

## LIKE MOM'S CHILI

MARK SILCOX

“D’you think they’ll shave our heads and paint them blue before or after they attach the electrodes?”

I had been maintaining this shtick for the whole week leading up to our big downtown appointment.

“Jesus,” she said, “which of your favorite depressing novels is that from?” Cassie’s patience was starting to crumble. She fastened her seatbelt and put the car into reverse. “*Brave New World* or some shit?”

“Old episode of *The X Files*.”

“You need to spend more time in the library, bro, you’re running low on material.”

We pulled out of the parking lot of our apartment complex and drove up the ramp onto I-35 northbound. The car juddered and sighed as Cassie stomped on the accelerator. It was a twelve-year-old Chevrolet hatchback we’d put through a lot of ordeals since we had moved in together. The cracked tweedy interior still smelled of pot smoke and buttered popcorn from the previous weekend’s adventures, and the backseat was covered in drifts of surplus paperwork from our grad school applications. We mostly just used it to run errands around town; highway driving makes me super nervous. My dad had promised us a brand-new-used car on the day we graduated. But we wouldn’t be able to collect it if we died in a gruesome wreck.

Cassie glanced over at me as we blended in to the morning traffic. “You look all tense! I think there’s some candy in the glove compartment. Eat and relax - today’s activities should be both fun and profitable.”

“Famous last words.” I dug around until I had located a fragment of un-fresh saltwater taffy and started picking at the greasy wrapper. The colorless wind-haunted exurbs of Oklahoma City blurred past my window. Fresh out of unfunny jokes, I decided to just sit and sulk for a while.

Cassie reached over and squeezed my upper thigh after the silence had gone on for too long. “C’mon, Brian – you remember what Jared was like before he graduated. Totally harmless! I’ve actually missed him a little bit since he moved away.”

“Yeah, he could be fun to spend time with, but that was before...” I let my voice trail off and leaned forward to forage for more candy.

Cassie snickered at me. “Come on, then – say it already.”

“Nah. I mean – I’m sure it’ll be fine. And the money really *will* be useful.”

“Say it! It’ll do you good!” She jostled the wheel back and forth, and the hapless Chevy shimmied to and fro in the passing lane. This was one of the few things she knew how to do to make me lose my cool.

“All right, all right! Fuck. He was fun *before* he, y’know, Sold his Soul to The Man, and traded in his guitar for a tie, and turned into an evil corporate cyborg, etcetera. Happy?”

She quit it with the gyrations. “Yeah,” she said, “I must admit, I never fail to be tickled when you talk like that. Because of course it reminds me of your lovely, wonderful, kindhearted...”

“Oh, shut up.”

Her *sub rosa* laughter turned into a blast of self-satisfied giggles. Cassie was genuinely fond of my parents, but their earnest, slightly preachy leftism – which they’d picked up in the dark depths of the Reagan era and converted over the past three decades into a hybrid car, a houseful of cats named after Latin American revolutionaries, and a pair of matching Green Party memberships – was a source of bottomless mirth to her. She especially enjoyed it whenever I slipped into talking the party line.

As some old disco music came on the car radio and the sun ascended over the crooked panorama of skyscrapers ahead of us, I could feel my mood starting to lift a bit. We had accepted Jared’s invitation downtown because he had promised money and we were dirt poor, having overspent our annual budget with three weeks left before the end of Spring Term. But perhaps this whole gig would turn out to be a minor adventure. “I wonder what he’s gonna feed us for lunch,” I said.

“Probably something made out of the blood of the peasantry.”

“Keep practicing that stuff, Che Guevara - one day I’ll show you the secret handshake.”

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About twenty minutes later we pulled into a parking garage underneath the city’s second-tallest building. It was a superficially art deco-

ish, but also unmistakably phallic skyscraper that had been full of oil executives until a couple of years ago. When the petroleum market bottomed out, they'd sold off half the office space to other local businesses. Jared worked for a small PR and marketing firm on the seventeenth floor.

The security guard gave us a once-over as we passed through the echoey lobby. I avoided making eye contact, suddenly feeling self-conscious. We stepped into an elevator, which lifted off with a soft metallic purr.

I checked myself out in the door's reflective inner surface. Cheap running shoes a little haggard, jeans and sweater acceptably laundered, but rumpled. "Jeez," I said, "I hope we're dressed up enough."

"Dressed up enough for what? Oh, come on, Bri," said Cassie, "It's Jared. Don't you remember sleeping bag week?"

Back when the three of us lived in a co-op near campus, Jared had once gotten overstressed about exams and completely flaked out for a few days. He had skipped class to binge on anime DVDs, sustaining himself on dry cereal straight out of the box, and shuffling around the building wrapped in nothing but a greasy sleeping bag. With a different type of person the spectacle would have been disturbing, but with Jared you just sort of rolled with it, even when it became clear around day three that he had also quit bathing. His sloppy, freestyle approach to daily life could be infectious. But it hadn't left him with much of an exit strategy once he finished his degree. Which was how he had ended up working in this airless coffin of a building, I guess.

On the eighth floor a couple of guys in tailored suits got into the elevator and gave us both another quickly appraising up-and-down look. Cassie just stared right back at them of course, facial piercings and all. Her flower-print dress was more garden party than business appointment, but the tattoos made everything more ambiguous. One of the pair leaned forward a little as though he was trying to read the patterns on the skin of her right shoulder. He stood that way for almost three floors, and his lips seemed to be moving slightly. Then he sharply looked away, and started talking too loudly to his buddy about quarterly projections or some damn thing.

When the little bell dinged for us we stepped out into an empty hallway. There was carpet the color of roast beef and a row of wood-paneled doors with transparent plastic nameplates. I could hear conversation going on close by but couldn't make out the words.

Cassie crinkled her nose. "Somebody turned up a coffee pot too high."

She was right – there was a bitter smell hanging in the still air.

“So what do we do now?” she asked me.

“Jared said to keep walking ’til we see a sign that says ‘Conference Room Three.’”

We had immediately taken to whispering to each other, and we found ourselves tiptoeing along the squashy carpet. Something about the place made you feel the need to keep an obsequious silence. Perhaps it was just knowing that we were that high up in the air – the tallest building back on campus was only six stories. When we arrived at the conference room door, we paused and took a deep breath together before Cassie nudged it halfway open.

Jared was inside the room. He was wearing a white shirt and a bright red tie and scribbling on something against a clipboard. There was also a polished hardwood table, bare apart from a miniature microwave oven and two white china plates.

He glanced up from whatever he was writing and saw us. “*Dudes!*” he cried out, and swept forward with one arm held out in front of him.

When Cassie’s first impulse was to flinch, he drew back a bit. I rescued him by taking a quick step forward and seizing his hand in mine. Handshaking is a tricky thing for our generation – it feels stilted and uncool, but we still haven’t figured out a better way to greet old friends we’ve never slept with.

“How’re you doing, man?” I asked him. “Never thought I’d get to visit anybody in this place.” It was true – and to my own surprise, I was warming to the novelty of the experience.

Jared’s eyes were on Cassie’s face as he responded to me. “Oh, well...just a temporary gig, y’know, while I, uh. While I ...”

“It’s *really* good to see you, Jared.” Cassie recovered quickly, leaning forward to give him a light hug round the shoulders. “I miss folding the sheets together!” The two of them had made up the co-op’s ‘laundry committee’ the year before Jared moved downtown.

“Aw, man. You’re going to make me tear up. Thanks for helping me out with this project, you guys. I hope the traffic was OK.”

He stepped aside and gestured toward the table. Sitting on top of each plate was a small brown disc of something not immediately identifiable. It was the wrong consistency for hamburger, and had the disturbing symmetry and uniformity of a product never touched by the human hand. Behind the table

were a couple of those ornate office chairs that look impossible to sit in but turn out to be really comfortable.

Cassie and I sat down. Jared set aside his clipboard and stood across from us with the palms of his hands resting on the tabletop. He seemed to go into a brief trance.

Cassie poked at her mystery disc with the tip of a finger. “So, are we, uh, supposed to eat these things?”

“Oh! Aha, um, sorry, I didn’t really explain much of how this works over the phone, did I?”

“You said we’d be part of a focus group,” I reminded him. “I’ve never been in one before, though, so...”

“Right!” He fingered the knot in his tie and glanced back and forth between us. “That’s what you are! We’re doing a little research on...uh...so what we want you to do is, ah...”

It occurred to me that we were possibly being recorded. God help the poor underling who’d have to listen to this conversation afterwards.

Cassie poked at the soft brown disk again, this time with two fingers. “This looks a little like a hockey puck.”

Jared swept my plate up from under my nose and shoved it into the microwave. He set the timer for a minute and a half.

“So my company’s been hired to do some product testing,” he explained. “All you guys have to do is take a few bites of The Product when it’s warmed up, then answer some questions about it.” He picked up his clipboard again and lifted the first sheet of paper to look underneath. Then he flashed us a quick sideways grin. It was the first thing he had done since we’d arrived that reminded me of our good-natured former roomie. “Some of the questions might seem a bit goofy.”

“Just the two of us? Nobody else is coming?” Cassie was playing with her bracelets under the table, something she only did when she was uncomfortable.

“Yeah. See, it’s the first one of these things I’ve run by myself. My boss told me it’d be OK to start small, with people I know.”

The microwave dinged. Yet another weird new smell had crept into the air. It was earthy, a little bitter, like damp tree bark or freshly dug topsoil. Not wholly unpleasant, but not what you’d normally think of as a cooking smell.

“Oh – ha ha! I guess you guys will need forks, or something, if you’re going to actually eat this thing.” Jared dashed out the door, leaving the two of us staring at the tiny oven.

When he had been gone for maybe thirty seconds, I decided to retrieve The Product for myself. The little disc was steaming, but appeared otherwise unaltered.

“What the fuck’s happened to him, Bri?” Cassie whispered. “He’s acting like-”

“Shh!”

I jerked my head toward the ceiling where I thought the invisible microphones might be hidden. Cassie gave me a look that made me instantly realize I was acting like a loon.

“I think he’s just nervous, y’know,” I told her. “New job and all.”

Jared rushed back in with a fistful of plastic cutlery. He passed us a bright white fork each, then quickly nuked Cassie’s plate. While the two of them waited for it in silence I slid my fork underneath my prospective meal, just for something to do really. The thing didn’t hold together at all; it was the texture of a very loosely-packed cereal bar. Jared was watching me and nodding in a way that was probably meant to be encouraging, but honestly he looked kind of nuts.

“Go ahead!” he said when I paused with the soft morsel hovering in front of my face.

I chewed and swallowed. Yuck! The thing was straight-up nasty. Obviously some kind of grainy, chemically flavored meat substitute, but I had eaten vegetarian faux-food lots of times before and not minded it. I struggled not to grimace. Jared tilted his head to the side in exactly the way that might make a small dog seem human-like.

“It’s....” I was talking so that I didn’t have to swallow.

“Hang on!” Jared held up a hand. “Let’s let Cassie try hers first, before she hears your reaction.”

Another awkward few seconds passed while we all ogled the microwave door. As Jared slid Cassie’s warm plate across to her, I tried to catch her eye and provide some sort of warning, but she was entirely focused on the thing she was about to ingest.

“It’s...” she said, after getting through the first mouthful, then swallowed slowly and pursed her lips.

“So I, uh, have these questions...” Jared was fiddling with his clipboard again.

“It’s a little gritty, and...is it actual meat, though?” Cassie gave the disc another prod, but couldn’t seem to make herself elevate a second mouthful.

“So, question one. What was your first impression when you saw The Product? Was it a), appealing, b), unappealing, or c), intriguing?”

“But it’s OK, really.” Cassie was swirling her tongue around her mouth. “I mean, it’s not something you’d want to...but of course, if you thought that-”

Jared’s pen was hovering over his notes. He shot us both a look that struck me as so utterly lost and baleful that I suddenly wanted to be out of there very quickly. Cassie was still waving at the air with her hands, in the way she often did when trying to summon up words adequate to some bizarre (or straight-up nasty) experience.

“Definitely c),” I replied, hoping to cut her off. “Intriguing.”

“Aha!” Hearing this seemed to set Jared a little more at ease. “That’s great,” he said. “Thanks. Just a few more questions. By the way, feel free to finish it off if you want. It’s almost noon; you guys must be hungry.”

I had already set my fork aside, and I left it right where it was. But Cassie braved another morsel of The Product, clearly enjoying this bite even less than the first. “Ugh,” she groaned, “it’s just so, um, so-”

“Which other common food item does it most remind you of?” Jared was speaking more rapidly. “Is it more like a), a hamburger fresh of the grill, b), a sizzling-hot sausage patty, c), a slice of home-cooked meatloaf, or d), your mom’s special chili?”

Cassie dropped her fork, snorting loudly. “Holy fuck, Jared. Did you actually write that stuff yourself?”

Jared shook his head. “It, ah, comes from the manufacturer.” His back straightened a bit. “They do actually research this stuff pretty carefully.”

I managed to swallow a giggle, but not before Jared noticed my mouth twitch.

“They’re a pretty big company. They’ve had a lot of success with this sort of thing in the past. And they actually have a reputation for making stuff

out of high quality ingredients. One of the things I like about Blue Apple” – that was the name of the company he worked for – “is how we really try hard to partner with businesses that...”

Jesus Christ – he seemed to be totally in earnest. “It’s cool, Jared,” I said. “Don’t worry – we’re just new at this whole thing. And you know *us*. We’ve always got ten words for every one that’s necessary.” Cassie gave me a sharp look at that. She was more defensive and less willing than I was when it came to apologizing for conversational liberties. I nudged her knee with mine under the table and pressed on. “Why don’t you give us the rest of the questions?”

“OK. You’re, uh, actually supposed to eat a bit more first, though.” He was starting to look gloomy. The smell of the heated patties had completely filled the air by this time, and would have taken the edge off anybody’s cheerful mood.

I gripped the base of my fork and was about to dig in, but Cassie’s stamina was obviously faltering.

“I don’t know if I *can*, Jared,” she said. “It already feels like it’s doing a little Celtic dance inside my stomach. Do you think you could at least tell us what it’s supposed to *be*?” She started picking the still-warm patty apart with the tines of her fork. “Is it some sort of vegan thing, maybe?”

“I’m actually not supposed to. Or...well...” He quickly scanned both sides of the first page on his clipboard. “I guess it doesn’t say anywhere on here that it’s not allowed. But the way I understood how they wanted this to go, there’s supposed to be a sort of a big reveal, right at the end.”

“A ‘big reveal?’” I reared back from the table in my ergonomic chair. I probably wouldn’t have reacted so strongly if I hadn’t watched an online documentary that week about some engineer in Finland who had discovered a way to make faux sausage meat out of raw sewage.

But Cassie had understood the expression in a slightly different way. “Like, in a Sherlock Holmes story? I guess that could be fun. Like a role-playing game! Remember that Spring break we all played *Mask of Cthulhu*?” She looked down at her plate, inhaled and exhaled, then picked up a yielding morsel between two fingertips and managed a shaky smile. “Okay, down the hatch!”

“It’s dog food.”



The brown matter was already in her mouth before she had time to process this.

“What, now?” I asked Jared. Cassie’s hand closed over my knee, her bracelets noisily jingling.

“It’s...it’s for dogs. It’s a new thing – you heat it up a little, and the dog just goes nuts for it. But what the company wanted to show was that human beings-”

“Nnhhhhh...” Cassie’s hand was over her mouth. She kicked back her chair and rushed for the door. The sounds we heard her make out in the hallway seemed to indicate she might not get to the bathroom in time.

For the first time since we had arrived, Jared looked me full in the face. I leaned backward and met his gaze. In his eyes there was a quiet, muted but obstinate plea for something I had always known I’d never be able to give him.

“Dude,” I said to him at last.

“I guess you’d better go and check up on her.”

I walked out and pushed the door of the ladies’ room open a crack. “You OK in there babe?”

“Just vomiting, sweetheart!” The grandmotherly singsong voice she used made me smile, but I could sense the anger resonating behind it. Then I heard a low groan and an ominous splash.

Jared appeared in the corridor. Somehow, during his five-yard journey across the conference room his hair had gotten tousled and his skinny tie had swung over to one side.

“Is she-?”

“She’s okay,” I told him. “Just barfing a little.”

“Hadn’t you better-?”

“No. It’s a public women’s restroom, Jared. Not unless she says she actually needs me in there for some reason.”

“Are you-?”

“Yeah, I’m totally sure.”

Incredibly, he was still holding his clipboard. He raised it now, concealing his face from me as though he was double-checking some highly pertinent factoid. “I guess we’d better wrap things up right here,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, probably best.”

“You guys’ll still get paid, though.”

“It’s fine either way,” I said, even though it wasn’t really. When he peeked at me over the giant metal clip, I managed a smile and a shrug.

Then, because I somehow couldn’t resist twisting the knife just a little: “Cassie’s parents were really poor, when she was a little kid. Like, *really* poor. Trailer park, no health insurance, no money for groceries.” Law of the jungle, I guess.

“Oh.” Jared frowned, and he got that look that used to come over him studying for a stats exam, like his brain was in danger of overheating. “I guess I don’t understand how that...”

“It makes a difference, man. Trust me.”

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“...like a couple of lab rats, y’know! Shoving that garbage down our throats, then expecting us to maybe write a fucking radio jingle about it! With that smug goddamn grin on his face the whole time, like he’d somehow joined the *real world* and left people like us way behind, as though we’re some sort of...I don’t know...”

I had taken over driving duties on the way out of the city while Cassie was getting this out of her system. I squeezed her hand, then gently removed it from the gearshift.

“How much of that stuff did you have to eat, back in the day?” I asked her, sympathetic but also genuinely curious.

“What, actual dog food?” He voice stabilized a bit. “None. Whatever happened to my parents, my brothers and I somehow always got decent stuff to eat. But there were half a dozen cans of soft cat food in the cupboard of our trailer out in Altus. I never asked my mom what they were for. But of course, we didn’t have a cat.” She honked her nose into a wad of toilet paper she had swiped from the Blue Apple ladies’ room. “One time, the week after my Dad lost his second job, I noticed two of the cans were missing.”

I lowered the passenger side window a couple of inches. Even in the middle of the city, the outdoor air smelled sweet and vernal to me after having been stuck inside that tower all morning.

“Thanks,” said Cassie, tilting her head back and breathing deeply. “Hoo-ee! Quite an adventure, that was. Thanks for getting me out of that place so quickly, Bri. You’re def my favorite person to throw up with.”

“Awesome to know!”

The car gave a resigned hiccup as we pattered back up the ramp onto the interstate. It had turned into a sunny, optimistic sort of day, and for a while we just looked out at the bright lawns and textured rooves of the newly built suburbs north of the city. A little further along, a giant inflatable gorilla waved to us from a used car lot, and I almost waved back. It struck me as slightly sad that this was the first time since winter we had been more than maybe a mile off campus.

“I just don’t understand what he thought he’d get out of playing that kind of prank on us, Bri. We weren’t ever mean to him at the co-op, were we? It was like he wanted to rub our faces in something. Does he maybe think we’re pretentious for applying to grad school?”

I just shrugged.

She was digging around in the glove compartment now. “Or maybe he’s just mad at *anyone* who doesn’t have to wear a pissant little polyester necktie every day. I hope you didn’t scarf the last candy; I’ve still got the taste of dog burger in my mouth. He must have been laughing up a storm deep inside while we were shoveling that crap into our mouths.”

Usually when Cassie was in this type of mood I would take on an abstracted air, nod my head a bunch, and just let her slowly talk herself down. But I didn’t feel like I could let this last remark pass unanswered. I took a deep breath.

“What? What?” she said, immediately on her guard. “I know that noise!”

Damn it. “Well, I, um...I actually think you might be misreading the situation just a bit.”

“Really? How?”

“I think he was actually trying to impress us.”

She snorted. “Oh, really.”

“Yes, really. Even with the dog burger. I think he wanted us to be amazed by his recent successes.”

She had found another ancient piece of taffy, and was chewing it noisily as she gave me a long sideways look. I kept my eyes on the freeway, which had gotten busier since the morning. “Jesus,” she said eventually, “you actually sound like you’re serious.”

“I mean, I might be wrong. But when you take a job in that field, you’re bound to pick up some fancy notions about the value of what you’re selling, just to get yourself out of bed in the morning. I think he expected us to *like* the dog burger, and then be amazed by the fact that we did. I’d be willing to bet he’s eaten a couple of the damn things himself.”

For the last few miles out of town she was clearly giving my proposal some serious thought. She didn’t say anything else until we were off the freeway and idling down the main drag east of campus.

“I don’t think I buy it, though, Bri. Aren’t you maybe being over-charitable?”

“Unh-unh. I think Jared’s a total fucking idiot, actually.” I sighed. “Which I always sort of suspected, for all that he could be fun to hang out with. Wouldn’t bother me if we never spoke to the guy again. But...”

“‘But?’ ‘But’ *what*? Now you’re being mysterious.”

We stopped at a red light. My stomach was starting to protest its recent mistreatment. “Hey, do you want to stop at that cheap Chinese place one block over? I’m dying of hunger here.”

Vicious elbow prod. “Quit wriggling – ‘but’ *what*, already?”

I took a left turn. I really *was* hungry, to be fair. For another minute or so I could get away with pretending to fuss over navigation, then edging into a tight parking spot between two SUVs. When I pulled up the parking brake, though, Cassie grabbed my arm and squeezed it hard, like she used to whenever she needed something or other really badly from me, from a fistful of small change to a word of encouragement.

“See, the thing is...the guy’s in love with you, Cassie. Always has been, I reckon.”

“Oh! Oh, Brian.” Her eyes got very wide. “Brian, no. I really don’t think you-”

“I don’t just *think* it, Cass. I mean, I really am 100% sure about this. Back in co-op there were, um, incidents. Just a few little physical tells and gestures he made, that I saw.” I didn’t tell her about the time I caught him

sketching her face in red ink from across the breakfast table. Or the time I noticed a cheap bracelet she had complained about losing weeks before sitting on his bedside table. Some leftover, semi-brotherly loyalty I guess.

Cassie was still shaking her head.

“Then, after a while,” I went on, “he knew that I knew. I didn’t torture him over it. But we did have, let’s say, a frank exchange.”

For a minute or two we just sat there in the restaurant’s parking lot looking at each other. The sky had greyed over and a few blobs and spatters of light spring rain hit the windshield. When I made a move to get out of the car, Cassie pointedly didn’t let go of my forearm. She was starting to emit little gasps, building up to something heavier, just like the rain.

“I know. I know.” I said. “Love is strange! It’s just like that guy says in that song – y’know, the one with the Farfisa organ? I mean, what can you do right?”

*“I don’t know! But...dog food, Brian?”*

While I waited for what I thought would be the inevitable wisecrack or one-liner she just stared out at the rain as it intensified, sobbing loudly for a couple of minutes, plucking at the candy wrappers in the cracked plastic divider between us, then sniffing and wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. That’s the thing you always have to remember about Cassie – empathy will always trump irony in the end. Back then, crank atheist though I thought I was, I used to sincerely pray she’d never find out I was just the opposite.

“Come on,” I said as soon as I thought she’d had enough time. “Egg rolls are calling.”

She released my arm and kissed me on the cheek. I reached into the back seat to dig out our busted plastic umbrella. The skies were getting black, but there was a hearty, greasy food smell making its way into the car. We stepped out onto the tarmac and trudged through the warm rain together like refugees.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Silcox is a professor of Humanities and Philosophy at the University of Central Oklahoma. His stories have been published in *The Dread Machine*, *Sci Phi Quarterly*, *Perihelion SF*, *Leading Edge*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Write Ahead/The Future Looms*, and *KZine*, among other venues. His SF novel *The Face on the Mountain* was published by Incandescent Phoenix Books in 2015.