MEAT FOR TEA

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THE VALLEY REVIEW

CRIADILLA DE TORO

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Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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salutations from the editor

A survey conducted in June 2018, asked more than 500 people between the ages of 18 and 34, what they'd prefer to forgo, rather than lose their smart phones, and revealed that nearly a quarter of them would rather give up one of their senses than lose access to their phones. Smell was the most common sense chosen to be sacrificed.

Upon discovering this, I had to wonder what would happen if the same survey were given now, after Covid 19 posed a real threat to both senses of taste and smell, which are almost inextricably interlinked. I would like to think the sense of smell has risen in the esteem, not just of millennials, but of most people.

I've been thinking quite a bit about smell, and in particular, fragrance, and this predilection started well before the pandemic reared its ugly head, and grew after a visit to St. Martin SXM, in which I had the chance to craft a fragrance at La Tijon Perfumery. I now realize, that although Meat for Tea has long been committed to celebrating art in multiple genres, I've been completely ignoring the fine art of perfumery.

I'm pleased to announce that starting with this issue, I'm rectifying this oversight and Meat for Tea now has a new feature: Nosings, a portmanteau of sorts for musings of a nose. The inaugural Nosings essay is by none other than the brilliant writer and perfumer, Sarah McCartney. Are you excited? I know I am.

Welcome to the "Criadilla de Toro" issue and if you currently are blessed with such, give thanks for your sense of smell. (You can always buy a new phone, you know;)
Besos y Abrazos,
Elizabeth

in the park

A.J. Sorrentino

In the Park

On the swing
with steel-linked chains,
launched
into the sky's wheel
the body's loneliness
no longer weighs.

At one end of the arc, treetops
and the world gone small,
at the other the body
takes flight.
Head thrust back,
eyes closed,
the dizzying rush and giddiness.

If a link snapped,
would the body mend?
Is it worth the risk
to step on the face of the sun?

The chain jangles at the top of
the descent
–so like a child's laughter.

a girl will wait

Christian Livermore

I'm worried she won't come. I'm already preparing myself for it. There's a hurricane forecast. It's supposed to veer off and make landfall in South Carolina, but still. The sky is brown as the sand in the bare patches of the yard, and the trees are swaying. She might not come. I hear my father stirring in his room, so I go out on the porch and sit in one of the white wicker chairs Theron salvaged from the side of the road during clean-up week. I've changed three times already and have settled on a jean skirt and a white peasant blouse with little orange and red flowers around the neckline. I hope it makes me look mature but fun. I would like my mother to think I am mature and fun. There's a big difference between thirteen and fifteen, and I'd like her to think I've used the time to grow up well.

An anole pads across the railing, electric green like Gatorade. I smell the wood from the smoker and rise. I stop before the anole and bend to look. It freezes like I can't see it if it doesn't move, then scrambles away off the railing onto the ferns at the edge of the porch, into the maritime forest that seems always like it's trying to take back our house, swallow it up into its dark green maw. I've played in these woods my whole life, crossed the stream into the deep cool where the loblolly and Georgia pines vault upwards and make a cathedral of trees, and out the other side into town, but looking into them from outside, it always feels like something might reach out and grab me, haul me into a cave and digest me slowly over a hundred years.

I cross the yard and walk around back. Nan Effie is packing the smoker with hickory and mesquite. She sees me and positions herself in front of the smoker. I bend at the wood pile and fill my arms, then go to her and stand by as she takes the wood from me one piece at a time and stacks it on the low fire. Her face is red from the heat and sun, and cottony strands of hair have broken loose from her bun. The thing that happens to old peoples' hair has happened to hers. It's grown coarse and springs loose at the temples, and the browned skin of her arms is crumpled like unmade sheets. But after all these years of hard work, much of it since Papa Claude died, she is still strong. The back of her neck has that hump old ladies get, but her arms are wiry and useful. I want her to think I'm strong. Nan Effie. My nan.

'That blouse looks pretty on you,' she says.

She gave it to me and has seen me in it already, but it's her way of comforting me. I look across the yard towards the road.

'Don't worry,' she says.

She doesn't tell me my mother will come because she knows there's a good chance she won't. *Either way*, she's saying, *it will be okay. I'm here.*

I look across at my house. It needs paint. Its shaggy, faded wood makes it look even more a part of the forest now, but it scares me less because I know Papa Claude built it. Actually built it, with his own hands. Cut the trees from the forest and hauled them out, planed them, framed the house and laid each plank himself. He got an electrician and a plumber to rig the wiring

and pipes, friends of his who he traded for the work. Put a new roof on the electrician's house and raised the plumber's fishing camp another five feet after a hundred-year-flood wiped out everybody on the river. It's a good old house, but I was glad when he built Nan Effie this new place. He painted it blue for her favorite flower, which is also how I got my name. I was glad because it meant we got the old house and could move out of the trailer, but mostly because I get to live near Nan Effie and because she deserves the new one.

I hear the screen door bang and turn to my house. Theron is standing at the porch rail buttoning the shirt he's just put on, his hair a ragged crown from sleep. Nan Effie doesn't like me to say it, but I think it anyway: we are just poor white trash.

'Bluet. Phone.'

I wonder if it's my mother calling to say she isn't coming. But no. She wouldn't call. She just wouldn't turn up.

Theron hovers as I climb the porch stairs and glares down at me as I take the cordless and pass.

'Woke me up.'

I go inside and let the screen door bang behind me. 'Hello?'

'Come out to the corner.'

I duck my head and lower my voice as I head into my room. 'Can't right now, my mother's coming over.'

'When, then?'

'I don't know. You shouldn't call here.'

'He doesn't know who it is.'

'He knows it's a man.'

'Baby, your mama isn't coming, you know that. And we need to talk.'

Yes, she is, I want to say, but my throat is already ticking with disappointment.

Theron appears in the doorway.

'Talk to you later.'

I hang up and hand him the phone as I brush past.

'Who was that?'

'Nobody.'

'Got a deep voice for nobody.'

I cross the yard to Nan Effie's, and she's coughing and using her apron to wave away the smoke erupting from the smoker. I go to the rack of pork and brisket she's balanced on the cooler and hold it up for her so she doesn't have to bend. The smell of paprika and cider tickle my nose. Nan Effie places the joints on the smoker rack and closes the door. I know it's time for cole slaw so I go to the kitchen and get five heads of red cabbage and a bag of carrots. It's not too hot, so we work outside.

Nan Effie is the only woman pitmaster in the county. I used to go straight to her barbeque place after school, but since she sold it and retired she operates out of the house. She's not supposed to without a license, but the cops are there buying lunch every day with everybody else. People line up in the front yard and come up the front porch to order. When the meat runs out, that's it for the day. The food we're making is for tomorrow.

Some days after we're done preparing the food, I sit at the kitchen table and do the extra schoolwork Nan Effie gives me. She says they don't teach us enough at regular school. When she was my age, she had to name every member of the president's cabinet from a photo and know their titles and what they did. Now we don't even have civics class. I once got marked down on a test because I wrote that George Washington was a federalist. Teachers in the district aren't allowed to acknowledge the existence of ghosts, aliens or homosexuals.

'Damn fools,' Nan Effie said when I told her about it.

For the past month, she's had me studying for the entrance exam at the private school in Savannah. I have to do well enough to get in and to get a scholarship or I can't go. But I'm not sure I want to. I'd have to take a special bus an hour each way, and all the kids in that school are rich.

I look up and see the nose of the blue truck peeking out from behind the house at the next corner. Nan Effie sees me looking.

'Who's that?'

'Nobody.'

I peel the carrots a little while longer, and then wipe my hands. 'I'll be back in a second. I have to talk to him about a group project.'

'Mmm hmmm.'

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Nan looking at me, her head to one side. I can tell she's sad.

I cross the grass to where the yard meets the dead end and meander toward the truck like I'm in no hurry. Once I'm in, Tate shifts into gear and pulls onto the road.

'Just drive around the block,' I say. 'I can't be gone long.'

We go down the street past Mr. Cleary's house. He's on his porch listening to the police scanner. We drive around the corner and pull into the empty elementary school lot and park underneath a tree facing the woods. For a while we don't say anything, and I try to imagine we're just a comfortable couple enjoying the shade, but then Tate sighs and adjusts his cap, then takes it off and throws it on the dash.

'You aren't gonna say anything?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'I don't know. How did this happen?'

I smirk.

'You know what I mean.'

We go quiet again, and the air feels heavy. The cicadas are riotous.

Our first time flashes in my head. We drove out to Honey Ridge Road, where his family has a deer stand about a mile back in the woods. I could taste strawberry wine cooler on his tongue, and he was hard as a bottle against my thigh.

'Do you have a condom?' I said.

He breathed into my neck. 'I want to be able to feel you.'

I don't tell him it's my first time. I don't tell him to kiss me. He pushes in, and it hurts and feels good at the same time. It starts to feel the way they say it feels, but then he's there. He comes. I don't. He rolls off, and after a while we dress and he drives me home.

When I pull down my underwear to pee, I see blood.

In the truck, I take a green and blue paisley hairband from the center console. 'You couldn't hide it, at least?'

'What do you want me to do? It's her truck, too.' He snatches the hairband away and stuffs it back in the console. 'What are we going to do? This is serious.'

'You think I don't know that?'

'I've been thinking about it, and I can tell them I'm your guardian. I can sign permission.'

‘You think they’re not going to figure that out? Anyway, where are we going to get the money?’

‘I can take out about a hundred, maybe one-fifty without her noticing. Can you get the rest from your grandmother?’

‘Are you crazy?’

Tate slapped the air and let his hand fall on his leg.

‘Anyway, I don’t know if I want to.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know, I just…’ I don’t tell him I think of places we could live. I don’t tell him I imagine him dozing with the child in his arms. I don’t tell him I have already thought of names. ‘I don’t know.’

‘That is the last thing either of us needs. You’ve got to stay in school.’

‘Oh, so it’s for my sake? Yeah, school’s great. I just love my English teacher.’

I practically spit this last part at him. I pop the handle and kick the door open. The hinge creaks like a door in a haunted house. I climb out and slam the door behind me, but I don’t leave. I stand in the parking lot and look off into the trees, hiding my reddening eyes. They sting and I blink.

‘Would you want her to do it if it was her?’ I say.

‘It’s not her.’

Back in the yard, Nan Effie has finished the coleslaw and is enjoying the breeze in a lawn chair. I sit in the other chair and lean my chin in my hand, pretending to watch for my mother.

‘There’s plenty of boys out there, you know. Boys your age.’

‘I know.’

‘You need to find one as good as Papa Claude.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Nan Effie is watching me, I can see out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t look.

‘You know, a girl will wait until the end of time. A boy won’t care.’

I pick at a ragged nail. ‘I know.’

We sit quietly for a while, then Nan rises to get the wood chips she's been soaking for the smoker. I hear tires on sand and turn. The mailman is pulled up by the mailbox where the road meets our yard and is stuffing mail in the box. I look away and Theron is standing at the open screen door on our porch.

'Your mama don't care about nobody but herself,' he says. 'Never did.'

I pretend I don't hear him and cross the yard to get the mail. It's just circulars, and one thing for my mother that looks official. Her name and address are typed, Hella Davis Scruggs, and framed in a window covered with clear film. There's no return address. Anybody using her whole official name has to be because she owes them money. Theron used to play with her name to flirt, but that was a long time ago. I remember him saying it once as he stood behind her at the stove, his hands grazing her shoulders. I was looking up at them, so I must have been little. 'Baby, you are hella fine.' Now when her name comes up he just grunts.

There's a photo of me in the bathtub in the old house. I am about three, and I'm standing in the tub. Mama has covered me from head to toe in shaving foam, and we're both laughing. I am looking at her and she is looking at the camera, or at whoever is taking the photo. Theron, I expect. The photo is in an old album at the bottom of my closet.

I carry the mail back to Nan Effie's. I open the smoker and throw it all onto the burning wood. The circulars curl and smoke, and the poly film window on my mother's letter melts and collapses in on itself, swallowing her name.

I sit in the lawn chair, hovering on the edge. The aluminum frame digs into my butt. I think of Tate, and the baby whose name I've chosen but can't bring myself to say. I think of Theron, what he'll say if I have it, or if I don't. I think of how disappointed Nan Effie will be. I think of the new school.

I sit back and try to settle. I picture my mother, her open laughing face, and I watch the road, and I wait.

*

This story also appears in Livermore's chapbook, *A Girl, Lost and Found,* from Alien Buddha Press

new cowboy drawing

John Allen