

Hungry for More

Prologue

Present Day...

The guard escorted Father Sullivan to the door and as they stopped, he held out an arm to signal the Father to hold his position. The guard moved to the console next to the door, carrying a set of buttons and a radio speaker. He pushed one button on the console, and a light above the nearby door blinked a brilliant red, accompanied by a loud *BZZT* as the various mechanisms controlling the door stirred to life. The door itself rattled open slowly.

The guard pulled up the radio and called a command, "Doors opening! Code 102, Father Sullivan is on his way to cell 42B, inmate number D-2384." And the command blurted through the aging speakers on both Father Sullivan's side of the door, and the side beyond.

Father Sullivan stood where he was ordered to, straightening his robe and adjusting his collar, waiting for the guard to give him the order to proceed. Today was a somewhat special occasion. Though he had been a pastor for well over 10 years at this point, and was very familiar with the procedure, it was always a special case when he was asked to perform last rites for the condemned. Today's person of non-traditional predicament seemed extra special, at least to Father Sullivan. He figured this, because while most of the time prison guards, even the ones belonging to maximum security prisons, often follow their procedures rigidly, they usually did it with noticeable pangs of boredom. Spend one night hearing a bunch of lost souls scream in pain or sorrow in the middle of the night, spent them all, a guard once told him. This time, however, the guards Father Sullivan had met on the way to seeing his next patient might as well have been on stimulants. Their eyes were wiry, yet focused. Demeanors of extreme caution and dread hung from their faces. Though Father Sullivan had given the last rites to over 100 inmates at this point, none of them seemed to command this much attention.

The console squawked to life. A fuzzy, mumbled command was repeated back to Father Sullivan's chauffeur, and he looked up from the console, meeting Father Sullivan's eyes. "You can go in now, Father..." he trailed off, biting his lip in concern.

Father Sullivan for a moment, did not move. "Is something... the matter?" he inquired.

The guard nervously stroked his beard. "Yeah everything is fine just... be careful with that guy. He gives me the creeps. His cell is at the end of the hall. Don't give him any objects, especially anything sharp. We set up a chair for you outside of his cell."

Father Sullivan nodded and began his walk down the hall. The cell block he was located in was home to what the prison considered the most extreme cases. Those who most likely should have been receiving treatment in an asylum, but for whatever reason, were deemed too dangerous to be housed anywhere else but concrete cells, isolated from the rest of the inmates. As such, there was a total of six cells, all in one row, in a dark hallway. The space was cramped and dimly lit. The only light came from the occasional ceiling light dotting every third cell. When Father Sullivan walked down this hallway, if he wasn't directly under a light, walking between the lights, he had to squint just to see a few inches in front of him.

As he walked he tried to examine the other inmates. There were only four of the six cells filled, one of whom he was here to meet. He passed the second cell closest to the guard station. It was filled with a man who looked like he was trying his best to sleep but his eyes were wide open, and he was muttering to himself. Next to his cell was another man, sitting in a fetal position and staring at the concrete wall. His back was to Father Sullivan, so it was possible that this one was actually asleep, though it would be an odd position to do so. The next cell Father Sullivan passed

quicker than the others, because though he couldn't quite see the entire inner part of the cell, he was sure its occupant was pleasuring himself.

He passed the last empty cell, and before he reached the metal folding chair the guard had laid out for him, Father Sullivan paused. Because, while the hallway was quiet, save for the sounds of a man in the middle of some personal business, Father Sullivan became acutely aware that there was a soft voice drifting through the hallway. It had been there the whole time, he supposed, but only now as he approached the final cell did he truly hear it. It was a soft sound of a person humming. What song this was, Father Sullivan did not know, but whatever it was, the person singing it was treating it with the upmost care. Their voice drifted from note to note with a grace unseen by modern vocalists. Up and down in pitch it went, forming a melody that was both eerie, yet soothing. This must have been what the Big Bad Wolf hummed right before he swallowed Little Red's grandmother whole.

Finally, Father Sullivan reached the metal chair. He stood in front of it, to greet his newest patient. The inmate had his back to Sullivan, and he was swaying in a blissful manor. The back of his dull blue jumpsuit was stenciled with the black lettering of his ID number. Father Sullivan realized that the source of the eerie humming was coming from this particular inmate. He was swaying and humming and... doing something with his hands? Father Sullivan couldn't understand what the man was doing with them, but his hands drifted about him like the tentacles of an octopus. His body and hands swaggered and drifted like a lazy conductor, not moving with any particular hurry, but nonetheless with precision and grace.

This went on for a minute while Father Sullivan watched in hypnotic wonder. Finally he decided that performing last rites wasn't something you could wait on forever, and cleared his throat. The man halted in his swaying with a "Hmm?" and turned around. The inmate's eyes met Sullivan's and he greeted him with a warm smile.

"Ahh. Hello, Father. Can I help you with something?" He said this as casually as if Father Sullivan was only there to ask for directions.

Father Sullivan produced a bible from the inner part of his robe and began, "My son, I am here to perform a prayer in the name of your rights as a human being, and as a child of God." He drew a cross in the air, held the bible to his chest, and resumed, "In the name of the Father--"

The inmate, still wearing that warm smile, put up a hand. "Ahh, sorry but... no thanks. God and I, we don't get along. I'm a talker, you see," at this the warm smile seemed to swell into one of almost sinister delight, "And well, let's just say He's not much of a conversationalist."

Father Sullivan stood in his well prepared pose for a moment, then blew air out of his nose and let out a shrug. "That's alright." He said, taking his seat in the metal chair. "That's not too uncommon. Most men on death row are either begging for God to spare them, or want nothing to do with Him anymore. Though I do wish I had known that ahead of time, otherwise I wouldn't have spent all that time practicing."

At this, the inmate let out a laugh and took a seat on his cot. The rusty metal thing squealed along with his warm laugh. "Well I'm sorry to make you come all this way."

Father Sullivan shook his head. "Think nothing of it. Those that don't want anything to do with God often still want some form of companionship in their... hour of need. Is that something you'd like as well?"

"You probably mean something like 'their final hours' don't you Father?" He said this all the while not losing that warm smile. It stuck to his face like it was stapled on, yet it didn't seem fake or forced. To Father Sullivan, it seemed like this was just another day for him. And today, he was visiting a friend.

"Yes," said Sullivan. "That is what I meant. I'm never quite sure how to phrase it."

"Well, Father...?"

“Sullivan.”

“Well, Father Sullivan, to answer your question, sure I wouldn’t mind some company. It’s been so long since I’ve had guests. If I had known you were coming I would have prepared something for two. I was just in the middle of preparing a roast for my dinner.” He waved a hand to the inner parts of his cell.

Father Sullivan squinted in the faint light and saw what the inmate was gesturing to. The walls of his cell were thick, grey slabs of concrete. They were barely taller than he was, about 6.5 ft tall, Sullivan guessed, and the space looked little bigger than a closet. But the size wasn’t what made Sullivan narrow his eyes in confusion. As the darkness cleared before him, Sullivan noticed that the walls of this cell were not completely bare. Instead, there were white markings located on the far east and north walls. They were crudely drawn shapes, like a caveman inscribing some great tale of the beast he’d slain. There was a large square with a smaller square within it, and along the top of the square was a set of lines pointed at varying angles. On the north wall was a taller, rectangular square that almost reached the ceiling. This square had a thick line just off center. Meanwhile next to that square was a smaller series of squares, each with their own thick lines off center.

It took Father Sullivan a long moment to finally understand what he was supposed to be looking at. It started to make sense when he took into consideration the clue his new friend had given him. A... fridge? Some cupboards? And that square with the smaller square and off angled lines... is that supposed to be an oven? With knobs for the stovetop?

“You were preparing something for dinner... in your kitchen?” Said Father Sullivan, cautiously.

The inmate clapped his hands together and hopped out of his cot, pointing dual finger guns at Sullivan. “Right! Right, right, right, right! You would be so surprised at how few folks understand that. As if a kitchen is such an unusual thing to have in a home.” He strode to the “oven” and patted the marking. “This little one is the Bronco 500. It can roast a whole turkey in 10 minutes flat.” He moved to the north wall and gestured grandly to the “fridge”. “Can’t forget the Breezmaster Tundra model, that means it acts as a freezer too! Freezing is important for food preservation, don’t you know!”

The inmate was grinning a wide, toothy smile, that made Father Sullivan worry. This was certainly a new one, he thought. Before he could open his mouth to voice his concerns, the inmate doubled over with laughter, howling with delight and sitting back down on his squeaky cot.

“Ho ho ho! Come on now, I’m on death row, but my sense of humor hasn’t been executed. I’m not *that* insane.” He returned his attention to Father Sullivan who was offering a weak smile. “I drew those with a rock I found some time ago. I just missed my kitchen is all. Everyone gets homesick, sooner or later.”

“And your home is a kitchen?”

The inmate nodded. “Of course! Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well... some folks consider their home to be more... home-y. Couches, recliners, TVs, their favorite coffee table. Something more livable, I would think.”

The inmate’s smile never left his face but his eyes did narrow. “You’re right... but not for one such as I. Tell me something, Father Sullivan, do you... know who I am?”

Father Sullivan shook his head.

The inmate shook his own head and let out a weary sigh. “Ahh that’s something isn’t it? An artist creates his masterpiece and yet somehow it’s forgotten in so little time. That’s why artists keep creating I guess. We have to keep creating, keep horrifying, keep shocking, keep intriguing, otherwise we’ll be forgotten. We’re like sharks in that way. Keep moving forward or drown.”

Father Sullivan’s face was more confused than concerned. “I’m... not sure I follow.”

“What I mean to say, Father Sullivan, is that you wouldn’t be so confused as to why I consider the kitchen my home if you knew me. You truly don’t know who I am, do you? Did that guard, Bernie, I think his name is, did he even tell you my name?”

Father Sullivan shook his head again. “No sir, sorry. They didn’t say, and I’m afraid I don’t know anything about you, other than the predicament you’re in.”

“I see... well then, Father Sullivan, if you’d like to offer me some companionship perhaps we can start with introductions. My name is Edward. Edward Verona. But, you can call me Eddie.”

When Father Sullivan did not respond to this name, he continued. “I am a chef. I owned and operated a small restaurant about one hour north of this prison. And, while time is a bit hard to track here, I believe it was about two years ago that I was imprisoned and set forth on the path I am now. My crime? The reason for my imprisonment and subsequent execution?” At this, Eddie’s eyes listed dreamily to a space on his concrete wall. Or, more likely, somewhere far beyond it. “I created my masterpiece.”

Part 1

Two Years Ago...

MEEP! MEEP! MEEP! MEEP!

The alarm stabbed into Eddie's brain like a fine kitchen knife. Well, one wielded by a particularly reckless butcher, he figured. Shaking himself from sleep, he reached over and slapped the top of his alarm clock. It finally ceased its racket and Eddie sat up in bed, yawning and stretching. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock he had just assaulted. 5:30 AM. Far too early for most mortal men, just early enough for Eddie.

A mass of covers and blankets stirred next to him and Eddie leaned over to pat his still sleeping wife, Jessica, on the shoulder. She let out a groan that sounded like it was trying to form speech.

"Murgurbbbrit?"

Eddie let out a quiet laugh. "Ha ha, what?"

"Mrugbrugh time is it?" said the groggy lump, hiding itself under the blankets.

"It's early. Go back to sleep."

"Nooo I'll get up." Said his wife. She did not move.

"I'll make you something before work." Said Eddie, getting out of bed and stretching some more.

"You don't have to do thaaat." Came the groaning reply.

Eddie continued his stretches and mentally counted to ten. Six... seven... eight...

"Mgurg actually... bacon and eggs sounds nice..."

She must be hungry, she's a little early this time. Eddie thought to himself. He chuckled lightly, and leaned over to his blanket covered lump of a wife and kissed her on the cheek.

He strode into the bathroom for his morning shower. When he was done, he returned to the bedroom and got dressed. Cargo shorts and a T shirt, emblazoned with the logo of a band that no one but Eddie knew about. Jessica was still somewhere in between sleep and awake, but she was moving. *Probably checking her phone. That's a step.* Mused Eddie.

"I'll be downstairs." He said, giving her a wave.

"Mmmkay." Came the reply.

Eddie marched down the steep staircase leading from their apartment to the lower floor. The room was dark, but Eddie had navigated this space in the dark so many times, he could probably navigate it with a blindfold and a head injury. Walk in two steps, turn left, flip the switches on the wall. *Click! Click! Click!* In three large sections of ceiling, the lights dotting the space illuminated. Each one was dedicated to a different section of the floor. From left to right, they were entrance, dining area, and kitchen. Continue a few paces, and another left, and finally, he was where he belonged, the kitchen. *Honey, I'm home!* He thought to himself, sarcastically.

The kitchen was longer than it was wide. In a squared U shape, it contained everything he needed for the days work, and then some. On the right side of the U was the bay window that opened the kitchen to the rest of the restaurant. Below that was the prep counter, where food needed to be dressed and made presentable before being given to the customer. This space included everything from extra seasonings to additional knives, toothpicks, sauce bottles and of course, clean plates. On the opposite side was the stove, oven, grill, and deep fryer. All lined side by side, with the far part of the U housing the large fridge which stocked that day's meats.

Eddie walked down the leftmost row of the kitchen and flicked on all the switches he flicked on every day. Get the fryers ready, keep the grill hot, etc. Routine as it was, Eddie never minded it. After all, if you don't do all the prep, the food just won't taste the same.

His preparations complete he cracked his knuckles and made for the fridge. It was time to start breakfast. Eddie pulled his ingredients from the fridge. A large box of eggs, some thick cut bacon, and butter. Eddie confirmed that the bread and the toaster were nearby, and took a deep inhale before cracking- oh wait, can't forget the best part. Not even moving from his prep station, Eddie reached over and flicked on a music player/radio combo attached to the wall. A gently pulsating percussive beat, drowning in bass and reverb, filled the small space. The music wormed its way into Eddie's brain, filling in the gaps that sleep had left behind. Who needs coffee, when you have some nice drums and a good baseline?

His preparations *actually* complete, Eddie cracked his knuckles once more. Those who've seen Eddie in action in front of a stove often told him he seemed to be in a trance when he cooked. Eddie was never quite sure of what to make of this, but he figured it must at the very least, be true. When he was cooking, Eddie often found himself daydreaming. His mind left him but not because he wasn't there, but because he was in a higher state of focus. His arms and legs moved on their own, his higher brain need not interfere, they knew where they were going. Nothing else mattered or even existed at all when it was time to cook.

Eddie's thoughts while cooking often bounced between rigid instructions and mental reminders. Actually, this was less bouncing that it was dancing, as his thoughts swayed gracefully from one to the other, in a rhythm that didn't make sense to anyone but him.

Get a pan, on the left burner, not the right one the right one is still broken. Set stove to 4, no higher. Any higher and it will burn. Crack the eggs. One, two... better make it four, I'm hungry too. A dash of milk... eh, a little more than that, perfect! Now whisk, whisk, whisk... that's enough whisking. Is the pan ready? Seems like it. In you go, bacon! Three minutes per side, maybe even less, it always cooks faster than I think it should. Three minutes are up, turn them over. Hmm, it's a little darker than I expected. Better make it two minutes on this side. Two minutes are up, how's the bacon? Perfect. Plate it. Leave the grease. Ready eggs? In ya go. Arg! Damn it! The grease splattered. Too high! Ya poured it too high ya bastard! Anyways, get to work with that spatula. Nice and slow, let it form some nice curds.

"Eddie?"

"Hmm?" Eddie shook himself and returned to reality. Jessica was standing just outside of the kitchen, fixing her hair in a bun. She had done the rest of her morning routine while Eddie was busy prepping for the day, and was dressed in a simple gray business suit.

"I said, can I help at all?"

Eddie smiled. She asked this every morning, and Eddie knew she always meant it. But, Eddie always gave her the same reply: "No but thanks for asking, dear. Go get a seat, breakfast will be ready soon."

Eddie plated the fluffy eggs, crispy bacon, and buttered toast, adding a dash of salt and pepper to the latter two. He didn't measure the amounts of each, there was no need. Once you've been in a kitchen for as long as he had, the right amount of salt and pepper becomes a sixth sense. He grabbed the large serving disc and added the plates to it, carrying the whole thing from the kitchen to where Jessica was seated, by the window looking out onto the street.

Jessica took a greedy bite of her scrambled eggs and crooned in delight. Speaking through her chewing she said, "mrgmy god Eddie, these eggs are so good. Did you do something special to them?"

Eddie shrugged and took his own starving bite. "Nothing too fancy, but I used the bacon grease to cook the eggs. Gives it a hell of a lot of flavor, even though it probably gives it enough cholesterol to kill a man."

Jessica laughed and patted his hand. "Well it's delicious. Thank you, honey."

“You’re welcome, dear.” He sat up and gave his wife a peck on the cheek, who playfully pushed him away.

“Stoop I just did my makeup! You’ll cover me in grease!”

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. It wasn’t a silence of resentment or boredom. It was merely the silence of two people who enjoy being in each other’s space. Words and conversation weren’t always needed when you’ve been married for over 5 years. The two graciously eat their meal while watching the city before them slowly wake itself up. First there was only dim light, as the early morning dawn cut off the street lights. Then the warm morning sun slowly eased its way onto the street. Then one passerby became two, then five, then a steady flow. Traffic slowly went from a car here and there, to dense rush hour traffic. Finally, the restaurant across the street, the eatery known as Ché Top, came to life with its lavish neon sign.

At seeing the sign light up, Jessica dotted her mouth with a napkin and looked down at her watch. “I should get going.”

Eddie nodded and collected her empty plate along with his, leaving them on the table for a minute while he kissed his wife goodbye and watched her walk out the door, down the street out of view. He took a deep breath and exhaled. He slapped himself gently on the face, a habit he often found himself doing to psych himself up for the day. He stood in front of the window and clicked on his own, though admittedly smaller and not as lavish, neon sign. The neon brilliantly shown, with a faint buzzing noise, the swirly text reading “Eddie-bles!” and beneath that, “OPEN!” Eddie returned to the kitchen and threw on the apron with his logo on it. Gotta look presentable for the customers. The tables were cleared, the sign was on, and the clock had just rolled on to 7:30, it was time for business.

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Eddie watched the clock with bored resignation. 12:29 it read. He tapped his finger on the counter, trying not to think about how hard his taps echoed throughout the empty restaurant. The clock finally rolled over to 12:30 and Eddie let out a sigh and a roll of his eyes. Break time. He returned to his post in the kitchen and began prepping for lunch. Nothing too fancy, he figured, just a chicken sandwich will do.

Just as he had pulled out the bread for his sandwich, he heard the jingling of the bell hanging by the front entrance. Excitedly he popped his head out of the kitchen window, beaming with delight.

“Hi! Welcome to Eddie-ble’s! I’m Eddie just go ahead and... oh. Hi, dear.”

Jessica was in the middle of letting her hair down when her eyes met Eddie’s and she smiled and blew him a kiss. “Hi honey. Sorry to get your hopes up.”

Eddie returned to his bread and prepared a second plate for Jessica. “It’s ok... I just haven’t had a damn customer all day. I’m going a little stir crazy.”

Jessica took her seat from earlier that morning, gazing out the window and watching pedestrians. “Not a single one, huh? That’s a shame. Don’t you usually have that one guy stop by for lunch? That big guy, British?”

Eddie brought out the plates of sandwiches to his wife and took the seat across from her. “No, afraid not. Last time he was in, he said he got laid off recently, can’t afford to eat out on the regular anymore. Times are tough all around, I guess.”

Jessica took a bite of her sandwich. “Aweeee, that’s too bad. I liked him.”

The two ate their lunch in that blissful silence. Only occasionally did Jessica interrupt the peace to inform Eddie on her recent work gossip. Sounds like that bitch Robin is at it again!

The meal was finished and Eddie found himself sighing heavily while watching a man in a suit pick his nose in broad daylight strolling by the window. “This is the third day in a row without a single customer.” He grumbled. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up. I’ve never had a large clientele but there’s usually enough casual walk ins to at least stay afloat.”

His wife patted his hand. “Oh, honey, it will get better. Your cooking is incredible! People just need see that for themselves.”

“I sure hope so...”

The front door jangled and Eddie was immediately out of his seat. “Welcome to Eddie-bles! I’ll be right with- oh for Christ sakes!”

“Well hello to you too, darling!”

It was the sarcastic crooning of a thin, well dressed man, that Eddie knew far too well, one Marvin Hazely, owner of Ché Top. He had strolled in with his usual flamboyant charm that seemed to work on everyone except Eddie.

“What do you want, Marvin?” said Eddie with a roll of his eyes.

“I see you’re a bit cranky, perhaps I shouldn’t have come during your lunch rush.” Marvin said with a tight smile.

Eddie took a single step forward, fists balled, but was stopped by Jessica who put an arm in front of him. “Relax, Eddie. He’s just joking around. How are you Marvin?”

Marvin’s tight smile brightened to a more sincere smile as his eyes snapped from Eddie to Jessica. “Jessicaaa! Darling! I’m very well, how’s the office life?”

“Couldn’t be more terrible.”

“Oh do tell. Is that little harlot Robin still being a pain?”

“Actually,” interjected Eddie, “Jessica was just getting back to work and so was I, so I think you should probably leave, Marvin. Right now. Before I escort you out. Face first.”

Marvin put up his hands, “Alright, alright, down boy. I come in peace. I simply stopped by to invite you both to a little get together at my fine eatery.”

Eddie folded his arms. “Sorry, Marvin, we don’t eat much fast food these days.”

Marvin let out a good natured chuckle. What surprised Eddie was how this chuckle was actually sincere, and not merely a polite gesture.

“Ordinarily Eddie, I’d have you neutered for daring to call my fine five star establishment ‘fast food’, but I’m in far too good of spirits to let that bother me. Besides, it isn’t for a meal, per se, it’s more of an event. My engineers and I have been cooking up something rather extraordinary and I’m inviting some of the local press as well as some of the local chefs to the unveiling event. It’s tomorrow evening, if you have the time.”

Eddie opened his mouth to tell Marvin to shove it, but Jessica beat him to it. Except it sounded less like “Shove it, Marvin!” and more like, “That sounds lovely Marvin, we’ll be there.”

“Excellent.” Marvin said, with a clap of the hands. “Well, I must be off, places to go, people to see and all that.”

He gave a nod and strode out of the door. When he was gone Eddie kicked a wall and slumped back into his seat, folding his arms and pouting. “Ugh. I hate that guy.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Really? I couldn’t tell. Be nice to him, he’s a nice guy.”

Still pouting, Eddie shook his head. “I don’t think he is. He *acts* nice. He wants you to *think* he’s nice but it’s all theater if you ask me. I’ve been to that restaurant of his. It’s all nice and clean on the outside but on the inside it’s nothing but stuffy chefs serving stuffy customers. I bet they don’t even card you for entry, they just check your bank balance.”

“Oh don’t be that way. His clientele might be different than ours but they’ve still got empty bellies. Besides, don’t think I don’t know you’ve actually enjoyed Marvin’s cooking before.”

Jessica was eyeing Eddie and grinning smugly. Eddie was deliberately avoided her gaze, taking interest in a passerby who hadn't noticed his zipper was down. As much as he hated to admit it, and probably never would to his wife, Eddie knew that Marvin was in fact a good cook. You don't become the proprietor of a five star restaurant due to nepotism or blind luck. Not in this city, at least.

"Whatever." He finally said.

"Whatever." Jessica mocked. Eddie hated it when she did that, she knew it always made him laugh, not matter what mood he was in.

Part 2

The Next Day...

“I want my cargo shorts.” Grumbled Eddie.

“Stop being a baby!” said Jessica, straightening his tie. “Besides you look handsome.”

“Why should I have to dress up for Marvin’s dumb event-hurk!”

Jessica tightened the tie a little too snug. Her dower expression made it clear that it wasn’t an accident. “Because...” she began, dropping the tie and returning to her mirror to apply her eyeliner. She let out the rest of her thought in one long breath. “We don’t go out enough and we don’t have enough friends in the neighborhood and Marvin was nice enough to invite us and because I like dressing up and because I said so!”

Eddie felt like he was in a standoff without bullets yet his opponent had brought double. He let down his (figurative) gun and weakly let out, “Yes, dear.”

After getting dressed the two made their way across the street. A small crowd was gathering outside of Ché Top, blocked off by some velvet ropes, and punctuated by a large, bored looking man with a clipboard acting as a bouncer. The crowd was dense, there were probably over fifty people filling the sidewalk and spilling out onto the street. The crowd only grew in size as random passerby would stop and join the throngs, curious as to the commotion they had come across.

Eddie and Jessica scanned the crowd for some kind of order. Some kind of signal to show where they were supposed to be. Their eyes landed on an exceptionally well dressed couple, the man in an expensive looking suit, the woman in furs of some animal they did not recognize, cutting through the crowd and approaching the bouncer directly. When they met, they exchanged a few words before the bouncer nodded and allowed the couple to pass through the door to Ché Top.

The two looked at each other and gave themselves a look that said “worth a try” and approached the bouncer in the same manner.

When they reached him, the bouncer took a half hearted interest in them. “Names?”

“Eddie and Jessica Verona.” Said Jessica, before Eddie could say something sarcastic.

The bouncer looked up and down his clipboard with more bored contempt before looking back up, nodding, and stepping aside.

The two made their way into Ché Top. The size of the space dwarfed Eddie’s. It was practically a gymnasium or a ballroom. Tables with fine cloths lined the space in a perfectly symmetrical pattern, with a walkway in the middle dividing the two sections, leading directly to the back kitchen and its set of double doors. Eddie supposed this is what happens when you’re a five star restaurant. It needs five star space to serve five star clientele.

The only thing obstructing the symmetry of the space was the small stage in front of the kitchen doors. It was a structure comprised of several prefab stage contraptions, each only about the size of a large desk. It was noticeably cheap looking, at least compared to everything else in Ché Top. Whatever presentation this was, it seems like Marvin wanted to show it off as soon as possible, stage rentals on short notice be damned. Adorning the stage was a microphone with accompanying stand, and behind it, a large object obscured by a white tarp. It was impossible to make out what was under the tarp. The thick cloth jutted out in weird angles that dissuaded every attempt Eddie made to figure out what it was, and was about as tall as a full grown man.

Eddie’s eyes wandered around Ché Top. Patrons were waiting patiently for whatever show was about to begin. A few well dressed staff members were wadding through the crowd, carrying hors d'oeuvres on platters. One approached Jessica and Eddie with meatballs on toothpicks, offering to them both.

“Ohh they look delicious! Thank you!” Jessica said, graciously taking one.

“Erm, yeah. Thanks, guy.” Said Eddie. He wasn’t used to being served food.

Finally, the lights dimmed, and the crowd in unison, spun around and faced the stage. A hush silence followed, broken quickly by the clattering of feet against a cheap plastic stage, and a gentle applause as Marvin strode up to the mic. He patiently waited for the applause to die down before he began.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” his eyes scanned the room intensely. “I want to put in an order at all of your restaurants. I need enough food to feed everyone here.”

A few chuckles rose up from the crowd. Marvin smiled but remained undaunted.

“Yes, yes,” he continued. “It’s a lot isn’t it? And on such short notice, too! You there!” He pointed to a member of the crowd that stood to Eddie and Jessica’s far right. Eddie recognized him as Lenny, the owner of Lenny’s Bar & Grill from a few blocks down the street. At Marvin’s exclamation, he had jumped and made a ‘who me?’ face.

“Yes, you! Lenny, how long do you think it would take you to feed everyone here if you took their orders right now?” He was grinning with manic delight. It was a look that was starting to make Eddie nervous.

“I dunno!” Called back Lenny. “God, maybe hours. Days even!”

“And the cost of ingredients?” urged Marvin.

At this, Lenny let out a laugh. “Outrageous. I probably wouldn’t recoup my cost even if I doubled the bill of everyone here!”

“That’s right, that’s right. Sure it would be a gargantuan task, I think we can all agree. But Lenny, I want you to do it all in 30 minutes.”

Lenny’s eyes ballooned to the size of dinner plates before he teared up and doubled over with laughter. The crowd joined in, Eddie included. What a ridiculous notion. A ballroom full of people? 30 minutes? Some dishes take that long to bake in an oven. What Marvin was asking for wasn’t just impossible, it was so absurd that it was hysterical. Eddie stopped laughing, however, when he looked up at Marvin and saw that not only was he not laughing, he was still grinning that smug grin, waiting for the laughter to die down. It was a smile that said ‘I’ve got you now’.

He resumed when he had his peace again. “Yes, yes that is rather funny isn’t, you could never fulfill an order like that in 30 minutes... but I can.”

Silence. A narrowing of eyes. A few confused glances. The audience was waiting. Marvin was letting them stew just a bit longer. “Not only can I feed you all in 30 minutes...” he said, once the stew had properly simmered. “But I already have.”

He brought his fingers to the air and snapped twice. The doors behind him leading to the kitchen suddenly burst open, and a train of staff, all dressed in pristine white, charged forward. There must have been dozens of them, Marvin could afford a large kitchen staff after all, all rolling out large carts covered in white table cloths. Atop each cart was several large platters and trays, all covered with large shiny domes. The staff moved like a well trained militia, organizing quickly around either walls of the dining area. When each soldier had lined up, they stood at the ready behind their carts in perfect stoic attention.

There was a sudden silence as all the clattering of carts and the pattering of feet finally ceased. It only lasted for a moment as Marvin snapped his fingers once again. In unison the staff members threw open their lids, revealing the contents underneath. Before the guests could register what was under the lids with their eyes, their noses were hit with the scent. All at once the scent of decadent, well prepared food blasted the inner dining hall, invading the nostrils of every attendant. The scent of plump roast chicken, spicy grilled beef, and thick tangy sauces caused some guests to gush instantly with drool. It was like firing a cannon volley all in unison at the invading army, only the result had more saliva than blood.

“Show off.” Grumbled Eddie. Jessica elbowed him in the ribs.

“Dig in, everyone!” Said Marvin, gesturing grandly to the carts on either side. “Take a plate, eat your fill, grab a seat! Tonight is on me!”

The audience graciously obliged.

~*~

The audience surged upon the massive buffet Marvin had laid out. There was just about any kind of food one could ask for, from the simplest burgers and fries combo to the elaborate dessert, tiramisu. Eddie found himself with a small plate consisting of a fried chicken drumstick and some mashed potatoes, while Jessica plated herself some baked ziti and garlic bread. They had found themselves sitting at one of the middle tables. There were a few other guests at their table, but since Eddie only personally knew one of them, Lenny from Lenny’s Bar & Grill, Eddie saved his words for him and his wife only.

The group dug in to their meals, occasionally producing sounds of delight, reminiscent of a dying camel. When there was speech it was usually only small barks in the form of “so good!” or “my word!”

Eddie sat for a moment, observing the rest of the group. His stubbornness had prevented him from joining the group in their grazing but eventually hunger won out and he took a bite from his drumstick. He chewed thoroughly and swallowed. He raised an eyebrow at the drumstick, puzzled.

“How is it?” said Jessica, through a mouthful of pasta.

Eddie’s confused eyes remained on his chicken. “It’s... food.”

Jessica rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the ribs, this time playfully. “Oh stop being stubborn, admit that you like Marvin’s cooking.”

Eddie shook his head. “No, no, I really mean it. Ok, Marvin isn’t exactly a terrible cook but this...” he gestured to his meal. “Just... isn’t that good. It’s like he prepared it well but didn’t add any seasonings. Sure it’s *food*. It’s edible. It’s better than nothing I guess.”

Jessica shrugged. “Maybe you got a batch that was left out too long? Here, try my pasta.”

Eddie did. He took a bite of the cheesy, sauce covered noodles and once again looked puzzled. “It tastes the same. I can’t even tell the difference. A completely different set of ingredients making up a completely different dish, and I can’t tell the difference between them. Something’s not right.”

Jessica shrugged again. Eddie turned to Lenny. “Lenny, do you mind? Can I try your ribs?”

Lenny had his mouth full but nodded his head and offered his plate. Once again Eddie grabbed a forkful of rib meat, and once again he found himself tasting the same dull matter that was mimicking food. He shook his head. Nothing. His eyes drifted from the plate to Marvin on the stage. The entire time they were eating, Marvin had been watching them with delight. The look he was giving as he scanned the crowd made Eddie more nervous. Something wasn’t right here.

“Please do not let me interrupt your meal, but I must ask. How does everything taste?” said Marvin, interrupting everyone’s meal.

Cheers and applause arose from the crowd.

“Good, good. Now I’m sure you’re all still wondering how I made all of this in only 30 minutes. Hell, some of you probably don’t even believe me.” For some reason, Marvin’s eyes landed on Eddie. “Well that’s what I’m here to present to you tonight. For you see, I had some help. My wonderful engineers have been hard at work on a device of my own design to aid in the cooking process. And it is with that device that I was able to prepare all of this wonderful food in such a short amount of time.” He took a step back and took hold of the white tarp covering the *thing* that was standing behind him.

With a flourish he pulled off the tarp. What was revealed underneath was hard to grasp. It was certainly a machine, plated in silvery metal, with cogs and gears visible in some spots. But its shape didn't resemble any shape that made any sense of what it was. It had coils sticking out of its square-ish boxy shape, and a flat plane jutting out from the side. This plane and the small touch screen panel in front of it were the only things about the device that anyone could actually recognize: one was a conveyor belt, and the other was a panel for inputting commands.

"I give you," bellowed Marvin "The Hazely Oven."

The crowd applauded but it was clearly not the roaring applause that Marvin expected. His smile didn't falter however, and with a gentle chuckle he returned to the microphone. "Now, now. I know that applause was merely to spare my feelings. A demonstration is required." His eyes drifted among the crowd. "Would anyone care for seconds?"

After a pause, it was Lenny who stood up. "Alright Marvin, I'll bite. I'd like another plate of ribs. Go on and show me how that machine can do it."

"Ahh! Ribs!" said Marvin, clapping his hands. "Excellent choice." He walked over to the device, and started touching the touch screen. He started his well rehearsed spiel, occasionally looking over his shoulder to address the crowd. "You see, this device is programmed with hundreds of different recipes of a hundreds of different dishes. All I need to do is place an order for ribs..." he trailed off, preoccupied with the screen. When he was done, he circled around the machine and brought out a large bag of... it wasn't clear what it was. It resembled an industrial bag of gravel, nothing but grey and black blobs of rocks and other particles in a large plastic bag. Along with this bag was a funnel, which he installed in a port on the side of the machine, and began pouring the "gravel" into.

"Lastly," he said mid pour, "We pour in the necessary amount of ingredients..." When he was finally done pouring, he returned to the screen. "And press the cook button!" as he so did.

After pressing the button the machine whirred to life. It groaned, waking up from its silent slumber. The groan turned into a dull hum as the machine did whatever it was supposed to be doing. After only a minute or so of this dull humming, there was a loud *ding*, and the conveyor belt on the machine's side started up. Slowly but surely, a plate of ribs dripping in barbeque sauce slid along the belt. That same pungent aroma that began the feast wafted gently from the plate, it was strong enough to reach those in the back tables.

"C'mon up here, Lenny, take a bite for yourself." Said Marvin, waving an arm to Lenny.

Lenny did as he was told, eagerly marching to the stage for his plate of ribs. Upon reaching the plate he took a hearty bite and let out a groan of satisfaction. Marvin gestured to the mic.

"It's good!" Lenny said, beaming to the crowd. It was in this moment that Marvin received the praise he had been waiting for. He basked in it, raising his head and closing his eyes, letting the noise wash over him like a warm bath on a cold day.

The only one not joining in this applause, was Eddie. He remained in his seat, stunned into silence. He had gotten his answer. That was the reason why the food had tasted off. Marvin hadn't cooked it, it was as simple as that. That machine of his, The Hazely Oven, had done all of the work. And this machine seemed like it could do a lot in very little time, but to Eddie at least, it didn't seem like it was very good at it.

Marvin had finally returned to reality and was egging on the crowd. "C'mon, c'mon! Ribs? That was easy, give me a hard one. Give me something you don't think this machine can handle!"

At this, Eddie's eyes lit up. He sprang up and grinned. The sudden jolt caused Jessica to jump, but upon seeing Eddie's eyes, her face went from that of surprise, to annoyance. She shot him a look that said "don't you dare!". Eddie returned his own that gleefully said "I'm gonna do it!".

Eddie cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted over the crowd. "Baked potato!"

All at once the crowd turned to see Eddie, grinning while trying not to look smug, and Jessica, who was trying not to look like they were a couple. There was a particular reason why Eddie suggested a baked potato. Potatoes can be a notorious pain to cook. A simple baked potato, for instance, is simple enough to prep. Add some oil to a potato, make a few holes with a fork, and bake until done. The baking part was the hard part. No matter how hot your oven is, the average cook time on a baked potato is somewhere in the ballpark of a full hour. If Marvin really wanted to prove his machine was that proficient, then a baked potato in under an hour would certainly be impressive.

Marvin's face twitched, but his smile didn't falter. He brought his lips close to the mic and declared, "I said, I wanted a *challenge*." And spun on his heels to the machine as the "ooohs!" from the crowd scored his strut. Again he repeated his routine. Push a few buttons on the screen, pour another batch of "gravel" into the machine, push the cook button. It did take longer for the hum to stop this time, but sure enough, in only a few minutes, a piping hot baked potato rolled its way out of the machine.

Eddie was out of his seat before Marvin could even gesture for him. He bounced up to the stage, ready to taste the potato he knew full well wasn't going to live up to his expectations. He dug his fork into the steaming ball of cooked starch, bit, chewed, and swallowed. Sure enough, it was the same dull flavor that everything else had. Marvin was standing beside him, still wearing his confident grin. He was urging Eddie towards the mic, eager to bask in hearing Eddie admit that his machine could do no wrong. Eddie produced his own smile, and approached the mic, fully intending to let the audience have it.

"It's..." he began. His eyes scanned the room. He only wished Marvin was in the audience so he could hit his face when he told him the truth. His eyes landed on Jessica, who was staring at him with embarrassed contempt. Eddie bit his lip. He ground his teeth and let out a puff of air from his nose. Mentally, he made a note that she owed him one.

"...delicious." He muttered. The stomping of his bitter footsteps were drowned out by the cacophonous applause. Marvin continued his showboating, daring another volunteer to put his machine to the task. Eddie made his way through the crowd and slumped back into his chair, folding his arms in a pout.

"Well that was embarrassing." Hissed Jessica.

"Tell me about it." Eddie muttered. "Who does he think he is?"

Jessica kicked Eddie under the table. It wasn't a playful tap. "I'm talking about you, you jackass. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Eddie turned to his wife, still pouting. "Me? What did I do?"

"Don't play dumb. You tried to ruin Marvin's big presentation by asking for something you thought the machine couldn't handle."

Eddie blew out some bitter air. "Pfft. If you ask me that machine is already ruined. Everything it makes tastes like mush to me. You're not a chef so maybe you don't get it but-"

"Excuse me?! I'm not a chef? What's that got to do with this?"

Eddie fumbled his thoughts, he wasn't prepared for that retort. "Well erm... nothing I'm just saying I'm a bit more well versed in food than you so-"

"Stop it, Eddie, just stop. I may not be some five star chef but I still know what I like."

She was raising her voice now, something she rarely did, much less in public. People were starting to stare now. Those that weren't staring were either just noticing the commotion or trying to take a greater interest in their dinnerware.

"Uhm. Dear, maybe we should deal with this when we get home." Eddie put a hand on Jessica's shoulder which she batted away.

“Nope. I don’t think so. You hate Marvin’s machine that much, you don’t have to deal with it anymore. I’ll see you at home.” She stuck her nose in the air and returned her attention to the stage.

“Jessica...” Once again he tried to touch her and was refused.

“I’ll see you. At home.” She said again, not looking at him.

Eddie ground his teeth and let out a bitter, “Fine!”

He stood up, throwing his chair back violently. He weaved through the crowd, practically shoving anyone who didn’t make room, pushed open the front door and stepped out into the cool night air. Without even looking both ways he crossed the street to Eddie-bles and slammed the door behind him.

Part 3

Immediately After Eddie Slammed the Door...

Immediately after Eddie slammed the door, he couldn't help but let his frustrations out. He picked up one of the nearby chairs, brought it over his head and slammed it to the ground as hard as he could. The light wooden chair immediately splintered into a few large pieces, and several dozen smaller ones, all the while Eddie was roaring with rage at no one in particular. He began kicking and punching random objects around the restaurant. Anything that could take the punishment would do. Hell, anything that wouldn't, as long as he could get the rage out. He screamed obscenities and kicked a wall, yelled expletives and snapped a chair leg off, and shouted profanity while punching a table. When he was done his dining area was a mess of broken furniture, wooden parts and crumbling drywall littering the floor.

Eddie was panting and gasping for air, finally catching his breath. He grabbed one of the only chairs that remained intact and dragged it to the kitchen, the only spot that it could reasonably stand it on unobscured ground. When he was there, he clicked on his radio and slumped down. For a moment he sat in the still dark room and let his breathing catch up, while the soft music eased his mind. He began to weep. What a mess he's made. Not just with the restaurant but with Jessica. For the length of their entire relationship they hadn't so much as raised their voices at each other and tonight that all felt like it was falling apart. Was this just a small spat? The beginning of a divorce? Eddie didn't know and he was afraid. He was afraid and embarrassed and ashamed.

He stared up at the ceiling, not wanting to think about what his tantrum had done to his restaurant. So much damage... and all for what? Because he threw a little tantrum over his wife being angry with him? Who was angry for perfectly valid reasons? He put his head in his hands. He knew that Jessica was right to be mad. He shouldn't have said that. It was a slip of the tongue, maybe, but it was still rude. It wasn't Jessica's fault she liked the food from Marvin's machine, she was just being honest. That's what he liked about her. That's why they complimented each other. She liked his cooking, and Eddie liked to cook. Eddie sometimes let his anger get the better of him, and Jessica was as calm as a monk.

Eddie finally stood up. His breathing had returned to normal, the rage had subsided. He flicked on the lights to the restaurant and winced when he saw the damage. There was a grand total of two tables and two chairs remaining, the rest were in pieces strewn about the room. Eddie let out a sigh. *She's gonna be even more pissed.* He thought. He started brainstorming ways to fix this. 'This' being a more broad way to refer to 'every single mistake he's made within the past several hours'. He paced around the damage, doing his best to think optimistically. Perhaps Harvey, the carpenter around the block, could help repair some of this... and perhaps the price won't be too bad if Eddie explained it was to get back on his wife's good side. Eddie brightened as another thought occurred to him: antiques. Jessica loved to go antique shopping, and what better excuse than an apology trip to the antique store! He chuckled at the thought. Yeah, that wasn't going to help much, but it was better than nothing. And better than nothing was what he needed right now.

He returned to his kitchen and stood. He closed his eyes and let the soft music drift about his brain. Instantly his eyes snapped open when he heard the jingle of the front door bell. He opened his mouth to say something. Something like "Jessica, I'm so sorry!" or "Honey, please forgive me!" or, more than likely "I know this looks really bad but don't worry we're going antiques!" His plan to speak was halted, however, when he heard a voice drift through the restaurant to the kitchen.

"Hello darling! Anybody home? Your wife said you- good god what happened here?"

For a moment Eddie stood still, staring off into some space beyond his oven. Why? Why him? Why now? Eddie heard Marvin calling out to him, gingerly trying to make his way through the

wreckage. He decided Marvin wasn't going to leave without seeing him and took a few steps out from the kitchen. "What do you want, Marvin?"

Marvin's eyes met his. "Ah, there you are." He scanned the floor. "What the hell happened here?"

"Tornado. Now get lost."

"Oh don't be like that." Marvin said, taking a seat in the second remaining chair. "I was talking to your wife and she said you left early."

Eddie dragged out his own chair and placed it a few feet away from Marvin. He plopped down into it. "Yeah well... I was full." He muttered.

"Well full or not, I wanted to ask you directly. What do you think of The Hazely Oven?"

He was splaying his hands, earnestly waiting for Eddie's reply. Before he opened his mouth to speak, Eddie pictured Jessica's face. Specifically the look he gave him when he was on Marvin's stage, trying his baked potato.

"I think it's... great." He eventually mumbled.

Marvin let out a light chuckle and shook his head. "Eddie, Eddie, Eddie... let's not mince words, you and I don't get along."

Eddie stared at him.

"But," he continued, "There is a reason I invited you to the reveal. It's the same reason I invited all the other local chefs. Even if we have different clientele, even if we have different profit margins, even if we outright hate each other, I still consider you all comrades in the culinary arts. Competitors or allies, we are chefs, and that means when I think I have something that will revolutionize the world of cooking, I want to hear the opinions of other chefs." He stared deeply into Eddie's eyes. "Their *honest* opinions."

Eddie continued to stare at him, and Marvin stared back, patiently waiting for a reply.

Eddie exhaled a long, deep, sigh. "Alright, Marvin. If the truth will get you to leave sooner then I'll tell you the truth." He folded his arms. "I hate your machine."

Marvin's eyebrows raised, but he remained silent.

"I think your machine is only capable of making really mediocre tasting food. That's probably the secret, isn't it? You sacrifice taste for price and convenience. That's not a sacrifice I thought a chef would ever make. I might not like you, Marvin, but I didn't think you would stoop this low."

Marvin sat back in his chair. His face had taken on a more intense expression. Not one of anger or spite, but one of determination and consideration. Eddie wasn't sure where this Marvin was coming from but he was actually listening to him, and taking his words into consideration.

Finally he spoke, "You're right. That was in fact the decision I had to make. Like it or not even a device as magnificent as The Hazely Oven had to make compromises, and the compromise was flavor." He sat forward. "But don't you see what that sacrifice allowed us to do? This device isn't just for making buffets it's for making *anything*. Sacrificing flavor meant that we could focus more on things like shape, form factor, presentation, food type, *anything*. The whole world of cooking is no longer divided by those that can and cannot. With this machine anyone could cook anything!"

Eddie shook his head. "That's a fallacy, Marvin. Anyone *already* can cook anything. Nothing was preventing you from making those ribs yourself by hand. Nothing was preventing you from making a buffet for a room full of people. You're a skilled chef, you could have done that and it probably would have tasted great! The barrier you speak of is called skill, and despite what some people think, skills aren't inherent, they're earned. They're *learned*. Anyone *could* have made delicious ribs, they just needed to actually practice at it. You want to make a world where anyone can cook anything? You should have encouraged others to start cooking."

Marvin shook his head. “Sure, I may have had the skill but what about the time? No one has time to learn a skill and then even more time to put it to practice. Surely you must agree that the time investment is not something everyone can manage?”

Eddie frowned. “To be perfectly honest, anyone not willing to put the time in for something probably doesn’t want it that bad. Cooking is like any other skill, it takes time to learn and it takes time to execute, but that’s life. You can’t learn every skill there is and master it all in your lifetime. You have to focus on something you actually care about and get better at it. You can’t learn to be good at something in a day, everyone starts as a novice, everyone makes mistakes and then you learn from them, that’s what being a human is.”

“Hmph”. Marvin had his arms folded now, Eddie’s words were getting to him. “You’re so lucky to have been blessed with all that money and time to dedicate to your craft. Surely The Hazely Oven will be much more beneficial to those less fortunate.”

Eddie sprang from his chair, throwing it back so violently it clattered to the floor. From across the room he jabbed a finger at Marvin. “Don’t you dare try and play virtues with me Marvin! You know damn well I dropped out of culinary school. I learned by doing, taught myself, worked odd jobs every day until I could afford this little hole in the wall I could call my own. Sure it was hard but I was driven. I wanted to cook more than anything. I stand before you as the owner of a restaurant not because it was given to me, not because I pushed a button and became a chef, but because I cared enough about food to make something of myself!

And while I’m on the subject, Marvin, do you even know what a food bank is? I donate my leftovers every chance I get, never seen you there, funny enough! And don’t even try to pretend like you built this machine to fix world hunger or something. How much is that machine going to go for at retail, huh? A couple hundred? A thousand? Maybe it will only be a hundred and those damn bags of manure you call ingredients will be where the real money is.”

Marvin chuckled. It was a bitter, cold chortle. He stood up and dusted off his suit. “Oh it’s not going to retail... yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, I’m focusing on the business market at the moment. You see, I recently found some investors to help me scale up production of The Hazely Oven. Our target market is local restaurants, at least for now, until we can convince some of the larger chains of its potential.”

Eddie’s eyes narrowed. “That will never work. You’re delivering a device that’s guaranteed to make slop. The big chain restaurants might jump at the chance to produce slop and fire half of their staff but the locals will never go for it.”

Marvin’s smile grew wide. Eddie knew he wasn’t going to like what came next.

“Oh, I’m afraid they already have.” He took a step forward, making Eddie step back. “You see, I’ve already convinced more than a few of the locals to give it a try. That Lenny fellow that owns the tacky little eatery up the street, he’s buying one. So are some of the other little dives on this street. And, of course, as creator of the device it will be a mainstay at my restaurant as well.” He was striding closer and closer to Eddie, who was receding more and more into the safety of the kitchen. “You may have your pride, Eddie, but pride won’t matter much when every eatery on this block is capable of outdoing you in terms of price and quantity.”

Eddie found himself backed against his fridge, Marvin suddenly in his very personal space. They were practically chest to chest. Marvin continued his tirade while jabbing a finger in his stomach.

“Sooner or later, every restaurant in this city will want a Hazely Oven. And you’ll be nothing but a single prideful little insect drowning in an ocean of my own creation.” His eyes darted around Eddie’s kitchen. They were wiry, full of more venom than Eddie thought was even possible. “And

eventually every little chef like you who thought they could win with nothing but good intentions and a shit shack of a kitchen will learn. Their. Place.”

Eddie shivered with his back against the fridge. Marvin’s tirade finally ended but he was still far too close for comfort. He didn’t know what to do. He did the only thing that made sense to him. He closed his eyes and pretended he was cooking. That sensation, the feeling of calm disassociation, yanked him out of his body like his brain was picked up by a claw machine. Eddie found himself staring at his own body, his consciousness completely disconnected from the physical realm. His conscious mind, separated from all other sensation, suddenly found itself docile, as if it had been tranquilized with a comically large syringe.

He dazedly watched his corporeal form move without him. His body moved with the pleasant grace that he always had when he cooked. His physical face, staring off into the distance, showed no remorse or spite. There was not a single twitch of concern in his face as his physical arm reached behind him and pulled the knife from its stand. In an instant Eddie’s arm was no longer behind him, but in front of him, the handle suddenly hovering in midair, the blade plunged deep into Marvin’s chest.

Marvin hadn’t even noticed the movement, his bitter rage keeping him focused on Eddie’s dazed expression. But when the blade punctured his heart he suddenly understood everything in one moment, punctuated by sudden, searing pain. His strength faded fast, he suddenly lost the ability to stand. His knees buckled but he kept a firm grip on Eddie’s arms. As he sank to the floor, still clutching Eddie, he uttered, “You... bastard.” And finally collapsed. He lay on the floor as the blood pooled around him, forming an ugly rose red puddle. He continued breathed in long, slow, raspy intervals that slowly receded, until he was silent and still.

Eddie’s docile consciousness watched as his physical form stood still over Marvin’s corpse. Still separated from his body, Eddie couldn’t feel any of the anguish that one might have had in this moment. The guilt of slaughter, the remorse of ending another life, it would have been enough to drive even the most stoic man to tears. But none of that sensation came to him, he was too far gone. Too far removed from physical reality to feel anything remotely physical. All he had was his thoughts, still sluggish and tame as if he was thinking in slow motion. *Ohhh... maaan... this... isn’t... good.*

Without any physical sensation, Eddie was unsure of what he could do. Could he return to his body? If so, how? Walk there? With what legs? Swim there? With what arms? All he seemed to have available to him was sight, sound, and his thoughts. With little alternative he struggled to mentally will himself back into his body. He tried with all of his might, sluggishly thinking about things like holding a pan, smelling a nice cooked meal, seeing Jessica’s bright face again, any feeling at all that he thought would get him closer to actually being there, in the flesh, to no avail.

His physical body remained where it was, staring at Marvin’s corpse with indifference. Without warning it started moving again. It slowly brought its hands to its face and experimentally touched his cheeks. After confirming the cheeks were there, Eddie’s physical body grinned. What force was driving these actions, Eddie’s conscious mind did not know. Its hands were near its face again, and with that sickly grin, it gently slapped itself on the cheeks.

No...

Eddie’s physical body peered around the kitchen. The music on his radio pulsed gently. His physical mind started relaying the graceful thought patterns that he always had when he was behind a stove.

4 large eggs, ½ a cup of butter. Better preheat the oven, not too high, baking is very touchy.

No..!

Do I have enough vanilla? What sweetness pairs with the bitterness of entrails?

NO!

Part 4

30 Minutes at 350 °F Later...

The mood at Ché Top was one of pleasant excitement. Marvin's machine continually impressed every volunteer as he dared the audience to challenge his machine. Eventually though, enough was enough, and Marvin had taken from the stage to the crowd to formally discuss the machine in further detail with the guests. His swagger and showmanship kept the party alive even from the audience. He was gone now, not seen by any of the guests for more than a few minutes. As it often does when the host is missing from his own show, the party was dying down. A few guests had already left, but the majority were still around, making small talk and enjoying the evening. Some guests were on edge, mostly the ones with more money than sense. They were the ones who hadn't talked to Marvin right away, and thus couldn't be first in line as investors. These were the ones nervously drumming their fingers on the table and scanning the crowd, desperately searching for their target. At this rate, some of them thought, they might be able to only get in at a rate of 8% instead of 9%.

These were the people that clapped the loudest when the lights dimmed once again. The rest of the crowd took notice, joining in and turning their attention to the stage. The staff lining the trays exchanged glances and shrugs. Marvin wasn't supposed to make another announcement, at least as far as they were aware. The confusion furthered when the person who took the stage wasn't Marvin at all. It was someone they did not recognize. He was wearing the pure white outfit worn by the other staff members, save for the addition of the large white chef hat, and had pushed his way through the kitchen doors with a rolling tray of his own. Adorning this tray was a large silver dome. The stranger awkwardly clambered to the stage, straining under the weight of the tray and whatever was under the dome.

Finally he managed to steady himself. He placed the tray very carefully to his side, just before the lip of the stage. The stranger cautiously approached the mic. Concern was rising among the staff as they took in this new arrival more carefully. This person's eyes were sunken and hollow, they seemed to be sweating profusely, their moist skin gleaming under the hot lights. But the concern mostly stemmed from his smile. It was awkward, yet confident and proud, it was clear that this was a devilish, knowing smile. This was the smile of a bratty kid knowing they're about to get into trouble, but didn't care. The smile of a prankster about to see his big joke come to fruition.

"He-hello all." Said the man's tiny voice. His voice was hushed and calm, almost ghostly in its breathy presentation. He was fidgeting uncontrollably. Discomfort perhaps? Or excited nerves charging his body? "I... I'm going to show you something... something that *machine* could never do."

The man turned to his large dish and gripped the handle tightly. Before he lifted it up he felt the world around him disappear. For a moment there was nothing but him and his cart. He saw nothing else, the rest of the world fading to gray mist before his eyes. He heard nothing, as the murmurs of the crowd blended altogether into a single toneless note. This included the sudden shouting of a woman in the back row. Who was shouting for someone named "Eddie" to "get off the stage." It disappeared into the void along with every other sound. For a moment he felt nothing. But when he raised the lid, he suddenly felt everything.

He held the lid aloft, throwing up both of his hands in a grand gesture of display. He let the heavy metal thing clang to the floor. He smiled brightly, letting the sudden wave of sensory information crash over him, consuming him. First was the sights. The faces in the crowd contorted into twisted visions of shock and horror. Those that weren't horrified were stone faced, frozen in utter disbelief at what they were seeing. He could see the contorting faces running away. Some sprinted for the door immediately, some were only just now figuring out how their legs worked, backing away slowly. Some were driven ill by the very sight and littered their surroundings with

vomit. A woman near the back was driven to her knees, hand clasped over mouth, tearing at the sight of it all.

Then came the sounds. Like the thunderous rumble of an incoming tsunami, a wall of noise crashed into him. It was as if the chaos of a hundred scared and horrified voices were all released in unison. The screams and cries and wails formed a chorus of terror, reverberating in his eardrums, making him shiver with delight.

The delight made him cackle. The wicked laugh of a shyster seeing his plan in action. Over the terrified voices he continued to cackle and shout, "My masterpiece! It is my masterpiece!"

The masterpiece in question was the final result of his labors: a massive cake, recognizable as such by its size and shape, but distorted and ugly by its use of ingredients. The outer layer, usually white or brown depending on its flavor, was the tan color of flesh, complete with strands of body hair and indentations of a life long lived. The cake was decorated not with any candles or edible trinkets, but the various parts of a human face that didn't belong. A mouth hung open on its side, somehow still drooling in a catatonic state. From the audience, one could see straight through this mouth, and could even tell its throat and esophagus were still attached. Placed at odd points on either side of the cake were Marvin's hazel eyes, wide open but glassy and dull, like a freshly prepared fish. His nose and ears adorned the cake in seemingly random directions and angles, the placement was either deliberately uncanny or haphazardly thrown together. If they were part of a painting, it would be Picasso's finest work.

When he was done shouting he finally directed his attention to the device behind him. His adrenaline surged at the very sight of the machine, and before he could even make a conscious effort to act, he was already upon it, banging his fists upon the device. He brought his balled hands down with such force, his hands clanged noisily against the metal. Repeatedly he thumped the machine, causing dents here and marks there. His hands were getting bloody red while the machine stood still. Eventually though, flesh triumphed, and the machine started to wane. It started to crunch and creek against his rage. The battered metal finally couldn't stand it anymore and the machine crumpled to the floor, pieces of metal flaking off and bending at odd angles. Still, he did not cease. He continued pounding the rubble until it was nothing more than a mess of wires and circuits. His work finally done, he examined his hands. They were so stained with blood he looked like he was wearing red gloves, yet he flexed them and felt no pain.

The cacophony raged on. As it continued, the man stood and found himself basking in the chaos. He found his arms moving on their own. Swinging in a coordinated rhythm, directing the noise like a conductor. The noise refused to follow his commands, but he did not care, he continued to playfully weave his hands about the air.

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Two Years Later...

Eddie shook himself and found himself staring at a gray black wall. The sights and the sounds of that cacophonous night faded rapidly, reality seeping back into his mind. He blinked and looked around the room. He was back in his cell, amateur chalk drawings and all. He turned his attention to the bars. Through them was Father Sullivan, eyes wide with shock. He was pale and silent. Eddie realized that in his daze, while he was telling his story to Father Sullivan, he had been pantomiming his actions on that fateful day.

Eddie let out a combination chuckle and awkward cough, "Ahem... excuse me." And returned to his cot.

“You...” Father Sullivan was trying to find his voice. “You... killed him. And turned him into a cake?”

Eddie returned a smile and a nod. “I did. I sure did.”

Father Sullivan moistened his lips. So suddenly they were as dry as sandpaper. “What... happened next?”

Eddie shrugged. “Not much to tell, after that. Shortly after my little show I was arrested, tried and sent to this prison to await my demise. I don’t know what happened to my restaurant or Ché Top. I’m assuming they’re in the hands of some realtor now. My wife left me. She never told me that but I haven’t seen her since that day, so I’m pretty sure it’s over.”

“Not even a visit?”

“Not even a visit.”

Father Sullivan regained a bit of his composure. He produced a handkerchief from his robes and dotted his sweating brow. “That was... quite a tale.”

Eddie laughed. “It sure was, wasn’t it? I don’t think I’ve told that story much since I’ve been here. Maybe to a few psychiatrists but many of them don’t like the ending.” He grinned at Father Sullivan. “Everyone’s a critic, eh?”

“I suppose so...”

For a moment the two men remained in silence. It was Father Sullivan who broke it. “Do you... regret anything?”

Eddie shook his head. “Not at all, why would I?”

Father Sullivan glanced from Eddie, to the walls of his cell, and back again.

Eddie had caught his gaze. “What? Because I ended up here? Ha! I laugh at the thought. My actions were done in the name of the fine art of cooking. For that, I have no regret.”

Father Sullivan leaned forward, “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, simply, that if I didn’t do what I did, the culinary world would be worse off. The very artistry of cooking would have been dulled away by the mediocrity of that infernal machine. And make no mistake, when I say artistry I mean it. Food is an artform just as much as it is a means of staying alive. What I did to Marvin might have been considered murder in the eyes of the law. But in my opinion, what I actually did was create art.”

He leaned forward and whispered to Father Sullivan, “And you know something... I think some folks can’t help but agree with me.”

Father Sullivan recoiled. “You’re completely mad. Who in their right mind would agree with that?”

“Oh I don’t have their names. It’s just rumors, truthfully. But it sure does raise the eyebrow. For you see, I never got a chance to taste my masterpiece. It’s ironic. The artist creates his masterpiece but can’t indulge in the results. So I never did find out how Marvin the Marble Cake tasted. However... I heard some rumors about what happened after I was arrested. Supposedly some of the folks working the case placed my masterpiece in storage as evidence. It was never shown at my trial, only pictures. But those pictures didn’t look quite right to me. They were at odd angles. Very strange, thought I. If you wanted to show a room full of people the true horror of a mad genius, why not simply present the evidence as is?”

Father Sullivan’s knit eyebrow unfurled as the realization came to him. Eddie watched with delight as he saw the old man’s face light up with understanding.

“No.” he said.

“Oh yes,” gloated Eddie. “The only reason to take a picture of a cake at a weird angle... is to hide the part with a piece taken off.”

Father Sullivan stood and backed away from Eddie. Without even realizing it Eddie had risen from his seat on the cot and pressed himself against the bars of his cell, grinning wildly with manic energy.

“Do you see now, Father Sullivan? Do you understand now, why I know for a fact that I am at heart, an artist? I created a work of culinary art so beyond understanding that it shocks and it horrifies and it disgusts the audience to their very cores... yet they still ate it up. They wanted more. They saw my creation and couldn’t help but dig in. And if it weren’t for these bars... I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

Eddie laughed. The howling of his laughter echoed through the halls and penetrated Father Sullivan to his very core. Sullivan decided he had had enough. He backed away from Eddie’s cell. Slowly at first, as if the cackling monster in the cell would burst out and tear him to shreds at the first sign of sudden movements. When he felt he was safe enough, he turned and walked briskly down the dark hall to the safety of the guard station, Eddie’s laughter forming a vortex of hysteric wind that pushed him along as he went.

In his haste, Father Sullivan slammed chest first into the guard waiting by the door. They both bounced back in shock, Father Sullivan panting rapidly, trying to steady himself.

“Are you ok, Father?” said the guard. “What happened? What did he do to you?”

Father Sullivan gasped for air and held up a hand. After a few more shaky wheezes, he spoke. “I’m- I’m fine.” He shook his head. “I- I don’t like to think this way but... I think that man deserves to be in here.”

The guard nodded. “He sure does. Sorry for the trouble, Father.”

Father Sullivan straightened his robe and began walking towards the exit. “No, no. It’s alright. Good day to you.” He walked out of the guard station and down the long staircase leading to the front entrance. As he went he desperately tried to ignore the growling of his stomach.