

## FOOD CHAIN BY CHARLES PINCH

Strong had a big heart in a big chest that a boy's trust in humanity broke at least once a month. Riff (aka Reefer) was already aloft in the atmosphere hydrating on rum fizzes and champagne cocktails at thirty-five thousand feet plus the extra three or four inches it took to get through the straw. Strong had been the last to see him the night before. Strong had stood at the employee's exit like the good store security staff he was. He checked purchases against receipts. Even if they bought nothing he checked bags. Sweaters and worn at the heels shoes mostly and visible odors like sour breath. Riff was the exception. He flashed the watch in Strong's face with un-Marxist brash.

"How long you had that on hold?"

"Three months, two weeks, four days. How many hours I aint sure about."

"Didn't Momma tell you never to say 'aint'?"

"Momma said don't say fuck, neither, but fuck man, what are you gonna say?"

A shrunk runt; closely related to rodents but closely related to humans. Riff's hair was a self-styled shipwreck where both sides met in the middle like a wet cockscomb. For all that Strong thought he had a good face: the eyes were gray and noble and content to be out of place in that rat-like countenance. Below the neck lived a body like a bent wire hanger.

"You got a bill of sale for me?"

Riff groped inside his pocket. He pulled a condom out. Inside the condom was the sales receipt. Strong's eyebrows snarled. He scratched the head that in a few years would shame him into a hair transplant.

"Don't you have a wallet?"

“No. I got my wallet stolen two times.”

“The same wallet?”

“Two different wallets. I had a box full of these on the top of my dresser. I figure recycle. In my other pocket I got a condom full of change. You should see the look I get when I cash out anywhere.”

“A box full of unused condoms tells me you got the kind of weekends the rest of us should be lining up for.”

“Sure, officer. Can I go now?”

“What time’s your flight?”

“Three oh five in the morning. By the time you’ve had your wet dream I’m on a beach with a boner. Palm trees. Tits and ass. Tropical sunsets. Tits and ass. You know how it is...”

“Yeah. That’s how come I need my wallet.”

He reached out and rubbed his hand through Riff’s younger hair and mussed it up. “You stay out of trouble, kid. I’m glad you finally bought your watch.”

Riff flashed his wrist under the lone cathode above the door. Platinum pretension verged on the polished rhodium-plated steel band.

“It took me long enough to save for it. That and my upcoming junket and I’m a poverty statistic.”

“Get out of here and go have some fun!”

Satisfied, Strong folded the sales slip, the receipt of purchase and felt like a fool stuffing it back into the condom but figured he couldn’t appear any sillier than the man who took it.

That was the last he saw of him and ever would. Riff walking through the open door with his hand raised like he was taking an oath but not looking behind him.

Boomers had cut back like every other business in the recessive slump. Those who survived the purge double dutied. Andy used to come in to do the cash and deposits (week nights after his symbolic logic tutorials) but now conscription included things like a vacuum cleaner and Windex. When Strong wasn't blending into racks of Polo shirts to watch a junkie stuff his pockets with ill gotten gain, he was billeted to multi-task. One or two tons of incoming merchandise off the loading dock. A gun that shot plastic thread-like ammo and harpooned gloves and scarves with price tags.

Andy looked up when the big man ambled into the basement office.

“Hey, McStrong.”

“Andrew Gordon. Just because you're a laddie doesn't mean you have to 'scotch-athize' everything.”

“Why Mac Not, bro?”

“Yeah,” Deepa said. “Why do you do that, Andy-O?”

Strong returned in a caring, brotherly baritone. “You don't hear Deepa saying sah-heeb after everything.”

The young man, dark skin, dark flashing eyes, glanced up from his laptop.

“Hey, you. Get off my political correctness!”

They all laughed. Then Strong said, “Whatchya workin' on?”

“Philosophical ruminations on the food chain.”

“I knew it was a mistake to bunk with you college guys.”

“Ruminations is a good word.” Jill opened the cap of her bottled water after coming back from flushing the last intake. “Ruminates. Cows ruminates.”

“Chew their Mc Cuds...?”

“It’s a good verb given your topic, Deep. We eat cows.”

“Hindus don’t.”

“Deepa and deepa the defiled virgin screams at Deepa the Defiler!”

The young man blushed. “C’mon, Andy. Knock it off.”

“What have you got?” Strong asked him. Cogs and wheels beginning to grind upstairs.

“Did Riff finally pay for his watch?”

“Yessum. I saw the bill.”

“Where does he get the money?” Andy asked.

“Workin’ minimum wage for Boomers, stupid.”

“Like I said. Where’d he get the Mac Money?”

“What’s a watch cost...?”

“What’s a watch that he takes three months to save up for and a trip to Cancun cost?”

Strong said, “He’s not spending it on lube. I know that much.”

“Listen up, white people. The food chain, right? My micro-thesis thus far is that civilized man---“

“Footnote! Citation required!”

“Shutup. Civilized man has usurped the role of nature by becoming the prime mover in the food chain. After that I’m stuck.”

“Didn’t God used to be the prime mover?”

“Okay,” Strong nodded, stepping up to the plate. “He’s usurped the natural modus and artificialized the food chain. Example. A cat no longer picks off birds and rodents. It relies on man for its food supply which has been de-naturalized in the form of canned pet food.”

Deepa smiled with double eyelashes. It was good enough to write down. He started writing.

“You forgot kibble.”

“No I didn’t. Kibble in fact is your de-facto example, Deep. Why? Because there is no natural equivalent for it. Kibble is neither plant nor animal. This usurpation is expressed collectively by the pet food industry which has become the cat’s rung on the new food chain.”

Andy frowned at the stack of sales receipts. “We’re short nine hundred and forty-three dollars.”

“Link,” Jill corrected.

“Link, what?”

“Chains have links. Ladders have rungs.”

“Are you getting this down, Deepa? You see, Man is gradually extinguishing the operandus behind existence. Man’s gradual elimination of the need for nature. Parallel, congruent operations replace the old order. It eventually leads to pure hybridization.”

“Shit,” Andy scowled.

Jill snatched up a handful of sales receipts and started eyeballing.

“Nine hundred and forty-three dollars? That’s what Riff paid for his watch.”

“Did you see the Mc Bill, Strong?”

“Yes, McAndy.”

“Then why are we out?”

“Here’s the receipt.” Jill leaned against the desk in a way that had all her clothes off in Deepa’s mind. She waved the piece of paper. “Nine hundred and forty-three dollars and seventy-five cents. He paid cash. Register four. Transaction number two seven three.”

“Right. So how come we’re McShort?”

“This is your territory, isn’t it?” Jill squinted at Strong like a tourist in Tangiers sun.

“I saw the bill. He paid for it.”

“Wait a minute. Register seven. There was a voided transaction.” Andy thumbed through a pile of stapled slips. Deepa had stopped keying.

Strong’s suspicion woke and surged. He rubbed the sweat forming on his hide-bound cranium. Oh Jesus Christ.

“You know what the guy did?”

“That little fuck!”

“He bought it on register four. Puts the cash in or not. Then he refunds himself on register seven. Takes the cash out or not. We’re short because four thinks seven owes it nine hundred and forty-three dullah.”

“What a fucking little FUCK!”

Strong, the ‘Strong Man’, Mister Security Man placed his hand against the wall just under the light. Mini-spectrums unlocked in the translucent hairs of his blond arm while his soul quietly crumbled.

Andy was laughing now. “You’re in the wrong line of work, boy!”

Deepa told Strong, if it was any comfort, “It’s your name should be on my diploma, saheeb. I got an A on the last essay you wrote.”