



The air was stuffed. I sat there, tired and worn. I looked at the faces surrounding me in the pale, colorless light. Stuffed faces, shining and hot. I think they are heart-attacks-waiting-to-happen as they eat their cigarettes by the pack and selfishly force me to inhale as well. My eyes scope out the room, looking for the one true reason we are here. It is Easter. But where is the Holy Man? Where is He? Not in these people. They shout obscenities, smacking their lips. The woman with the unwashed brown hair licks another smoke ball and snarls.

Men with overgrown stomachs screaming from within their flannel shirts lean back in fulfillment. They have had their fix, and I am forced to watch them loll. The food in their teeth has set in now, and they may soon have the energy to move downstairs to the couch. Rubbing their bloated bellies and their slicked-up and greased-back hair, they are impressed with themselves—they cut the turkey.

And there *they* are—the women. The women and the turkey and the empty plates filmed with remnants of egg salad. I sit there, stuffed and feeling pregnant. Shall I unleash myself? Shall I deliver? Can I unbuckle my belt—will they notice? Should I dare? Would I? They smile softly and watch the words that leave their mouths as if they are gold-plated. They have been patient. Cooking all morning and looking good. Now they sit and wait, uncertain of what to say next. A sense of apprehension fills them; they are being watched.

Ashley Nelson lives in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, and submitted this story as a senior at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Of greatest interest to Ashley are writing and reading—especially the works of Woolf, Plath, Yeats, Joyce, and Hemingway. She was editor-in-chief of her school magazines, The Wit and The Half-Wit, and received an award at the Illinois Poet Laureate Awards for a poem version of “Kitchen Women.”

I sit there, uncool. I exhale and float into the smoke that lingers overhead. As they said the Lord’s Prayer, I was forced to open my eyes and peer into the plateful of clear blood provided by the rawest meat. After that, my eyes never left my stomach. I ate the scalloped potatoes that dried my mouth. And I skinned the rawest meat with my somewhat spotted knife and my bloody teeth. I was a barbarian and I was ready. I felt a sense of authority over these people. A serene authority. I knew the sharing secrets of life, and they knew . . . what? How to not cook the meat completely? Is it so wrong that I wanted to reach into the throat of the sweet girl sitting beside me in the hose hose hose that covered her luscious and liquid legs? Should I be damned because I wanted to tear the vocal cords out of her sensual sunset mouth and stomp on them until they sounded inhuman? I was being uncool. But I was tired, and the Frank Sinatra that filled my ears choked me. I had not breathed since the prayer began. And had we even said Amen? If not, every action we did was being sent to heaven as a prayer. Ahem.

I watched as my plate was lifted up and above me. The hose girl with shiny hair smiled a big fake smile at me as I sat, mesmerized in thoughts of the book that sat on the couch that I so desperately wanted to read yet couldn’t because I shouldn’t dare because it would be rude. I saw the blueberry muffin’s paper holder flutter in the wind provided by her “naturally” crimped and primped hair. I smiled an equally fake smile because I had to pretend I was not superior. Then I noticed they had all gotten up. The meat, the potatoes, the cigarette voice, the rawest women no longer sat right between my teeth. I looked up and around. I was a man, or at least I should have been.

And I saw them—the women, fluttering back and forth from their kitchen to the table, from the table to their kitchen. They moved like clockwork. I sat. I wouldn’t get up. I’d be cool. I am not feeling like getting up. I am not feeling like wiping the drool from the overgrown figures exhaling hard in front of me because they had a hard day. Yes, I concluded within the chambers of my own bloody house, I will sit here and make my point! So there I sat among three generations of men. They talked of the same old, old, old . . . I laughed along with them when it was funny. They never cried, so I cried alone.

The women were now laughing and smiling into my eyes. I wondered what they were doing that was so entertaining. Cleaning? *Whew*. I knew my place. So I sat, feeling like a nail in the foot of an old man—unclean and out of place. I sat (continued on page 24)

Their **stomachs**
scream
as they lean
back in fulfillment.
I’m forced ^{to}
watch
them loll.

Heartfelt (continued from page 6)

year and started dabbling in other things. Turned out I had quite a knack for pottery. It's quite popular with the college kids and their parents who come up to visit them." He came back holding a chipped earthenware mug. The smell of the coffee, mixed with the

**"Your bear is made
of a special
filling that
bad thoughts can't
live in."**

smell of evergreen trees and Volkswagen exhaust, completed the recipe for a helping of Washington air. "We ship anywhere in the U.S. for free." We grimaced as he took a too-big gulp of too-hot coffee. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you." He seemed like a friendly man, so as I browsed, I continued the conversation.

"Did you work for your father while the store was still in business?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't get me wrong. I loved the toy business." He smiled. "I loved watching the people. You wouldn't believe the care some parents took in picking out things for their kids." He paused and took another, more cautious sip of coffee. "But the best customers to watch were grandparents. There was this one man who came in here. I don't even think he intended to buy anything—just came in here asking if the owner of the bakery was going to come back soon, adding something about having to get something to take his medicine with. My dad told him Floyd could be gone for days, but that he was welcome to have some coffee cake we had out back. My dad told the guy to help himself to some water from the cooler, too."

I could feel the sun warming my back from the window behind me. The cat had returned unnoticed and was meowing as it laced its body around my legs.

The man waited until I looked at him, affirming that I was indeed listening to his story. He put his coffee mug down so he could use his hands to accentuate the story he was telling. Then he continued, "So the guy makes a big deal about imposing and causing trou-

ble. My dad throws his head back and groans, 'Oy vey,' and this guy laughs and says, 'You, my friend, have just lost a piece of your coffee cake,' before going into the back. The guy comes back out to thank my dad, and just before the door closes behind him, he catches it with his foot and says, 'The bear on the red stool next to the counter—it has a felt heart sewn to it and blue eyes like my newborn granddaughter.'"

I was thinking about Bari and how old and loved he had gotten. My grandma had conducted many surgeries on him, stitching a hole in his arm, and more than once she had had to replace the felt heart. My eyes wandered back to the window.

"So he says, 'Ring that up for me, please, sir. I would like to have it for my little one. I'll be right back with some money.'"

I wasn't really listening to the man's story until I heard him say, "my little one."

"What was that?" I asked him.

"Yeah, isn't that amazing?" He threw his arms up and shook his head. "The guy knew exactly which bear to get, and he was only in the store for about five minutes. My dad was impressed, too, and when the guy came back in to pay, they struck up quite a conversation."

I wanted to say something, but I wasn't sure what. The cat had stopped rubbing against my legs and was now sitting, looking at me patiently with its big yellow eyes. I realized I had been rubbing the tag in my hand during the whole story, like rubbing a genie's



lamp, waiting to make a wish.

I looked back at the man; there was a break in the clouds, and the sun reflected off the glazed coffee mug back to me.

The man continued, "Turns out his granddaughter was in the hospital. I guess she was late, and the birth had to be induced. The mom almost died, but doctors ended up saving both of them. My dad was fascinated. The guy had only seen his granddaughter through the window of the waiting room twice,

but you could tell he imagined holding 'his little one' every night. I guess her heart was really weak." He paused and looked over his shoulder as if reminiscing. "Man, did his eyes light up when he talked about her! This guy and my dad sent each other Hanukkah cards every year, but then the cards stopped coming."

The pottery in the room was glittering in the unexpected sunlight and threw prisms of purple and yellow onto the white walls. Outside the window the trees had turned hundreds of colors of green, and even the gravel in the parking lot shone whiter.

"He died."

"Excuse me?"

"The man you were talking about. He died of a heart attack seven years ago. I'm his granddaughter."

The man nodded his head in affirmation. He smiled delicately before saying, "You have his round face."

I added half-jokingly, "And his heart, too."

The man looked down at the floor, then at me again. "That doesn't have to be a bad thing." ★

Kitchen Women (continued from page 21)

until they noticed me and then I left when nature called.

When I came back from the washroom, my feet led me, by it seemed some uncontrollable force, into the kitchen. And there were the women in their own world. They laughed and smoked and cleaned. They laughed at the hardships of being a mother, of being a young girl without a special boy. I scoped the room and found my place, a comfortable chair that could have been mistaken for a throne.

I took my seat. I felt I needed to show these kitchen women something. I saw everything merging together, and I was to teach them to find their own space.

I sat in the kitchen chair and leaned back. I was not particularly comfortable there. I could not even add anything significant to the conversation. I didn't even smoke. But I am a person trying out my feet in life, and I knew right then I was not done moving. I am a new breed, I said into my chamber. I am my own new child. I am in labor.

As I sat there, I began to let go of the pains and deliver myself, belly rolled and smoking, into my own world. ★