

SPORK

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The Russians had gotten wind of his business. The e-mail read: “Hello Sir. Do not to build more replicas. We know where you live.” No signature. Simple, spare. Chilling.

Eugene knew the Russians had dominated the field for years, but he’d always hoped to fly under their radar. He built his replicas slowly, one by one, didn’t contract the work out as the Russians reportedly did. Quality, not quantity. Never flooded the market.

His fakes usually fetched three or four hundred dollars on eBay, sometimes more. A couple of these per week, he could pay his bills, live in style. Not champagne, maybe. But. Beer. Cable. A movie.

His latest eBay auction was ending in 53 minutes. His masterpiece, this must have been the fake that drew the Russians’ attention. So far, it had garnered a high bid of \$563, but the price would certainly go up in the last few seconds as the snipers made their last-second bids.

Eugene studied his listing: “RARE!!! Spork just found! Discovered at former Pine Ridge Reservation, colony of South Dakota! Intact, VF. Guaranteed genuine!” As he watched, new bids appeared: \$565, then \$566, \$567. This was looking to be his most profitable auction ever since he’d started making the fakes, three years ago.

He’d learned his trade by starting off with the easy stuff—a KFC knife, a Dunkin’ Donuts spoon. Cutting the plastic, striking off, molding, baking, distressing it just enough. The early fakes, not so good. Impatient, he rushed the process. He’d since learned that it took at least fifteen or twenty hours to create a convincing fake. Then, a few minutes to print out a “Certificate of Authenticity.”

He considered himself a craftsman now. The craft, that was the important part, not the money. In the last two years, only one fake had been challenged by a buyer. And really, that was his fault. He’d bitten off more than he could chew.

He’d tried to create a McDonald’s coffee stirrer. The Holy Grail. The tiny oval bowl, the McDonald’s legend along the handle, the arches logo at the top. No one had been able to create a convincing replica of the McDonald’s stirrer, not since Young Bear—the master—had disappeared a decade ago.

Hubris, to think that he could create on the same level as Young Bear. That would take a

lifetime of study, practice, dedication to the craft. For now, he was happy to specialize in Taco Bell, Arby's, Burger King. Put out just enough fakes on the market to keep going, financially, as he got better and better. That was the plan, anyway.

Now the Russians knew about him.

No point in worrying about it now. Eugene saw the red message light blinking, flashing the number 2 on his old-school answering machine. Should he listen to the messages? What if it was the Russians?

His hands trembling, he picked up the phone and pressed the Messages button.

“Eugene, it's Tony. Just wanted to tell you about the latest at the daycare center. My boss is hacked at me because during story time I told the kids about Quetzalcoatl and Chac. I thought they'd like the story about how Chac made Jaguar and Deer live together in the desert; then I told them how Quetzalcoatl ate the Roadrunner and vomited out an Eagle, then they asked about the bloodletting and how the people cut out their own tongues. . .”

Eugene put the phone down on the table. To get to the second message, he'd have to let the entire first message play out before he could delete it.

The doorbell rang.

Eugene froze. Tony was at work, Zero was out of town, and Angela wasn't speaking to him anymore.

He considered his options. The only way out of the apartment, besides the front door, was the back deck. His unit was on the third floor, so jumping off of the deck would likely bring a broken leg or worse. Maybe pretend he wasn't home, hope they went away?

The doorbell rang again, then a knock. Another knock.

Now or never. Eugene opened the top drawer of his dresser, pulled out the Bersa. Semi-Automatic, Double Action, 380 ACP, 3.5 Inch Barrel, 15 Round Capacity, Fixed Sights, Matte Finish, Fired Casing.

Loaded.

Eugene stood behind the door at an angle, out of the line of fire, then yanked it open quickly.

A zombie stood there, staring straight ahead.

Green flesh rotting off the skull, one eye missing, mouth contorted into a frenzied scowl, blood splattered and splintered. The Undead.

“Trick or treat!”

Eugene noticed a pirate standing behind the zombie, the pirate’s face looking expectantly at him. He stuck the gun in his pocket.

No candy in his apartment. He’d had a Snitchum a few weeks ago, but that was long gone.

“Wait here, guys, I’ve got something for you.”

Eugene went to his kitchen, found what he was looking for.

“Hold out your bags.” He gave each of the kids a large batch of red pepper hummus, straight into their sacks. They grinned at him, their smiles radiating joy and delight.

His heart skittering, Eugene picked up the phone again to finish listening to his messages. He heard Tony’s voice still crackling: “. . . their hearts wept, oh, our Sons, We give you counsel before you leave on your journey, do not forget Us, do not erase Us, go on Your path and reclaim the honor which has been lost to our People, go forth and see the place from which We came, go forth. . .”

Eugene put the phone down on the table again. He had to get out of the apartment, clear his head, come back in the morning.

Next day, nerves still shaky coming back to the apartment complex. Eugene got off the elevator, crouched down in the hallway and peered around the corner, looking to see if anyone was lurking by his unit. *So far, so good.*

He slowly walked down the hallway, then saw a handwritten note taped to his door.

What now?

“How DARE you put that PASTE in my sons trick or treat bag. It is RUINED. I do NOT APPRECIATE it. You owe my son ANOTHER BAG. Please BRING it to #307. THANK YOU, Diana PS He is OLFACTORILY CHALLENGED”

Olfactorily challenged? Did he attend a special school? Eugene took the note and crumpled it, threw it in the corner.

He saw the phone, still playing the first message, lifted it to his ear and listened, “. . . they punctured their ears and their arms, their Blood flowing before the divinities, and they collected their Blood and put it in a urn near the Rocks, and the Rocks were not really Rocks, but appeared in the likeness of a Youth, and . . .”

Eugene put the phone down, and jiggled the touchpad on his laptop. He watched the

computer screen slowly return to eBay. The winning bid on the spork: \$815, already paid. A new record.

Finally, some good news. He'd pack up the fake and ship it off. But first, he'd go see Diana in 307. *What the hell.* He'd give the kid one of his fakes, maybe the Dairy Queen parfait scraper. Kids loved those, that should chill her out. No sense making enemies.

Eugene rang the doorbell at Unit 307.

A long pause. Finally, the door opened.

“Yes?” The woman at the door looked to be about 30 or so. Long black hair, brown skin, green eyes, strange eye makeup. The makeup—*what was it called? eyeliner? mascara?*—angled up to the corner of her face, nearly to her hairline, giving her a cat-like appearance.

“I'm Eugene, I live in 315, you left a note on my door?” He looked around for the kid, didn't see him. Maybe at school? He held out the package that he'd wrapped up as a gift and gave it to the woman, who was presumably Diana, the author of the note.

“Please come in,” she said, a strained smile on her face as she took the package.

He walked into the apartment, stood in the foyer. She locked the door behind him. A dank, earthy odor enveloped him. *What was that smell?* He'd never eaten a rutabaga, but he imagined this was what it smelled like.

“Am I interrupting?” he asked.

“No. Sit down.”

He walked into the kitchen, where he saw a cauldron of red liquid roiling and steaming on the stove.

“What is that?” He sat down at the kitchen table.

“Soup.”

“What kind of soup?”

“We call it blood soup,” she said.

She ladled some of the mixture into an ancient metal bowl and set it in front of him. When the steam cleared, he could see that the soup was viscous, oily, with large green and white chunks floating within. Smaller, iridescent pieces resembling migrant worker fingertips rose to the top then sank.

She stared at him, expectantly.

He looked at the soup.

Eugene took a battered wooden spoon and disheveled some liquid—no chunks—into it. He blew on it, waited. He raised it to his nose, inhaled. It smelled like a mustache, a street light, an old chair, an exhaust manifold.

He tasted it.

The first note was a deep animal saltiness, accented by the flavor of sage and vinegarweed. Then he tasted red wine, dark beer, pearl onions, defragmented celery, slithered carrots. The finishing note was of sugar, butter, cinnamon, a mellow and polite sweetness, like a beef pie crust mixed with blackberries and Girl Scout cookies. This soup was like nothing he'd ever eaten—tasting it was like a journey to the kingdom of Zembla, or perhaps a vacation to a distant planet with as yet undiscovered herbs, spices redolent of the musky alien soil, the thin atmosphere, the toil of the spice workers.

“Good,” he said.

He ate the soup quickly, hungrily, as if it were his last meal, without speaking.

When he was finished, she opened her icebox and took out what appeared to be a block of distressed cherry wood. She took a hack saw and carved off a slice, wrapped it in newspaper.

“You take this for later. Now go, before my son gets home.”

He nodded, left without saying goodbye.

Later that night, Eugene ate the bread. It was a revelation. Dense and spongy, it tasted of forest hops and prairie grasses.

He wanted more.

During the next week, he tried to concentrate on his business, not Diana. Although it wasn't his best work, he finished his latest project by the end of the week and put up a new listing: “GENUINE!!! Hardee's knife, just found! No chips or cracks, great condition, some mustard residue!! Appears to be from former Chicago area! No reserve!!!!” Eugene hoped to clear a few hundred dollars, but the Russians had saturated the market with Hardee's cutlery last year, so he'd be lucky to get anything, especially in this post-war economy.

Within hours of putting up the Hardee's listing, he received another e-mail message: “No legs, no problems.” *What did this mean?*

To clear his head, Eugene picked up his phone, which was still playing Tony's message: “. . . and Xbalanque cut off Hunahpu's legs and offered him as a sacrifice, but Hunahpu arose from the dead, and One Death and Seven Deaths, the Lords of the Sky, demanded that the

miracle be performed again, and the Twins cut off the Lords’ legs but did not bring them back from the dead, and the Xibalbans despaired, and begged for mercy. . .”

He had to get out.

He walked down the hall to Unit 307 and rang the bell. Diana opened the door, motioned him inside. He started to speak, but she silenced him. She pulled him into the bedroom and sank to her knees.

A warm red cloud began to envelope Eugene’s brain. He peered through the cloud and looked around the room. He saw galvanic paintings, defenestrated posters, kachina dolls. He gave over to the cloud, electrolytic charges traveling to his extremities, soft waves of ions dissolving into positive and negative particles.

Spent, he sat down on the bed. He stared at a photograph of a soldier holding an automatic weapon. After a while, she brought out a small translucent container, filled with what looked like pickled cactus and dried fruit.

“This is called acorn soup,” she said, handing him the box.

“When can I see you again?” he asked.

She gave him a faint smile and shut the door behind him.

In the following weeks, Eugene settled into a routine. Work on the fakes, go to the post office, maybe pick up a bottle of tree vodka as a gift before going to Diana’s apartment in the afternoon. She would dejizzle him, then give him some new dish to take back to his flat. He never saw her kid, and she would only smile when he asked about him.

He never knew what to expect from the strange food she gave him, but each bite took him back to the red cloud. He could no longer look at root vegetables or fish without becoming tumescent. As a consequence, he avoided farmers’ markets and aquariums, but still became aroused at the inadvertent sight of nuts or smell of turnips.

When he felt lonely, he listened to Tony’s message, still playing: “. . . and when the Twins did return to the village, They did see that All were dead and murdered, and the village had been burned, and They did despair of the evil that had been brought, and They did, in their sadness, walk and walk until the end of time, and then They ascended into the middle of the sky so that one was the Sun and one was the Moon. . .”

One afternoon, Eugene stopped by Diana's apartment and found the front door open.

"Diana?"

No answer.

He looked inside, saw no one. He called her name again.

He walked into the foyer, poked his head around the wall.

"Hello?"

Still no answer. He noticed that a light was on in the bathroom—the light squeaking around the doorjamb like a picture frame.

He opened the door.

On the counter, a makeup mirror shined like the sun, eight clear bulbs blazing and surrounding the lunar surface of the mirror. The smell of copper and magnesium filled the small space.

Diana was nude, lying down in the tub on her side, facing away from him. It looked like she was bathing in soup—shiny red liquid completely covered the bottom of the bowl.

Eugene leaned down and turned her over on her back. Blood covered her face and drizzled over her lifeless green eyes, which were still open. Her skin was pure white, the color of bleached chalk.

He stared down at her torso. Her legs were gone at the knees. Only crinkled and crenulated stumps remained, gray tendons and white bone contrasting with the scarlet and crimson of veins and muscles.

No legs, no problems.

He wasn't sure what to do—cover her up, say some words, call the cops?

He turned off the light and shut the bathroom door, slowly. He walked into the kitchen.

Eugene stared at her spices, her pots, her spoons, her forks. He looked at her dishes, her bags of flour, sugar, salt. He opened the refrigerator and gazed at her vegetables, meats, fruits.

He started to cook. He used no recipe, no formula. He went by instinct, taking vegetables he'd never seen before; peeling, slicing, and boiling them. He fried unknown cuts of meat, then chopped them into smaller pieces and added them to the stock pot. In the cupboard, there were jars of spices with strange symbols on the labels. He added these to the pot without tasting them.

The soup boiled and simmered. Eugene waited.

As night began to fall, he ate, using his spork, which he found on the table.
And then he walked.

Did he think, in that diaphanous moment between dusk and nightfall, that she would return? Did he walk the streets each night, listening to snatches of conversation, hearing her voice in the markets, the cafes, the elevators? Did he eat dark bread and corn soup, constantly, obsessively? Did he try to swallow in a foreign language?

Wouldn't you?