

SOMMELIER  
OF  
DEFORMITY  
A NOVEL

NICK YETTO

TURNER

# PROLOGUE

I'm not ashamed.

Should I envy him? I've never envied anybody or anything. Deny his beauty? I've got my delusions, same as anyone, but I always find myself out and feel doubly pathetic. I'm ugly. Terrance Johnson is handsome. If there is a God, he is an artist God, and he saves his careful chisel work for the rare few.

I'm like a Special Olympian. My event: lovemaking. My handicap: ugliness. My eyes are puckered inwards and darkly rimmed, so that gazing into them is like staring at a pair of twin anuses. My nose is a mashed toadstool, and my chin is a small, frightened thing, hiding in the cavern of my overbite. I'm short. Very short. Four feet nine. My spine is bent by scoliosis. Straightened out, I'd be five even, but the serpentine aspect of my skeletal structure knocks a good three inches off my height. In x-ray, you might mistake me for the missing link; in the flesh, for a human prototype that was deemed unworthy of production. My face belongs to

the bullied schoolboy, to the overqualified middle manager who's banged his head against the glass ceiling of good looks. I'm the speechwriter who stuffs fertile words into handsome mouths. I'm the board operator, hidden from the audience, casting spotlights on the costumed beauties. I look like something you'd peel off the bottom of your shoe.

Yet I am not without my gifts. Or maybe *gift*. Is a "silver tongue" a gift or a skill? If it is a gift, is it a mental or physical one? I'm a strict materialist, a lapsed dualist, so I try to avoid mind-body distinctions whenever possible. Anyway, I've got a silver tongue. My other gift, and possibly, my only one, presents no metaphysical questions.

I've got a magnificent penis.

Large? Of course. Sans size, sans girth, a penis can never be "magnificent." But there's more. My penis can do a thing that other penises cannot do. Read on. All will be revealed.

"Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me, otherwise, I will never pay a farthing for it."

Not my favorite historical dictator, Cromwell, but I dig the "warts and all" thing. I shall endeavor to adhere to that standard throughout.

I once made love to an ectrodactyl. A double ectrodactyl, in fact, as the deformity was present in both hands. The condition is also known as "lobster-claw hand," but that's antiquated, a slur, and if you ever find yourself chatting with an ectrodactyl—let alone *cossetting* one—I suggest steering clear of all crustacean references. Yet I cannot say she had "hands." So, "pincers." That's what she had. Calling them "hands" would do my readers no service.

Her pincers weren't sexy to me by default. I had to make them sexy. I had to choke down my revulsion and get past

it so that I could get on to her beauty. Lo, there was beauty to be had! Her lips! They were full and pink, soft, forever moist, and nothing in her kiss was greedy or desperate. Her buttocks! Hers were the buttocks of an urban postal worker! *Buttocks nonpareil*. Buttocks that haunt your dreams, and all the more because they were yours for a time and are no longer. For a single shining night, every part of her was mine. She gifted herself to me, and I accepted, and the more she gave, the more I took, until the whole concept of giving and taking—what was hers, what was mine—blurred into irrelevance. It was ecstasy. All I had to do was get beyond her pincers. Rather than deny them—and let me tell you, there is no denying it when a lover has pincers for hands—I made them the star of the show. I begged her to masturbate me with those pincers. I made it sexy. Bodies were oiled. Breasts were tickled with feathers. We shifted posture. Her lordosis behavior demanded a response. “This game is *over!*” I cried, and then, after a thunderous smack on that magnificent rump, I impaled her. I thought she would implode. I thought she would implode into nothingness and take me with her, and at that moment I was glad to join her in the abyss.

Would you like to know how appreciative she was? She sent me an FTD TeddyGram bouquet. The very totem of appreciation! I still have that bear. It sits in a glass display case, alongside other treasures. Subsequent lovers have asked “Is that your childhood Teddy?” I say yes. *Yes, it is*. I’m not one for lies—even the little white ones—but there are times when the wheels of progress require the ol’ lubricating squirt. We call such circumstances “diplomacy.”

I’m a connoisseur of the unwanted, a sommelier of deformity, a coveter of the unloved. If I am a pervert, let it be said that my perversion is a golden Shangri-la, built

upon the manly bedrock of my libido. I can be as soft as dandelion fluff or as hard as a boat anchor. I'll pull hair. I'll deliver an open-handed shot to the chops if that's what she requires. At the other extreme: a lover once requested that I wear her brassiere and panties, as well as a set of costume fairy wings, and flitter about the bedchamber like a pixie princess. After some impish frolic (pan-flute playing, jig dancing, the telling of riddles), I tossed a handful of sparkles into the air and cast a "sleeping spell" upon her. She feigned a supernatural slumber and I mounted her like a love-hungry satyr. It was her fantasy, and I never broke character. It's not that I'm an unselfish lover. I'm *selfless*. It's not enough to be inside a woman. I want her to consume me like a chicken potpie: meat, potatoes, crust, and all. I want to satisfy her deepest hunger—to leave her with greasy lips and gravy on her chin. By day, I am forever chased by the shadow of my ugliness. In darkness, no shadow remains, and it's all diamonds.

My Don Juan pretensions have no truck with long commitments; my Quasimodo physique ensures that such commitments are never requested. I'm incapable of being the answer to any woman's dreams. Even for the most humble; even for those with the fewest prospects; I'm the fetid water they drink, not because they want to, but because they're dying of thirst. From the minute they meet me, they're hoping for better. They're wrong to want that. They don't deserve better, and neither do I. It's for me, through intimacy and compassion, to make them aware of this fact. There's no ideal. There's only *best we can get*.

I grip tight to my limitations. Only once have I been tempted to stray beyond them. She was attractive. Physically, I'm saying. By any measure. Her deformity? There was none. My want for her is the only shame I maintain.

As for Terrance: if you think that I am the type who likes to brag on having a black friend, you are mistaken. Blacks—especially young black males—have frightened me all my life. I have suffered grave indignities at their hands, and my psyche bears the scars. I was not seeking Terrance Johnson's friendship. On the contrary. I raged against it.

And so I begin my book. Let's call it a novel. You could also call it a pseudo-memoir, because the events within are sculpted from the soft clay of my memories. The narrative and the characters who take part in it will be cartoon renderings of the truth. Life, like war, involves hours of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. Or embarrassment. Or lust. I'll try to keep things brisk. Were it not for Homer, Odysseus would be nothing but dust and bones. I'm a repulsive little nobody, so I'll have to be my own Homer. My name is Buddy Hayes. I hope that you'll forgive me this indulgence.

March 27, 2006. A day like so many forgotten days; a day lived; a day of no consequence. So I claim it. A Monday. It is the blank canvas upon which I begin my masterwork.

- 1 -  
A MORNING

Dangling. Like a side of beef in a butcher-shop window. It's how my grandfather spent his days. He had six months to live, a year at most—the same timeline they'd been giving us for the better part of a decade. He was a "fighter," they said. A "miracle." Of a type few would wish to be.

Cancer had struck. Surgery followed. They took the left eye and a chunk of the jaw. Shortly after that, a series of strokes. Atrophy in the limbs. His left arm desiccated. His legs shriveled, sores developed, gangrene threatened. The left leg was amputated first, below the knee, and months later the right, at mid-thigh.

Puppa. Pronounced *pup-uh*, lest the spelling lead you to a conclusion of *poop-uh*, which is far too cutesy a nickname for a decorated WWII veteran. Puppa's place is in the den. There is an elegant leather armchair there, and in healthier days he'd sit there for hours, reading, sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes. It was all the retirement he'd ever

wanted. For a few years, he got it. Then the diagnosis. The decline was swift.

We tried to adapt. Books: easy to operate with two hands, a frustrating challenge otherwise. We got him a lap desk. His motor skills diminished further. He developed resting tremors in the functioning hand. We sat beside him and turned the pages. Then, out came the eye, the left, which had previously been his good one, the right was astigmatic, always had been, and the operation left him legally blind. From then on, Puppa took his books in audio format, with Mummy or me serving as reader.

The loss of the armchair. Of all the sad things his illness brought, this was the hardest to take. The chair had been his Florida condo; the thing he'd worked for all his life; that favorite place, that most satisfying spot, where he would spend his golden years. We couldn't make it work. We tried. God knows we did. It was the leather! The leather, damn it, with all its oily richness! It was too slick against his flannel pajamas. He lost the strength to keep himself upright. We tried strapping him in. He hated the feel of it, and we hated seeing him tied down like a mental patient. Pads and pillows didn't work. He'd be fine for a while, but sooner or later he would slip from the chair, like a frankfurter ejecting from a condiment-slathered bun. We'd hear a thud in the den and enter to find him in a heap on the floor, smarting and humiliated.

The Hoyer lift. Its inventor should win a humanitarian prize. At first, we used the device only as prescribed: to *lift* Puppa's body; to transport him from bed to armchair, from armchair to commode, from commode to bathtub. Then a surprise. Puppa came to enjoy the harness. He'd fuss whenever we unstrapped him. No telling why. Perhaps it was the womblike clutch. A swaddling effect, in other words.

A less Freudian possibility: old men possess a natural affection for rocking chairs and porch swings, and there were elements of both in the Hoyer lift. Consider also the adjustable height of the boom pole. At the top of its range, Puppa could hover at standing height, offering the illusion (from his perspective) that he was just as he had always been, with two healthy legs firmly beneath him. Whatever the case, he came to like dangling more than sitting, and dangling was certainly the safer alternative, so we left him in the lift throughout his waking hours.

Seven fifteen A.M. I stood in the center of the room facing my audience of one. Drops of spring rain struck the window, and the city brooded under a gunmetal sky. The city of Ilium. Upstate New York. Ours is a three-story brownstone. We live on a quiet, decaying street.

“It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain . . . but once conceived, it haunted me day and night!”

I performed the reading with great dramatic flair. Puppa wriggled in his harness, his little stumps dancing in the air, his groans mixed with laughter and phlegm. He was enjoying the show.

“Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult.”

I paused. Shot a theatrical look of menace into Puppa’s good eye. You may not have noticed, but you can only look a person in one eye at a time. You cannot focus on both at once, and this is for the best when you’re speaking to Puppa. One grows used to empty eye sockets, but one would never say that there is a “kind of beauty” to them, or that “he looks better *without* the eyeball.” Most times we keep the orifice stuffed with gauze. Out of doors, we cover it with a fine leather eye patch. Sometimes—in the privacy

of our home, and only at Puppa's behest—we add a bit of whimsy and put in one of his custom ocular prostheses. He wore one then. The qualities of this false eye will take some explaining.

We used to keep a Ping-Pong table in the downstairs parlor. The table is long gone, and I'd assumed the same of the paddles and balls, but I'd been doing some spring cleaning a couple of years prior and ran across these recreational articles in the bottom of an old shoebox. Puppa was delighted by the find. Nostalgia sparked. I placed a paddle in his hand. We reenacted past duels. The old man zestfully batted at the imagined ball and I faux-volleyed back, reaching and diving, grunting like a pro, swinging at the empty air. Puppa's potent bids provoked a swaying in his harness, side-to-side, suggestive of the lateral dance performed by authentic table tennis masters. It was good exercise for him. I wondered: *might there be a way for us to play actual Ping-Pong?* Our fantasy version offered some cardio benefits, but it lacked the thrill of actual competition and did little to stimulate Puppa's motor skills. Propriety forbids the batting of Ping-Pong balls in lavishly appointed dens—that's a given—but I was excited to explore the concept, so I asked Puppa "Do you think you could catch a ball if I bounced it toward you?" He indicated yes. I bounced a ball, slowly, with lots of arc, directly toward his hand. He missed badly. I retrieved, tried again, and again he missed.

Third try. He missed again but got a hand on it. Fourth try, and he plucked the ball from the air. I cheered. Puppa raised the ball in triumph. Then, a devilish grin. He rolled the ball between his fingers. A flicker of lunacy danced across his face and then, in a flash, he mashed the ball into his open eye socket. The fit was nearly perfect. He removed his hand. The ball remained. I cried out in horror. It was

ghastly! The bulbous, milky white ball transformed him into something inhuman. I begged him to remove it. He cackled demonically.

Ladies have their handbags and shoes. Gentlemen have their hats, their tiepins, their cufflinks. These small, changeable details are the brass tacks of fashion. Puppa started wedging the Ping-Pong ball into his face on a regular basis. Odd behavior, of course, I'm not claiming it wasn't . . . but is it so different than a mink stole? Than an ascot? Fashion teaches us to "accessorize around" our less attractive features. Empty eye sockets are not common in the general population. If they were, there'd be decorative eyeball sections in every department store.

We tolerated it for a while. Puppa kept the ball in his breast pocket, and he'd wedge it into his cabbage whenever the spirit moved him. That "spirit" was usually a malevolent one. It frightened Mummy every time. I found it uncouth.

"Puppa, if you insist on accessorizing in this way, can't it be done with a bit more élan? A gentleman should not be seen with sporting goods lodged in his head."

What happens when ocular science meets arts and crafts? When a loving grandson, armed with the Internet and a Hobby Lobby rewards card, commits his labors to an ailing elder's comfort and pleasure? *Progress* happens, reader. Prosthetic bijouterie happens.

The collection is up to fourteen. There's The Mobius: ashwood, painted black, with a large sapphire set as the pupil. There's The Marksman: mahogany, natural finish, with red crosshairs in the center. The Viper: tiger maple, wax polished, with an infinity symbol beveled into the face. I design and construct them. Take great care in doing so. Puppa receives a new eyeball every birthday, and another at Christmas as a stocking stuffer.

Back to the main thread. The morning. The dramatic reading. Puppa wore The Specter—a white painted number, no pupil, and sprinkled all over with silver glitter.

“For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever!”

Puppa squealed. Intelligible speech was no longer an option, so he expressed his emotions in great bursts of pantomime. When saddened, he would blubber, and tears would flow from his functioning duct. If a song caught his fancy, he would bray along in indiscernible rendition. Here I had selected a tale of horror that spoke directly to his condition, as if Mr. Poe had penned it just for us. He was the old man; I, the killer. I’d even dressed the part. A tweed coat, a gentleman’s bow tie, a bowler hat. This brand of playacting was a regular part of our mornings.

“*Breakfast . . .*” Mummy sang as she entered the den. She pushed our wooden butler’s cart in front of her. A breakfast spread was arrayed upon it: slices of pineapple, bowls of blueberry and cream, toast, and homemade peach marmalade. “The Breakfast Surprise” was hidden under the lid of our silver serving platter. Steam kissed at the edges of the dome. Today’s surprise smelled delicious.

My mother is not an attractive woman. Inside, in the heart of her, she is the most beautiful woman in God’s creation. On the existence of a supernatural God, I am dubious, but Mummy, in all her sweetness and benevolence, could serve as proof of the divine. Maybe she’s an angel. She’s certainly a saint. She’s performed no miracles that I’m aware of, and I doubt that anyone will deign to

paint her on a chapel ceiling; but if she is ever so honored, I will demand to oversee the work. "Paint the soul, not the woman!" I would instruct. "Put some roses in her cheeks! Slim her hips! Tighten her hindquarters! And please, I beg you, take note of the sparkle in her eye and try with all your skill to capture it."

Inner beauty is of small account in this vulgar world, and Mummy does little to improve her outward appearance. She has the fashion sense of a sixty-year-old biddy, and a body to match. Her "chin" is a soft roll of flesh, and there are more than a few whiskers there. A harelip scar runs vertically from mouth to right nostril, just a bit off-center, and serves as a visual indicator of her mood. When she's tranquil, the scar blends in with the surrounding flesh. When she's agitated, the defect goes to pink; when further agitated, to red; when enraged, to blood red, and the scar looks like a live wound, open, glistening, and it's clear to all that Mummy has pulled on her war face.

She wears her hair in a style that I call "grandma puff." She calls it "fuss-free." She has the figure of a tree stump and short little arms that shoot forward from where her breasts should be. She's a chimera of sorts: a *T. rex* in miniature with an old lady's head. That morning her hair was done up in pink curlers, and she wore her blue terry robe, decorated all over with little rubber duckies. She is forty-two years old.

I'll tell you my age now. I'm twenty-eight. Do the math. As you might imagine, my entry into this world was a bit of a fiasco. It is one of the many reasons why I love Puppa so much. Without him, Mummy and I would have devolved into white trash monstrosities. We'd be living in public housing now, surviving on beans and Vienna sausages.

"What are you reading?" asked Mummy.

"Puppa's favorite," I said.

The butler's cart had folding leaves on either side. When locked into place, the cart became a small, round table.

"You're wearing the hat," she said, pulling the leaves into place. "And Puppa is wearing The Specter. I should have known."

"They're the perfect accessories. The eyeball is Puppa's most ghoulish, and the closest match to the 'vulture eye' described in the tale. As for the hat—it instantly transforms me into dandy *boulevardier*. The rest is in the performance."

I shot Mummy a stiletto look.

"Oh my!" she cried. "If looks could kill!"

I doffed the bowler and set it gently on Puppa's bald head. The hat had been his. He'd picked it up years ago, in a thrift shop, during one of his book hunts. It was no costume piece. The hat was old, English-made, and fine. Puppa's face rent into a mangled simulation of a smile.

"Now you look like a gentleman," I said, clapping the book shut. "We'll finish later, okay? You simply *must* know what happens to the old man." I patted his shoulder. "As if you didn't know already, you old feather-duster!"

He smiled like a toothless baby. Spit bubbled at his lips.

"That certainly got your energy up," Mummy said to the elder. "Just like last Wednesday, when Terrance came over and sang. Puppa was like a Mexican jumping bean."

"Urgh!" bellowed Puppa in the affirmative.

"It was some of the loveliest music I ever heard," she continued.

"Urghhh!" A small bola of mucus spun from his mouth and landed on the cart, barely missing a wedge of grapefruit.

"I heard faint whispers of that 'music' from my chambers," I scoffed.

"Wasn't it grand?"

"As I said, it was faint, and I was otherwise engaged. 'The Wheels of Commerce' and all that. What I *did* hear, I found . . . disconcerting."

She demanded elucidation.

"The thought of that big chocolate-covered marshmallow, strumming away on his banjo and singing like Ricky Nelson," I said. "It sounded unnatural. Like someone trying to *prove* something."

"Oh please! What on Earth would he have to prove?"

"If you listened to contemporary Afro-American music, you'd know. It's all about 'sampling.' 'Mix mastering,' they call it. I call it theft! Those few strains that found their way to my ear reeked of plagiarism—as if my musical heritage were a plaything for his amusement."

"You don't have a 'musical heritage.'"

"Yes, I do. So do you."

"There is no musical talent in this family."

"Defeatist! Musically, I am an untapped fountain. The throb of primal rhythms beats in my DNA. But when I say 'heritage,' I'm speaking *culturally*. Country-inspired music. I hate that cornpone junk, but as a Caucasian-American it's mine to take or leave. I say, leave it!"

"Nonsense. If you had come out of your room . . ."

". . . my chambers."

"Your *chambers*, then you would have seen and heard something marvelous. Terrance has real gifts. Did you know that he used to perform on Broadway? As an actor, a singer, and a dancer? They call that a 'triple threat.' Isn't that wonderful!?"

"If he were so wonderful, he'd still be singing for his supper, and not peddling compassion like a TV evangelist."

"He's a nurse!"

"His family must be proud."

“A Visiting Nurse.”

“And a *singing* nurse, and a *banjo* nurse. He’s a good fit for a traveling circus. What’s his level of certification?”

“LPN.”

“LPN!?”

Trade certification is a sure marker of cognitive ability among the working classes. I’m always saying *the trades are the surest path out of poverty*, and I believe it (my darling Puppa is proof!), and accreditation in *anything* counts for *something*, no doubt about it, but to stop at the basement level—to stick there, like a clam half-buried in sand—well, it told me everything I needed to know. Terrance was a “good enough” guy. A speck. The world is covered in them. Little flakes of dandruff, riding on the shoulders of civilized society. Nothing worked for, nothing gained, and so nothing to offer. I could have bounced these bricks off of Mummy’s noggin, but the indicator warned against it. Her harelip scar had lost its cool pallor. It was up to pink. Best to let the engines cool.

“I’d prefer not to discuss it over breakfast,” I said.

“We need help.”

“And now we have it—be it ever so humble.”

“We need help more than once a week. I want to try the home health care aides.”

“My stars! I agreed to the whole ‘visiting nurse’ business, and yes, I can see the utility of it, but I’m not going to have our home turned into some kind of—”

I cut myself off. I was going to say “nursing home,” but that was #1 on our list of banned terms. We’d never consider it. We refused to acknowledge the existence of such places. Mummy and I were in total agreement on this point.

“Terrance speaks very highly of them,” Mummy said.

“Of whom?”

"The aides!"

"I'm sure he does. And who speaks for him?"

"Everyone! His references were impeccable."

"Fake references are a cottage industry."

"Not when they come from the head of the VNA. We were lucky to get him at all. He's the best. A 'giving soul.' That's what the director said about him."

"No man giveth but with intention of good to himself.' Your helper is paid for what he does. I'm sure that he spends the greater portion of his paycheck on brandy and cheap cigars. His flexible schedule allows him to drink said brandy until the wee hours and to sleep until noon the following day."

"He's here at 8:30 in the morning."

"Hung over, no doubt. Stinking of brandy."

"You say these things just to rile me," Mummy spat. "I don't like it. Get the chairs."

I moved to the den closet and retrieved the two folding chairs that are part of our daily breakfast arrangement. Mummy carefully rolled Puppa toward the cart and lowered his harness to an appropriate dining height. The hydraulic piston hissed as Puppa descended into place. I set the two folding chairs, and we took our places.

"I don't mean to upset you," I said. "I'm just not used to having strange men in our home. I may be a self-taught black belt, but he's a formidable specimen. *And* he's Afro-American. Did that fact occur to you?"

The scar pulsed.

"I've noticed, and I have no idea what difference it makes at all."

"You'll admit that Afro-Americans, as a race, possess more fast-twitch muscle than we? Well, it doesn't matter if you admit it or not because it's scientifically proven. I'm not

sure that a Tiger Strike to the temple would even faze him. I would have to assume Creeping Lotus and work his legs, but you know that Creeping Lotus is not one of my better stances. He might punt me through the uprights!"

A sigh of frustration. "Why are you even talking like that?"

"Because I am the man of this house and it is my sacred duty to protect it."

"We require no protection from Terrance." Silence for a time, and then: "If you were so concerned, why didn't you come down and introduce yourself?"

"And display my plumage like a strutting cock? Ha! Maybe I would have, but I was on the telephone with a very important client."

"Well, it would have been nice. And polite. It seems like you spend eighteen hours a day in that dark office."

"Chambers!"

"There's no light in there. You live like a vampire. And you wonder why you have S.A.D." She tisk-tisk-tisked me. "A computer screen does not offer the full spectrum of light. You'll become like those poor children in Alaska."

"Occupational hazard. These tasties are not going to buy themselves. And speaking of tasties. . . ." I reached across the table and lifted the silver dome that concealed The Breakfast Surprise. The aroma of fish and smoke and butter burst from the platter like an escaped prisoner. Inside, a beautiful salmon steak dressed in hollandaise.

"Mummy! Is there some special occasion of which I am unaware? My word! Did you smoke this in the back yard?"

"You know I did," she said proudly.

"Yesterday? I thought I smelled something. Why didn't you call me?"

She performed a shooin' gesture with her fingers, as if

my question were a pesky fly.

"I don't need you meddling with my smoker."

"Meddling!?"

"You don't check the meat—you poke it. You pull little chunks from it and the whole thing looks as if it's been nibbled by a raccoon."

"And how do you check it? By running your tongue across it?"

"I check it with a thermometer. As you know."

"Taste is the only measure that counts."

"I didn't want any fuss."

"I do not meddle, nor do I fuss. I advise and encourage."

"You're a meddler and a fusser. But I didn't mean you. I meant *her*."

The mention of *her* was noxious, like the first whiff of a decaying mouse buried deep in the walls.

"Did she call the police on you again?" I asked.

"Don't remind me."

"The batty old crone was probably hovering above on her broomstick, snapping away with her spy camera. One of these days—and in grand fashion—I shall run a hickory stake through her heart."

"Buddy! I will not tolerate any more violent rhetoric!"

"It wouldn't work anyway. The only way to kill a witch is by drowning."

The witch under discussion was our hated neighbor. "Little Miss Sunshine," I call her. Flashback a couple of years. Mummy was in the backyard smoking sausages. Little Miss Sunshine called the police.

"There's been a report that you're burning garbage," the policemen said when they arrived. Well, anyone with a set of nostrils could tell that wasn't the case, and the investigators had four nostrils between them, two apiece, and

the scents that filled those inquisitive nostrils, from the moment they exited their cruiser, suggested only the most delicious savories. After some cordial banter, we invited the lawmen to investigate our private grounds. We showed them our custom-built smokehouse. Mummy offered them sausages to take home. This was when the truth came out. A “concerned neighbor” had suggested that maybe—just *maybe*—we were cremating a human body. The policemen laughed about it. They were the only ones laughing.

“I’ll never understand it,” said Mummy in a huff. “As if smoking meats in your own backyard was a crime.”

“At least she’s on record as a bona fide kook. The police hate having their time wasted. I’m sure their report is full of coded scribbles that label her a fruitcake. It’ll all prove useful when we file suit against her. Charge number one—”

“. . . Buddy, please . . .”

“—Harassment!”

Mummy thrust her fingers into her ears and commenced with an obnoxious *la-la-la* rendition of Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”

“Charge number two,” I shouted, so as to penetrate her musically induced deafness. “Slander!”

The whole “I will lay me down” bit, delivered as a series of *la*’s. On key, but reedy. Too much breath. Mummy’s tantrums might benefit from some vocal training.

“She accuses our beloved patriarch of murder!” I cried.

*I will lay me down . . .*

“Charge number three,” louder still. “Theft of cultural relics!”

I had other charges to level against the witch, but my point was made. I interlocked my fingers and set my hands neatly on the table. Mummy ended her childish display.

“Finished?” she asked.

"I could go on," I said demurely.

"Don't. I've heard it all a million times. Can we just have a nice breakfast?"

"You know she has it."

"I don't know that."

"She stole it!"

"Even if it's in her possession—which I doubt—I don't think you can say that she 'stole it.'"

"Oh, no? Tell that to Egypt. They've been chasing their relics all over the world. A sarcophagus pops up at a museum in Dayton, Ohio, and Egypt is like *'That's ours, sucker!'* And guess what? They get it back."

She let out a tired sigh.

"It was a long time ago, Buddy."

"There's no other explanation."

"And there's no way to prove it. So enough."

I helped myself to a generous portion of salmon. I was famished. Mine was a morning-after hunger born of torrid sex play. The previous night, I had enjoyed a furious masturbation session with one of my online galpals. I know only three things about this cyberlover: her Skype username (SoggyHoochy69), her email address (I will keep that to myself), and what her vagina looks like in extreme close-up. Our relationship is purely genital. We contact each other on Skype messenger once or twice a week—just long enough to arrange a video rendezvous. At the appointed time I set my webcam on a stool between my legs and illuminate my manhood with a flashlight. SoggyHoochy69 presents her sex in a similar way—in extreme genital close-up. Our headset microphones leave our hands free, and we play our organs like a pair of dueling virtuosos. Our strokes and proddings are a pixellated blur. As for the erotic banter, let me tell you! I have no doubt that SoggyHoochy69 is the most depraved

woman on Earth. She belongs in an institution. She asked me to pretend I was her cousin James! Have you ever heard of such a thing? God help her family. More than once, my online playmates have evolved into flesh-and-blood encounters. It was like that with Daphne, the ectrodactyl, and with Kelly—a Romanesque goddess whose peanut butter folds and cottage cheese crevices I still occasionally enjoy. There were no such plans for SoggyHoochy69.

I took a forkful of the smoked salmon. In my mouth, an explosion of smoke, of brine, of cream, of citrus zest.

“Mummy, this is a delicacy!”

She was pleased. “That fish smoked up very well, but it’s the homemade butter that makes the real difference.”

“I knew it was a good idea to build that churn,” I said.

Puppa’s single eye focused mournfully on my plate. He began smacking his lips.

“You can have a little fish,” Mummy told him. She took a bit of fish from the platter and placed it in her mouth. She closed her eyes and moaned in chef’s delight as she chewed it. Then, as delicately as a mother bird, she spit the premasticated wad onto a china saucer. This may sound vile, but it was a regular part of our breakfasts, and necessary. Puppa couldn’t swallow solid food. The smallest bone could choke him. His palate was like a gaping wound; an open hole connected directly to his empty eye socket. Occasionally, a bit of gauze might slip back, and the easiest path of retrieval would be from the mouth. A prosthetic bite plate—a palatal obturator, made of translucent silicon—plugs the hole. Mummy topped the salmon-and-saliva pâté with a dollop of hollandaise and took up a tiny portion with a salt spoon. Puppa held his lips as if ready for a kiss. Mummy slid the spoonful into his mouth, and Puppa sucked at the gob like a lozenge. He emitted a low, satisfied groan. The Specter glittered. He savored the flavor.

Mummy unscrewed the lid of his actual meal.

“How many calories today?” I asked.

“Thirteen hundred, I think. We’ve got peanut butter, heavy cream, chocolate syrup, chocolate ice cream, and an egg.”

“Remarkable. The Magic Bullet people should start marketing their product as an eldercare aid.”

“I agree. I’ve come up with a hundred different recipes. I’m working on a spicy Mexican fiesta shake that I think he’ll like.”

“Something savory to complement the sweet. Good thinking. You ought to pool those recipes and publish a Magic Bullet cookbook. The primary market would likely be home caregivers, but you might attract the bodybuilder market as well.”

“Maybe you could help me write it?”

“A mother/son publishing project? I like it! Make a note of it in your journal. We’ll revisit the concept when I finish my novel.” I stuffed my face with fish.

These elaborate breakfast sessions represented our bid at normalcy. We’d always enjoyed breakfasts together. To alter the practice in light of Puppa’s condition would have been a kind of surrender. Dignity, reader. It was a matter of dignity. How to assure it. How to maintain it. In this, one must realize that dignity is not a construct, but a collection of small comforts and liberties. Breakfast was a sacred family ritual. Dignity demanded that Puppa feed himself. And so again to my tinker’s table. I invented a special appliance: a two-foot length of medical tubing with an inexpensive snorkel mouthpiece fitted to one end. Puppa wasn’t able to operate a traditional drinking straw. He couldn’t create sufficient “suck,” even with his palatal obturator in place. The lips wanted a more perfect seal, and what’s a snorkel

but a mouth gasket affixed to a tube? A length of medical tubing, some food-grade silicone cement, and voila!

Puppa opened his mouth, and Mummy set the mouth-piece. She then inserted the rubber tubing into the Bullet-Cup. Puppa closed his good eye, and the thick brown liquid climbed the tube in a slow, incremental ascent. In moments he was drinking it up, and we all set about enjoying our breakfast.

"That Terrance of yours—do you suppose he's on performance-enhancing drugs?"

Mummy rolled her eyes.

"You're not back to that nonsense, are you?"

"You must admit that he has a *dangerous* physique."

"That's a dancer's body," she said.

"It's more of a lumberjack body. A sharecropper body. I haven't seen him up close, but I've surveilled him from my chamber window. That's about as close as I intend to get. I find him extremely intimidating."

"That's good. Maybe you'll treat him with respect and not cause trouble."

"I'm imagining him now, locked in the throes of a roid rage. The bloodshot eyes. The foaming mouth. I'd have to put him down with the musket."

"Don't even make jokes like that," she scolded.

"Which reminds me—we need some fresh black powder."

"No, we don't, and I'll thank you for leaving that musket right where it is, hanging in the parlor below Mr. Moose."

"Mummy, what's the point of having a firearm if you cannot use it to defend yourself?"

"Because it's a lovely decoration, that's what. If you leave it loaded all the time, how do you know that a real intruder wouldn't find it and use it against *us*?"

"Ha! They wouldn't even know how to set the frizzen!"

"Terrance is a visitor, not an intruder."

"And I will grant him all the hospitality he is due, but don't pooh-pooh *me* just because I voice my concerns. Isn't it better to be safe than sorry? This house is full of antiques. I mean, our collection of Tobies alone! If word were to get out, we'd certainly become a target for armed robbery."

Her chin wattles danced to the rhythm of her dismissive head shakes.

"Our samovar," I continued. "The Shaker rockers. The salt-glaze stoneware. And don't get me started on the value of our library!"

More wattle dancing, more eye rolling. Mummy proceeded to pour coffee from the French press into our china cups.

"Terrance does not want our antiques, Buddy."

"Not the antiques. The *money* from selling them. This city is growing pawnshops faster than weeds! Could you imagine seeing one of our beloved Tobies in a pawnshop window? And it doesn't have to be Terrance who does the stealing. It could be one of his *stoopmates*. One of his *homeboys*."

Puppa emitted a belch from behind his snorkel mouthpiece. He begged our pardon. The pardon was granted, and he resumed sucking.

"You promised you'd work on this, Buddy."

"I have been working on it."

"Your racism, I mean."

"Indeed."

"Your 'Anti-Bias Reprogramming.'"

"That's what I call it, yes."

"And? How's it been going?"

"Wonderfully!"

“And yet your disgusting racism persists!”

I shrugged. Sighed helplessly.

“Some bells cannot be unrung.”

“*No* bells can be unrung. You ring a bell, it’s rung.”

“Then my point is taken.”

“I know you had a difficult time in grade school . . .”

“ . . . and in junior high, and high school, for as long as I was there . . .”

“ . . . but you need to freshen your outlook.”

I’d attended high school until halfway through my sophomore year. The harassment I endured—the physical assaults on my person!—rendered the environment unsuitable for intellectual growth. To call my classmates “students” would be an insult to the liberal arts tradition. They were preening imbeciles. Barbarians! The strong and the beautiful sat atop the hierarchy and maintained their rule through physical and emotional violence. They hunted me in packs. They called me “Snowflake” and “Troll” and “Hunchback” and beat me without mercy. Escape was more than a desire—it was a matter of life and death! I completed my schooling at home. Puppa served as dean, Mummy as headmistress.

“Have you read the neighborhood watch emails that I’ve been printing?” I asked.

“I can’t bear to!” Mummy exclaimed. “It’s all so depressing.”

“Let me tell you this: nine times out of ten, the crime is theft—often at gunpoint—and the suspect is a young black male, tall, athletically built. Is it prejudice to recognize a fact? Terrance falls into a very unsavory demographic.”

“Your question was rhetorical, but I’ll answer it bluntly. It *is* prejudiced and narrow-minded.”

“And I will take *your* accusations and invoke my right

to counsel. My lawyer: Science. Racism is a byproduct of natural selection. Our primitive ancestors had every reason to distrust those from outside their clan. Those born with multicultural curiosities were likely to have their heads clubbed in. Man has always been man's deadliest predator. It's why 'stranger danger' remains a natural childhood impulse. Consider also the fear of rodents. That's a plague-avoidance adaptation, and another primitive relic I suffer from. My racism may be undesirable, but it's not irrational."

"Hyperbole! Cite your sources!"

"I'll provide an appendix!"

A sloppy gurgle came from Puppa's BulletCup as he sucked the dregs of his chocolate shake. Mummy carefully removed the mouthpiece. When she did, rivulets of brown goo flowed down Puppa's chin and dribbled to the floor. Mummy quickly dispatched the gunk with a linen napkin.

"Was it good, Puppa?" she asked.

"Urgh . . ." in the affirmative.

My fish was gone. I moved on to a slice of cantaloupe. Cantaloupe: nature's great oral cleanser. My blood sugar was in perfect balance. The synapses crackled like sparked kindling. I was ready to begin my day.

"When will this candy striper be holding another one of his tiny concerts?"

"Wednesday," she said, her eyes hopeful.

"Then Wednesday—and only if my schedule permits—I will come down from my chambers and watch this latter-day minstrel show. I can't promise that I'll enjoy it, but I will gently applaud at the appropriate times. If moved, I might offer more."

I rose, kissed Mummy on the cheek, and then took the bowler from Puppa's head and set it on my own at a rakish angle. "We'll finish the story later," I promised, and then retired to my lair.