

Flash in the Pan



Tim VanSant

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by

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## Hunger Strike

It started when the decapitated head of lettuce in my salad screamed. The carrots were skinned alive. The artichoke hearts beat softly while the flesh of the tomatoes bled onto the carnage. The celery began stalking me. Then I was served a severed ear of corn. Soon, the eyes of the potatoes were watching me. I may never eat again....



## Giving Thanks

Paul winced involuntarily from the pain as he reached across the small folding table. He handed a paper plate to each of his guests. Then he passed the food around. It was hardly traditional holiday fare -- ravioli and yellow corn, both from cans -- but everything in his life was different now

One year ago he had awakened on that cool, crisp Thanksgiving Day blissfully entwined with his beloved wife Linda. The birth of their daughter Vera the previous week had precluded any traveling, but they looked forward to starting new traditions with their new little family. Vera's demands were nearly constant but they had been preparing a small feast in the moments they could manage over the last couple of days.

Paul kissed Linda lightly, hoping she would get a few more minutes of sleep. Then he slid out of bed and leaned over Vera's crib. He was briefly overcome. All his senses registered -- angelic face, rhythmic breathing, baby powder, the incredible softness of her cheek as he brought his lips close. He had thought he knew how powerful love could be when he married Linda, but his love for this child was all-consuming.

He stopped in the kitchen to put coffee on the stove and then stepped outside. He picked the newspaper up from the porch and looked eastward. The sun was just a glow on the horizon and he stood there shivering to watch it rise. It was silly, he thought, but he had made it a point to watch the sun rise every day since Vera was born. Silently he said a prayer of thanks as he breathed in the autumn morning. Mostly it was the smell of the leaves scattered across the ground. And then... smoke!

He rushed inside to find the house full of dense, black smoke and the kitchen ablaze. He shouted Linda's name and crawled toward the bedroom. He never made it that far. He awoke days later in the burn ward and began a long, slow recovery.

When he finally got to visit the graves of his wife and daughter, he fell into an inconsolable sobbing heap. The painful rehab dragged on for months. His business closed and his insurance

was about to run out. He was already a month behind on the rent for the small room in which Chuck and Dave, two other long-term patients at the rehab center, now joined him for the holiday meal.

Any summary of his life at this point would conclude that in a year he had lost everything -- his family, home, business, and health. The only thing he had not lost was his faith. So he clasped his withered hands, bowed his head, and said, "Let us give thanks."



### Just Thirst

I don't usually play with my food, but I had to admit I was rather enjoying the look of terror on his face. Soon he would be begging for his life, but I would not spare it.

I had come to terms with my existence (I never call what I have a "life" any more). The bitterness. The loneliness. The insatiable thirst for blood. I learned to survive on the blood of animals. Livestock makes for easy meals and as long as I don't kill them I can feed indefinitely. It had been decades since I had harmed a human. Until tonight.

I can smell people long before I'm close enough to see them. Sometimes I wander close to their houses just to take in the bouquet. The laborers are salty, the old are bitter, and the young are sweet. So I was shocked tonight when I saw the little girl playing in the barn — not just because a child that young shouldn't be out so late. She smelled... ruined... defiled.

Even back when I fed on humans regularly, I never attacked one so young. Who could harm a child like this? She couldn't be more than ten. And then I smelled him. His stink nearly made me retch. He entered the barn and from the way the little girl went silent I knew he was responsible. She stared at his feet when he reached down to run his fingers through her hair. She closed her eyes when he pulled her into an embrace.

I could watch no more. I flew from the shadows and grabbed the reprobate by the throat. "Daddy!" the girl cried. In soothing tones I bade the child return to the house and go to sleep. She won't remember me at all. I wish it were in my power to keep her from remembering her father as well.

"So," I dug my fingers deep into his skin, "you abuse your own daughter?" I stopped his denial with an even tighter grip. He clutched at my hand trying to pry my fingers loose. His eyes bulged as he choked for air. I relaxed my grip to let him breathe just a little. He sought to claw at my face and I threw him to the ground. "Oh, this is going to be fun," I whispered.

For two hours I thrashed him mightily, taking him just to the brink of death and making him linger there. Eventually, he confessed his sins easily and repeatedly. He begged forgiveness, as if

that were mine to give. And, as I anticipated, he begged for his life. But there was no way I was going to allow the possibility that he would return to his abusive ways.

Finally, I tired of toying with him. I opened a vein in his wrist and took a small drink from the fountain it produced, but his blood was rancid. I ripped his throat open and left him twitching on the floor. Thirsty then and with that horrible taste in my mouth, I killed one of his cows and drank my fill. I'd have killed all his cattle, but that would have just harmed his family.

I left quickly and quietly. When his body and that of his cow were discovered the alarm would be raised. His neighbors would be looking for the creature that did the killing. It wouldn't do for a stranger like me to be in the area. I knew they'd probably find a wolf or bear to blame for the carnage. And if not, well they all had a scary story to tell around the fire on cold nights. All of them except the little girl. She would never tell her story. But at least she had one less real monster in her life.



### Recipe for Disaster

1 man (slightly beaten)

2 women (pitted)

1/2 truth

Mix man and one woman. Initially, man will be stiff and woman will be soft. Grind together with 1/2 truth until man is limp and woman hardens. Gradually introduce second woman. Fold together, then heat in pressure cooker until truth comes out. Transfer to chafing dish.

Note: Many people find second woman to be quite tart.

Alternate serving suggestion: Add alcohol and two lawyers and serve cold.



## The Hunger

Jackson closed his eyes and prayed he had the strength to carry out his plan. He lay in a hospital bed surrounded by devices that monitored and maintained his vital signs. He had stopped thinking of this as living a long time ago.

Olivia entered the decontamination suite and began the procedure that had become routine: multiple showers, a vacuum room, an ultraviolet room, autonomous detection system, multiple airlocks. All that just to see Jackson through a plate glass window and talk to him on an intercom. Next week a closed-circuit video system was due to be installed and she wouldn't even be allowed in the building any more. Since this was to be her last visit in person, she had permission to don a haz-mat suit with an oxygen tank and enter the room. "The things we do for love" echoed through her head as she wrestled her way into the cumbersome suit.

Jackson saw Olivia enter the anteroom. Usually he would sit up right away. Today he had to time his movements carefully. Lying down would bring her closer. He would sit up at the last second to reach her head and get the leverage he needed.

Olivia entered Jackson's room. She leaned over his bed and stroked his cheek. He brought his hand to hers and tried to interlace their fingers, but her bulky glove made the gesture impossible.

"I can't feel you," he said.

"It's okay, honey."

"You know, I'll never make it out of here."

"Don't say that. I'll never give up until I can take you back home."

"I want..."

"What, honey? What do you want?"

Jackson raised the bed to a sitting position bringing his face closer to hers. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I want..." he said again softly knowing she would lean closer.

With superhuman strength he grabbed her and ripped the hood off her haz-mat suit. Then he held her face between his hands and rose up to meet her mouth in a long, deep kiss.

"I want a kiss before dying," he said as he released her.

"Oh my god, Jackson." Olivia futilely tried to replace her hood. "You know that any human contact will kill you. Why did you do that?"

Jackson settled back on the bed as the monitors around him blinked and beeped into a frenzy. "Because, my love, I would rather die than to live without being able to touch you."



## Is That What the Kids are Calling It?

Mary held her breath, put a hand on each leg and spread them gently. Tentatively, she explored between them with her fingers. Joey began with short, sharp thrusts but settled in to longer, slower, smoother strokes. He carefully gave equal attention to both breasts. Mary breathed again. Together they were determined to serve the perfect turkey and dressing dinner to their family for the holiday.



## Pullet Surprise

Five years ago today I woke up craving chicken and dumplings. An hour later I got a call from my Uncle John. Momma had passed away that morning. I didn't go home for the funeral. There was nothing in that town for me when I left, even less now. But I did go in search of chicken and dumplings.

I quickly learned that there are damn few restaurants that have chicken and dumplings on the menu. And without exception, the ones that do are absolutely awful. So I decided to try cooking it myself. Yeah. Me. I never cook. Unless you count reheating leftover pizza in the microwave as cooking.

Momma would get up early on Sundays and put a chicken in a pot to boil. She sliced in onion, celery, and carrots. Chopped tomato. Salt and pepper and what else I don't know. I never thought to ask. Then she'd cover it and leave it to simmer all morning while we were at services. There was never any question that we would all go to church together every week. When I was old enough and bold enough to ask, "Why do I have to go?" the closest I ever got to an answer was, "It's what we do." It was simply expected and accepted. And so it was that I left home and the church at the same time.

We all had chores to do after church. Momma would put Tennessee Ernie Ford on the Victrola and sing along as she finished preparing the meal. She'd take the chicken out of the pot and remove all the bones. She'd shred the meat and put it back in the pot. Then she would drop biscuit dough on top, cover it, and let it simmer another 15 minutes or so. Or whenever we finished our chores.

All this makes it sound like cooking chicken and dumplings is an easy thing. I suppose it is, but I have tried 167 times at last count to make it turn out just like Momma's. I tried every day and night of the week before settling on Sunday mornings. I tried singing along with brother Ford to no avail. I even tried going to a church while it simmered. Twice. Apparently, comfort

food is another thing that god and I don't see eye-to-eye on 'cause when I got home I was too pissed off to eat. You'd think he'd at least let me enjoy a meal after I went and met him half way.

Last week I invited Katie from work to come over and bring her two daughters. Katie lost her husband to a car wreck a while back. We had always got along good even before she was widowed and she's the easiest woman to talk to I ever met. She's just a friend, of course — getting “involved” with a coworker is a bad idea. But those little girls were cute as puppies and they let me talk about what it was like to grow up out in the sticks. I haven't laughed so much in I don't know when.

All three of them gave me hugs when they left. And while I cleaned up I reckoned that it was the best batch of chicken and dumplings I have ever made. Still not quite as good as Momma's but I think I finally figured out the ingredient I was missing all these years.



### Something Phishy

Kathleen answered the phone on the second ring. “Fischer Detective Agency.”

“Hi, Kat Fish. I need your help.”

She allowed herself just a moment to cringe at the nickname she had always hated and then went right back to business. “Hi, Dad. What's up?”

“My Twitter account has been hacked.”

“Holy mackerel! You're on Twitter? Since when?”

“Ever since I got my iPhone. What difference does that make? Can you help me or not?”

Whatever floats your boat, she thought. “What exactly do you want me to do, Dad?”

“I want you to catch the bottom feeders that did this and school 'em.”

“That's a little beyond the beam of my usual work,” Kathleen replied sternly.

“Are you just angling for a compliment or is this really too big for you to tackle?”

Swallowing her pride, not to mention the hook, line, and sinker, Kathleen waded into the Twitter stream. She was surprised to find out what a large mouth her father had about his personal life. And there was definitely something fishy about some of the DMs from his account.

The messages included a link with a line intended to lure unsuspecting users into clicking through. It was a classic bait and switch scheme. The site would look like a Twitter page and ask

them to log in. Giving their user name and password was a gaff that allowed the sharks to access their accounts. Then they were flooded with spam and porn.

Kathleen examined the IP addresses of all the phishing sites she could find, but soon realized that was casting too wide a net. Every clue was a red herring. It was a problem of scale. She was getting crabby and decided to lay a trap. She had to catch one of them in the act and reel them in. So she set up her own account, @Gata\_Ichthys, and [god help her] started tweeting.

*Hi. I'm a Pisces. What's your sign?*

She watched the traffic through the site carefully. She was a little fish in a big pond though and had only a few nibbles — all of them small fry. After she uploaded a profile pic of a blowfish bikini the barracuda really started running. Those boobs. It didn't take much longer before she got a bite. This was a big one, no doubt. And she was determined it would not be one to get away.

He DMed her, *Hey QT, want to see my bonefish?*

*Click here if you want to be my chum*, she replied and included a link. Then she quickly signed off. “No remora Mr. nice guy,” she bubbled.

Watching the network traffic like a hawkfish, she was elated to see him take the bait. The link introduced a worm into his system. Soon the ‘net would close around him and his computer would tank.

She dialed her father's number.

“This is Gil,” he answered.

What, he has an iPhone and doesn't understand caller ID? “Hi, Dad.”

“Kat Fish! How's the case going?”

“Swimmingly. At least one of those slimy eels won't be shocking anyone else.”

“That's great, honey. I'm really proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I'll see you this weekend.”

Kathleen hung up the phone and closed the folder on her desk. In large letters she marked it,

Fin



## Spice of Life

Madeline shivered in the booth of the little diner. “Maybe eating somewhere new will break me out of this rut,” she mused to herself. “And this place looks so warm and cozy.” Besides, it was close to her office and had not been open long. It’s always good to support a local establishment.

The proprietor, Alphonse, a slight middle-aged man with a beatific smile, greeted her warmly. “How about some nice, hot soup to warm you up?”

“That sounds great,” Madeline smiled back.

“I’ll bring you something special,” Alphonse gave a little bow. “This is the only place in the world you can get it. My own creation.” He returned to the kitchen.

Madeline closed her eyes and massaged her temples. This case. This case had her mind in turmoil. No one she had talked to in any law enforcement agency anywhere had heard anything like it. And now it had happened for the third time. Three times in as many months.

Three times make it a serial, but serial what? Some madman is abducting young mothers with their infant children. He tortures the women — there’s no other word for it — by making them watch their child being murdered. He makes them watch. The bastard. But then, moments later returns the child unharmed.

No one knows how he’s making such a convincing display of the horror. Drugs? Hypnosis? CGI? The women all swear they saw their child die. It seems completely real. And then, perhaps most inexplicable of all, when the children are returned he collects the mother’s tears. And then he lets them go.

“Here’s your soup, ma’am,” Alphonse placed the steaming bowl on the table. “Careful, it’s piping hot.”

“Thank you,” Madeline stirred the hot liquid. “This is your own creation you said?”

“Oh yes. And very special. One of the ingredients is very hard to come by. This is only the third time I’ve been able to make it.”

Third time. She turned her gaze from Alphonse’s inscrutable smile to the wall behind him where the diner specials were neatly printed in colored chalk. In cheery, yellow script she read:

Soup du jour: *larmes de joie*



## The Sweet Shoppe

My eyes glazed over (if you'll pardon the pun) as I gazed through the window at the myriad confections in the Sweet Shoppe. I don't understand how it was that I never noticed the place before. I'd been walking these streets for weeks, looking for work. No one had "Help Wanted" signs up, but I would go in and ask anyway. And so it was that even though I know nothing about making candies, I entered the Sweet Shoppe with hope in my heart. After all, they must need help with cleaning up I reasoned, and I can do that.

The proprietor was an older gentleman with a healthy mane of hair and bushy mustache, all shockingly white. I introduced myself and he greeted me kindly, but he ignored my inquiry as to the possibility of employment. Instead he began wandering around the shoppe pointing to his creations and muttering the most extraordinary things.

He straightened a box of taffy. "Bobby pulled his sister's hair," he said softly. "Jimmy pulled a puppy's tail. And Sally loosed the ribbon from Betsy's braids on the way to school." At least I think that's what he said.

He tapped the side of a jar of gumballs. (I would almost swear they turned to follow his finger tip.) "Jacob took a dollar from his mother's purse. Mary read Lucy's diary to Michelle and Cindy and Ben." Could I possibly have heard that right?

He turned his attention to whips of licorice hanging freely over the counter. "My dog ate my homework. You look great! Of course I'll respect you in the morning." Now he just seemed to be babbling.

He rearranged a tray full of bon-bons. "Stolen boyfriends. Cheating spouses. Broken marriages." He chuckled. Then with a soft cloth he began wiping the glass front of a tall case full of cakes. "Old man Martin." He nearly sang with delight. "Every single one of them."

I didn't understand. Finally, he turned to me. "The sweetness has to come from somewhere," he sighed. "But I'm getting too old. Would you care to apprentice? I can teach you. Or shall I just...."

Horrified, I retreated quickly. Once on the street though I hesitated and looked back. I thought I saw the old man with a flask of syrup in hand. But then the storefront was vacant and my morning a fuzzy memory. I continued walking. Hopeless.



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About the author: Tim VanSant is a technician and rogue poet in academician's clothing. He thinks too much and sometimes he writes what he thinks. He has a face made for radio, a voice made for print, and a blog suitable for lining your NeoPet's cage.

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