

## **Lunch at Wild Horse Mountain BBQ** by Tony Cox

“In the beginning, there was grilled meat--and it was good. Then man learned to cook with hot woodsmoke--and it was even better.”

Chuck threw back his head and laughed. Encased in black leather with his gray hair hidden under a bright yellow do-rag, he was a poster child for Harley-Davidson.

I removed my helmet and laughed with him. Chuck and I had arrived at the same time and had parked our Harleys next to each other in the graveled parking lot of the barbecue restaurant. Not bad, considering I had made the trip down from Tulsa and Chuck had biked in from Fayetteville, Arkansas.

We were a couple of retired college professors, old enough to know better than to hit the road solo on a motorcycle, but young enough to do it anyway. The BBQ joint was a long-time favorite meeting place of ours, more or less a half-way point between the two cities with just enough distance to make the bike ride fun.

Situated on a hillside in eastern Oklahoma, the Wild Horse Mountain Barbecue Restaurant was a third generation operation. Each generation had added their personality to the rustic structure and to the business while each year of the constant wood fire had added an appealing and appetizing aroma to the entire hillside.

One thing that remained unchanged over the years was the tender and delicious smoked meat. The menu was simple: ribs, brisket, and baked beans. The bodacious sauce came in two flavors: hot and hotter.

Inside the busy restaurant, we ordered and found a place to sit. For the nth time, Chuck complained to the counter lady about the lack of unsweetened iced tea. For the nth time, she ignored his complaint.

“There's got to be more type-two diabetics besides me that eat here,” he grumbled as I carried our tray of brisket sandwiches and foam cups of ice water to a table.

While we ate the sandwiches, we exchanged the latest family news. Chuck had just returned from a biker gathering in Sturgis, South

Dakota. I was careful not to ask for the full particulars. He'd met his third wife at the rally several years ago and was now looking for a fourth. I told him about my last trip to southern China. I'm a part-timer, doing research on the avian flu virus for the CDC.

"The situation is getting worse," I concluded. "The poultry farmers and their families are caught in the middle. Their birds make them sick with the flu, sometimes kills them, and the government destroys their flocks, their livelihood."

"But still no human to human transference?" Chuck was serious now.

I shook my head. "Not yet, but you know that will happen, eventually."

Chuck and I shared a research specialty: viruses that had the ability to mutate and jump from animals to humans and then from humans to humans. Unfortunately, history provided us with many examples of animal viruses that had made that jump to humans and devastated whole populations. Smallpox, anthrax, yellow fever, encephalitis, West Nile, Dengue fever, and, in my opinion, the Black Death of the Dark Ages were the most famous ones. There were many others, less virile, that caused milder maladies.

We'd almost finished our sandwiches when Chuck nudged me.

"There's a hot babe over there that keeps giving you the eye."

Acting like a teenager, he raised his eyebrows and nodded in the woman's direction.

I glanced at her. She was getting up. I saw an attractive young woman dressed in powder-blue jeans, a white cowgirl shirt, and ostrich skin boots. Her straight brown hair was parted in the middle and fell below her shoulders.

She dumped her tray and walked over to our table.

"Professor Watkins--mind if I interrupt?"

"Not at all. Chuck and I welcome the distraction," I said, smiling.

"You probably don't remember me, Professor, but I took one of your classes at the University of Oklahoma."

Chuck and I had taught for many years and the chance meeting of an old student of ours was not unusual. I looked closely at her and had not even a hint of recognition. Stalling for time, I motioned to an empty chair. She sat.

“What class?”

“Your seminar on virus transference during animal-human interactions,” she replied.

“Ah yes,” I said. *That was at least three years ago.*

“I was going through a difficult period back then, and what I learned in your class helped me understand some things.”

I remained silent, still trying to place her.

“When I noticed you sitting here, Professor Watkins, I just had to stop and say hello.”

She laughed. “You don't remember me at all, do you? I wasn't one of your grad students. I was a biologist specializing in amphibians. I'd already graduated and had spent several years in Kenya studying *hyperolius viridiflavus* in the wild.”

Chuck said, “the sex-changing Common Reed Frog?”

Trust Chuck to know about those frogs.

“Yes, that's the one. In the lab, I'd studied the ability of the adult female Reed frogs to switch gender and successfully mate. After graduation, I received a grant to observe gender switching in the wild. At the time, Kenya was a good place to do that--I was successful--I even documented a rare male to female change.”

Chuck nodded and replied, “There's still quite a bit of speculation about what actually causes the gender change. Some say it's triggered by a chemical imbalance brought on by the stress of the difference in the male-female ratio.”

She frowned. “Yes. That's what some say.”

I raised my hand, palm out. “Wait--I remember a post-doc in one of my classes--a fellow--he was convinced the frog gender change was caused by a virus--not just any virus, but one that could mutate toward human transference.”

She was silent while I leaned forward and continued my recall.

“His name was--Frank. Frank Givens.”

The woman absentmindedly tucked an errant lock of brown hair behind her ear and smiled. “Actually, I go by Frankie, now.”