

The Taster

He was supposed to meet her at three o'clock sharp. Everything had been arranged by a mutual third party weeks earlier. She despised tardiness. It was now three fifteen.

She spent the second half of the morning getting prepared. At her age such trivial matters were no longer taken for granted.

Things began with an early wake up. She did not set an alarm. For most of her life she had little choice in the matter. She woke up when she woke up. She just did, and it was always early. Only during her second marriage did she find time to sleep in occasionally. But she had given that up since Tom died.

In the last few years her life had become a doldrums of weekly doctor visits and daily pill routines. She would get up early and begin her morning by counting pills out and distributing them across all the rows of individual slots in her pill box. Monday through Friday, Early Morning, Mid-Morning, Late Morning, Afternoon, Evening, and Bedtime. As much as she resented the need to take the pills in the first place, there was something she found relaxing about the experience of sorting them into their boxes, almost to the point of enjoyment. She always loved her baubles. It had started with collecting rocks, sea shells and crystals when she was a child and had morphed into wooden drawers full of different sized slots with necklaces, earrings, and rings in her old age. She had so much jewelry. She felt it was too much. But unsure of what to do with it all, she kept it organized.

She looked at her watch. Then up and down the sidewalk. Towards either end of the block. In the distance she could see the light at the avenue was beginning to change. A tall dark haired young man in a brown coat was doing a polite jog across the intersection. She took this to be her date for the day. At least he knew he was running behind.

“Sorry for being late,” he said trying to catch his breath.

“And why were you late?” She asked.

“The train was delayed.”

“Why didn’t you leave early?” She was not having it.

He could tell she was unhappy with him.

“Maybe we should go inside and get a cup of coffee,” he said.

“Wouldn’t do any good,” she said flippantly.

“I’m sorry I— ”

“I wouldn’t taste a thing.”

“I’m sorry what?”

“Would you stop apologizing.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked him square in the eye.

He frowned apologetically.

“I said I can’t taste it. Maybe the coffee, a little, if it’s strong. Bitter things I can sort of taste. Sometimes sour. But usually—”

He was staring at her with his mouth hanging open. She could tell he wasn’t following.

“—What I want you to do is taste my food for me.”

“What?” He was genuinely confused.

“It will be like a game.”

“A game where I eat your food?” He didn’t get it.

“Don’t be so unimaginative. Just look around at where we are,” she turned her attention to the contemporary modern art café they were standing in front of, wedged between two rows of city brownstones was a white marble tribute to slopes and soft angles, complete with a courtyard of perfectly manicured trees in parallel rows and iron planters.

“Pretend we’re in a spy movie,” she giggled, “Or I don’t know. Imagine we’re in some sort of political thriller and I’m the ambassador to so and so and you are my faithful bodyguard.”

He was beginning to wonder if she had a crush on him.

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

She felt as though he had a tone to him, “Look,” she said, “Just stay quiet and let’s get a cup of coffee.”

“Yes m’am,” he said nodding uniformly.

They walked up to the café entrance where he pulled and held the door open for her and she stepped inside.

There was no one to greet them. She stood by the front entrance for a moment while he stood up on his tippy toes scanning the space for an open pair of seats. He apologetically excused himself while he walked away around a corner to see what other tables may be in the back. A few minutes later he returned with a smile on his face. He had found one. The two of them walked back and he led her to a small round table by a porthole overlooking a stone garden behind the restaurant that was tucked away between the various backs and sidewalls of neighboring buildings.

He pulled out a chair and helped her sit down.

“What can I get you?” He asked. “I don’t mind waiting on line. You stay here at the table.”

She laughed, “You’re not the waiter.”

He didn't understand.

"Sit down." She said. "They do table service here."

His face grew red, "Oh," he said. There was some sweat on his brow.

"It's ok, just sit down and relax," she said calmly.

He smiled and sat down, tripping over his own foot as he did.

"You're funny," she said.

"Oh?" He smiled.

"Used to hearing that?" She asked.

"You could say that. I'm a little bit sick of it."

"Must be hard, being liked." She said.

He frowned.

"Well, it's not the being liked part," he was speaking in a different tone now, "it's the idea that no one takes you seriously."

"You're not the only pebble on the beach," she said flatly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not everything is about you."

"I wasn't saying that it was." He appeared a bit nervous.

"Oh for goodness sake," she looked him over, "You really do take life a bit too seriously I think."

"Life is serious business." He smiled.

She did too.

"So what are you having?" She asked handing him the menu.

It was one of those fancy midtown Manhattan kind of menus where

everything was tiny with italicized cursive lettering. A single custom cut sheet of high grade cotton paper with the corners tucked into a leatherback holder. At first glance he couldn't tell if it was in a different language or not.

"Uhhh," he said trying to fill the air with sound while he made time to think.

"Come on, really? It's only one page." She prodded him.

The waiter arrived and in that moment he took his chance to seize back control of the situation, looking up from the menu to say, "One cappuccino please."

The waiter smiled, "Excellent choice sir." He turned to her across the table, "and for you madame?"

"I'll have the same."

"Fantastic!" The waiter said collecting the menus from the two of them and shuffling off towards the bar.

The woman giggled, "Did you hear what he called me? 'madame' oh my, I haven't heard that one yet."

"Oh I think madame suits you."

She looked at him with a smirk, "and why is that?"

"You're very... commanding."

She laughed.

"You're funny," she said.

He smiled. So did she.

He looked over towards the bar where he could make out the familiar steam shooting out of a large shiny contraption behind the bartender. He scanned the room taking note of its grand depth, low ceilings, and dark wood furniture. There was something classic about the red carpets and ornamental burgundy carvings that contrasted the rest of the building which seemed so white and clean and modern. It wasn't what he was expecting.

"So what made you choose this place?" He asked.

"Oh this? I don't know. My husband used to like it."

"That sounds nice."

"It was."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No it's ok."

The waiter arrived at the table holding a silver tray with two white cups on top of round saucers and an accompanying small metal container with ornamental carvings and cute little side handles.

The waiter placed each of the items on the table one at a time.

The lid on top of the metal container was old and worn but sturdy looking. It had a U-shaped curve in the side where a tiny silver spoon handle stuck out.

"If you're so curious about it. Why don't you look inside." The woman said.

He lifted the lid to reveal a pile of perfectly squared sugar cubes. There

was something oddly fascinating about them, like a sparkling set of cinderblocks made for tiny elves, setting the foundation for their mystical village somewhere under the restaurant tables.

“Pass me one of those, would you?”

He looked down.

What he thought was a spoon handle turned out to be a miniature pair of tongs, he grabbed them carefully with two fingers to lift a cube up and drop it into the cup, passing it to her.

“I love sugar cubes,” she said.

“I know what you mean,” he smiled.

“Y’know I don’t think I ever caught your name,” she said.

He laughed. “It’s James.”

“Have you been working for the agency long?”

He looked at her. “Well that depends on which agency you mean.”

“You know,” she said excitedly, “The agency.”

He got the idea. “I can’t talk about that.”

“Oh, you can trust me.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“I won’t tell your secrets. Besides, who am I going to tell? Everyone I know is dead!” She laughed.

He felt sorry for her. At the same time he admired her attitude. He went along with it.

“Since I was a child. But only recently put on assignment in the city.”

“What happened to your predecessor?”

“She moved on.”

“Oh dear. Nothing bad I hope.”

“Let’s just say she was reassigned after a promotion.”

“Oh my, that sounds ominous. Was it an overseas assignment?”

“Worse. She got a domestic posting. City college.”

The woman laughed.

“Hey! City schools are very good.”

“I know. I went to one.”

“Really? Where?”

“I don’t like to talk about my past.”

“Mysterious. My favorite kind of man.”

“So what made you choose this place for a rendezvous? It’s a little crowded don’t you think?”

“Oh I used to come here with Tom.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“What?”

“Bring up your husband.”

“Why not?”

He looked nervous.

“Well, spit it out.” She said.

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

“I’m not upset.”

“Oh, well. I’m sorry.”

“Dear lord, would you please stop apologizing.”

“Ok, ok ok,” he said.

“To be honest, it’s really not so much Tom.” She sighed. “I haven’t been here with Tom in ages.”

James nodded.

“It was my friend Liz, she’s the one I used to come here with. After Tom died. He never liked the café. He always came here for the art. I never much cared for it. But I did very much care for him. So, once a year I used to come here with Liz, to remember Tom.”

She leaned forward and lifted her cup to sip the coffee.

He did the same.

“it’s just that, I don’t know. I miss them both so much. At first it seemed like this nice thing. Coming here. And then after Liz died I thought I could keep coming, like I was in one of those books or movies about the steadfast person honoring the traditions of their lost loved ones. But the truth is... well, I just can’t do it anymore. I don’t know.”

He took another sip of his coffee.

She looked at him. “Well?” She said. “What am I supposed to do?”

She caught him off guard and he almost coughed up his coffee as it went down the wrong pipe.

“Oh... I don't know.” He said.

“Really?”

He took his moment, leaning forward to place the cup back on its saucer.

“You could meet someone new.”

“Me? Meet someone new? At my age? I don't think so. Who wants to spend time with an old broad like me? I'm sure they have plenty of old people they're already committed to spending their time with.”

“You shouldn't think of yourself as such a burden. I think you're pretty funny.”

He smiled and took another sip of his coffee. He wanted to avoid looking smarmy.

She sort of laughed. She did appreciate the compliment.

“You're sweet. But no, it's impossible to meet anyone once you're over the age of sixty.”

“I doubt that,” he said.

She looked at him. “Well anyone you don't pay, that is.”

“Fair enough. But just so you're aware. I'm not being paid for this.”

He took another sip of his coffee. “I get school credit.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well that's not very American.”

“See, I told ya you were funny.”

“Oh please,” she said.

“See? Not so bad.” He said.

She looked at her watch. “Well, I think it’s about time I get going.”

“What? You can’t come all this way and not visit the museum.”

“I’m tired.”

He was trying to show her a good time.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“Really?”

“Trust me.”

“Why should I?”

“We can play a game I used to play with my father called ‘if you could steal only one painting, which painting would you steal?’”

She perked up at the suggestion. “Sure,” she said. “Why not.”

She flagged down the waiter, the two of them finished their coffees, split the bill on his insistence, and shuffled off towards the main entrance.

The ticket line wasn’t very long and in short time they found themselves wandering the halls of the first floor.

“I always loved post-impressionism.”

He looked at her.

“What?” She said. “I may have lost my sense of taste, but I still have taste.”

“HA!” He exclaimed as he made a big gesture with his arms that alarmed the neighboring patrons.

“Be careful!” She hushed under her breath. “You’ll get us kicked out!”

“Sorry!” He said.

She whacked him in the arm with her purse.

“Right right,” he pulled himself together. “Shall we?”

He extended his arm for her.

“Oh you’re a cute one you are.”

She hooked her arm into his.

“I think the elevators are this way.” He pointed down towards the end of the grand hall in front of them. There were windows the size of walls on one side. The rest of the space was made of some kind of white marble plastic, with minimal floors and ceilings and staircases creating negative space design to look as though something in the construction were hidden, or simply not there.

“Lead the way.” She said.

“Of course.” He smiled.

They made their way through a large open hall and around a corner to a small tucked away area where two matching white elevator doors sat next to each other, surrounded by framed photographs and paintings. It looked as though it were any other gallery room, except with elevator doors.

“I love how they’ve put things on display here by the elevator.”

“Yeah right? Elevator Bank Gallery Wing Number Five.”

She laughed. “Stop it.”

“Yeah ok...” He looked up at the numbered lights. It was several

floors away. “Hey, wanna just take the escalator?”
She looked at him. “This is your show,” she said.
“Ok, follow me.”

They stepped off the escalator laughing. She was having a good time. He lead her through the in-between area towards the gallery.

"The furniture of your imaginations."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"No, what were you saying? Something about furniture."

"Just something silly my first husband said."

"Tell me!"

"Oh you wouldn't be interested in that."

He turned to her and smiled, "Oh—I think you'd be surprised." And then he pointed to a wall on the left. "Check it out." They were beginning to enter the gallery.

Across the way was an old landscape painting reminiscent of a European classic, except there was something surreal about it and the

subject matter was an American farmland. The wheat fields were gold, the sky was blue, the clouds big, puffy, and white. The light glowed from in-between them but there was something dark and ominous about it despite all that.

"That one's pretty interesting."

"Yeah."

"Well, my first husband got so angry after the divorce." She paused, looking around as if to check if anyone was overhearing them. "He always demanded things be returned, things he felt belonged to him, so much so that after the separation he demanded I give him back the specific children's books he had read aloud to them so they could be on the children's shelves, in their room, in his house."

She looked around the gallery and sighed. "He would always say, 'those books are the furniture of their imaginations.' And at the time I remember it being so infuriating. Just one more thing for him to be an ass about. But now, now it's kind of funny."

She looked at the painting in front of them. "What do you think of this one?"

He took a moment and then said simply, "It's strong, but it takes itself too seriously."

"Would you steal it?"

"If it were the only one? Maybe."

"Do you have time to hit the vault?"

He laughed. "First we scout the galleries."

She hunched and darted her eyes left and right, "I'll keep my eyes peeled for security."

"And I'll watch for camera positions."

"Now's our chance."

"Ok, and—go!"

The two began walking assertively across the room and towards the hall into the next gallery.

"This is fun," she giggled.

They entered the next room acting as if they were casing the joint. He turned his head dramatically left and right, gesturing subtly with his finger.

"Guard at the north exit, security camera in the southwest corner sweeps the room."

"Really I don't even know why I'm telling you any of this."

She looked him up and down.

He froze.

"I guess I feel like I can trust you—you remind me of my husband. Not the first one. The second one. Tom. He was a good guy."

Coming back down the escalator the red light of a neon exit sign began to appear from below the ceiling.

He turned to his new partner. “Would you like to do this again sometime?”

“Funny you should say that,” she said, “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Well actually, the program wanted me to visit you once a week.”

“Oh so that’s the only reason, you have to.”

He looked at her with a sideways glance.

“I’m not getting paid for this, remember?”

She fiddled her hands for a moment with her purse clasp. Opening it then closing it again.

“Tell you what, let’s just say we did it and not, if anyone calls asking about you I’ll tell them we just finished our lovely outing.”

“That’s too bad, I was kinda looking forward to it.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She was trying to decide if she believed him or not.

“So I’ll see you next week?”

She reached back down to her purse, undid the clasp, and sunk her hand into it before pulling out a big black pair of sunglasses. She put them on.

“Sure—I’ll see you next week.”

He wasn’t ready for what to do next.

“Y’know after all this talk of spy games and playing pretend, I can’t believe I never got your real name.” He said. “I’m not even sure you’re the person I was supposed to meet—and I told you my name.” He looked down to the floor, “Come to think of it I sort of feel rude for not asking.”

She smirked.

“What’d I tell you?”

She poked him gently in the chest.

“Oh right. Yeah yeah,” he said, “Nevermind.”

“Helen. My name is Helen Cowne.”

She placed her hands over his.

“Will I see you next week?”

“See you next week.”

She had sent a message through their mutual contact at the agency. He was invited to her home for a showing of the private collection. He was not going to be late. He was supposed to meet her at nine-thirty. He made sure to be early this time. He always felt buried underwater in a fish bowl when he woke up this early. Getting ready was confusing. Ready to fall asleep standing up in the shower, wishing he could go back to bed. But the anxiety of missing this, or being late, had woken him up five minutes before his alarm was set to go off, continuing to energize him through his morning routine. Arriving five minutes early to a beautiful brick townhouse with white rusticated ground floor. He walked up to the front stoop taking note of the shale cracks and crevices of old bluestone that covered the sidewalk leading up to her home. It was uptown but not too far from the train. He got up here faster than he had expected. He couldn't help but notice that in between each slab

of bluestone fuzzy green patches of moss had grown. It all looked so perfect. He rang the doorbell. Stood there waiting for a moment. He looked up. It was a clear day and the wind was moving clouds beautifully over the dark green triangular rooftop. He noticed it was the only one of its shape on the whole block. The rest of the houses were flat, this one stuck out.

“My first husband thought it was too narrow.”

He turned around to see the front door open and Helen standing there watching him.

“Too narrow? It’s a palace!”

“You think so?”

“I know friends that would die to rent just one room of a single floor in this whole building. People would kill for this kind of square footage in an apartment.”

“It is rather nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He was no longer paying attention. He was too caught up looking at the ceilings.

“You see that corner over there?” She turned to point across the room, “It leaks. Remember the beautiful cornice adorning the front roof of the house on the way in? It drips. I’m told the gutter is too small, can’t take big rain. Some say it’s climate change, hurricane season, others say the house has been here over a hundred years and it’s survived this long. I don’t know. But I’m the one that has to decide what to do, or not do,

about any of it. Tom used to do that kinda stuff.”

She trailed off.

He felt bad for bringing it up. He wasn't trying to upset her.

“I actually think the cracks and imperfections give it character.”

“Oh, you're sweet,” she looked at him, “did you see my bluestone sidewalk out front? It's classic. Landmarked. Supposed to be better than concrete because it allows for natural drainage. But you have to maintain it. I tried. After Tom died. Got out there with a pressure washer I bought from a hardware store. Put this stuff in there. Wood cleaner. Figured if it works on wood, it must be safe on stone. Turns out I was wrong, boy was I wrong. Acid. The key ingredient in wood cleaner is acid, and stone doesn't like acid. Things started chipping and flaking and oh god I was so worried I had ruined the whole thing. Over a hundred years of history destroyed by my foolishness. The stone is actually supposed to be darker than it is right now. I'm told it will return over time, that natural patina.”

“I'm sure it will,” he was trying to reassure her.

She stopped. Made eye contact with him.

“If you say so, honey.”

She appreciated being told something, especially if she already knew. It was like a lifeline to the voice of reason beneath her mind caught up in a tunnel-vision of worry.

“Sorry to fret so much,” she caught herself, “Sometimes, maybe we just

need to get it out. Thanks for listening to all that.”

“I actually think it’s all very interesting.”

“You’re sweet.”

“No. Really. Everything here has so much history behind it.”

“Yeah?” There was an air of excitement in her voice. She turned to point across the room, “Well you see that wall of bookcases over there?”

He scanned the old tattered brown books, some big art books about painters and architecture, some smaller hardcovers and paperbacks from famous authors. He wondered how much money they were worth.

“They’re beautiful,” he said.

“The shelf is made of particle board. Factory made. From Sweden.”

“You would never know!”

“That was Tom’s idea. He was very clever. We considered having custom ones made by a carpenter, but when we looked at the prices, well... Let’s just say, I’m still on social security.”

“But this place is so fancy, and this neighborhood...”

“We’ve lived here a long time.” She was surprised by his forwardness. “It wasn’t always this way y’know.”

“What was it like?”

“No trees. A lot more trash.”

He laughed.

“No, really.” She was serious.

“When was this?”

Again she was surprised by his forwardness.

“During the seventies.”

“Wow.”

She found herself remembering how young he was.

“It wasn’t always this nice. There used to be a lot less stuff here. More empty lots, lots of trash, crime. Back then people thought we were crazy for buying this house. Now they look at me with envious eyes. Jealous. Contempt. It’s hilarious. Like I’ve won the lottery with my two dead husbands and a rotting rusty old junk heap I’ll be too old to climb the stairs of one day. Assuming I can keep up with the property tax.”

He didn’t really understand everything she said but he was intrigued by all of it. “So much seems so long ago, but it wasn’t really, was it?”

“No. It wasn’t.” This kid wasn’t such an idiot, she thought. Naïve yes. But smart.

“Would you want to tell me about it?”

Suddenly she found herself questioning his motives. Why was he here.

“What makes a young kid like you so curious about it?”

“I don’t know, I just think it’s all so cool. I’ve lived here my whole life and I still feel like I know so little of the city. There are so many places I haven’t even been.”

“Oh, you’re from here?”

“Yeah. I grew up outer borough, though, don’t hold it against me.”

She smirked.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she leaned in and lowered her voice, “But I’m from outside the city.”

He pulled back and looked at her sideways, “and here I thought you were some kind of fancy uptown girl.”

“Oh I can play the part.”

“I’m sure.”

They smiled at each other, as if sharing an inside joke.

He thought about his first impression of her voice, and considered there was something to rethink about this older lady.

“So how about that tour?”

He was looking around the room now, so many things to take in. The shelves were full of old books by American authors and the walls were covered in a patch quilt of black-and-white photographs, colorful drawings, and dignified oil paintings. There was a classic richness to everything but also a playful sense of whimsy in the way they had been arranged.

Helen pointed to a small photo of a blonde woman in the center of the wall. She was sitting at an outdoor counter holding a cigarette with some neon lights behind her.

“That old broad is my grandmother.”

“She doesn’t look so old.”

“Well she’s not, in that one. But you know what I mean.”

She gave his shoulder a playful little push.

“What about that one?” He motioned to an acrylic illustration in a brown box frame that was hung at an unusually lower height on the wall. It was an impressionistic painting of a subway platform with a young kid standing in the middle, holding up his hand, pretending to stop the train. His father behind him, looking amused and embarrassed.

“The furniture of your imagination.” The words came out of his mouth without thinking.

She blurted out an excited chortle, “Yeah, I always loved that one.”

“But what about that one?” He turned her attention to the main piece hanging over the fireplace. It was an old and classic landscape oil painting.

“Oh, that’s just some old expensive piece of shit.”

“But it looks so nice!” He had never seen something like this so casually in someone’s living room as if it were nothing. This was a painting that belonged in the museum they had visited.

“Y’know if you spend too much time furrowing that brow and thinking about things, it’s going to get stuck that way.”

He broke from his train of thought and looked at her.

She smiled. “It’s not that I don’t like it, it’s just that it’s never brought me anything but trouble. Bad luck, that painting. The canvas is warped, the bottom left corner needs cleaning, the cost of insuring it is not worth the cost of maintaining it. Oh boy. Maybe one day I’ll donate it

somewhere. Assuming anyone wants it.”

“I’m sure they’d want it. Hell, I want it.”

He spoke with the certainty of someone who didn’t know what he was talking about. He just liked the art for what it was. A feeling it had given him.

“I don’t know. It’s just that, I feel rather foolish,” she said. “I tried talking to Tom’s brother after Tom died. I would call him. He would come to visit. He actually made a point of coming to the funeral and seeing me. He helped to close Tom’s estate. But he couldn’t come to Thanksgiving. I don’t know. I feel silly that I’m even bothered by it. But I am. Maybe it’s because he said he would come and then cancelled. I was fine with him not coming. But once he said he was, well, I got excited for it. And now that he isn’t coming, it makes me really sad. I feel so stupid. I don’t even know why I’m so sad. And then when I think, why am I so sad, the answer is obvious. Because of Tom. And I feel even more foolish. I can’t say that to his brother. What am I supposed to say to anyone? It’s just so stupid. I should probably see a psychologist. But that would depress me even more. I just want someone to talk to. Obviously I miss Tom. But I can’t say that to his brother, and I know how upset I am, is obviously way out of proportion. So I just hide. Say nothing to anyone. And that upsets me even more. I feel so horribly lonely.”

The room was silent now. Helen had realized what she said. James

was looking for something to say.

“Maybe you should call him.”

“Call him? Oh how nice of a suggestion,” she was not being serious. “Maybe I’ll just call him and tell him how I feel and he’ll understand and everything will be ok. Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t just call him.”

“Why not?”

“Nothing works that way. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I think it does. Or at least, it can. Why not? People really do understand each other. Or at least they want to, when they speak up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

He laughed.

“Why are you laughing?” She was angry. “It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not funny.” He agreed. “It’s ridiculous.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No.”

“You are. You’re making fun of me.”

“Well maybe just a little. Look. You invited me all the way here. You told me your life story. Maybe give yourself a little more credit. Clearly you know what you’re doing.”

She crossed her arms and looked James in the eyes. “Well that’s just it. Isn’t it. Tom’s brother is just a stand-in for Tom. And I knew this. But I was happy to let things happen on their own, allow myself to enjoy it. But now that he’s not coming? I know I shouldn’t be as upset as I am.

But I am. I don't need anyone seeing this foolishness."

"Why not?"

"It would just be awkward."

"Life is pretty awkward. I would say I'm awkward right now." He smiled with a reassuring quality.

"What am I supposed to say to him? I miss Tom and spending time with him makes me feel better for some reason and I don't know why, but I just like it, and could he please go out of his way to come see me?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"But really, why not?"

"Hey, you're a cute kid and all, but you can't just walk into my house and start spouting your new age bullcrap—"

"New age bullcrap?" He was laughing.

"It's not funny!" She whacked him on the elbow.

"No it's not. But come on. You can't be serious. I'm just trying to tell you to be honest."

She still wasn't having it. "It all seems so simple and easy to you kids, doesn't it? Just be honest. Just tell them how you feel. Well, not everything in life is that simple."

"Hey I'm not trying to solve world peace, I'm just trying to get you to

communicate better with your family.”

She uncrossed her arms. “Fair enough.”

“So are you gonna call them?”

“Maybe later.”

He laughed. “Fair enough.”

She smiled, “Come here I want to show you something.” She began walking past him into the kitchen where she opened the refrigerator and took out a few small plastic bags. He followed close behind and before he knew it she was opening a bag and pulling out a salty piece of sliced meat that she shoved in his face. “Here, try this.”

It hung in front of him like a red and white flag.

“What?” He laughed.

“I said, try this.” She waved it around his face.

“What is it?”

“It’s prosciutto.”

“I’m not that hungry.”

“Try it, I promise you’ll like it.”

She pushed it towards him. He giggled and opened his mouth.

“See?” She said. “Pretty good right?”

“Pretty good.” He smiled.

“Tom used to snack on this kind of stuff. I keep it around out of habit. But I can’t taste much of it anymore.”

He was nodding his head. He reached for another piece from the

counter and placed it in his mouth.

“He would stand here in the kitchen with all the materials and assemble the sandwich in his mouth. I don’t know if he ever actually built one. Maybe he did in the beginning. But I think he started trying to save time. Then we started getting the fancier stuff from the better deli, and he would just love to eat it by itself, individual slices. I still get the same stuff.”

“It’s really good.” He was nodding, eating another piece.

“Yeah it’s the best.” She smiled.

He was chewing, thinking, enjoying. Then suddenly he had a thought, “So wait, like, you can’t taste anything at all?”

She stopped. This was an unexpected question. But she was glad to answer. “Well, yes and no. It started out I could taste everything, but the filters were all messed up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like one night I thought something was off about some apple cider, that it had gone bad. The next day I put ketchup on something and I thought it was old and expired. But it wasn’t until after I put barbecue sauce on chips with cheese that I realized. Something was wrong with me. It tasted like every condiment had been mixed with rubbing alcohol. I thought it must be the tomato in there. Turns out it was the vinegar. Which is in almost every single condiment known to man. From mustard to ketchup to hot sauce. If there is even a hint of it in

there, it tastes like it's been laced with battery acid.”

He was shocked. But also a little intrigued. “Wait, what do you mean ‘chips with cheese?’”

“It’s something I’ve been making since I was a kid. It’s a plate of shredded cheese and corns chips.”

He couldn’t believe it. “So you put barbecue sauce on corn chips with shredded cheese?”

She laughed. “Stop it.”

“No really, I want to know, why would you do something so insane as that.”

She whacked him in the arm. “Well I microwave it! The cheese melts over the chips. You should try it sometime, it’s actually pretty good.”

“Don’t mean to be a snob, but I don’t know if that’s for me.”

“Well that’s your loss. I thought young people were supposed to be adventurous.”

He laughed. “Things have changed.”

“Oh come on. You won’t even try just a little?”

She walked to a cabinet and grabbed an open bag of corn chips. The top was folded over with a big plastic clip. She lifted it above her head. Then started dancing around with it. She made her way gracefully over to the refrigerator, and pulled out a bag of shredded cheese, doing a spin as she closed the fridge door. Clearly she had lost her mind, he thought.

“Chips with cheese. Chips with cheese,” she was humming to herself

as she bounced around the kitchen. She grabbed a plate, dropped a spread of chips on top, and then sprinkled a strong helping of shredded cheese from high over head.

She walked over to the microwave, placed the plate inside, closed it, set the timer for one minute, and leaned against the counter smirking at James.

“We’ll get you started with the straight stuff. No barbecue sauce up front. You need to know what regular chips and cheese taste like before we move you into the more niche varieties.”