

Bigfoot

FIRST MET BIGFOOT while still at CIA. He was then, and remains, a West Village legend, either loved or despised (and frequently both) by generations of bar customers, waiters, bartenders, cooks, chefs and restaurant lifers. I won't give his name, though everyone below 14th Street who reads this will know who I'm talking about. He'll certainly know. He'll call me.

"Hey, Flaco," he'll say. He calls me Flaco to this day. There was *already* a Tony working for him when he took me on, and as Bigfoot likes an organized operation, he needed a distinct name for me. "Flaco, I read your book . . ."

"Yess . . ." I'll respond, waiting for the punch line.

"There's a typo on page seventy-seven," he'll say. "I don't know a lot about publishing, but . . . it seems to me that . . . maybe someone over there should know how to spell . . ."

Now, the first thing I heard about Bigfoot when I worked for him weekends back in the seventies was that "he killed a guy"! Whether this is true or not, I have *no* idea. Though I like to consider him a friend and mentor, we have never discussed it—and I

have heard, over the years, so many versions from so many unreliable people that I can't vouch for the veracity of even that simple statement. But the point is that this was the first thing I heard about him. That he had killed a guy with his bare hands. And Bigfoot, as you might imagine, is *big*. As he likes to describe himself, "a big, fat, balding, red-faced Jewboy," which is typically a less than completely fair description. Bigfoot is not an unattractive guy—he looks like an elongated Bruce Willis—but he *is* over 6 foot 4, an ex-college basketball player, with enormous hands, strong shoulders and arms and deceptively quizzical eyes. He likes to play dumb—*loves* to play dumb—and like a sunbathing crocodile, when he makes his move, it's way too late.

"You know . . ." he'd say, "I'm not a chef . . . and I don't know a lot about food, or cooking . . . so I don't know how to make, say . . . guacamole." Then he'd shred my recipe and any illusions I might have about him not knowing anything about food, breaking down that preparation ingredient by ingredient, gram by gram, and showing how it could be done faster, better, cheaper. Of course he knew how to make guacamole! He knows to the atom how much of each ingredient goes in for how much eventual yield. He knows where to get the best avocados cheapest, how to ripen them, store them, sell them, merchandise them. He also knows how much fillet you get off every fish that swims, keeps a book on *every* cook who works for him with the individual yield averages for each and every fish they ever cut for him—so he *knows*, when Tony puts a knife to, say, a striped bass, exactly how many portions Tony is likely to get compared to the other cooks. Tony averages 62.5 percent usable yield on red snapper, and Mike averages 62.7 . . . so maybe Mike should cut that fish. As an ex-jock, Bigfoot likes scrupulous stats.

Cunning, manipulative, brilliant, mercurial, physically intimidating—even terrifying—a bully, a yenta, a sadist and a mensch: Bigfoot is all those things. He's also the most stand-up guy I ever worked for. He inspires a strange and consuming loyalty. I try, in my kitchen, to be just like him. I want my cooks to have me inside

their heads just like Bigfoot remains in mine. I want them to think that, like Bigfoot, when I look into their eyes, I see right into their very souls.