

Katherine Ann Davis

The Hero and the Hot Dog Vendor

In the city, the golden late-September dusk was a signal for sellers to clear the sidewalks, even in high-traffic areas, but tonight the hot dog vendor stayed. This year, he reminded himself, was the year of change. He'd said so last night at his birthday celebration, or wished it as he blew out the votive candle Charlie had pushed into his poppyseed muffin. He'd written it on two envelope scraps, pocketed one and taped the other to his cart as a constant, friendly nudge. Now the hot dog vendor smoothed that tape, stomped down the usual pain, and blinked into an expanse of people. No officers, thank goodness. A silly ordinance—autumn evenings were when tourists walked about most eager to spend—but he understood. They all did. Across the street, Russ of Russ's Slushes folded his umbrella. He was fined by an officer last week and couldn't afford more chances this season.

Pain threatened again, climbed past the hot dog vendor's ankles to settle around his knees and hips. A second stomp, a third, and he pictured it sink like mercury in a thermometer. A fourth stomped it all out, he imagined, spilled it from his heels and toes into the concrete. That's what his physical therapist advised when treatments no longer fit into his budget: *positive visualizations and/or distractions, no rich desserts, lots of water and turmeric*. Sometimes ibuprofen, but the hot dog vendor had forgotten the change purse where he kept pain relief, so caffeine was his lone source of any different feeling.

At least distractions were easy: he posed for the double-decker bus tours, reinterpreted maps for sightseers, sold passersby cans of cold soda, and swapped stories with folks who crowded his cart to cross *try street food* off their bucket lists. He met grandkids, bachelorettes, the recently retired. He liked this rhythm, this quick turn to embrace visitors in the city that had fashioned him into a satisfying performance. His cash pouch grew fat. The extra money would of course go to Charlie.

He opened a silver lid and pinched a hot dog between his tongs, shook off the water and asked about toppings.

"The works," a young woman requested. Music notes were

tattooed up the side of her neck. She pulled a few bills from her handbag while, around them, people whispered and pointed into the sky, the alleys. God, not tonight, he thought. Tourists gathered every night in hopeful clusters across the city, but the hot dog vendor sensed urgency in this crowd's gestures, a frenzy that had ballooned over the hours. His stomach rumbled. The woman laughed.

“Have *you* eaten yet?”

“Nah.”

He put on his little show for her. Still shaking the tongs with one hand, he tore a sheet of wax paper from the dispenser and scooped up a bun with the other. Next, his best trick: his fingers spread to open the bun at the exact moment he dropped the hot dog from above. Then a sweep of mustard, of relish. The plop of a pickle spear. Cabbage and diced onion sprinkled on top and, finally, the handoff.

He'd done well. Her face brightened, and she didn't flinch when she brushed his fingers while taking hold of her purchase. She thanked him. He offered her a soda. She accepted, presented another bill. He counted change. The umbrella overhead rippled in the breeze. Yes, the air had grown a touch calmer—but it also gained a tartness dark enough to unsettle him. The officers, he knew, came by at times like this. He nodded goodbye to the woman, sold hot dogs to the two boys in line behind her, then quietly shut it down.

That night, Charlie agreed things seemed better. He was newly settled in an apartment the hot dog vendor recommended—a low rent situation far outside the city, not too many residents—and had googled cheap car insurance, cheap life insurance, self-pay clinics, and food pantries. Charlie's motivation ended there, though. Unopened mail blanketed the couch. Unopened dish and laundry soap bottles the hot dog vendor had bought for housewarming sat undisturbed on the bathroom counter. In the kitchen, trash bags burst from paper plates and plasticware. Greasy footprints crisscrossed the floors. Charlie pulled gray socks up to his knees and slumped in a chair that once belonged to his mother. The hot dog vendor had spent many hours with this chair: he'd loved Charlie's mother, bought her mystery stories and cherry cordials from the drugstore, helped light her prayer votives on Saturdays, let her teach him cribbage and talk conspiracy theories whenever he'd visit otherwise, which was usually without her son. Though he'd waited until after she passed to break professional ties with Charlie, the hot dog vendor still twisted with guilt inside when he

thought of her. She'd prayed for her son's future, tacked all hopes onto their partnership's outcome.

Charlie picked at the pink cushion beneath his thighs. The hot dog vendor sipped instant coffee from a juice glass.

"Did you cancel your cable?"

Charlie shook his head, wouldn't look him in the face. "They got me in a contract. Two years."

"Your phone?"

"Contract." Charlie knotted a loose thread around his thumb.

Sixty years old and still a child, thought the hot dog vendor. He wanted to yell, to whack Charlie across the head with an open palm—a fantasy that had popped up and solidified over the years, he was ashamed to admit. In the early days, when they shared a stand, when the hot dog vendor was saving for a cart and Charlie's mother's roasted cashew recipe kept them earning between part-time jobs, he might have drowned Charlie in a vat of melted butter and rosemary. Given multiple credit card debts at 17-23% interest and a sequence of payday loans to pay off other payday loans, he was astonished he didn't. And he was glad he didn't, in truth. Chewing his lip, the hot dog vendor set his coffee on a newspaper stack. Three important-looking pieces of mail, separate from the rest on the sofa's arm, caught his attention. He slid open their envelopes with a butter knife, read the letter enclosed in the first. "I told you," he said. "I said to stop asking for cash advances."

"I know."

"The fees are a scam. Don't you know that?"

"I know."

But Charlie didn't know. Charlie, whose adult life was a series of decisions to ensure only the moment's comfort, never weighed consequences, never eyed the future, never had a fucking clue. And who could educate him now? The hot dog vendor crumpled the letter and said, "Give me your credit cards." Two or three phone calls might lessen his monthly payments at least, or knock down the interest rate. Maybe save a hundred a month for other bills. *This year is the year of change*—yep, and dammit, he was going to try.

Charlie felt his shorts pockets. He tossed a slim wallet to the hot dog vendor. "Take it all."

"Don't be stupid." The hot dog vendor found the cards and brushed aside the wallet, gulped the rest of his cold coffee and rinsed his glass. He wanted to be done with this, the cleaning-up-the-messes part. If Charlie kept to a schedule, a budget with a little spending money, then the hot dog vendor could check in maybe twice a month. Two phone calls. Two cheerful *hellos*, two brief *how are yous*. Two friendly nudges not to live on popcorn and

frozen French fries. Two rundowns of the day's game shows. A possible friendship in recovery. And no late night performances with the hot dog cart—once the debts disappeared. The hot dog vendor sudsed a dollop of soap in his palm and rubbed the glass rim, rinsed it again while completing his daily tip-toe stretches. He'd had a plan for those debts, a timeline. Everything was arranged for himself and for Charlie. But insurance wouldn't cover the damage last time.

It was several months ago, mid-spring, when the sun began to linger into evening. Twin girls in orange tights asked for plain hot dogs, then pulled ketchup packets out of their mother's shoulder bag. Suddenly, a frenzied energy from the tourists buzzed and crescendoed. Dozens of armed men spilled out from the shadows, fought with officers and each other. When the Hero arrived, tourists cheered on his takedown of the baddest armed man. The city: saved. The hot dog cart: toppled, smashed by the crowd, thickening and wild.

"An act of God," insurance agents called it.

The hot dog vendor blamed himself for lack of foresight and preparation. Since last year's hurricane season caused record coastal damage and future seasons were predicted to worsen, since the Mayor pushed for twice-a-month heroic demonstrations to increase tourism and therefore city-repair revenue, the hot dog vendor had heard stories of other street vendors' losses. Of course they had the ordinance now, which the Mayor assured was for their protection, as the heroic demonstrations only occurred at or post-dusk. But because they couldn't benefit from the tourism increase, the vendors felt their livelihoods wobble, their savings chopped away—especially when the Mayor refused to disclose exact dates and locations for the heroic demonstrations. Somewhere in the city, was all they knew.

Charlie said he hadn't eaten dinner.

Remembering the extra cash, the hot dog vendor pulled out his money pouch and uncreased several bills. "Tomorrow could pay even better. Weather permitting."

Charlie scrolled on his phone. "Weather's supposed to be good."

"Then I'll just have to look out for officers." He handed Charlie the money. "Order a pizza or something. With a salad."

Charlie refused the gift at first, which was not what the hot dog vendor expected, then asked if the hot dog vendor kept enough for himself.

"I—yes. I'm good to go, Charlie."

Tears stuck in Charlie's eyelashes. His voice choked when he

spoke again. “Thank you.”

Overwhelmed by his former partner’s shame, a rare moment of self-reflection but a real one nonetheless, the hot dog vendor squeezed the credit cards in his pocket and frowned. He told Charlie not to worry and patted his shoulder on the way to the door, took the mail and boarded the bus home to his own apartment and fellow tenants.

The next day carried a sweet warmth reminiscent of early summer, and the hot dog vendor lost count of the customers who arrived with a Russ’s Slush already in-hand. Soda would be impossible to unload, he knew, and while he regretted those losses, today he sold twice as many hot dogs during the noon hour. Possibly the Mayor’s initiative was working: tour buses seemed to run like a carousel, and the foot traffic was like a throng of concert-goers. The hot dog vendor barely remembered to stomp, or didn’t have to.

A ballooning sense of the crowd’s frenetic energy never left him, though. Throughout his busy afternoon, the hot dog vendor searched for inspectors-in-hiding, for signs of the Hero and preparations for a heroic demonstration. He weighed the risk of a second late workday: if insurance didn’t pay out last time, then it certainly wouldn’t when he was in violation of a city ordinance. He was undecided still when evening air scattered the afternoon’s warmth and the other carts packed up for the night—undecided until the woman with the tattooed music notes joined his line again, and he felt reassured. “I fly out tomorrow,” she said, “but I’d love another. The works, please.” While he fixed the order, he worried about how to entertain her. She’d already caught his peak performance, and he had little experience with repeat customers. But she clapped her hands at his taped-up inspirational scrap, read it aloud—“*This year is the year of change*, hell yes!”—and snapped a selfie with it, her head propped against his cart. Thrilled, he handed her the hot dog, and she took a bite, *mmmm*ing in an exaggerated way that endeared him. He wanted to ask her to take a selfie with him and with his sign, their faces together, hopeful and wide-grinned. It was just the two of them at the cart; the rest of the tourists had congregated up a distance.

As he pep-talked himself to request the picture, she coughed. The hot dog vendor’s head snapped up, his muscles tensed, ready to perform the Heimlich. But the woman wasn’t choking. She screeched, “Look!” and he peeked at the sky from underneath the umbrella, peeked into the shadows beyond their sidewalk. There they were. The goddamn officers.

“Shit,” said the hot dog vendor and cleared his throat into his handkerchief. He shouldn’t curse in front of customers. His embarrassment at being fined in front of an audience was no excuse for rude behavior. But no one in the thickening crowd noticed him. No one paid attention to anything but that yellow glow of dusk bouncing off the buildings and the officers emerging into the half-light. It was the reason they’d come here. It was the reason anyone came here. They pulled out their phones and took pictures.

“Where is it? Where is he?” The tourists ran into the street to look, then hurried to claim spaces on the sidewalk. They’d forgotten their sunburns, their bucket lists, their maps, and their hunger. A rumble filled the air, an expanding bubble of clangs and shouts. They readied their phones.

The hot dog vendor closed the umbrella and scooted his cart behind them. Separate from the crowd, he reasoned, we’re beyond their rush and smother. We’re onlookers, removed from the action. Scenery to them, even. Not like last time. He stood in front of his cart, rolled tightness out of his ankles, kicked the pain out of his knees.

The bubble burst.

Men in armor—different armor than last time—flooded the open spaces. They whirled and twisted their bodies; they struck the officers’ jaws, crumbled the pre-treated columns and sides of buildings, and pushed harder against anyone who pushed back. Coughs erupted in the dust-filled air. The crunch of bone and concrete. The thud of baton against metal. The hocking of phlegm. The smell of shit and sweat. High laughter exploded from the baddest armed man, and then the Hero’s entrance: the still-gleaming sun gold against his suit, he rushed to the baddest’s throat, choked the laughter. Both men fell.

Whoops and hollers, egging them on.

The clicks and flashes of maybe a thousand camera phones.

To the tourists, the scene was expected—extraordinary only due to the lucky timing of their visit. It was a live show, off the big screen, as they’d been promised. But the hot dog vendor knew something was wrong.

Like all residents, he had seen this action before. Damage to streets, sidewalks, storefronts, offices—all the reasons the city was a construction zone in perpetuity, even outside hurricane season. City officials budgeted for this sort of thing. They could absorb the costs, plus a certain amount of police corruption through sabotage, overreach. Confusion as people mixed up enemies, loyalties, their ever-changing storylines. More recently, though, tourists arrived with their own weapons and the will to use them.

The hot dog vendor had watched the Hero dodge these men and relocate the main scene when tourists were too intent on their own hero fantasies, when the unarmed spectators were thrilled with the new characters' presence regardless and viewed the Hero's personal risk as an additional layer of tension. Fools never fear the effects of impulse.

Now, away from the crowd, the hot dog vendor again watched and wondered, but it wasn't until the Hero used a fire hydrant to hoist himself that he recognized a subsequent change. Panting, the Hero stood and faced them. Someone shone a cellphone flashlight over his eyes. Blood vessels. Bags. Blankness. The Hero looked at the hot dog vendor and stomped his legs—three, four times for each leg—and at once the hot dog vendor understood the change as well. Between ever-shifting streams of enemies, pressure from the Mayor to “stimulate the local economy,” tourists' expectations and interference, and growing threats of harm to himself and the officers—it was too much. The Hero wanted to be done. With more than cleaning-up-the-messes.

The hot dog vendor offered a wink to the Hero, a little nod. He felt kinship: together, they wanted this impossible thing. A clear way out. A clean end to their debts and hassles. As a fellow resident of the city and performer, the Hero, the hot dog vendor felt, understood him too.

The hot dog vendor stretched out an arm, opened his hand.

“The cart,” said the Hero.

“My cart?”

The Hero said nothing more.

Before panic could bloom in his chest, before he could register that the baddest armed man was about to rise and strike again, the hot dog vendor felt the tourists' grip on his body. They pulled and squeezed; they shoved him aside. He tripped over the sidewalk curb and skidded on his knees, winded. Pain shot up through his ankles, his hips, seared his neck and shoulders. Concrete scraped his shins and elbows. The crowd swarmed past and into the street. Cheers overtook the sounds of whatever was happening to his cart.

The hot dog vendor sat a long time alone, picking stones out of his cuts and wheezing. He sat until his legs fell numb and every other noise died. By then the sun was gone.

The city: saved.

A buzz on his chest and his tinny cell phone ring. That would be Charlie calling about the day's earnings, or dinner. Or to ask how his conversations with the credit card companies went.

Wiping his eyes with his sleeves, the hot dog vendor touched one apron pocket, then the other. No cash pouch. No purse with

the ibuprofen. No inspirational scrap. Nothing but the letters and Charlie's credit cards, as though the thieves had sensed their worthlessness. He ignored the ringtone, struggled to his feet, and stomped each foot four, five, six times. The pain refused to move, like hardened cement in his tissues.

He took the cards and letters out of his pocket, and erased Charlie's voicemail before dialing the first number. He recited Charlie's zip code and Social Security number, long ago memorized. "Yes, I'll hold," he said into the recording. Music blared. The hot dog vendor imagined its notes pulsing alive in an upward spiral, their origin someplace deeper than his pain. He imagined the existence of a salve that might heal his skin, a peppermint oil that might penetrate his weak knees and ankles. His cart... "Yes, this is account ending in—" he wiped his eyes again, looked at the first card. "In 5539. There's been an accident. A mistake." The music had disappeared, but its notes were still there in this woman's pre-recorded voice, in her customer-rep confidence. He watched them spin and rise and glitter in the dusk. "Yes, continue. I am interested. Yes, cash advance. Please tell me your rates. Please, tell me I haven't exceeded my limits."

Katherine Ann Davis is a writer from WI who serves as Senior Prose Editor for *3Elements Review*. Her work has been published by *Passages North*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Pinch*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Sycamore Review*, and other journals. For more about her, please visit katherineanddavis.com.