

A Litany for Tender Mercies and Tougher Meats

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“Reebs, chicken, poke chop, slice beef, chop beef, turkey laig, links, baked pohtatah, boot ann, bolo, brisket, bone-sucker sauce. Reebs, chicken, poke chop...”

Edward breathed deeply and firmly pressed his thumbs against the hollow crescents of bone beneath his eyebrows. This effected a flickering in his vision and a momentary release of sinus pressure, a sensation of half pleasure, half pain. Under the table, he pumped his knees with nervous energy. He needed clarity, yet faced distraction: the man at the barbecue joint across the street tonelessly recited the contents of his menu, over and over. It was a mesmerizing devotion, nearly a litany; Edward wouldn't have been half-surprised to see the pot-bellied man fondling an actual rosary instead of the knotted strings of his dirty apron.

“...Reebs, chicken, poke chop, slice beef, chop beef...”

Edward was spending his Memorial Day at the The Silver Bean, a newly opened coffee shop outside Odessa, Texas that seemed sure to fail; they charged \$3.25 for a cup of coffee, whereas across the street at Bobby's BBQ, you could obtain a baked potato buried beneath a half-stick of butter, a fist-sized clump of shredded cheddar, and a quarter-pound of pulled pork for only \$2. The choice was simple.

Across the table from Edward sat Emily Cheng, a lovely young

woman whose perfectly straight, raven hair was at that moment parted quite awkwardly, so as to obscure the purple bruising that coiled about her right eye like a thunderhead.

“He really *is* excited to meet you,” Emily said, “and I’m excited for you to meet him.” She anxiously flexed and crinkled the bellows of her accordion straw. “I think he’d like to hear about your girlfriend a lot... you should definitely tell us all about her when he comes.”

Emily’s deception was incredibly transparent, but to Edward, unexpected. Throughout high school, he had worked alongside her at the pharmacy counter inside the Apache Fresh Market, and though he had never met her fiancée, Roger, he’d heard mostly glowing reports. They’d been together for seven years (since she was twelve and Roger, seventeen), and while she had sometimes described his pigheadedness, every complaint was tempered with the reminder that “Roger’s just about the sweetest man in the world.” Edward hadn’t seen much of Emily since he’d left for college (“You got out on good behavior,” she’d said), and though she had stayed behind in this dusty corner of the world, he’d tried his best to stay in touch.

“...*Bolo, brisket, bone sucker sauce. Reefs, chicken...*”

“How’d it happen?” asked Edward. “Your eye, I mean.”

“Oh. What?” Emily shook her head in a tizzy, as if the question were ridiculous.

“It looks like a black eye to me.”

Emily giggled blankly. “Oh, yeah, the kitchen door. The kitchen cabinet door. So stupid of me, really...”

Edward considered the cliché: that of the battered woman, feigning a household accident. Whether a fall down the stairs or an

errant car door, it seemed like a plot culled from a soap opera or a movie-of-the-week—and yet here it was, happening in real life.

Edward stilled his restless feet and folded his hands. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“*Everything’s* okay with Roger?”

“He thought it was a little funny that you’d want to spend your Memorial Day with me... with *us*, I mean, away from your exciting life and the parties and...”

“It’s not really a party school.”

“Oh.” Emily turned away sharply to eye a passing car.

“...*turkey laig, links, baked pohtatah, boot ann, bolo...*”

“That guy never lets up, does he?” she said.

Edward considered his options, and it was a conclusion quickly reached: in a matter of seconds, within his mind’s eye, he’d transitioned from a potential White Knight into an impotent onlooker. He decided that confronting Roger would lead only to another beating, which Emily—poor, sweet, damaged Emily—would likely accept and consign unto secrecy. Contacting the police anonymously would achieve a similar effect. He leaned back, shrinking like a deflated balloon.

“Hey, guys!” Roger’s grin was a mile wide, his handshake forceful, his posture immaculate. His keyring—boasting more than two-hundred keys—jangled impressively as he sat. Edward and Emily wore their bravest masks and settled in for the long haul. Emily knew that things would return to normal once Roger saw that Edward was simply a friend and nothing more, no one to get jealous about. If only she

hadn't told him about all the fun they'd used to have at the pharmacy, then she wouldn't have had to quit and stay at home. If only she hadn't harped on about Edward's college when she knew Roger was so easily upset. She had many character flaws and knew that if she wanted to keep Roger, she'd have to begin improving on them.

"...*bone sucker sauce. Reeb's, chicken, poke chop, slice beef, chop beef...*"

Hearing the litany of barbecue for approximately the two hundredth time, Emily realized that life was like a wheel. Things had a way of coming back around. The good would be back, the bad would recede. Of that she was sure.

"...*poke chop, slice beef, chop beef, turkey laig...*"

Edward, too, listened to the litany. It was easier than listening to the cheerful poison that emerged from Roger's lips.

"...*Brisket, bone-sucker sauce. Reeb's...*"

Edward fell into a trance, and each menu item was punctuated by his subconscious with a distant thumping, like the pounding of a meat tenderizer.

"...*poke chop, slice beef, chop beef...*"

He shut his eyes and in the darkness saw the blows raining upon his friend, relentlessly, flesh driving into flesh. Within his mind he screamed silently: *Show mercy, show mercy, show mercy!* but to whom, even Edward was not sure. □