

LUNCH TIME

By Alexander Jones

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author MICHAEL HOWARD writes: Perhaps the most effective—and surely the most efficient—means of developing characters and presenting them to readers is through dialogue. More can be said about a character or a scenario in one well-crafted line of speech than in five pages of mediocre description. Salinger knew it, Hemingway knew it, Steinbeck knew it, and the author of this story evidently knows it. Consisting wholly of dialogue, minus the tags, this one-act play manages to boldly communicate the frustration, banality and conformity that so often characterize middling suburban existence without ever directly alluding to it. All that is going on is going on beneath the surface, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps as he or she likes. The author creates the scene, but the reader completes it—and that, ultimately, is how fiction should operate. Frills have no place here; ingenuity of form does, though, as you'll see when you start reading. With such a boiled-down style, every line has to pop, and in this story they do. Try these on for size:*

Hey, that's not funny.

Yeah, lay off. He's touchy now that he's the one in the family wearing the leash.

Whipped.

Fuck both of you.

Lunch Time

Cold, overcooked meatloaf. Again.

At least you're married and your wife'll cook for you. I've got turkey. Again. And the kid didn't put enough fucking mustard on it. Again.

That's life as a bachelor. Me, I got peanut butter.

You have peanut butter every day.

So? You both are the ones complaining. I like having peanut butter every day.

You love, love, love that peanut butter.

Yup.

You're the type of pervert that'll put peanut butter all over your dick and let the dog lick it off.

Why are you always starting shit with me? He's starting his bullshit again.

How about you?

He's just trolling. Desperate for attention.

You're not denying it, though.

Dogs love peanut butter.

That's animal cruelty.

You're a fucking dirty pervert, you know that?

You started talking about this. And I don't even have a dog.

Well, I'm not letting you near my dog.

You don't have a dog either. Your wife decided you weren't getting one.

We had a dog. She just didn't want another after he died.

Choked to death on the peanut butter?

Hey, that's not funny.

Yeah, lay off. He's touchy now that he's the one in the family wearing the leash.

Whipped.

Fuck both of you.

You know, speaking about pets and animals and all, you know what I saw on one of those nature shows my son likes?

You're not going to start talking about watching the lions fuck again, are you?

It was tigers, not lions.

What difference does it make?

They're not the same animal.

I said 'what difference does it make?' not 'what's the difference?'

Don't take it out on him, that you're mad your wife won't let you get another dog.

That was so thirty seconds ago. What'd you see on the nature show?

It was about animals in the ocean. It said that an octopus is smarter than a dog.

Bullshit.

It's true.

Do you believe everything you see on tv?

There was a lot of, like, evidence to back it up.

Evidence?

Scientific shit.

Still sounds like bullshit to me.

No, it's true. It says right here... hang on, my signal died again... alright, here we go. It says that an octopus has better recognition of shapes and numbers than a dog, more problem solving ability and that it's the smartest non-vertebrate animal.

There's no way an octopus is smarter than a dog.

It says so, right here. And, hey, it's on the internet so it has to be true, right?

Whatever.

Google it yourself, then.

I don't have internet in here. I never get internet in here. I'm lucky if I even get texts.

That's because of your bullshit phone.

I'm not cheap.

Did I say that? Don't get all defensive. He's getting defensive.

That's because when someone accuses you of being cheap, there's no way to argue your way out of it.

Like being a pervert?

Anyway, at least according to this, some people are saying an octopus is smarter than a dog. So it's worth thinking about.

Some people.

Scientists doing research.

Our tax dollars at work.

The show said they're training octopuses to do things, so maybe it's worth it. I mean, an octopus could do your job, even if it is dumber than a dog.

Stop trying to sound like you know what you're talking about, it's octopi, not octopuses. You sound extra fucking stupid when you try and sound smart, you know that?

Octopuses isn't wrong.

It's octopi.

Actually, both of them are acceptable, according to this.

See?

You need him to keep backing you up.

If you weren't too cheap to get a real phone, you could look up this shit yourself and you wouldn't need me to play referee.

No one needs you to play referee, you just like coming off like you're the reasonable one, like you're some fucking... guardian of knowledge and wisdom.

No, he just sounds like someone that spent money on a phone with internet service.

And he believes everything he reads on the internet, so what does that prove?

It says here that octopuses mainly eat crabs, clams and other small crustaceans.

So?

Would you let an octopus suck clam meat off your balls?

I don't want to think about it.

Seriously. An octopus is in the water, so it's probably slippery, which feels good, and this says that they don't have teeth or claws, so you don't have to worry about it biting and scratching you. Plus it has eight arms, so it can jerk you off and cup your balls at the same time, and still have a couple tentacles left over to massage your ass.

Huh.

That's gay.

An octopus isn't even a person, so how can fucking an octopus be gay?

Fucking an octopus can be stupid, though. The show said that they're poisonous.

Oh, wait. Yeah, it does say that down here, though. But still, it doesn't have teeth. Or hair. I'm-

We only got like, two more minutes.

Shit. I didn't even have time to finish.

You talk too much.

No I don't.

If you couldn't finish your lunch because you were talking, then you were talking too fucking much.

I didn't even really want it. The guy didn't put on enough mustard.

Don't throw it out, I'll take that other half.

Sure?

Man, I only eat peanut butter every fucking day. Gimme the rest of the sandwich?

Knock yourself out.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was inspired by my interest in minimalism and because I recently took a class in dramatic writing. For the most part, other people get a sense of who we are by what we do and what we say; the problem is that most of us don't get the chance for grand, sweeping, memorable actions on day to day basis. Instead, we have mundane conversations like the characters in "Lunch Time." Which is where the need for characterization through dialogue becomes paramount, similar to a stage play. A coworker recently showed me a Not Safe For Work anime tentacle porn image, and the rest flowed pretty naturally. As a literary inspiration, Nicholson Baker wrote a novel titled "Vox" in which a man and a woman discuss their sex lives over the telephone, using nothing but dialogue. Monica Lewinsky famously gave a copy of it to Bill Clinton. Elmore Leonard is a dialogue master. So is Hemingway.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Alexander Jones has short fiction and poetry appearing Akashic Books, Bastion Magazine, Crack the Spine and DASH, among other publications. His nonfiction was recently anthologized by 2Leaf Press; multiple short stories he's written have received honorable mentions in Writer's Digest Annual contests and an essay he wrote won GoRail's 2012 contest. He has a BA in English/ Creative Writing and is currently pursuing a second BA in History. He works as a metal fabricator and lives with his family in New Jersey.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com. His story 'At the end of the day' appears in this issue (fiction).*