

# The Good Life

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# THE GOOD LIFE

by Jim Fusilli



HIS GRANDSON SETTLED across from him, Thom sat facing north where in the distance the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building shimmered in the June sun. He looked through the sun-streaked windows. A fashion model in layers of winter clothes posed on a concrete island between West Broadway and Varick – the photographer wanted in the frame the blur of yellow cabs as they charged by in an unruly race. An ordinary Saturday afternoon in lower Manhattan, though not so ordinary after all.

“It’s upside down, Tommy,” he said to his grandson. “The menu. Turn it around.”

The four-year-old did as instructed. He was a determined boy and amiable, much as his father had been.

The boxcar diner claimed to have been in the same spot for more than a century. Thom could believe it was so: When he was a boy not very much older than Tommy, he came here with his father, who drank black coffee with every meal. In turn, Thom brought his son here many, many times across the decades. From the beginning, Adam entered like it was his palace; the burly man at the cash register who was the son of the burly man who owned it when Thom was a child greeted him with thunderous clap of his hands. The waitresses fawned over Adam who, so

much like his late mother, was irreversibly cute and never not so. It was at a red vinyl booth in a back corner where Adam told his father his cancer was no longer in remission.

Thom hadn't been back since Adam died. He couldn't bear it alone. When he wandered the neighborhood, especially at night, he avoided even the sight of the diner with its antiquated Pepsi bottle-cap sign against the maudlin sky. The sign read *The Good Life*, an appropriate name as Tribeca continued to boom or back in the 1930s when Lower West Side retailers thrived. When he came to the diner with Adam in the '90s and into the new century, he thought it was a good life indeed.

After Adam's death, more than a year passed before he decided it was time to introduce his grandson to the diner. At age 64, he was *de facto* father to the little boy; Tommy looked to him for love, companionship and, though he didn't yet know it, continuity. Thom couldn't burden him with his heartache, though Tommy talked like Adam and laughed like Adam and could name all the planets just as Adam could at that age. Thom knew he needed to find a way to joy for the little boy's sake.

He proceeded slowly, letting him run free in Central Park or walking along the promenade above the choppy Hudson River. They met twice a week; more often if the nanny couldn't stay while his daughter-in-law Laura was held up at work. He began to look forward to their visits; he would pick up Tommy at pre-school. "Pop-Pop!" the boy cheered as he retrieved his backpack and lunch box. Off they went, hand-in-hand, Tommy sharing his day with his grandfather. If their dates extended into the evening, Thom took Tommy to dinner at restaurants he had never visited with Adam, ones that had cropped up in Tribeca's

post-9/11 revival. Through he was a widower for some time now, Thom had never learned to cook.

“Excuse me,” said a waitress at a new Italian place, brick oven, Tommy waiting for his lasagna to cool. “You’re Adam Sloan’s father, aren’t you?”

Thom hesitated before proposing a trip to the Hayden Planetarium, fearing it would be too much to take. But it wasn’t. The planetarium was different than it had been decades ago and Tommy was electric with glee, pointing, “Pop-Pop, look. Pop-Pop.” He cupped his hands to hold the stars. Afterwards, they sat in the park and debated the quality of life in the icy Kuiper Belt.

“Are you happy, Tommy?” he asked, tousling the boy’s auburn hair.

Without looking up from his picture book, Tommy nodded.

But Thom wasn’t. He was lost. Being with his grandson was his only relief. Nothing else erased his trepidation, his melancholy, his dread. He was fallen deeper into a sadness that seemed an inescapable part of his being.

Hand on his arm, Laura said, “Dad, maybe, I don’t know, you should see someone. A therapist... Someone to talk to? You’re not yourself.”

Telling himself he needed to be brave for the boy, Thom Sloan pressed on. He took Tommy to the annual holiday train show at the Botanical Garden and to Comic Con at the Javits Center and, just last week, out to Jones Beach where the little boy splashed in the surf.

Now they were about to enter The Good Life.

Even as he had held open the screen door open to let Tommy scoot inside, Thom was remembering with startling clarity how Adam ordered meatloaf on rye and doused the sandwich with

bargain-brand ketchup. Thom teased him by stealing a French fry while his son's hands were full. At age three, Adam had said, "Hey, Dad. No stealing." Soon, Adam struck first, waving the pilfered French fry. They stole one from each other for years and years. A silly routine, but one of the little signs of affection they shared as father and son as time moved on, seemingly without end, their joy unabated.



THE GOOD LIFE WAS CLEAN and decrepit and the little jukeboxes on the walls no longer worked, but there they remained. The two-seat tables that ran along the center aisle were covered in plastic, a checkerboard pattern in pale blue. On weekdays, it was crowded with construction workers in for a quick lunch. The kitchen churned out meals with speed. No one grouched. Knives and forks clattered on industrial plates. On weekend afternoons, the pace was slower. Now only one man was at a counter, his head hanging over this morning's *Daily News*. Across the aisle, two women in jeans and Ts lingered over coffee. They smiled at Tommy.

"Pop-Pop," said Tommy. "I want grill cheese."

"Grilled cheese," Thom replied, still returning.

"With bacon."

Smile for the boy, he told himself. "Sure. Has to be with bacon."

Thom remembered; it was forever ago: He saw Adam sliding out of the booth to say hello to a friend; Adam, sinewy, lean, graceful. The friend turned to wave to Thom, who couldn't place her. His son was convivial: a teenager at ease. He didn't mind being seen with his father.



Thom's father had been strict. Stern and imposing, he kept Thom at distance. He was broad and muscled with steel-gray eyes. When Adam was born, Thom's father came to the hospital and shook his hand. "Good work, son," he allowed.

"For God's sake, Dad," Thom said, demanding a hug. His father hesitated, then declined.

"I'm hunger," said Tommy.

"Me too," Thom said, sliding out of the booth. "I'll find our waitress."

She was upfront by the cash register, her back to the long narrow room. A busboy was regaling her with some kind of story. Her name was Betty. She had worked here for decades. When she took an order, her little pencil flew across her pad, scribbling code. It seemed to Thom that she was wearing the same black-and-white uniform and peaked cap she had on decades ago, back when a cigarette hung from her bottom lip.

As Thom walked toward her, he dreaded any mention of Adam.

"Dad, I've reached acceptance," Adam had said to him in the back booth. He was wearing a Mets cap to cover his scalp, his hair lost to chemotherapy. He was gray and sallow. Thom could see his son was trying to make his eyes bright. Adam placed his hand on his father's hand. "There's not much sense in denying it, Dad."

Don't leave us, thought Thom then, their last visit to The Good Life. You are the light in this world.

Now, on this bright June afternoon, Thom suddenly felt woozy. He staggered. Reaching out, he grabbed at the Formica counter to steady himself.

Seeing Thom falter, the bus boy interrupted his tale.

Thom closed his eyes to gather himself. He turned to assure his grandson he was all right, he would be right back.

The boy was gone. Thom's father sat in his place.



THOM'S FATHER SIPPED coffee. He wore a gray suit, black tie, white shirt. His gray fedora hung from the hat rack. He was a young man now, 35 or so, stocky, sturdy and in prime health.

Confused, not yet steady, Thom Sloan struggled along the aisle to return to the booth. If he was only imagining what he was seeing, he didn't want Tommy to witness his grandfather as bumbling and confused.

Thom's father said, "Where is she? Did you find her?" He folded his hand into a fist.

Voice quaking with wonder, Thom said, "Dad...?" He would have been eight years old or as young as seven.

"Thom, God damn it. Go get her." He snapped his chin toward the break in the counter.

In his confusion, Thom followed the path of the gesture. The diner he saw seemed refreshed. It was how it had been more than a half-century ago. Time hadn't yet dulled its spark.

"Thom," his father barked.

Thom saw the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building through the window behind the booth. Implacable and stalwart as ever, they hadn't changed. But the taxis that rushed by were squat and yellow with a checkerboard stripe along their sides – Checker Cabs, common when Thom was a boy, but long since replaced by electric hybrids and SUVs.

Thom looked at his father, who was standing now, and felt a sudden weakness. His father had been more than detached. He

would greet the immediate failure to comply to his whims with a cruel remark that might precede a blow. As his father charged toward him, Thom braced, bowing to protect his face.

When the blow failed to land, Thom opened his eyes.

At the booth, Tommy was talking to the waitress. His grandson had already ordered his grilled cheese and bacon. A cup of chocolate milk too.

“Any time now, Sloan,” snapped Betty the gray-haired waitress.

Little Tommy laughed as, fist on hip, Betty tapped her black Crocs.

Before he could respond, she said, “Never mind. Meatloaf, rye. Fries. Slaw. You want chocolate milk too.”

“No,” Thom managed. “Water is fine.”

With an exaggerated huff, Betty blew by him, a scent of a cigarette trailing her though no cigarette was in view.



BETTY HAD GIVEN A BOY a paper cup of crayons. Tommy was drawing something on the back of the paper placemat. A few more patrons were in the diner now; chatty, animated, laughing – signs of life. Thom hadn’t noticed when they arrived.

He could still sense of the presence of his father: the heat of his anger, the constant threat that no period of tranquility could fully diminish. As a boy, he suffered hammering headaches.

“Pop-Pop, look,” said Tommy.

He glanced at the placemat, marked now with squiggles and planet-like circles and indecipherable figures – rocket ships, maybe. Or astro-mermaids.

“Nice, but what is that, exactly?”

“No, Pop-Pop.” The boy was pointing toward the concrete island on West Broadway.

The model, the photographer and their attendants had disappeared. Thom now saw city workers placing a new canopy over the Franklin Street subway entrance: two men worked, two men watched. A woman wearing padded headphones was staring at what appeared to be an old-fashioned Sony Walkman. The happy baby in her stroller was reaching to grab his chubby feet.

Thom was confused: That canopy had been there for many years. Nevertheless, he said, “Tommy, see the little baby. Not so long ago, you were—”

His son Adam was now seated across from him. He wore a faded Talking Heads T shirt – four red masks against a blue field. Spread around his plate were pogs from his colorful collection: bands and sports figures and planets all mixed together.

“That subway station always seemed kind of a lonely place to me,” Adam said.

On his plate was a half-eaten meatloaf sandwich.

As Thom was about to respond, he heard the squeal of tires, then saw a big old Buick roar into view as it tried a hairpin turn, a hubcap tumbling and rolling onto West Broadway. Out of control, the car hit the scaffolding, throwing the workers into the air. Lurching, the Buick then slammed into the stroller. As Thom and Adam watched in horror, the car came to a halt. The stroller was crushed under its front driver’s side wheel.

Without a word, Adam burst from the booth, scurried along the narrow aisle and raced toward the accident. Thom stood. He pressed his palms against the glass.

The woman with the Walkman was screaming hysterically, pointing toward the Buick. The workers were tending to their

fallen colleagues who crashed into the structure's steel frame before landing on the sidewalk.

Thom watched as Adam, without pausing, slid head-first under the Buick. He wriggled as he groped for the baby.

Thom grimaced, fearful of what his son would find.

Soon Adam wriggled backwards. He had the baby in his hands. The child's head was bleeding, but he was alive. The baby trembled as he wailed.

Adam searched for the woman. He held out the crying child as if he were an offering.

"Pop-Pop, look," said Tommy. Blowing into the straw, he made bubbles in his chocolate milk. Then he giggled with delight.

The model on the island shook out her long black mane.



WHAT IS HAPPENING? thought Thom. As Betty arrived, laden with food, he leaned back, then looked down at the tabletop. She placed a bowl of chicken soup in front of him.

He said, "I didn't—"

"Eat it," his father said. "It's good for you."

His father had been served a blood-red burger with a slice of raw onion. When he lifted it, the juice dripped onto his plate.

Without thinking, Thom reached for a spoon. There were none of the table.

"Pop-Pop."

The little boy had let a piece of the grilled-cheese sandwich fall out of his mouth and onto the plate. He seemed forlorn.

"Is it too hot?"

Tommy nodded.

Thom took half the sandwich. As he blew on it to cool it down, he threatened to steal a bite.

“Chomp-chomp,” he said.

Adam replied, “Chomp-chomp, Dad?”

Adam was fine. No cancer. A thick head of hair combed just so. He was noticing girls now and they were noticing him.

Thom said, “I was talking to—”

His father glared at him. “Put it back,” he said.

Thom held a plump pickle. He had taken it from the jar that sat next to the napkin holder.

When he hesitated, Thom’s father slapped his hand. The pickle tumbled to the floor.

“I get it, Pop-Pop,” Tommy said.

‘No, that’s—“

The boy squirmed under the booth. He returned with a paper napkin.

Thom closed his eyes against the dizzying changes. Time was spinning like a revolving door: Who would emerge when it stopped? His father glowering with disdain or his grandson glowing with innocence?

Then he thought, Adam, please. Send Adam.

When he opened his eyes, the diner was dark – all the lights had been dimmed. It was silent inside. He was alone.

The world had disappeared too. Everything was gone but the purgatory of his memories.

I don’t know what to do to get back to where I need to be, he thought.

A light came from beyond the diner’s window.

Outside, it was a sunny day. Thom looked toward West Broadway. Western Union messengers on red bicycles rocketed

north. He kept his eye on them as they pedaled furiously until he saw, in the great distance, the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Neither skyscraper had been completed yet. They were skeletons awaiting skin. Cranes swung 1,000 feet above the midtown streets.

On the island, a boy not much older than Tommy stood behind a bushel of apples. "5¢ apiece," read his handmade sign. When a traffic light told the cars and taxis to stop, the boy scooped up an armful of apples and ran from driver to driver, pleading for a sale.

Thom understood a mistake had been made. He hadn't been born until after the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building had been completed. Very few people received telegrams even when he was a boy. He could not have been here back then.

But he thought he recognized the poor child who was peddling apples.

He heard himself say, "Dad?"

The boy dropped an apple. He watched in despair as the cars tore away from him.

The boy – his father as a child – looked at him in despair.

The diner's lights snapped on in a flash. He heard the bustle of industry: The Good Life was crowded now.

Adam said, "Dad, I always meant to ask you: Why was Grandpa always in such a foul mood?"

Adam was a man in his late 20s. His tie at half mast, collar open, the sleeves of his white short rolled up to the elbows. He had begun to wear glasses. Still thin and gangly, Adam was an administrator way uptown at New York Presbyterian Hospital.

"I never knew. He never said," Thom replied. "Is he still alive? My father?"

"Are you all right, Dad?"

"He loved you, Adam. He just didn't show it. Or couldn't. He was the same with me."

Now he could explain. His father had been a child of the Depression. The little boy selling apples may have had little more than nothing at all. In response, he folded into a shell. Thom had too, though never so angry. It was Adam who had allowed him to blossom.

To explain to his son, Thom raised a finger and pointed to the concrete island where the boy with the apples had been. Before he could speak, his son interrupted.

"The car, the baby," Adam said with a smile. "You saved him, Dad. The way you ran out of here—"

"Adam, *you* saved him."

Adam frowned. "It was you, Dad. How could it have been me? I was a kid."

Thom replied, "You have to tell Tommy you love him. Every day."

"Tommy?"

Tommy hadn't been born yet.

"I'm saying— I'm assuming you'll name your son after me," he said with sheepish self-deprecation. "One day."

Adam seemed astonished. Later, he would tell his father that he had met Laura a few days before the conversation and somehow he already knew she was the one.

"I love you, Adam," Thom said. "I always have."



Adam reached to hold his hand. "I know that, Dad." He adjusted his glasses. "I know I was lucky to have you for a father." As he took back his hand, he stole a French fry.

"Pop-Pop," said Tommy.

The little boy had separated his grilled-cheese sandwich. He held one half high and watched as the gooey cheese drooped toward his plate.

"Tommy," Thom whispered, "put your mouth under it. Let it flow into your mouth. Pretend it's the lava from a volcano on Venus or Mars."

His grandson eyed him suspiciously. Then he did as instructed.

"Watch him, Tommy," Betty said as she passed with a hot gyro wrap on a plate. "He's going to steal your bacon."

"Ah, she caught me, Tommy," he said with a shrug. "So much for my big scheme."

"Don't forget I know you, Sloan," Betty warned.

Putting down the messy sandwich, the boy lifted a piece of bacon with his greasy fingertips and offered it to his grandfather.

"Take it, Pop-Pop," he said.

Thom smiled. "Thank you, my boy."

On the return trip, Betty said, "You make 'em adorable in your family, don't you?"

She winked as she passed by.

On out West Broadway, the model removed her heavy fur. She took a long cooling drink of water and leaned her head back to savor the summer sun.



## Also by Jim Fusilli

The Good Life  
Zerbie vs. The Pandemic  
The Minnesota Twins  
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## About the Author

Jim Fusilli is an author and journalist. His current novel, **THE MAYOR OF POLK STREET**, is available exclusively through Audible.

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