

## Soda

Brad Barry

Claire took a deep breath, then exhaled the words into her drive-through headset: “Welcome to Roadrunner’s. May I take your order?”

At first, the Customer-Who’s-Always-Right sounded normal enough: “Yeah, gimme a...ah...a *medium* fry.” He emphasized the word “medium” as if he were coming to the most important conclusion of his day. The choice was decisive, spoken with a tone that seemed to satisfy him.

Claire looked over her shoulder, to make sure the manager was not within ear-shot. She then covered the headset mic with a hand, and looked at her co-worker who was standing next to her. “Judy, we’ve got another one.”

“Of course we do,” answered Judy, sliding two burgers at once into an open paper bag. “Nice car?”

Claire leaned out of the drive-through window to take a peek. “Yes, very nice.”

*Cool and refreshing!*

They were accustomed to countless drive-through customers who were alone in their cars. That was nothing new, and hardly an indicator. Yet, after each day’s horde of drive-bys (as Judy liked to call them), Claire’s mind could not help but look for patterns. Even a glimmer of pattern recognition, after all, helped to pass the time, and helped to give a sense of meaning to the day’s rote-Roadrunner routines.

Yet this particular customer defied any hint of a comforting pattern for Claire. He was not ordering anything that could be construed as even a partial meal, like an order of fries with a soda. Nor was he one of those solo customers who requested multiple meals in the guise of picking up lunches “for the family” or “for everyone back at the office”—only to quickly pull over at the next nearest parking lot for five-minutes of blissful caloric inhaling.

*Bubbly!*

No, this type of drive-by was unique; he was ordering a single item.

“I just don’t get it,” Claire continued. She opened a paper bag as if she were putting on a glove. “I mean, the single *French fry order*. Why wouldn’t he at least order a drink to go with it?”

“Or even a water,” Judy said. “*That* would help me sleep at night.”

Claire wished the part about not-sleeping-at-night were added for dramatic flair. “Or even a cup of ice,” she added.

Over the headset, she quickly greeted her next car, and then turned back to Judy. “I mean, to eat so many fries—in this dry, desert air—and not get thirsty? It’s just *not normal*.”

*Sparkling and clear!*

Behind the workers – at a good, safe distance – the manager wrestled with an imbalanced table-leg, so Claire felt free to continue her ruminations about drive-through patterns. “Last week,” she continued to Judy, “this woman came through—you know, one of those strong-smelling aunty types in a new Caddy—and *same thing!* A single order of fries and nothing else.”

“Uh hum,” Judy grunted, as if she knew the type well.

“And when I leaned over,” Claire continued, “I could see a bottle of *salad dressing* sitting on the passenger seat!”

“Did not!”

“Did too! I’m tellin’ you, for the rest of that week, I kept imagining that small whisp-of-a-woman driving down that hot summer road, interchanging swigs of Thousand Island with each crispy fry!”

Behind her, the cook groaned as he flipped a row of burgers.

~ ~ ~  
*Children-and-husband-of-Claire wait at home, couch-ready, TV-ready, for the soma of mother’s generously given work-comp’d-meal to arrive warm and ready-to-eat. “Lower” “Middle” “Upper” – classes of bygone categories in our age of drive-through chutes that neatly channel we, the salivating, as we roll forward, comforted by our brightly-lit-lane boundaries that leads us closer and closer to*

*A drink to make your day!*

~ ~ ~  
He arrived at Claire’s window. She greeted him with a smile, and then a question: “Are you sure you wouldn’t like an ice-cold drink with your fries?” She had never pressed the issue before, but her boredom had reached new depths. *Will a simple hint, she wondered, bring him back to Sanity Land?*

“No,” he said in a sharp tone. “No drink.”

*A new sensation!*

Claire looked over her shoulder. Her manager was closer, within ear-shot, and so she spoke louder. “It sure is hot out there,” she added. “Maybe a *medium* drink to go with your *medium* fries?”

He did not seem to hear her emphasis. “I have air-conditioning,” he answered in a matter-of-fact tone that made Claire think of The Terminator.

*The new sensation!*

Had the Customer-Who’s-Always-Right hesitated, Claire would have been able to let it go. Even a blip of hesitation would show that he was at least able to consider an alternate order. But there was no hesitation. Zero. Blip. Claire’s eye twitched, and she scratched at her neck. *Can there be no color to my day?*

She took another deep breath, and tried to calmly, dispassionately reflect on his decisive-tone. *This can only mean one thing: all single-item drive-bys must surely be premeditated, well in advance of getting in the car.* She imagined the title of a future research paper: “Single-Order (In)Sanity” in the *Journal of Drive-Through Dementia Research*. Claire then looked at his face and saw a scowl work its way through a closely-trimmed goatee.

“Well then,” Claire smiled, “that’ll be one eighty-nine please.”

*Your choice for an instant smile!*

“Do you know,” asked the man in the car, “how long I waited in line before I placed my order?” The scowl found its way to his teeth.

Claire knew better than to satisfy him with the desired, *How long?* So instead, she swiveled away one of her ear-pieces so that Judy could eavesdrop, and then marshalled an upbeat tone: “I’m sure it was quite some time, sir.” But then she couldn’t help herself, and added: “We’re really very busy with all the vehicles coming through and ordering full meals.”

“Five minutes!” he yelled.

Claire, of course, was not surprised that he answered his own question. Nor was she surprised that he missed her veiled insult. She looked over her shoulder, glancing for sight of her manager, then looked back at the drive-by and chose not to apologize. Her eye-twitch calmed.

*The choice of a new generation!*

“And then I waited another five minutes *after* placing my order!”

She noticed that not once since he pulled up to the window did his eyes leave her. It seemed to Claire that he believed *she* were the cause of every car that came before him.

“That makes *ten* minutes in total!” he yelled. “I’ve been waiting for *ten minutes!*”

Judy was once again next to Claire, filling more drinks. She leaned toward Claire and whispered, “He’s good at math, ain’t he?”

“What will your manager have to say about this!” the man shouted.

Judy slowed the rate with which she filled each cup. She then lingered as she snapped each plastic lid into place.

And then it happened. Claire buckled: “We are very sorry, sir.” She couldn’t help saying it, but at least felt a small amount of comfort in the universal *we*.

“Well what happened!” he yelled. “Did you screw up my order?”

A laugh jumped out of Claire’s throat. She looked over her shoulder; the manager was nowhere.

“What the hell is so funny?” He lowered his volume, but deepened his tone.

The day’s boredom inspired her to take another risk: “Well, it’s just that it’s hard to mess up an order of fries.”

He said nothing in reply, turned red, and once again scowled.

As she looked at him, Claire found herself wishing he would have instead continued to yell. *What kind of steam is building up in there?* she wondered.

*Liquid happiness!*

She continued to meet his gaze, and her eye-twitch returned. “Sir, can I throw in anything extra, on the house?”

“Oh, and would *that* take another ten minutes too?”

Claire could hear Judy behind her, breathing heavily. She craned her neck over Claire’s shoulder. “Hey listen *sir!*” She grabbed his bag of fries from Claire and thrust them through the window, into his waiting hand. (Claire imaged the fries inside the bag, breaking.) “I’m giving these fries to you at no cost!” yelled Judy.

His eyes narrowed, and he took the bag.

*Liquid satisfaction!*

Judy then turned around, took hold of one of the sodas she had just filled, and then thrust it through the drive-through window. For a moment, Claire thought she might throw the drink at him, but Judy slowed down as her arm approached his car window. “And here’s a drink for the hot day. Maybe your AC isn’t working, and that’s why you’re so damned rude!”

Claire’s eyes widened.

His eyes narrowed.

Then suddenly, he snatched the drink from Judy’s hand. As he pulled it into his car, Claire noticed that he was holding it in an unusual manner, as if palming a football.

“I told you for the *last* time,” he yelled, “I do *not*. . . *want*. . . a drink!”

Neither Judy nor Claire could have anticipated what came next. He pulled his hand back, then dropped a shoulder.

*The choice of. . .*

By instinct, Claire’s muscles responded on her behalf; her hands and arms moved toward a food tray, while her mind raced behind, trying to catch up.

The driver hurled the soda directly at them.

Judy ducked.

Claire leaned forward. *Surely the lid will come off*, she thought, even before the drink left his hand. Her eyes caught the happy, vibrant logo painted onto the cup. Her arms lifted the food tray as if it were a shield—and then pushed the flying soda back toward Mr. Medium-Fries-Only. She could not see what happened, but the sounds gave her a clear picture.

Tray still in hand, dripping with soda, she looked over her shoulder. Her manager approached, red-faced.

*. . . a new generation!*

“Claire, you’re done! Get your things, and go! Now!”

~ ~ ~  
Claire quickly gathered her things from her storage locker, then walked out of Roadrunners for last time. The sun skidded across the pavement. She looked for the man in the car, but he was still on the opposite side of the building, yelling at the manager. She started her ignition, pulled out from under the shade-tree, then headed toward the street. Though her home was toward one direction, she felt she could go either way—and so let her hands decide for her.

*The choice of a new generation!*

As she rolled down the road, through rippling heat waves, Claire felt the side of her hand sticking to the steering wheel. She licked the dried soda from her skin, then wiped her hand on her apron. Only then did she smell the meal. While Claire had gathered her things from her locker, Judy had placed four bags of food on the passenger seat.

Author Bio:

Brad Barry's previous publications are the poems "creosote" and "neighbor hood," as well as the essays "The Intellectual Value of Caring" and "Writer Motivation: Beyond the Intrinsic/Extrinsic Dichotomy."