please," said the man.

"Coming up." said Zeke as he nervously filled the Styrofoam bowls.

Zeke could tell he had a winner. Their faces seemed to almost melt after their first bite.

"Now that's chili. Who did you use for your meat?"

"Can't say. A good magician never reveals their best trick." Zeke replied.

"I don't blame you. I'm going to say this chili is better than last years. I think you can take it." said the man.

Zeke couldn't understand why the man looked so disheveled and filthy. He looked like a homeless bum. His girl didn't look much better. They both look like they had just been dug up out of a grave. Looking around, Zeke began to notice a familiar theme amongst the crowd. *They all look like they were half dead. Old, dirty suits, worn out shoes and their faces were so pale. They almost look like corpses brought back to life.*

It wasn't long before Zeke had attracted a small crowd around his table. They were devouring his chili, faster than he could fill the bowls. Two judges came over to Zeke's table. They both took a few bites and nodded. One of them even gave him a thumbs up. That was nice to see. Any encouragement was welcome.

Zeke noticed that all of the tables seemed to be manned by single, older men. There were no ladies or wives present. He thought that was kind of odd. These types of events usually attract older and retired couples. Zeke looked and looked, but he couldn't see any women.

Something about this event was beginning to rub him the wrong way. The guy next to him that looked exactly like Hitler only spoke German. None of these rules really made any sense and everyone here looked.....*dead*. It was an eerie feeling. Cook offs are supposed to be fun. This cook off was just downright creepy. Still, the thought of taking top billing overrode his emotions. There was just too much at stake to simply walk away.

The creepiness factor was elevated further when he saw a man manning a booth that looked exactly like the killer John Wayne Gacy. Now, Zeke was really upset. He remembers seeing Gacy's picture everywhere when he was growing up in Chicago. This was just getting too weird. Zeke decided to try and talk to some of his customers about what he was witnessing.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to interrupt your meal, but there's something kind of weird about this place, isn't there?" asked Zeke.

"What do you mean?" replied a man who looked as thin and white as a ghost.

"Well, the guy next to me looks exactly like Hitler! He even speaks German. That guy over there looks like Jeffery Dahmer. Everyone here looks like a very famous evil person."

"Yeah, so?"

"So? That's not normal. All of these people are dead."

"Zeke, your chili needs more meat. It's good, but not in the top three. You really, really need to be in the top three around here."

"What do you mean?"

The man just kept eating and walked away. Zeke was now nervous. Maybe even a little scared. He was certain the man two tables down from him was Jeffery Dahmer. The man to his right was John Wayne Gacy. Zeke knew he had to maintain his composure. This was just a lot of strange coincidences. They weren't really Jeffery Dahmer and Adolph Hitler. They just strongly resemble them. That was all. His worry should be on his chili and his customers. Still, Zeke just couldn't shake the fact that the guy was Jeffery Dahmer. He even had his strange looking thick rimmed glasses on. It was just too much. Zeke had to have some answers. When he had no customers standing in front of him. He walked over to Jeffery Dahmer's table. Jeff looked up at him and smiled.

"Hi, would you like a big bowl or small bowl?" asked Jeff.

"Are you Jeffery Dahmer?" asked Zeke

"Yes. Big bowl or small bowl? replied the man.

Zeke took a step back and thought he was going to faint. Jeff just held a small bowl of chili for him to sample.

"Oh, wait. You're the new guy, right? Yeah we heard about you. That was pretty ballsy if you ask me." said Jeff smiling.

"How did you hear about me?"

"Word travels quickly in these parts.....*and I thought I was messed up.*"

Zeke quickly scurried away. He didn't even look back. He just went back to his table and started filling bowls for his customers, some of which were on their second and third bowl.

"It needs more meat." said one of the men eating Zeke's chili.

"I agree. Excellent aroma and texture, but a little too light on the main ingredients." said another.

"Well, chili is supposed to be a blend of several things at once," he replied.

"Yeah, but it needs more meat. You should really listen to us. We know our chili." said another woman stuffing her face with his chili.

"I'll be sure and take that under advisement." said Zeke.

Zeke left his customers and walked over to the man who looked like Adolph Hitler.

"Are you Adolph Hitler?" he asked nervously.

"Yes, my dear boy. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step." he said in broken English.

"Screw you." said Zeke as he walked away.

He had no idea what was happening. None of this made any sense. These people were long since dead. How were they serving chili right next to him? Zeke walked up to a woman who was also a judge.

"Hey.....what the hell is going on here?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"That guy is Adolph Hitler. The guy over there is Jeff Dahmer and the guy way over there is John Wayne Gacy."

"Yeah, so?"

"What do you mean so? This is crazy."

"Zeke.....you need to concentrate on your chili.....you really, really need to concentrate on your chili. Your life depends on it. Now, you've certainly made quite a name for yourself here. Don't go and ruin your reputation. For many of you, that's all you have here."

Zeke didn't know what to say. He just walked away from her. Something about this place was just.....*off*. It was supposed to be a chili cook off. Nothing made sense here. He wanted to just get in his van and get the hell away from this place, but the thought of taking top billing was just too much. Zeke walked back to his table and saw a massive man wearing a blood stained white smock standing in his line. Zeke just looked at him for a moment. This guy was just not right.. Nothing about this place was right. It was as if he was the only sane one in this place.

"The hell happened to you?" asked Zeke.

The man said nothing and just held up his empty bowl.

Zeke filled his bowl and the hungry giant walked away.

"Oh, that was the butcher. You better stay on his good side." said one of Zeke's customers.

"The butcher?"

“Yes, he carves up all the meat.”

“Carves up the meat? What meat?”

“He carves up all the losers.” said the customer.

That was about it for Zeke. He had made up his mind to just get in his van and get the hell out of here, when he heard the pistol fire once more. One of the judges held a microphone up to his mouth. Everyone dropped what they were doing and ran towards him.

“Okay everyone. The results are in. Now, I’m sure this may come as a shock to most of you. I know I was surprised, but the judges have spoken. Now third place, our good friend and master cooker, Richard Ramirez. Let’s give rich a big hand. Second place goes to someone who needs no introduction: the famous Dr. Death, Harold Shipman with his amazing Baja chili recipe. Well done, Harold. Now, first place goes to a newcomer here. Someone who’s just as nasty as the rest of us. His chili recipe caught us all off guard. I mean folks, we have a real bonafide cooker here. Let’s give a big round of applause to Mr. Zeke Tustin, where are you Zeke?”

Zeke was shaking so bad, he could barely walk. He tried to smile as he accepted his first place prize. “Well done, Zeke. Couldn’t have done it better myself.” said Gacy. Zeke was shocked at how big the man’s hands are.

“Zeke, welcome to the family. If you want to stay out of trouble, just finish in the top three. Believe me, you don’t want to finish in the bottom three.” said Dahmer.

“Why? What happens to the bottom three?”

“They go in the pot.” he said and pointed to the giant pot. He could see a human leg sticking out from the top of it. Zeke had to fight hard not to vomit.

These people were absolutely batshit crazy with no let up in sight.

He had to get out of here as soon as he could.

“What.....what the hell is this place?” Zeke asked.

“Zeke, don’t you know where you are? Don’t you know how you got here?”

“I just want to get out of here.”

“Well, Zeke. I’ve got some bad news for you. You ain’t going anywhere. You see my friend, this is a one way ticket. There’s no return date on it.” said one of the judges.

“What? I don’t belong here with these people. I don’t belong with Gacy or Dahmer or Hitler. They’re all killers and monsters.” he said hysterically.

“Zeke, don’t you remember what you did? I mean Gacy killed a lot of people, but even he never killed his own wife and son. That’s a whole new level of evil. One that you crossed without any hesitation whatsoever.”

“What? No, I didn’t.”

“You sure did. You shot them both, then killed your mother in law, when she showed up to bring you some cookies she baked. You shot her right in the head. She even called you her son.” said another judge.

Zeke collapsed into the chair. It came back to him, all at once. The trial, the long, miserable years in prison, awaiting his execution. Then, when the big day came. His last meal was a big hearty bowl of chili. That bowl of chili was the last thing he remembered as the lethal injection drugs were pumped into his body. Zeke died a few days ago. Now, here he was, in a very bad place, for very bad people. But, even hell has its rules.....and those rules will be followed.....*to the letter of the law.*

“Well, it’s no surprise who our bottom three are. I don’t think they’ve even left the bottom since they got here. H.H. Holmes, now where are you?”

Holmes just collapsed and started sobbing in the dirt.

“It’s not fair.....do you hear me, it’s not fair. I can feel my limbs being ripped off by him.” he said softly.

“Oh, stop your whining. He’ll show you about as much mercy as you showed your victims.” said the judge.

The butcher stepped forward and drove his machete right into Holme’s head, splitting it in two. He then proceeded to carve him up, right in front of a roaring crowd, cheering him on. Zeke was shaking so bad, he could barely sit in the chair.

“Now, Zeke, you can try to run away, I mean most of them do, but you won’t get very far and when you return, you’ll be first on the chopping block that day. Now, you have some real skill. I mean most of these idiots couldn’t make a decent bowl of chili to save their lives, but you my boy, oh.....you showed some real promise today, but we do have to try and make it fair for everyone, so from this point on in, we will choose your ingredients, okay?” said the judge as he put his arm around Zeke and walked him back to his table.

“Wait, I can’t choose my ingredients?”

“No, understand, you have so much skill, it wouldn’t be fair to the others. Adolph still couldn’t make a decent bowl of chili to save his life, so here you go.”

Zeke was in shock as he saw what was on his table. Gone were his meats and spices and peppers. In their place were a pile of dead rats and a human head.

“I’m sure you will work wonders, the great ones always do.” said the judge as he left him at his table. “How long do I have to stay here?” he asked, starting to sob.

“Oh, not very long. Only a thousand years or so. Whenever your dead wife and mother and son think you served your sentence.” said the judge as he turned.

Zeke began to sob. The butcher walked by carrying a wheelbarrow, stuffed full of body parts. He pulled out a human heart and put it on the table. It was still beating.

“Hope this helps Zeke.” he said and started to laugh.

“God help me.....please. I’m not a bad person, I just made a mistake.....okay, I made a big mistake, but I’m not an evil person, not like these people. You understand that, right? I don’t really have to spend a thousand years here.....do I.....God? Do I?”