

FRONT PORCH

Farensteen Here and There

Steven Gillis

Farensteen sat, hands on knees, fingers in a cat scratch working the material of his jeans. His shoes were turned inward at the tip, scuffed through old polish. Beside him on the bench, folded over to cover the wood green slats on both sides, front and back, was a large, once-white sheet of cardboard. Farensteen had used six-inch stencils to write the words: RESERVE YOUR SPOT.

People saw the sign and asked while passing, “Reserved for what? What’s up with that?”

“What for sure?” Farensteen answered. “Come and see. Reserved for you. Sit with me and see what happens.”

A man in a grey suit sat down on the far end of the bench. Farensteen watched the man unpack a sack lunch, turkey and swiss stacked on rye. He waited until the man started eating then said, “I’m sorry, but you can’t sit here without a reservation.”

“How’s that?”

“This space.” He pointed to the sign. “It’s reserved.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The bench.”

“Is in a public park.”

“All the more reason.” Farensteen nodded again at his sign, pulled out his clipboard and a pen, showed a sheet of paper where he’d created slots for each half hour, placed fake names in several positions to suggest a demand. “People eat lunch in the park every day,” Farensteen said. “Imagine if you arrived and found your bench unavailable.”

“I’d sit over there.” The man pointed a hundred yards up the hill.

“Right, there are other benches,” Farensteen said, “but that isn’t what you want, is it? Those other places are probably further from your office. Time is money and money time, yes? Besides, the view from this bench is perfect. Puts you near the footpath and still able to look across the lawns. Why worry whether your bench will be here for you when you can easily reserve your time now. If you’d like, I can check our list, see what we have for tomorrow and put you down. All monies returned in the advent of rain.” Farensteen held out the pen.

The man finished half his sandwich, wrapped up the rest, stood in front of Farensteen for several seconds. He turned and walked off.

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“Statistically speaking,” he told Liz, “seven out of ten products fail because people don’t do their homework.” Farensteen had read the books: *The Invisible Touch*, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, *How Winners Sell*. “The trick’s in creating value out of perception.” He had repeated as much to Randy and T-Bone as they worked three-to-a-truck at the city’s Parks & Recreation. Convinced he could land a job at one of the areas top marketing firms, Farensteen decided to write an article demonstrating his ability to invent demand and produce something out of nothing, like pet rocks and new-and-improved detergent.

Farensteen had finally interviewed at Denfield and Harris. He stood before the partners in his brown wool suit, too warm for summer, his red tie tight and black shoes polished. He answered the partners’ questions, sidestepped all mention of his education, described instead unpaid internships and independent projects. The references on his résumé were a fiction. “The rules regarding fixed block differences, variances and covariances within particular market populations,” he said and went on to recite how the AVROMOV (2002) analysis found the out-of-sample performance of the Bayesian model-averaging approach inferior to the statistical model selection criteria. Even after this, he knew the interview was going nowhere, and afraid of leaving empty-handed, he asked the partners, “What if I can show you? What if I can do that?”

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“I don’t think you can,” Liz answered when Farensteen offered the same question. She lay beside Farensteen in bed. “Stop,” she said. “Listen. What are we doing and why’s it so hard?”

“What if I can show you?” Farensteen said. “What if I can do that?”

“How?” She remained on her side of the bed. “How can you show me what’s no longer there?”

Farensteen rubbed his hands together. “It’s there,” he insisted. “You just can’t see it right now. Eight out of ten relationships go through a tough stretch in the first five years,” he said. “Statistically speaking.”

“Stop,” she said. “You can’t quantify us like that. We’re not some can of corn you put in a new package and try to resell.”

She got up and went into the kitchen. Farensteen followed. After three years of living together, he couldn’t understand what went wrong and why they no longer functioned like cog and gear. “Why is it?” he asked, unsure what was causing them to grind, steadily and carelessly, their sense of relationship tipped sideways. He tried his best to downplay their current slump, believed things would turn around and told Liz, “Rough waters is all.”

“Storm warnings,” she said.

“That’s it.”

“Yeah and sometimes sturdy ships sink.”

Farensteen stood in his undershorts and pale blue *Tea for the Tillerman* t-shirt. He debated the best response, dismissed some emotional appeal which left him defenseless, preferred to think in terms of market trends, the ups and downs and ebb and flow, projections he could calculate sufficiently and follow through to less-speculative conclusions. The secret to marketing was making the first guy assume the second guy wanted what you had. Farensteen considered creating jealousy, telling Liz that other women were coming onto him, sales clerks and waitresses and such, but the plot made him nervous. Unable to predict the probability for success, he settled for convention. “There’s more to us than just what’s happening now,” he said and reminded Liz of other times. “There’s history.”

“I know,” she said. “The cumulative carries weight, just like an anchor.”

Farensteen sighed. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Right.” Liz opened the fridge and pulled out two eggs. “Then how come it is?” She held the eggs in her hand and let them fall to the floor.

Farensteen tried to laugh it off. “Scrambled, yes? I swear,” he said, more anxious as Liz went into their bedroom next and started to pack. “If you think there’s something better. If that’s what you think.”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I’m thinking yes. You can’t make something out of nothing. Something either it is or isn’t.”

“And still,” Farensteen said, grasping for words, “sometimes people don’t know what they want. Sometimes they forget. If I can show you,” he said. “Statistically, that’s all I’m saying.”

Liz squeezed his hand, and he felt her nervous heat against his cold, hard facts. “Listen.” She stepped back. “Sometimes it’s true, we don’t know anymore. And sometimes because of that it’s good to forget. Sometimes there’s a reason.”

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Farensteen drove with Randy and T-Bone out to the dead deer. Randy got the shovel from the back while T-Bone watched for traffic and set the orange cone near the shoulder of the freeway. Each Tuesday and Thursday their job was to pick up and dispose of the latest road kill. “This one’s a heavy fuck.” Randy lifted the doe’s head with his boot. “Maybe we should get the saw.”

“Carve up some venison,” T-Bone said.

“Make doe burgers.” Randy’s round rubber belly shook when he laughed.

Farensteen came around and pulled on his gloves. “Can we just move her?” He wanted to load and dump so he had enough time to spend his lunch break on the park bench.

“No sweat,” T-Bone said, tugging at his sideburns. “Let’s just do a noose and drag.” Farensteen tossed the rope over. The deer had shattered her neck as she ran from the woods some fifty yards from the road, hitting the side of a car without breaking stride. “At least she’s not split,” T-Bone said. “Split ones are a fucking mess. You can’t drag them without leaving shit everywhere.”

Randy got the shovel underneath to make sure nothing hidden had spilled out. Farensteen tied the rope around the rear hoofs,

then lowered the lift in the back of the truck and brought the winch down so they could load the deer. He came back and gripped the rope, ready to roll the doe and get her on the lift.

The shovel was still tucked beneath the deer's chest. T-Bone at the head was setting the belt around her neck. "Wait." Randy let go of the shovel, took off his gloves and put his hand down on the doe. "Fuck, man."

"Quit screwing around," T-Bone said, fastening the belt around the deer's neck.

"I'm not."

"You're crazy," Farensteen said.

"I'm telling you." Randy left his hand on the deer and said to Farensteen, "Go ahead and feel."

Farensteen pulled off his own gloves and touched the center of the deer's side. "Christ"—the doe's eyes seemed to be watching him—"what are the odds?"

"Zero," T-Bone said. "She's been lying here all night. She busted her neck."

"So, she's paralyzed."

"Which means she can't breathe." T-Bone dropped the belt. "Her fucking chest muscles don't work. No lungs, no heart. Look."

"I don't need to look, man." Randy had his hand underneath now. "I can feel."

Farensteen ran his fingers over the fur as T-Bone went to the truck.

"You ladies are acting like any of this matters," T-Bone said. "You want to give her mouth-to-mouth? Hell, the thing's dead." He moved Farensteen out of the way, felt the deer's chest, located a space above the heart where the ribs separated, and using the knife from the truck, pushed the blade down.

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Farensteen drove them back onto the highway, out to the Eastgate composter where the remains of the deer were mixed with wood chips and straw, heated and churned into mulch. He spent his lunch break in the park, calling for passersby to reserve a spot. Doe blood had stained his shoes, and he used dirt to scrub it off. Last week Liz had carried boxes to her car while Farensteen stood at the curb, waiting for her to say she just needed space. He thought he could live with that for now, and ran raw data to assess the statistical chance of her coming back.

"Hey there." He waved from the bench. "Come and see." Things were not going well, and desperate, he decided to modify his pitch. He added incentive, a prize in the cereal box, a promise of "something extraordinary." Farensteen returned to the park again after work, carrying his sign and clipboard down the hill. He followed the footpath until the bench came into view, and he was surprised to find two people standing there.

"We heard you before," they said. "We're curious about what you're selling."

"You mean?"

"Something extraordinary." The man smiled at the woman.

"Right." Farensteen set his sign in place, stalled a moment. "Yes. Of course." He consulted the clipboard with its list of false names. The man was in his late twenties, in a light beige summer suit, his jacket off and tie undone. Farensteen motioned for the man to sit. Not sure what to do next, Farensteen joined him on the bench, folded his hands and asked, "All right then, are you ready?"

They sat silently for a few minutes until Farensteen realized he had to say more. "Can you feel it? Tell me what you feel."

"Nothing," the man answered.

"Nothing?"

Not a thing, Liz had said as she left. *That's the problem. That's what it is. It's all numb.*

"Give it a little while longer." Farensteen closed his eyes and remained quiet again.

“What about you?” the man finally asked. “How do you feel?”

“How do I?” Farensteen hadn’t expected the question. He kept his eyes closed and wondered how to explain that he felt like yesterday’s model twice marked down and left for good on the discount rack. How? That was the question. He weighed the odds again, tried to predict with charts and graphs, plugged in what he knew and didn’t know, thought in terms of SAS programs, conjoint analysis, discrete choice, and multidimensional preference mapping, none of which worked. He pictured the partners at Denfield and Harris, Liz standing in the kitchen, letting the two eggs fall from her hand. He saw the deer that morning, how he knelt and held her head as T-Bone stuck the knife into her heart. He expected her to jerk and groan but there was no reaction, not even a spasm or the slightest sound.

“I feel a bit lost,” Farensteen said. “Off my game.”

“Is that right?” the man asked.

Farensteen opened his eyes. The woman waiting was tall, with hair cut just below her ears and features halfway soft. She had on a skirt and jacket, the material two shades darker than the man’s. She came and sat beside Farensteen on the bench. He felt a need to apologize and told them, “This isn’t what I promised you, I know. This isn’t part of what I had in mind.”

“Don’t worry.” The woman reached for the clipboard.

“It’s ok.” The man shrugged his shoulders.

Farensteen looked off across the park. The woman stretched her legs.

“All of this is reserved for something,” she said and gave him her card.

“It’s true,” the man again. “Who knows what, but for something.”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“Yeah tomorrow,” the man said. “Who knows?”

“Let’s just wait and see what happens.”

“What happens, right?”

“Who can predict?”

Steven Gillis is the author of the novels *Walter Falls* and *The Weight of Nothing*, both finalists for the Independent Publishers Book of the Year and ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year (2003 and 2005). His third novel, *Temporary People*, will be published by Black Lawrence Press in 2008 and a collection of stories, *Giraffes*, was published in February, 2007. A six-time Pushcart nominee, he is the founder of 826 Michigan (www.826michigan.org) and Dzanc Books (www.dzancbooks.org). All proceeds from his writing goes to his nonprofit programs.

“A hundred years ago I was a kid living in Detroit where all the houses had these cement front porches, three steps leading up to the door, sometimes a chair and a plant, though mostly people sat on the steps, drank a bit, talked with their neighbors. For kids, we came to recognize our houses by the landing out front. In the games we played, the best was Ghost in the Graveyard. The object was to get all the way around the block and back again without being caught by the designated ghost. The only place one could not be caught was the front porch. Then as now, the front porch was our haven. The front porch was always safe.”