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A Short Story
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THE PIG ROAST

by

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They do it every fall, Janine explained. It's held in a state park near town. There's a big pit and a spit. You'll see.

OK.

I was new to the area and unfamiliar with its rituals. I came from another part of the country.

It's kind of cool, she went on.

Yeah, I imagine, I said.

I wasn't sure what one wore to a pig roast. Perhaps a bit more dressy than a backyard barbecue. Yet one wouldn't wear a dress, would one, to an outdoor affair, in a state park? I decided on an elegant pair of billowy black slacks I'd recently purchased and a polite white blouse. Just in case, I wore socks and sandals. I figured they would soften the formality of my attire and if the formality proved to be appropriate, I could hide my feet behind tall grass. I attached a discreet black fanny pack to my waist. Should I wear pearls? I had a one-strand string I could run around my neck. I decided not.

It was an all-day affair, I was told; they had to start the pig early in the morning to be sure it was cooked through by afternoon. With pigs you have the risk of trichinosis.

You don't have to stay all day, Janine said. Most people come just for the afternoon.

I arrived shortly after noon. The park's entrance was marked by a sign: Baxter State Park, with Indian arrowheads indicating where to turn. Wood-burned letters on rough-hewn logs, or at least a simulacrum to that effect

The car lurched from side to side on the gravel road as if on car-wash tracks, pulling the steering wheel nearly out of control. I finally managed, by speeding up, to reach the parking lot, which thankfully was paved.

The sun was very bright. I was glad I'd thought to bring my sunglasses, despite their old-fashioned style. I'd been meaning to get new ones that were more chic. These were in any event guaranteed to block 95% of the UV rays. I figured the remaining 5% could do little harm.

Happily, the first person I met as I climbed out of the car was Janine, the unit secretary. I say happily because she was the only one I was even minimally acquainted with and she knew the ropes.

You'll get a chance to meet Art Daley, she said brightly as we headed for the clearing where the event was being held. He's the boss, you know, she prompted after receiving no sign of recognition from me.

Yes, yes, I know, I said hastily. In truth, I'd forgotten his name. I'm looking forward to meeting him, I added.

It's a good way to get to know him, she went on. It gives you a chance to make a good impression, you know, in an informal setting.

Oh, good, I said. Of course, I wanted to make a good first impression.

A bluish haze drifted over the picnic area and I detected a strange pungently sweet smoky smell as we climbed the knoll.

That's the pig, Janine pointed.

I felt a kind of nervous excitement ripple up my back, as if approaching a religious shrine, something sacred. We should be whispering, I thought, as in church.

As we rounded a copse of trees, there it was, quite recognizable: a large charred pig skewed on a long metal pole, one end coming out its mouth and the other its behind. The feet and arms were bound up to the front and rear. The pole was propped up at each end by a forked metal branch driven into the ground. It was slowly turning, propelled, it appeared, by a small motor that was sputtering underneath, its black pulley belt spiraling in a wobbly figure 8. A low flame was burning beneath the animal as it turned. Strangely, there was a kind of benign smile on the creature's face, as if it were asleep and enjoying the ride. But, of course, I was just imagining.

Attending the process was a thin middle-aged man with a scruffy beard and wearing a baseball cap. He turned when he saw us and smiled a welcoming grin. I was happy to be distracted from the pig.

This is Elizabeth, Janine said, extending her hand toward me as if clearing a path to my body. She's one of the new ones.

To me she said, this here's Jim.

Why, welcome, welcome, said Jim, reaching his hand to shake mine and stumbling over a tuft of grass in the process. He was wearing a short-sleeved seersucker shirt, khaki pants, and sandals, I was relieved to see.

You can just call me Liz, I said.

You're new to this part of the country, aren't you? he asked, squinting his eyes earnestly.

Yes, I am, I said. I'm not from around here.

Well, you're lucky to have the chance to learn right off about one of our oldest customs, he said, gesturing at the spit.

Yes, I said. I am lucky.

We don't do this very often any more. Takes too much time. We only do it once a year, mostly so new folks like yourself can see one. Kind of an initiation.

Oh, I said, smiling, I hoped, appropriately. It's nice that you do this.

It's an old tradition, he went on, handed down from father to son. There's just a certain way of doing it, a certain procedure you have to follow. You have to get every step just right. It's a real skill—an art, really. Not just anyone can do it.

No, I can see that, I said.

Jim moved closer.

We haven't met yet, came a voice at my left elbow. I looked around to find a chubby red-faced fellow, who was sweating profusely in the hot afternoon sun, apparently unaware that Jim was speaking.

You have to get up at dawn, Jim continued (not seeing or perhaps ignoring the person at my other side), and get out here and start the fire.

No, I said, to the fellow at my left, automatically extending my hand. I'm Liz. I'm new, I giggled as an explanation. He shifted a glass of what looked like lemonade to his left hand and shook mine with his right.

I'm Ed, he said. I'm new too. He was wearing a white linen suit.

First you build it up real high, Jim went on, and you have to use hickory. That gives it its signal taste. You've heard of hickory-smoked ham?

I turned back to my right. Jim was looking at me insistently. I noticed for the first time how yellowed and cracked his teeth were.

Yes, of course, I said, frowning, so as to indicate serious interest in the subject.

You from around here? Ed said.

Yes, I said in confusion. I mean, no, I corrected, looking directly at Ed to orient myself. No, I'm not. I'm new here, I repeated. How about you? I asked.

I lived here as a kid, he said, blushing, but I've been away.

On my right Jim cleared his throat impatiently. I tried to explain that there was someone to my left named Ed who was talking to me, but Jim didn't seem to see or hear. Nor did Ed seem to realize that Jim was explaining a very intricate process. Thus I found myself the interlocutor of two conversations at once. Not wanting to appear rude, I tried to keep abreast of both strains of thought, nodding and commenting appropriately to each in turn.

Oh, I said to Ed, hitting on an idea of how to introduce my two companions. Then you must be familiar with local rituals. You must have seen many pig roasts in your youth. I stepped back abruptly so the two men would have to face one another.

Ed started to say no, but I interrupted.

Jim here, I said, gesturing to my right, is explaining their history. It's an old tradition.

Well, not exactly the history, Jim said to Ed. I was explaining how you.

Oh, you must be Elizabeth Norton, exclaimed an ebullient woman who rushed up to me, broadly smiling and reaching for my hand. I've heard so much about you. I'm Mabel, in Human Relations. We talked on the phone last week, remember, about your benefits?

Oh yes, I said. I did recall a disappointing conversation I'd had with someone who'd informed me I'd apparently misunderstood about the \$2,000 hiring bonus. They only did that in extraordinary circumstances, I was told.

I hope you're getting settled in here nicely now, she said.

Oh yes, I am, I said.

Mabel was wearing a pink pantsuit in some sort of polyester that had a sheen to it. She seemed to have trouble walking on the rough grass in her thin-strapped white sandals which had tiny high heels. I couldn't help noticing how wobbly they looked as I watched her stumble back to the refreshment table.

Would you like something to drink? It was Ed, still standing nervously at my side.

Ew, I said, wrinkling my nose and waving the smoke away. The wind had just shifted, sweeping fumes from the flame over me.. Let's move over here.

I slipped to the opposite side of the pit.

My back was now to the sun and I could see the creature more clearly now. With each turn of the spit it seemed to disintegrate more, looking less and less like a pig and more and more ominous, a nameless black blob. The smile seemed to be curling into another, less sanguine, expression.

Can I get you something to drink? Ed repeated once we had restationed ourselves.

Yes, thanks, a lemonade would be good, I said. It's getting hot out here.

Did you know, he blurted out suddenly, that pig roasts were once part of an ancient chthonic underworld worship? A Canaanite ritual. They were designed to cleanse the participants of their impurities. He giggled.

No kidding, I said. Awesome.

Finding myself momentarily alone, after Ed made his departure, I glanced over the area. Several people were scattered about, seated their backs to me on metal lawn chairs. A blue haze had drifted from the roasting animal across the field into lazy eddies that circled indolently but irrevocably about, cutting them off as isolated sandbars.

Elizabeth? A middle-aged man with a broad smile was approaching, his hand outstretched. He was tall and heavy-set, balding, wearing Bermuda shorts and tennies, which seemed a bit too familiar, I thought, but then I wasn't accustomed to local ways.

Liz, I corrected, so as to seem an everyday friendly person, shaking his hand.

I'm Art, he said in a sing-songy way, and gesturing to a woman behind him, he added, this is my wife Angela. Angela Rathbone-Daley.

Angela had a pretty face, blond hair in a classic suburban blunt cut, and was neatly dressed in a long denim skirt and plaid blouse.

Nice to meet you, I said to each in turn.

We were hoping you'd be here, Angela said effusively, moving forward. She had a slight English accent.

Yes, I said. I started to say, I wouldn't have missed it for the world, but couldn't quite summon myself to those heights; what came out was more muted. It's a lovely day, I think I said, waving at the turning spit.

Angela and I, Art began, moving closer to me, we like to feel it's one big family. The firm, you know. And we're the Mom and Pop. As he laughed encouragingly at what was apparently an exaggeration, if not a joke, I laughed too.

Angela nodded approvingly.

So if there's anything we can do for you, you just let us know, she added.

Fine, I said. I appreciate that. Then I added as an afterthought, everything's fine so far.

Well, Art said, clearing his throat. I hope it stays that way.

How's it coming? He called to Jim over the pig's body.

Almost done, Jim called back. Maybe an hour or so, and then we can dig in. He grinned, rubbing his hands together.

Great, Art said. He had a booming authoritative voice. I could see how he got to be boss.

Art and Angela soon excused themselves—I knew they had to circulate—and Ed soon returned with the lemonade. I needed to sit down as I was getting tired, but I wasn't sure I wanted to get stuck with Ed. Sitting down sort of locks you in with whomever you're with. He didn't strike me as much of a conversationalist. When I thanked him for the drink he grinned sheepishly. I sensed he lacked social skills, which made me nervous. I was anxious to make a good impression and feared being identified with anyone who might threaten that prospect.

How's it going? Janine had returned. She was drinking from a sweating can of Budweiser: red, silver, and blue. I was relieved to see her familiar face.

Fine, I said. I met Mr. Daley and his wife. I nodded in their direction, but the two had separated. Art was by the pig talking to Jim and Angela was seated alone in empty space. Or so it seemed. There was no one around her and a meadow stretched beyond her up a hill, beyond the horizon of which you couldn't see. Nothing but blue skies from there on.

Let's sit down a while, Janine suggested, ignoring Ed and leading me toward a couple of folding chairs that had been set up near the pig. Happily, the wind was still at our backs so the smoke was drifting in the opposite direction. Ed wandered back toward Jim and Art.

Janine pulled out a cigarette. I was surprised; so few people smoke anymore, anyway in our field. Marlboros, too.

After lighting up she thoughtfully blew the smoke off to her right, away from me. I hope you don't mind, she said coughing.

I couldn't imagine saying I did.

Janine surveyed the area. I detected a smirk materializing on her lips, but, as her eyes were shielded by bomber pilot sunglasses, I couldn't be sure. Her observation, however, confirmed my suspicion.

You know about Art and Angela, don't you? she asked.

Why, yes, I just met them, I said, my brain having somehow deleted the "about" in its transcription of her message.

No, I know that, Janine said with slight irritation. I mean their situation, their arrangement. Have you heard about that?

I hadn't heard about anything. I was new there. But I felt ashamed that I was out of the loop, so to speak, so out of the know. I shook my head without replying so as to minimize the magnitude of my ignorance.

Janine moved closer. They have an open marriage, she said in a low voice, glancing around as if someone might overhear her.

Oh, yeah? I said, not wanting to reveal my uncertainty as to what that meant.

Janine continued to amplify.

He's having an affair with, she paused to jerk her head behind and to the left. I glanced behind me and noticed a willowy woman dressed in a breezy apple-green outfit that looked like loose pajamas but couldn't have been, of course. She was standing near the refreshment table eating something from a paper plate. Her back was to us.

Oh? I said. Who is she?

Sheila Cunningham. She's the new hire in Marketing. She got the job by screwing with him, of course.

I glanced back at Sheila.

Don't stare, Janine said.

No, but I mean she's quite attractive.

Janine looked at me quizzically. What I was trying to say was, why would she be sleeping with him, because in truth I didn't find Art very handsome with his pot belly hanging out over his shorts, barely covered by a loose-fitting shirt, pinched together by two badly stressed buttons.

Power is an aphrodisiac, Janine explained, reading my unstated question.

Oh, I said. I didn't realize.

He has it. She doesn't.

Ah, I said.

I hesitated a few moments, allowing the new information to soak in.

And she? I asked, tilting my head toward Angela, who had moved upwind of the pig but was still alone. She . . . ?

She doesn't know, Janine said tersely.

Oh, that's not very nice, I blurted involuntarily, immediately regretting I'd been so frank. Perhaps customs were different here.

Janine snickered, then ratified my comment.

You've got it, she said.

She must suspect, I said gazing at Angela through my protective sunglasses.

Perhaps, Janine said.

And she? I continued, my curiosity aroused. Is she . . . ? I started to say, fooling around, but thought that might not be the right colloquialism.

We don't know, Janine said. There are rumors.

There you are. A high crackling voice, as sometimes heard in older women, echoed from somewhere behind us. I've been looking all over for you.

I turned to view the newcomer, who brushed around in front of us. It was an older woman, one with tight white curls, wearing a flowery print dress and carrying a white handbag.

There you are, she repeated breathlessly. She held her hand up to her chest to indicate she needed to pause.

Janine jumped up. Doctor Mansfield, she said.

Doctor, why don't you sit here? Janine pointed to her chair.

The older woman thanked her and flopped down beside me. Janine excused herself; she needed a refill, she said.

I've been looking all over for you, the older woman repeated, laying her hand on my arm as if to make sure I wouldn't slip away again. Then she turned and looked directly in my face as if perhaps she'd mistaken my identity and wanted to reassure herself.

You're Elizabeth Norton, aren't you?

I nodded. My you-can-just-call-me-Liz seemed to fall on deaf ears, though, as she rushed on breathlessly.

Well, I, I am Doctor Mansfield, Elizabeth. Perhaps you've heard of me? she paused, smiling expectantly.

I had heard of her and so informed her. She was a well-known specialist in the field.

I've been looking forward to meeting you, I assured her, debating whether to reach over to shake her hand but it seemed too awkward.

Upon learning of my recognition, she visibly relaxed, settling back in her chair, and laying her purse in the grass beside her. She patted my arm once again.

I wanted to get to you before the others did, she said, before they fill you full of lies.

Oh? I said, taking a sip on my now warm lemonade.

I wanted to alert you to the dynamics of the unit you'll be working in. Not a one of them is to be trusted. Not a one.

Oh? I said.

Oh, I know, you think I'm an old bat. They all do. But I've been around Robin Hood's barn a few times and I know what's what.

I stared out across the meadow. Angela's chair was empty, and I noticed a crowd had gathered around the pig. That's where the action was now, evidently.

You won't believe it, Doctor Mansfield continued obliviously, but I was young and innocent once myself. I came here I won't tell you how many years ago filled with hopes and dreams. Just like you yourself now.

She glanced in my direction without really looking to see my reaction. In truth I was asking myself, do I have hopes and dreams? If so, I wasn't sure what they were. I wanted to politely correct Doctor Mansfield, to bring her up to date: People don't have hopes and dreams anymore. That's old-fashioned. She sounded like a Sixties person; they had odd ideas, I knew.

The doctor continued, unaware of my silent critique. But I wanted to warn you, she patted my arm again, whom to look out for, so you won't be duped the way I was, and live to regret it.

I smiled politely.

Now Jim, for example, she said, waving in the direction of the pig where Jim was standing, arms akimbo, watching the turning beast.

He seems like a nice guy, she said, shrugging as if to emphasize his OK-ness. But he's one you can count on, if you're ever down, to move in for the kill. A strange smile spread across Doctor Mansfield's face as if relishing her imagery.

I can tell you some stories, she went on. There was Esther Maggard, for example. She was coming up for promotion and Jim felt she was a threat to his masculinity or something. Doctor Mansfield stopped to chortle.

So he began spreading rumors about her, not about her sex life or anything, just little things about her work habits, things you wouldn't ordinarily notice, but cumulatively, when people start keeping track, it can damage you.

She peered at me to see whether I'd gotten her point. Then she looked up abruptly. Ed had returned, bringing her a glass of iced tea.

Why, thank you, she said. I don't much like iced tea, but it'll do.

Ed made a saluting gesture and smiled before ambling off again.

Such a lackey, Doctor Mansfield muttered to me under her breath, referring to Ed.

Anyway, this Esther. They began saying she was late to work, that she was negligent in filing her reports, that her dress was sloppy, that she used the phone for personal use, that she missed important meetings, that she had a bad attitude. All of it: lies, Doctor Mansfield exclaimed. One lie after another. Except the last. Of course, she had an attitude problem. Who wouldn't, with all the harassment she received?

I took a deep breath, wishing all of a sudden I were somewhere else.

Well, Doctor Mansfield continued after a sip of the iced tea and a grimace of distaste. Of course, she didn't get the promotion. Eventually she had to leave; she couldn't stand it here anymore, with everyone snooping after her, monitoring her phone calls, checking her files. It drove her nuts.

That's too bad, I said vapidly. What else was there to say?

Encouraged by this mild expression of sympathy, Doctor Mansfield began another story.

There was this guy Alfred. Actually, come to think of it this new fellow, Ed, he reminds me of Al.

Then she stopped abruptly and glanced over her shoulder to see if Ed were still hanging around. In a low voice she said as an aside, Ed will never last. He's doomed before he starts. They'll go after him so fast it'll take your breath away. She shook her head. He's meat.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I was beginning to sweat, the afternoon sun seemed unseasonably hot.

Anyway, Doctor Mansfield continued, this guy Alfred, he came here several years ago, a young good-looking fellow. Too good-looking. That was his problem. They had to knock him down to their level. Had a nice wife, too, and some kids. So they began sticking it to him. First they.

Almost ready. Jim interrupted from afar, calling through hands cupped like a megaphone around his mouth. He waved his arms. C'mon over for the last turn.

Everyone started heading for the pig. Evidently it was part of the ritual for everyone to gather around for the final moments of the roast.

Oh, we better get over there, Doctor Mansfield said, pushing herself with a groan out of the chair. You don't want to get on their bad side, She'd forgotten her purse, I noticed, so I reached down and retrieved it for her.

As the others assembled, Doctor Mansfield took me aside and explained, now they do what they call the Sacrificial Bite.

I must have looked uncertain for she continued. They cut a piece off the pig and give it to a newcomer to taste, to see if it's done enough. It's part of the old tradition. I guess in the past they liked to use the newcomer as a kind of guinea pig, she chuckled, to make sure the meat hadn't been poisoned.

Sensing that as a newcomer I might be called upon to perform this office, I excused myself, saying I needed to visit the park's rest room, hoping thereby to be absent when they looked around for one of us newcomers. Let Ed be the one, I prayed.

When I returned what I hoped was a sufficient time later, I could see that the group was dispersing and the pig still turning, as if in imperceptible slow motion, on the spit.

It wasn't done enough, Janine explained as I reapproached the pit. It's supposed to fall off the bone and be soft to the touch.

Oh, I said.

Did Ed test it? I asked.

Janine nodded. He used to live around here as a kid.

Yes, I know, I said.

I noticed that Ed was standing protectively near the pig now, as if his new duties as acolyte had invested him more in the process.

We were told we had another half hour to kill before the final dismemberment. I glanced at the soon-to-be-devoutly-consumed object. By then the pig-shape was lost but on what had been the face I detected a frightening sneer. The lips had shrunk back and the teeth shone through. It was a look of rage. I stepped back, startled. Then I realized it was only my imagination, running away with me again.

Looks good, don't she? It was Jim at my side, rubbing his hands. Won't be long now before we can dig in.

Oh, good, I said, though I wasn't really hungry.

I see old Cassandra got to you, he laughed.

Cassandra?

That's what we call Mansfield. She's our Cassandra. Doom and gloom. Completely paranoid at this point. He tapped his forehead. Early dementia. You can't trust her, so don't give credence to anything she told you.

Oh, I said, looking around, but Doctor Mansfield had disappeared. Well, she seemed nice, I started, feeling I shouldn't get into putting anyone down at this point.

Oh, she's nice all right, he said sarcastically. She's just not trustworthy.

Ah, I said. OK. Thanks for the tip.

I began edging back toward the refreshment table. I was getting tired and hoped some iced tea with caffeine would reenergize me for the final go-round.

Standing at the far side of the table was Sheila Cunningham, whom I still hadn't met. I noticed she was talking to someone on a cell phone but seeing me approach she ended her conversation and slipped the phone into her pocket.

She came toward me, extending her hand. She had an open and fresh-looking face, which surprised me, given that she was involved, according to Janine, in a duplicitous affair, the other participants in which were nearby. On closer inspection, though, I did notice a haggard shadow beneath her eyes, belying perhaps buried anxiety.

After the preliminaries we sat down on a picnic bench in the shade. I was relieved to get out of the sun.

You'll find this a strange place, she said.

I couldn't help but smile.

No, I mean, strange isn't quite the word, she corrected herself, reaching for a beer. I could see she'd been drinking.

Cursed is the word. She pulled the top off the beer can which gave an appropriate hiss.

I felt a sudden fatigue sweep over me. Instead of prompting Sheila for more about her theory, which I should have done out of politeness, I took a sip of tea, welcoming its bracing tingle. I needed some stiffening support.

Everyone has a story here, a sad story, I should say, Sheila continued, speaking it seemed more to the pines than to me. Some bad patterns got established here long ago and they're hard to break. You'll find, despite the best of intentions, you'll be acting like the rest of them before long. She waved the beer can in the air, as if everything were a lost cause. She seemed absorbed in thought.

Finally, she turned toward me, realizing apparently all of a sudden that I was still there.

In the end you have to play their game to survive. You have to eat, don't you? You have to feed your family. I have a little girl. She has to be fed.

I gazed up at the tall pines. They were so dense you couldn't see the sky.

Sheila concluded. You do what you have to. Who wants to be road kill?

No, I murmured involuntarily.

As I see it, Sheila went on, you have two choices.

Dinner's ready. It was Janine tapping me on the shoulder. They're serving it up now.

I turned to Sheila. I think the pig's ready, I said. We better get over there.

Sheila snorted and rolled her eyes as she swung her legs around the bench end.

It's ham now, Janine said.

Actually, I don't think I'm that hungry, I said to Janine as we walked back to the pit.

You better take some, she said. It'll look bad if you don't.

Here we are, Elizabeth, Jim said. May I call you Liz? he asked, hesitating to look up at me as he sliced a piece from the pig/ham that was still hanging from the pole.

Yes, I said. Call me Liz.

I held out a paper plate to receive the slab of meat, which he slid off the fork with a piece of wood.

Thanks, I said.

Janine ushered me to a couple of empty chairs nearby.

I set the plate on my lap. The charred entity at its center was glowing, a radioactive coal, burning into my body like original sin. I wanted to throw it off and run away. Anywhere but here.

I'm not hungry, I repeated to Janine.