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Taste

by Laren Grey

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A new speckled green 1985 Bentley Mulsanne L rolled through a gate and up to a large, seaside home. A man stepped out and walked towards the house, then turned to look at the new car. It shined in the afternoon sun, and his reflection was distorted in the chrome bumper like a funhouse mirror. He grinned and took a deep breath. After a few seconds admiring his new luxury, his shoulders sank with a sigh and he slunk into the house.

Nicolas Marco stood staring blankly into a food pantry. He saw himself in the chrome toaster on the shelf. His hair was black and his tan skin expressed thin wrinkles and darkness around hazel eyes. He ignored the toaster and tried to concentrate on

making a decision about dinner. Behind him was a large floor-to-ceiling panoramic window that looked out to an endless blue sea beneath an orange and magenta sunset. He turned off the pantry light and remained staring at the dark. Food had become meaningless, tasteless, like money. The flavor had become bland and unfulfilling. Money could no longer buy excitement, and a car was just a car, no matter the cost, but Bentley's were a special companion for him. The eighties had so far been the most financially lucrative and unsatisfying time of his life.

An hour later he was sitting in a restaurant among chatter and forks tinkling against plates. He looked at the empty seat across the table. The only ghost sitting there was himself.

"Hello, Sir. Welcome to Landry's," a voice said while pouring water from a carafe.

Nicolas sat quietly with his eyes still affixed at the chair.

"Sir, here is a menu. May I recommend the lobster? It is served in shell with a glaze of rosemary garlic butter and..."

"I just need a minute," Nicolas said.

Two minutes later, the server returned. Nicolas stared through the menu at the chair across the table.

"Sir, you seem like a man with extraordinary taste. I can arrange something off-menu, as a matter of fact, something much more interesting... offshore." The server smiled, more like a salesperson working for commission than a server working for tips.

Nicolas perked up and looked at the waiter.

The server placed a black and gold business card on the table. It read:

EXTRAORDINARY CUISINE OPPORTUNITY

FOR THOSE WITH EXTRAORDINARY TASTE

CONTACT THE NUMBER ON THE BACK

“Sir, for today, go with the lobster,” the server said, “but call the number on the card for the special culinary opportunity.”

Nicolas gazed back and forth from the lobster plate to the business card while the lobster got cold.

The next day Nicolas stood most of the day looking out his living room window, entranced by the blueness of the sea. Hunger raged within him, but he was unable to eat. The doorbell broke his trance. He opened the door and felt a perfect handshake from a smiling man in a suit and sunglasses.

“Hello Mr. Marco,” the man said in an Austrian accent, “Thank you for contacting us regarding this extraordinary culinary experience. Shall I come in and discuss the arrangements with you?”

“Please call me Nicolas.”

“Nicolas, my name is Klaus. You have a beautiful Bentley, Mr. Marco. Is it the newest model?”

“Yes. 1985,” Nicolas replied, “Thank you. Come in.”

They spent the remainder of the afternoon talking in circles around a direct matter and discussing itinerary.

A black helicopter ripped through the sky, approaching a large white yacht in the middle of the ocean. Nicolas watched a pod of dolphins breaking the surface. He salivated and his stomach rumbled.

“We are now in international waters,” Klaus said. “There will be hors d'oeuvres and drinks on the deck when we land. Your host will greet you there. Dinner will begin on time at 6:30.”

Nicolas nodded.

Nicolas sat quietly at a long dinner table in front of a small bowl of caviar. The host, Mr. X, sat at the head. He wore a black turtleneck and glasses. Three other people sat at the table. One was a Japanese man with nervous eyes, one was a Texan, obvious by his accent and large presence, and the third was an athletic woman with skin like a panther and steel eyes.

“Gentlemen, and lady,” said Mr. X, “I hope you enjoyed the caviar. Now for the main course. But first, let me personally thank you for being people of such extraordinary taste. I remember my first experience in this most rare delicacy. It brings me joy to see you experience the flesh of fellow man for the first time. With no further delay, I announce to you the main course: Filet de Homo Sapien dans au jus de mystère.”

The server from Landry's emerged with a proud chest and holding a tray. He winked at Nicolas.

Each client was presented with a plate with a thin cut of meat. It was juicy and pink in the middle, with the au jus forming a golden ring round the oblong section of thigh muscle.

After the meal, the chef entered the room to meet the clients. He was on crutches and stood on one leg. The empty pant leg was tied into a knot with a smiley face pinned to it. He adjusted his chef hat and smiled.

Mr. X applauded as the chef bowed, and the clients followed the cue to clap.

Nicolas stood staring at his food pantry. It had been nearly a week since his strange but satisfying culinary experience. The food in his pantry now seemed more unappealing, as if it were all made of blocks of wood.

He grabbed his jacket and rushed out the door. The Bentley meandered along the seaside night.

Light ripped through a door into a dark room. Rows of fluorescent bulbs flickered on and created a symphony of buzzing that stuck to the cold cinderblock walls. A man in a white apron stepped in and grabbed a clipboard and shuffled through the attached papers.

A voice cracked the cold formaldehyde air. "Hello Jim Clifton."

The man in the apron jumped and spun. Small surgical tools flew from a tray and tinkled against the concrete floor. "Nicolas! Jesus Christ you scared the hell out of me! You know you aren't supposed to be in here."

“Yeah, well, money is a key to most doors.”

“Trespassing is illegal, you know,” Jim said.

“Yeah, and I know you haven’t always been a straight player when it comes to the law.”

“True.” The men laughed.

“How have you been?”

“Doing better than this guy.” Jim pulled a tarp back, exposing a cadaver on the steel table. “This guy here,” he continued, “tried to jump into a hotel swimming pool from the fifth floor. Missed.”

As Jim examined the corpse, Nicolas saw the bulky shape of the cadaver’s thigh through the tarp. His heart began to pound and saliva shot into his mouth.

“We go way back,” said Nicolas, ignoring his craving.

“Yes we do,” Jim replied, “so cut the bullshit and get straight to the point. What’s got you so wild-eyed?”

“I have a proposal for you. A transaction. I would like to be your customer. A new side business for you.”

“Like what?”

Nicolas smirked.

“Like what?” Jim repeated.

“Part time butcher,” Nicolas said. Jim’s eyes widened and stared at the wall.

Nicolas continued to explain his unique culinary experience and his proposal, followed with a hefty dollar amount. The two men looked at the cadaver and shook hands.

The next day Nicolas picked up a box from his front step. The weight of it was exciting. He set it down on his kitchen counter and opened it with a blade. Two slabs of dry ice sandwiched several plastic wrapped steaks. He pulled them out one by one and lined them up on the counter. There were seven of them with two steaks in each. With a marker he wrote on the plastic of each one: M, T, W, TH, F, S, and S. He slid a trash can to the freezer and tossed everything from the freezer into it, then placed the six steaks into the empty freezer.

That night he sat at his table under low light, facing a sea with flickering ships in the distance. He cut into the juicy meat, ignoring the Brussel sprouts, and slowly chewed the meat as it melted in his mouth. The room was so quiet he could hear his molars crushing through individual strands of muscle. Sarcomeres popped and fascia ripped, and the red-iron taste of blood seeped into his tongue. Each forkful was small, to prolong the experience. He sipped wine between bites, to cleanse his palate; the meat gave the wine a sweet metallic taste. Through his reflection in the glass, between mouthfuls he glanced at ships as they passed the distant night horizon with incredibly productive pace.

Four hours later, at 1:47 a.m. he jumped from his bed and jogged into his garage. He stacked plates onto a barbell and pressed out reps. These late night workouts became a powerful ritual. He found himself needing less and less sleep as the days turned into weeks.

Six weeks had passed. He rolled out of a handstand and stood in front of a large mirror in his fitness studio. Van Halen was blasting at high volume.

The cassette tape ended. The room became silent.

He studied himself in the wall mirror. Veins were popping through tight skin. Muscles shifted as they fired when he moved. He took deep, full breaths, then wiped himself with a towel.

He pressed a button on the sound system. The room filled with news announcements about the stock exchange and the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, then...

“Breaking news. The eccentric millionaire, Mr. X, former game show host, and exiled creator of the once popular board game HIT ME, known for having small, colorful pieces that lethally choked several children, was arrested today on charges of cannibalism and murder. He was accused of serving human meat to high end clients. He was soon released when it was discovered that none of the meat offered in his high end feasts was actually human meat. He had been serving roast beef to high end clients instead, advertised as human in origin. Fraud charges are still pending.”

Nicolas fell to the floor. “That fucker,” he said out loud. “Roast beef? No wonder the stuff Jim has been sending me tasted more... interesting.” He ran through the house to the kitchen and ripped open his freezer. The last steak for the week was there. The next weekly delivery was to arrive tomorrow. He pulled the steak out and lit the stove.

For the next two days and night, Nicolas checked his front patio for the box delivery. He paced with as much energy as his fading mitochondria could muster. He could feel his stomach eating itself as he tossed and turned within satin sheets all night.

He pulled himself out of bed and got dressed. Within an hour he was knocking on the door of the morgue. Jim answered in a bloody apron.

“What the hell are you doing here? I thought we agreed that...”

“Yes. We agreed, and my deliveries stopped arriving,” Nicolas said, scowling.

“You look like shit. Come in.” They entered the morgue.

On the table in the center of the room was a woman with gray skin, so subtle it almost seemed beautiful. Her eyes were open, staring directly at the ceiling. They looked hazy, like the eyes of a chilled fish in a marketplace, indifferent to anything happening. A smooth bloodless slit stretched across her neck. She seemed clean and peaceful, fully naked, athletic, as if she might leap off the table and cartwheel across the room.

“What happened to her?” Nicolas asked.

“Crazy ex couldn’t live without her,” Jim said, “and didn’t want her to live without him either. I’ve drained her, but I haven’t embalmed her yet.”

“All right, cut the shit. Where are my deliveries?”

“Listen,” Jim said, sinking into a chair, “I’ve got four, um, clients now, but after the news of Mr. X getting busted I had to slow down. The FBI came around asking questions, and Jenna, you remember my assistant Jenna?”

“The super-smart blonde with glasses? Always wears her lab coat unbuttoned at the top? Is she single?”

“She likes guys with money, so you are right up her alley. Anyway, she was asking about the boxes we shipped. Last thing I need is her freaking out and squealing to the feds.”

“But Mr. X was serving roast beef, not humans,” Nicolas said.

“Yeah, but the whole thing blew up in the news and sparked curiosity about the black market demand for human meat, which is surprisingly bigger than I had imagined. 60 Minutes is planning to do an expose on the industry. You know how these things go. Conspiracy nuts, crazies, necrophiliacs, devil worshippers, wealthy eccentrics like yourself. Morbid curiosity. Big market. Everybody starts talking. Then nosy feds looking for a high profile bust get stiff peckers and start sniffin’ around. We just need to lay low for a little while.”

“Can’t.”

“Have to.”

Nicolas went up to the cadaver on the table and gently passed his fingers along her curves from her toes to her face. Her skin was smooth and cold, like fine leather in winter. Her hair was black. Each strand was healthy and smooth.

“Back in Argentina, when I was younger, people disappeared often. Nobody cared. My father disappeared. Nobody cared.”

“Well, this is America,” Jim said, “People who disappear end up advertised on milk cartons and billboards. People notice everything here.”

“In the 1800s,” Nicolas said, “in America, scholarly men purchased bodies from grave robbers for the purpose of scientific research, which was illegal on human corpses at the time. Nobody missed them either.”

“What’s your point?”

“What was once illegal is now commonplace. Maybe, just maybe, the world will one day awaken to the value of tapping into the wasted, and powerful, food resource of human meat.”

“I wouldn’t count on it, buddy. The thought of it makes me want to go vegetarian.”

“Meat was, is, and always will be an appreciated food in Argentina. Import and export. I can find someone else to do business with.”

Nicolas picked up a handsaw and hacked into the stiff thigh of the cadaver. Jim leapt up from his chair and tried to stop him, but quickly ended up unconscious on the floor.

Later, Nicolas cut into a steak at his dinner table. The Simple Minds song “Alive and Kicking” played softly through overhead speakers. With each bite, he felt life return to his cells. In the window reflection he could see color returning to his face, and his heart responded like an excited dog, beating strong, energizing him for a workout.

That evening, after a late night workout, Nicolas slept without moving, and dreams flooded his mind: visions of gray-skinned beauty covering red meat, and full breaths of ocean air filling his lungs. Wrinkles faded from around his eyes, his few gray hairs turned dark brown again, and his joints didn’t crack when he stretched.

In the morning, the door to the morgue opened. In walked a confident blonde woman in glasses.

“Good morning, Mr. Clifton,” she said. She noticed the surgical tools and his clipboard on the floor. “Mr. Clifton? Jim? Are you here?” The room was silent except for the hum of the fluorescent lights. The cadaver of the gray athletic woman was on the steel table, with missing legs. Jenna winced and pulled a tarp over the corpse. From the

corner of her eye she saw blood on the floor coming from behind a lab table in the back of the room.

“Jim?” Her stomach twisted. She stepped around the lab table. There was Jim Clifton, laying on the floor, with empty eyes, naked from the waist down, what was left of him. His legs had been removed.

It was early morning in the Argentina countryside. Purple and green hills rolled behind an expansive ranch, and a slight breeze pulled the scent of grapes and ewes from the east. A man in a suit walked up to a large stucco house in the middle of the ranch. He placed a hand on a new 2021 viridian green Bentley Continental GT parked in the front and grinned. He paused at the front door and turned. Surrounding the building, beyond the new Bentley, were several vehicles with GRUPO ESPECIAL DE OPERACIONES FEDERALES written on the side. Men in tactical gear and helmets stood like statues pointing machine guns at the house. He noticed a group of curious gauchos gathering on horseback in the far field, Andean condors lifting in the heat of the southwest blue sky, an oblivious beetle rolling dung past the soldiers, and the flare of a sniper scope from the top of a barn. There were surprisingly few cattle for such a high end ranch. A flock of sheep crossed through the yard and broke the silence, followed by a studious llama turning its head in every direction. The man knocked on the door.

A short woman with busy green eyes answered to door.

“Señorita, soy el Agente Federal Juan Castillo con el Grupo Especial de Operaciones Federales. ¿Está el aquí?”

The short, shaking woman was frozen.

“Is he here?” Agent Castillo repeated.

She turned her eyes up at the man and replied, “Si.”

“Todo está bien. Levante las manos y camine hacia la policía,” he instructed her calmly, “Siga sus instrucciones.”

The short woman raised her arms. Her armpits were sweating through her cotton blouse and her hands shook the higher she raised them. She shuffled from the house towards the front yard, with her head hanging. Two of the tactical officers took her by the arms to a safe distance.

Agent Castillo drew his handgun and entered the home. After searching several rooms, he came to a den. The room was dark with beams of light entering through wood slat shutters that cut through cigar smoke. The walls were high gloss wood with bookshelves surrounding. A man coughed. He was hunched in a wheelchair with a gray, balding head. He struggled and turned the wheels to face the agent. He had no legs.

They faced each other in silence for a moment.

The old man coughed again.

“Nicolas Marco?” Agent Castillo asked.

“Yes.”

