

Family Meals

~Zen Li

There were no vegetables left. The weedy patch in the yard failed to yield a single potato, the runner beans had died. Winter was coming. Doris Richards lifted the pot again, and emptied the tin of concentrated soup into the water again. She forced herself to stay awake, wiping her mascara across her cheek.

She noticed John looking at her with his big 10 year old eyes while Mark banged his red plastic spoon over the bunny sticker on his high-chair.

The place at the head of the table was not set and had not been for 4 years.

Doris stirred the soup, thinner each day, lifted the dented pot and placed it on the table. John's expression fell when he saw the pot but his face recovered quickly, returning to its usual quiet calm.

"I don't want you to be upset," said Doris in her small voice, "but I've got something to tell you."

John's eyes darted between her and the soup and Mark continued to brain the bunny on his chair.

"Well, your auntie Roselda is very fond of you two, as you know, and times are very hard."

"When do we leave?" asked John.

Doris looked at her son's bright eyes and her heart genuinely skipped a beat. She would do anything to keep them but she could not let them get sick because of her inability to find a goddam job.

"Well, I haven't asked her yet but if you want to, its a good place to live and you won't be hungry any more. I know that..."

"I won't go. You can send shithead..."

"John, don't..."

"but I'm staying. I'll help too."

Doris's eyes dropped. "You're very sweet, my boy, but,"
"I mean it," John's voice was pitching higher with each sentence, "I'm staying!"

"John, don't..."

"Don't what, mom? Don't stand up? Don't leave the table? Don't go to bed hungry again? I just want to help but you won't let me!"

John eyed the pot for the last time and ran to his room. She felt older suddenly. Tired, old, at her end. She started as the door to John's room slammed. She took a bowl and spooned some watery soup into it for Mark. Thank god the third had died, she thought and then instantly hated herself for it. She could remember the pain, the embarrassment, the long drive to the Rocklands Community Hospital in the neighbour's car. The doctors and nurses had treated her like a plumbing part, shoving and sighing at her overweight frame. Doris had lost a lot of weight since.

The grocer's sweaty armpits made Doris nauseous. She moved around the little shop for an age, hoping that the grocer would not become suspicious. There was something wrong with the light here; her eyes saw spots. She could not do it. Doris stepped outside and breathed heavily. Her pride, or ego, or whatever the hell it was, did not let her do it. She walked to the 5 bed hospital again to ask for work, they said there was none. 15 Years experience, 4 years of training, not one

damn job in this shitty little town. Empty handed and dejected, Doris went home to face her kids.

Roselda's Ford compact was parked in the street, engine running, while Roselda and Doris had their little chat.

"It's for the best. We will look after them better than... better than you are able to at the moment."

Doris hardly heard the lecture.

"Yes, Roselda."

"Don't be like that, Doris, I'm just doing this because I love you and the boys. And you should put some makeup on, you look..."

"Yes. Thank you."

"Come John," Roselda's voice trilled, "bring your brother."

There was an uncomfortable silence and Roselda pitched her voice higher, "Jooooohnny?"

"He doesn't like to be called Johnny, Roselda."

"Oh shush, Doris!"

Roselda strode from the kitchen to the little living room looking for John. Mark was sitting on the floor playing with a broken-down truck. She picked up the boy who pointed a sad hand at his lost toy and started moaning.

"Jooooohnny, where are you? We're going sweetie!"

Roselda saw movement outside the window and found John sitting on the wooden garden chair.

"We're going sweetie. Get your things." Roselda said, with an amount of hidden impatience only a sister could measure.

"It's fine, I'm staying." said John, his voice calm.

"No sweetie, you can't stay here, we have to go now."

"No, I'm fine, I'm staying. Thanks." Roselda felt uneasy under the child's direct gaze. She sighed almost imperceptibly and walked back into the lounge. "I'm not going to make him go. Call me when you've talked some sense into him."

There was soup again. Thin, feeble. John the Champion never complained about the food. Doris sat with her head resting on her hand, the other scratching her arm. A red patch had formed, as if the skin was allergic to the short, unpainted nails.

"Mom." said John, looking at her hand. Doris looked at him, smiled absently and looked away, still scratching.

"Mom!"

Doris blushed, realising she was doing it again. She looked at John with a start, he had become thin, pale. She hardly recognised him.

"Eat your soup, dear, it's getting cold."

The town ambulance, rusted on one side, let out a feeble 'yalp yalp' as it approached Beacon Valley's only traffic light. It laboured up the hill to the 5 bed Community Hospital and parked outside.

Doctor Phelps was having a bad day. Robbie Roberts's pet pig had kicked him during its pelvic examination, and the snivelling brat belonging to the Krugerwaters had screamed bloody murder after its flu injection.

Doctor Phelps was relieved to see that this patient would be human.

"What happened, Peter?" he asked the ambulance driver.

"Uh, she got hit by a car or summin', at, uh, Dick Putter's place. Uh, looks like her leg is smashed, nutting too bad, uh, whatchoo think, doctor?"

"Yes, Peter, you're absolutely correct, her leg is smashed."

Peter McVicar gleamed at the doctor.

"Bring her in, is she conscious?"

"I don' know, guv, I mean, doctor."

Doctor Phelps sighed and walked in to the hospital.

Peter wheeled Doris into the only operating theater in Beacon Valley, and they lifted her onto the steel bed.

"Get Penny, would you, Peter?" Peter gleamed once more, any excuse to see his secret-crush-since-primary-school was welcome.

Doctor Phelps lifted Doris's skirt to the knee and injected Novocaine. He gave Doris a brief examination and found a few bruises on her shoulder and neck, nothing that couldn't wait.

John was looking at her, his eyes fixed on hers. John had stared her awake since he was a toddler, and he had stared her awake now.

"John!" Doris's voice echoed in the sterile room. She felt uncomfortable, weak.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Yes, John, I'm fine, just a little woozy. Where is the doctor?"

"Doctor Phelps is outside having a smoke." John's eyes strayed to her left leg. "The nurse was here a little while ago." Doris looked down through the evaporating haze and saw the surrounding supports and clamps. She knew what it meant.

"Jesus," she said. John gave a feeble smile, trying to make his mother feel better. The chloroform smell lingered in his clothes when he went home.

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There was soup again. Doris shifted uncomfortably off the artificial limb strapped to her right knee. She ladled John's bowl with two scoops and set it on the table. She caught his look of surprise.

"The hospital gave us something. An old friend from when I was an assistant." Doris's eyes never left the pot. John started shoveling mouthfuls of watery leek and meat soup. Doris winced at every slurp, forcing back tears.

Doris woke with sweat pouring down her face, the pain in her thigh above the amputation unbearable. Her ears were ringing. She reached over and opened the bedside drawer, but there was no Mezathol, no Omnidose, no Prosylnine. She bunched the sheets around the sensitive stump and it quelled the ripples of pain for a few seconds, but the pain returned with vengeance. She rolled to the side of the bed where the crutches leaned against the wall, mocking her, and fell out of the bed. She screamed uncontrollably into the night.

Dr. Phelps examined the wound under the ascetic operating light.

"Looks like there's a secondary infection above the patella, the whole site's caving in."

Peter McVicar yawned unimpressed. He had returned from a call at 2:30am, a hit and run, and had almost fallen into a glorious sleep when the doctor rang.

“Is her boy outside?” Peter asked, timing the question between the doctor’s jabs and frowns.

“He’s in the waiting room trying not to fall asleep, poor kid.”

Dr Angus Phelps injected Topozine into the thigh and waited.

“Help me put a new blade on the grinding saw.”

“Jesus.”

“Do you want help with that, Missus Richards?” Penny asked. The old lady had recovered a little, enough to go home, but was obviously in pain at every step.

“No, thank you. Just some personal things.”

Weird, she hadn’t seen the kid bring the plastic bags. A friend must have dropped them off.

“I’ve made some nice stew, John.” John eyed the pot with skepticism. The pieces that floated in the watery mixture looked less like frank and beans and more like Frankenstein.

“I don’t think you’ve been honest with me.” Doris jerked her head around in surprise.

“I think you’ve been stealing.” Doris’s face flushed and she wiped the cooking sweat from her brow.

“I’ve had to do some... things to feed us, John, but I’d never steal, never! You know that.”

John nodded, his mom was the most benign person he knew.

“What are we eating, anyway? It isn’t beef.”

“Just some odds and ends. We can’t afford steak, you know.”

“How is your leg? Um, I mean the wound?”

“Okay, I guess. I’ll get by, don’t you worry.”

“How could I not worry!” John shouted. “You’ve lost your leg! We have nothing! We’re starving! I want to get a job and...”

“No John, you concentrate on your schoolwork. You don’t want to end up like me. Have you done your homework?”

“Don’t change the subject! This is serious, mom. What are we going to do?”

“I... don’t know Johnny. Something will come up. God will provide.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you calling me Johnny?”

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“When I was your age I wanted to be so many things,” Doris sounded lost and further away than the dusty-smelling kitchen in the little house, “but I could never focus long enough to get anywhere, just keep flitting like a butterfly between dreams. Your father was the opposite, that is what drew me to him, I suppose. He was strong and straightforward.”

John sipped the hot bitter tea his mother had made from the neighbour’s rooibos tree.

Doris looked down, stopping her right hand from scratching itself raw. The stump of her left arm was tender; the bandage had lost its softness and scratched the fresh stitches. She felt so weak.

“Stupid people nowadays, never look where they’re driving. Anyway, time to make some food. John stood up, the raking of the cracked plastic chair across the greasy floorboards echoing against the bare kitchen walls.

“I’ll make the food.” John could not raise his eyes to look at his mother.

“No! That is, I will manage, it gives me something to do, please leave it, Johnnie.”

“I’m going to help! Your hand is gone, how are you going to cut anything?” John grabbed the package from the counter and started to unwrap the plastic wrapping.

“No! John! Leave it!” Doris stumbled against the table as she lurched towards her son, fell against the chair blocking her path. Slowly she eased herself into it. John unwrapped the brown plastic and stared at the contents. His eyes felt suddenly dry and he could not breathe.

“I just wanted you to be healthy, John. Don’t hate me.” John’s body started convulsing and he began retching, trying to get himself to the sink. On the counter the red meat and bone glistened in the hospital gown.

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