

Honorable Mention, Fiction

The Bacon Inside of Us

by Emily Wolinsky

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He was going primal again. This time it was going to be an all meatball diet and it was going to last for thirty days. Keath went to Whole Foods and purchased pork rinds to pulverize in the food processor and use instead of breadcrumbs. He bought organic beef, spices, and the strips of bacon that he would render for the bacon fat. When Keath closed his eyes, he pictured the layers of fat underneath his skin as being layers of cake, frosting, and pieces of sandwich bread. He now pictured those layers dripping off him like the bacon fat dripping into his frying pan and causing his girlfriend to cough.

“This house smells disgusting. It seriously does,” Ann said. Her eyes were watering from the smoke and white onions.

“Seriously.”

“Seriously.”

“No. Seriously?”

“Shut up!” Ann said. Keath always made fun of her for sounding like a valley girl with her seriouslys and whatevers.

“When are you going to be done cooking these things?”

“Never. I’m going to only eat meatballs for thirty years.”

“Whatev -- Well, hopefully you can make enough of these tonight to last a week or so,” Ann leaned back in her wheelchair and surveyed the kitchen. Pans were stacked on top of pans. Crumbs littered every counter and table surface. An open bag of chicharrónes lie on its side like a fighter punched out in a boxing ring. She couldn’t wait until Mona arrived to help her clean up before putting her into bed. Even though this was not Ann’s mess, she knew that Keath would not clean it up the way she wanted it to be clean.

Mona had eyes for dirt like Ann had. She also had the kindest heart of anyone Ann had ever met. This is why Ann hired her to be her home health care attendant twelve years before

Keath's meatball diet and seven years before Keath. Mona had only been in the U.S. for a little over a year and only knew a few sentences of English when she started working with Ann in 2000. An Ethiopian, Mona was a devout follower of Islam and had her first of four children at twenty---two to a husband fifteen years her senior. Ann was from a small country town in Upstate NY, an English major in college, an atheist, and would never bear children because of her disability.

Despite all of the differences, Ann and Mona had formed a sister---like bond that had depth and lastingness. Ann revealed this most when she and Keath would sometimes play this awful car game on their way home from the grocery store. He would present a scenario where two people Ann cherished would be drowning and she could only save one person. Each of her parents sunk into deep and cold waters when pitted against Mona. Ann's best friends gasped for their last breaths while Mona was plucked from the waves. Even Keath, the love of Ann's life, lost his battle for life against Mona when thrown in the angry sea. It was a matter of fact that all people became aware of: Mona always wins.

"Hellooooo!" Mona cheerfully pronounced as she opened the front door and entered the foyer. Ann could barely see her through the haze of bacon smoke and was reminded of the many glam rock singers she had gone to see as a teenager bursting onto the stage.

"Hell---a Moon---a!" Keath shouted from the kitchen in an affectionate mocking of Mona's Ethiopian accent, which everyone agreed was a fantastic impression of her.

"What is that smell?" She turned up her nose and immediately covered her nose with her flowery hijab.

"That smell, Moon--a -- bacon. Staya awaya from here!"

Ann looked at the dirty kitchen and mourned the loss of cleanliness. She frantically searched for something to ask Mona to help her clean or put away, knowing that these brief moments before getting ready for bed were the last she'd have for cleaning and straightening up until the following evening. Yes, she realized that Mona's pork restrictions were going to keep her from handling or touching any of the utensils involved in the meatball making, but Ann knew that all was not lost.

"Hey, Mona, can you help me throw away this junk mail?" Ann grabbed the pile sitting on the dining table and handed it to her. Mona stood up automatically and headed into the kitchen to toss it away, but Keath blocked her at the entrance.

“No, Moon---a. The bacon. The bacon will get inside of you. Stay outta this kitchen!” Keath went on to explain that the particles in the air if breathed would infect Mona with the hazardous pork product she was forbidden from. Mona dropped the mail back down on the dining room table like it was plate of raw pork ribs.

Mona then ordered Ann to the bedroom telling her that she needed to get her in bed so she could get out of the house before the bacon infected her. Suddenly a feeling of defeat, frustration, and selfish helplessness raged through Ann’s gut and translated into an action she would regret for a very long time:

Ann rolled her eyes.

She rolled them quick and aimed them straight at Keath. Why did he have to ruin Ann’s plans to clean and control her surroundings? Why was she a thirty--year old woman being forced to go to bed or left to sit in her wheelchair and rot? Why did he have to tell Mona that the bacon was inside of her? And why the fuck must Keath make meatballs at ten o’clock on a Tuesday night?

Instantly Mona lowered her voice and pointed toward Ann’s bedroom. “Bed. Now. If you don’t go to bed right now, I quit.” Mona walked into the room without waiting for her to follow.

Keath looked at Ann and mouthed that he was sorry. Ann went into her bedroom to face Mona who she had never witnessed so angry.

“If you speak a word to me, I will quit this job and I will never come back again!” Mona said and started heading to Ann’s dresser to pull out her nightclothes.

“Why? Are you serious? Come on! Are you really serious?”

“You rolled your eyes! You have no respect!”

“I do too!” Ann felt panicked and angry. “I rolled my eyes because the bacon is not *inside* of you. I didn’t roll them at you. I rolled them at Keath.”

“Yes, it is. No respect. You rolled your eyes at me, at my beliefs. That is what I believe.” She grabbed Ann’s laundry off the bed.

“It is not *inside* of you. It’s just a smell!”

“Do not talk about this with me anymore, Ann, or I’ll quit. I’ll quit right here and now. I don’t need this tonight!”

Ann could have shut--up, but rather than let it blow over, she did the worst possible thing. She rolled her eyes again.

It was as if it were a reflex outside of her control. Her subconscious selfishness and ingratitude mixed with her lack of control and ignorance pushed her eyeballs to the right, up, and to the left. When her eyeballs came back down they were mixed with salty tears.

The bedroom door slammed shut and Ann pictured herself in a sea, gasping for breath, unable to move her legs and arms, and sinking deeper and deeper into the clutch of the cold water.