

I was relieved not to see him. It's better to not find someone home if the only business you have visiting is to make him feel like he shouldn't be at home. I didn't know if Gooter would say something I would regret.

For the moment, he was busy getting our ball back while Pipe was furious with him for daring to try. The little dog pulled at his stake, following Gooter's every move and snapping at him. I couldn't help but admire the effort. It made me wonder if a storm pipe had anything to do with it. When Gooter found a stick and tried to roll the ball clear of the tent, Pipe grabbed that, too. He just wore Gooter out.

"Ah, let 'em keep it," he said finally, walking away disgusted. "I'm tired of this place!"

I was glad to hear Gooter say it.



That week, my mom took Irene and me to McDonald's for dinner. She does that when my dad is out of town. You may not believe this, but my dad has never stepped inside a McDonald's. He hasn't even gone in there to use the restroom. It's become one of his resolutions in life to never cross the Golden Arches. My mom says his tombstone will read:

Harold Roebecker
Devoted Husband, Loving Father
Never Set Foot in McDonald's

I, on the other hand, go there at least once a week. This time when I entered, I scanned for the chief on one of his trips to the restrooms. McDonald's can sometimes be a small world.

Then I spotted him. But it wasn't where I expected. Wearing a McDonald's uniform, he was behind the counter at the french fry station, sprinkling salt on a field of fries.

My jaw dropped at the sight. It was definitely him, but he looked different. A hat covered his wild hair. His face seemed thinner, too. Then I realized why. The chief had shaved. He had shaved and come to work at McDonald's!

I eased behind my mom, staying out of view.

What if he recognized me? What if he said, "Hey there! How you doing?" What if my mom asked, "Charlie, do you know that man?" What if Irene screamed, "He's the one who eats dogs!"

This wasn't the time for introductions, so I told my mom to order me a burger and a Coke.

"No fries, dear?" she asked loudly.

I shook my head. No fries. "I'll get us a seat," I said, and then quickly disappeared into a corner booth. It was the best spot to keep out of sight until the food arrived. It was also the best place for spying. From there, I watched the chief salt and bag fries. Then I watched him go to the soft drink dispenser and push some buttons. For a new guy, he knew the terrain.

Had he worked at McDonald's before the hurricane?

When my mom came with our tray, Irene insisted we move to a window booth. She was just being contrary. As we ate, I watched her pop fries into her mouth.

If she only knew who bagged them.

With a uniform to wear, the chief would finally have a chance to wash his clothes. Maybe he had them soaking somewhere right now. And he could bring leftovers home for Pipe. Working at McDonald's had its upside.

Then Irene said, "Charlie, get me some ketchup, would ya?"

"Why don't you get it yourself?" I replied. Obviously, I didn't want to get spotted. Besides, she had two legs.

My mom made her "you'd better be nice to your sister" face, so I got up and angled my way toward the dispensers, counting on the crowd for cover.

Please let me be just one more kid in the madhouse.

Just as I got to the counter and was about to reach for the ketchup cups, a familiar voice caught me like a hook.

"Hey there! How you doing?"

The chief was replenishing the napkins and straws.

"Hi, mister," I said, trying to look surprised. The madhouse hadn't saved me. "Are you working here?"

He smiled and said, "Started a few days ago. They were hiring, and I was coming here anyway."

This wasn't the time for a chat. He was working, and I was trying to get out of there.

"Well, my sister needs ketchup," I said urgently, as if

Irene might go into a coma without it. “See ya.”

I pumped some ketchup into a cup and ran back to the booth.

When I got there, Irene said, “What took you so long?”

She was being her usual disagreeable self. Neither she nor my mom had observed me. Still, I wasn’t about to risk another close encounter with the chief, so I retreated to the restroom, where I washed my hands more times than I needed to. I calculated how long my mom and Irene would take to finish their food, then I ran for the exit.

On the way home, I pondered the strange turn of events. The chief was working in a place where my dad had sworn that he would never enter. So now there were two men on the planet who would never cross paths in McDonald’s.



With the chief at work, I could only watch for Pipe from the bus. The little dog looked lonesome.

On Saturday, I biked to Hildreth’s again, but I didn’t want glue or kite string this time. I wanted to visit Pipe.

I first went to McDonald’s to make sure that the chief was okay with my visit. It was funny how things change. The week before, I had considered him to be the intruder. Now I was the one asking for permission.

The chief was wiping tabletops near the windows.

“Hey there, kiddo,” he said.

I noticed a nametag on his shirt.