

The smell of raw meat hung in the air. Bob Jr.'s fingers were deep into some 80/20 lean/fat hamburger meat. He worked the cold burger meat until it oozed through his fingers like a fat desert slug oozed through his toes after a big rainstorm.

Bob began to talk aloud, "An artist must choose his medium. I am a sculptor and I have chosen burger meat. Don't laugh. Far too many have. Instead, just for a moment, imagine the possibilities. Each globule of ground beef represents its own building block. And it is with these humble blocks that I build my masterpieces. Watch here how I use burger meat to shape my latest creation right before your very eyes."

Bob sculpted furiously. He carefully chose pieces of raw burger meat and squeezed them together, and then he scraped off the excess and shaped the statue with a variety of different plastic knives and sporks. Soon a figure started to emerge, a muscle-bound figure, kneeling down and balancing what looked like a hamburger patty on his shoulders. Bob held the figurine up and admired it.

Outside the shack's dusty window, the pale pink desert light had faded beyond the bruised purple and into a dark blue and the desert turned cold. The old "Big Bopper's Burgers" sign kicked out one last flicker then shut off.

Just then, the door to Bob's shed banged open and Bob Sr., rushed in. "Jr. you gotta check out Officer Chugg's night vision goggles." Bob. Sr. stopped short and looked at the excess ground meat on Bob's butcher's block and then back to his son's statue. "Jr., we need that meat."

California's Not For Losers

For three generations now, Bob and his family owned and operated a little hamburger stand on that lonely strip of the interstate called, "Somewhere Outthere" Nevada, pop. 5. The town was so far out there in the middle of nowhere that they had to give it a name, on account that that part of the state map was just too damn blank. Some state official pointed his fat finger down on the map and said, "Let's just call it, 'Somewhere Outthere'", and everyone laughed and the name stuck.

"You see how beautiful this is." Bob held his latest creation up to the light.

"And what exactly am I supposed to be looking at?"

"Ah, come on Dad! It's Atlas holding the weight of the world on his shoulders. Except the world is a hamburger patty."

"Bob, that's not art. It's burger meat! And it should be turned into hamburgers and sold for money."

"You see here how the fat and the meat cling to Atlas's ribs. You can't get that with clay."

"Now, Jr. you know how your mother gets when she hears you talk like that."

"Dad, Mom's been gone for five years now."

Back in the day, the population of "Somewhere, Outthere" was made up of Bob Jr., his father Bob Sr., his mother Diana, and Cleatus and Wheatus - the two brothers who owned the gas station next door – and that was it. Except that now that his mother had run off with Big Dale the Trucker, there were really only four people left.

"I know it's been hard on you, Jr. But mom's coming back. The sign still says population 5."

Bob's shoulders slumped. "I don't want to flip burgers for the rest of my life."

“Listen Jr. you’re becoming the best burger chef in these here parts. Right up there with your old man. A chip off the old burger! And it’s a dangerous world out there.”

“Dad, I’m almost seventeen!”

“And that’s why I’m telling you this. You’re at a very vulnerable age. You can’t trust those cars coming down the road. Who knows what kind of people they are. Some of them might even steal from you. Why, some of them driving them fancy cars might even say that the world is round, but look,” Bob Sr.’s hand swept the empty desert, “you see it’s flat. Flat just like a burger patty.”

“I know, dad. I know.”

Bob Sr. clamped a hand on Jr.’s back. “Now let’s go clean up that meat before it spoils.”

Five days later, Bob was slinking off with a bag in his hand. He had just snuck into Cleatus and Wheatus’s gas station and robbed their secret stash spot of two hundred and fifty dollars. Bob felt terrible about this, but he had to do it, because earlier in the day he had met a couple of hippies coming back from the Grateful Dead’s last tour and struck a deal with them. They said they’d wait for him out past the “Somewhere, Outthere” sign, and as long as he showed up with two hundred and fifty cash, they’d take him all the way to San Diego, California – where they said, there was a “burgeoning art scene.” They also said that he’d have to “you know, kick down a free lunch, too.” Bob quickly agreed to the terms.

Later on, after his father had shut the stand down, Bob went to see what was left in the cash register, but it was empty. Bob panicked. He needed cash fast, so he went over to Cleatus and Wheatus’s gas station to see if he could borrow the money, or perhaps even sell them some of his statues – after all, they were his biggest fans – but when no one was in the shop, Bob,

almost as if he was caught in trance, saw himself going to Cleatus and Wheatus's secret stash spot, the one behind, Nellie, the stuffed coyote, and he took out two hundred and fifty dollars.

Then Bob ran out of the gas station.

Bob picked his way through the desert cactus and scrub until he could safely reach the shoulder of the interstate. His heart skipped a beat when he didn't see the hippies VW Van, but then again, he couldn't see past the giant tumbleweed that was stuck to the "Somewhere Outthere" sign. Bob ran blindly ahead and was just about to pass the giant tumbleweed when he heard someone yell.

"Blast him with the light Wheatus!"

A dark figure jumped out from behind the pile of tumbleweeds and flicked on his headlamp. Bob shielded his eyes.

"Well, looky looky what we got here!"

"Aw, shoot! It's only Bob.

Bob squinted and saw Cleatus and Wheatus decked out in camo gear with binoculars slung around their necks, and headlamps strapped to their heads. Bob's heart skipped a beat.

"What are you guys doing!?!"

"We're setting a trap for them hippies up yonder." Cleatus spat out some chew.

"Yeah, we saw them park that wreck they call a van up on the side of the road. That's when we know'd they were up to something." Wheatus smiled.

Cleatus picked up his binoculars and trained them on the purple and green van. "It's got a bad rotator valve. Ain't gonna last ten miles down the road before it blows."

"But don't go trying to tell them that."

Cleatus put down his binoculars and gave Bob a hard look over with his headlamp.

“What’s in the bag, Bob?”

“You ain’t fixin’ on running away, are you Bob?” Wheatus eyed Bob.

“No. Why?” Bob stammered.

“Bob, maybe we fell off the turnip truck when we was kids, but we ain’t born yesterday.”

“Listen guys, you can’t tell my dad. Okay?” Bob then quickly told them the story of how the hippies were going to take him all the way to San Diego California, where there’s a “burgeoning art scene”, so he wasn’t really running away, he was only temporarily leaving so he could get rich and famous and then he’d come back and buy his dad – and them – all big houses to retire in. Only, Bob left out the part where the hippies asked him for the two fifty in cash and how he stole it from their secret stash spot.

Cleatus and Wheatus said they really didn’t know how they felt about Bob running out like that, but then they remembered about how when they were young, they ran out to Vegas that one time and lost a whole bunch of money and came back and swore they’d never talk about it, but then they did because it was actually one of the best times of their lives. So, in the end, they sort of gave Bob their blessing, but told him to “watch out for them hippies” because “they’ll steal your face right off your head.”

Bob thanked them, then quickly ran off towards the purple and green VW Van. As he approached the van, he saw a sticker on the back bumper that said, “1-800-How’s My Drifting”.

The van’s side door slid open and the furry hippie guy jumped out. He was wearing a pink dress and some leather sandals. Bob could see tufts of brown hair growing off of the guy’s shoulders. It seemed like the hippie guy had hair everywhere, except the top of his head. Bob remembered that the guy’s name was Brown Bear, or something like that.

“Hi Bob. You got the money?”

“Yes.”

“See Jane, I told you this kid was good for it,” Brown Bear yelled to the hippie girl.

Bob took one last look towards home. He looked past the twitching tumbleweed, where Cleatus and Wheatus were hiding, past the little roadside hamburger stand, past his work shed, and back to the small tan house that was his home. It was Sunday night, and that meant that his father would be watching one of his favorite biblical epics on the tv. Bob imagined the whipping and the sandals and the blood and the tears.

“Come on, what are you waiting for? There’s some weirdos with binoculars, and whatnot, in that cactus bush out there and they’re really starting to freak me out.”

Bob jumped into the purple and green VW van and Brown Bear slid the door closed. Jane was in the driver’s seat. She was wearing a floppy purple and green witch’s hat and green corduroy overalls with purple pockets. She was thin, if not skinny, and had blonde hair and showed crooked teeth when she laughed, which was a lot.

“Welcome aboard. Mr. Toad’s not that fast but he’ll get you where you want to go.” Jane laughed.

Brown Bear sat on an overturned milkcrate facing back towards Bob. Bob was pretty sure that Brown Bear wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“It’s hot in here. Are you hot?” Brown Bear’s eyes were wide and his pupils were big black pools. “Am I the only one who’s hot?”

“Not hot,” Jane chimed in.

"I'm fine" Bob said. He was sitting on another milkcrate in the middle of what was their living room. The van had cabinets and a little sink, purple walls, a green shag carpet and even a bed in the back. Bob admired the set-up, even if the van did have that funny hippie smell to it.

"Brown Bear, did you drop something when I wasn't looking?" Jane asked.

"Maybe." Brown Bear smiled at Jane, then he turned back to Bob. "Before we all drop through the rabbit hole, I've got to ask you for the money."

Bob carefully slid his hand into his bag and pulled out the wad of cash that he stole from Cleatus and Wheatus. Brown Bear counted it.

"Where did you get the money, Bob?" Brown Bear asked.

"I've been saving up my tips," Bob lied.

"Ok," Brown Bear said, as he slipped the cash into a beaded leather satchel. "Fire up the Toad!" Brown Bear commanded.

Jane rubbed the dashboard and exhaled, "Namaste" then she turned the key and the old engine kicked to life. She gave it some gas and the purple walls of the van started to shake and vibrate. She gave it some more gas and there was more vibrating and then Mr. Toad slowly started to roll onto the lonely interstate. Jane worked the gears expertly, shifting from one crotchety old gear to the next. Mr. Toad topped out at 50 mph.

Bob stared out the window and watched the endless cartoon strip of cactus and sand, broken up by the occasional pile of rocks. He was now further from home than he'd ever been before.

"Is the world really flat?" Bob asked.

Jane burst out laughing. "Why, Bob, who told you that?"

"Everyone says so. My Dad, Cleatus, Wheatus, Officer Chuggs. Everyone."

“No, Bob. The earth's not flat.”

Turns out Jane was one of those scientist types. Apparently, when she wasn't out touring with the Grateful Dead she worked in “nuclear medicine”, whatever that was.

The hippies seemed to have an endless supply of Grateful Dead bootleg tapes. When one tape ran out, they'd put on another. Sometimes Brown Bear would play guitar along to the tapes. Their favorite song was, The Wheel. They'd belt out, “every time the wheel goes round, you're bound to cover a bit more ground.”

Finally, when the jam was over, Brown Bear asked, “So, you cook hamburgers?”

“Sure do. Most people think it's easy, but that's only because they're going about it all wrong. In order to cook the perfect hamburger, you have to envision yourself as the hamburger and actually feel yourself sizzling. You've got to be the burger.”

“Far out man. Instead of Be Here Now, it's Be The Burger Now.” Brown Bear stroked his beard. “And those were some tasty burgers.”

“I'm third-generation burger man. A chip off the old burger. As far back as I can remember, I would stick my fingers into a tray of burger meat and squeeze.”

Jane laughed from up front. “Sounds a little unsanitary.”

A truck roared by and shook the whole van. Jane looked back and said, “that guy really busted my jam.” She slowed down to give Mr. Toad a couple of minutes to recover.

“What I really want to do is be an artist, but my dad say's no way.” Bob continued.

“Bob, you can be anything you want to be. You think I was born Brown Bear?” It turned out that Brown Bear was actually born Stanley Morgan and when Stanley wasn't out Brown Bearing he was a life coach to rich people back in San Diego, “man, those people sure are fucked up.”

“What’s the burgeoning art scene in San Diego like?”

“What?” Brown Bear scratched something and then looked at his fingernails.

“You know, the one you were telling Bob about.” Jane chimed in.

“Oh yeah, it’s wild.” Brown Bear reassured Bob. “I’m sure they’ll love your burger meat statues. At least, I hope so, ‘cause California’s not for losers.”

“You want to see them?”

“What?”

“My artwork. My burger meat statues. I brought along two of my best pieces. You can really examine my technique.” Bob reached into his bag.

“Bob, maybe this isn’t such a good idea.” Jane started to squirm. “I’m almost a vegan.”

“Trust me. Once you see them, you’ll love ‘em.” Bob put a sock on each hand. He carefully opened the top of a shoe box and gently picked up his statues. “Atlas, Rambo, meet Jane and Brown Bear.” Bob looked around and smiled, as if he were hearing applause.

Brown Bear leaned in real close and checked them out. “They smell a little stinky to me.”

“Of course, they’re only prototypes. I plan to make them much bigger when I get access to more meat.”

A bright light hit the back of the van and a big truck’s horn blasted.

“Hold on to your burgers boys. Here comes the convoy.” Jane shouted out.

A big convoy of trucks started blowing past the little van. One after another the forceful wind of the big eighteen-wheelers pounded the little old van. Mr. Toad shuttered and shook and something knocked off and rattled around in the engine. Another big semi blew past and Mr. Toad was blown completely off the road and into the desert. Somewhere in the turbulence Bob

lost his balance and fell off the milkcrate. He tried to cradle Atlas and Rambo, but they slipped and Bob fell on top of them, smushing Atlas and Rambo into the green shag carpeting.

“My babies!” Bob yelled out.

Mr. Toad bounced to a stop. Black smoke belched from his tailpipe. The Toad had had enough.

“Those guys really busted our jam.”

Bob picked up the two smushed blobs from the carpet.

“Are you boys okay?” Jane asked.

“Looks like I’ll have to salvage some meat from the carpet.” Bob was looking down at the misshapen blobs that were once Atlas and Rambo.

“Bob, maybe you should think about performance art.” Brown Bear was steadying himself.

“I’ll bet it’s the rotator valve again.” Jane pulled out an old metal toolbox from the wreckage of the living room. “And Texas chewed my last one up.” She shook her head.

“Well, we’re fucked.” Brown Bear grabbed an old Mexican blanket that was lying on the floor and wrapped it around his shoulders.

Bob had picked out as much burger meat as he could and was starting to separate it into two distinct piles. Somewhere out there a coyote howled.

Brown Bear started rolling around and mumbling something about cactus water, peyote, and what Sasquatch, his inner bear-god, would want him to do. Suddenly, Brown Bear sat up.

“We must go west.” Brown Bear grabbed his blanket and started walking east towards the rising moon. Jane dropped her wrench, grabbed her purple and green witches’ hat, and ran after Brown Bear.

“When he gets like this, the best thing to do is to follow him,” she called back to Bob.

“Bob, grab your burger meat and come on.” Brown Bear bellowed out.

Bob hesitantly picked up what was left of Atlas and Rambo and put them back in the shoe box and then ran out after Brown Bear and Jane.

Brown Bear was heading towards a large outcropping of rocks. Before Bob could say anything, Brown Bear and Jane had already scrambled up the rocks. Bob climbed up the rocks with Atlas and Rambo's remains tucked safely in his shoebox. When Bob got to the top, he saw that Brown Bear was anointing the ground with some of that funny smelling hippie water and Jane was gathering some rocks and placing them in a circle.

Brown Bear looked up at Bob. “It's time to free your inner burger-god.”

“He's in it deep tonight,” Jane whispered to Bob.

Bob sat down because he didn't know what else to do.

“Bob, take out the remains of Atlas and Rambo and place them in the center of the rocks,” Brown Bear instructed Bob.

Bob did as Brown Bear asked. Atlas and Rambo looked like sad misshaped versions of themselves. Their crude faces were distorted.

“Now we must build a fire and cook them.”

“No!” Bob cried out.

“What? I'm hungry.” Brown Bear's stomach growled.

“They're not food.” Bob quickly grabbed Atlas and Rambo and put them back in the shoebox.

“Bob, you yourself said that you have to Be the Burger.”

“Not like that. I meant imagine yourself as the burger.”

“There can be no separation in art and life. It’s time for the next step. Let me guide you.”

And it went on like that until Bob found himself out gathering some wood for the fire. He told himself that he was just stalling for time that at the end something would happen and Atlas and Rambo would be set free. God would intervene, just like in all those Biblical movies that he had watched as a kid. And for a moment he was right, because the hippies couldn’t start a fire. First there wasn’t enough wood, and then there wasn’t the right kind of wood, and then Brown Bear lost the lighter.

“We’ll just have to eat ‘em raw.”

Bob looked over to Brown Bear and was about to say something when he heard the whoosh of a fire roaring to life.

“Just kidding,” Brown Bear held up a small can of lighter fluid. “A little help from science.” Brown Bear smiled. “It’s time to skewer the beasts.”

“I can’t.” Bob clutched his shoebox tighter. “They’re all I have.”

“Bob, let’s face it, Atlas and Rambo aren’t going to cut it. You need to dig deeper. Now, close your eyes and tell me what you see.”

“I see my mother whispering, “Shh!” to me, as she walks out the door.”

“What about you Bob? What are you doing?”

“Smashing my statues. Mama always hated my art.”

Jane grabbed Bob’s hand and said, “It’s time to let go.”

Bob rubbed some tears from his cheek. Brown Bear handed Bob two wooded skewers. Bob picked up the wooden sticks and skewered Atlas and Rambo.

Brown Bear started chanting, “Om name shankara make me a burgerara” over and over.

Bob shoved the two skewers with the remains of his beloved Atlas and Rambo, his prototypes, his masterwork into the flames. The burger meat flamed up quickly.

“I smell meat.” Brown Bear opened his eyes.

“Wow, they’re flaming up good.” Jane moved back.

“It’s the shellack from my experimental preservation process.” Bob wiped a tear from his cheek. “It was a rush job.”

“Concentrate, Bob. I need you to visualize yourself as the hamburger and feel yourself burn.”

Bob closed his eyes and concentrated.

“Now tell me when you’re medium rare.”

“Freeze you hippies!” A bullhorn shrieked from out of the darkness. “We’ve got you surrounded! Come out with your hands up!” It was Officer Chuggs.

Brown Bear quickly shoved the two charred lumps of meat into his mouth.

“Brown Bear!?” Jane exclaimed.

“If I’m going to jail, I might as well be fed.”

Suddenly, faces started to appear, Officer Chuggs in his night vision goggles, Cleatus and Wheatus with their head lamps, and Bob Sr with his big cowboy hat.

“Jr are you okay, boy?” Bob thought his father looked silly with his big Sunday hat on.

“It’s too late! I’m never going back!”

“Jr don’t say that!”

“Hey, that hippie guy’s chewing something.”

“Must be drugs.”

“Get him!”

Cleatus and Wheatus made a move towards Brown Bear.

“Stand back! I know karate,” Brown Bear said through a mouthful of charred burger meat.

Cleatus and Wheatus jumped on Brown Bear and started to choke him, until he coughed up “the evidence”. Jane started hitting them on the head with her Birkenstock sandal.

“Search the fur-ball.”

Wheatus ripped a wad of cash from Brown Bear’s leather satchel. “Here’s the two hundred and fifty that was stolen from Nellie.”

“EVERYBODY STOP!” I was Bob, Jr. “I stole the money! No one kidnapped me. I ran away.”

“Oh my god, they’ve brainwashed my boy!”

“Just like that Lindberg baby!”

“Shoot. I know’d it.”

BLAM! Suddenly, a gunshot cracked the air. Everyone looked over at Chugg’s. His arm was up and his gun was smoking. He slowly lowered his gun and pointed it at Brown Bear.

“Freeze you hippie scum!”

“What’d I do?”

“Transporting a minor with the intent to cross state lines.”

“Ah, shit,” said Brown Bear.

Chuggs tossed a pair of handcuffs towards Wheatus. “Now cuff him.” He tossed another pair of handcuffs near Jane. He pointed to Cleatus, “Cuff her too.”

“You can’t do this!” Bob exclaimed. “They didn’t do anything. It’s all my fault.”

“Bob, you listen here. Your daddy’s a good man and this time I’m gonna get it right and I’m gonna bring you home – just like I wish I coulda done with your momma.”

That settled it. The wheels on the bus stopped rolling for Jane and Brown Bear. The ride was over. But when Jane and Brown Bear were about to get stuffed into the back of Chuggs’s squad car Jane yelled out, “Remember, every time the wheel goes ‘round you’re bound to cover a little bit more ground.’ See you in San Diego!”

“Keep it medium-rare on the inside.” Was Brown Bear’s advice. “Watch it. I have good lawyer.” The door to Chuggs’s squad car slammed shut.

Bob had no choice but to climb into his dad’s car. It was a long and lonely ride back to the shack that was his home. At one point, Bob Sr turned to Bob Jr. “You see this face?” he said. Jr looked over but didn’t say anything. “I’ve spent the last forty-five years looking at this face in the mirror. And if I look it long and hard enough, I don’t even recognize it anymore. My own face seems strange to me. So, you know what I do? I don’t look at it too closely. It’s just what it is. It’s the face your grandfather gave to me, and it’s the face that I gave to you. Someday you’ll give it to your son. And you can’t run away from that.”

“Dad, you lied. You said the world was flat. It’s not. It’s round.”

“You can’t believe those hippies-“

“Dad, Jane’s a scientist.”

“Oh, come on-“

“You lied about there being ‘bad people coming down the road that that I couldn’t trust’. Jane and Brown Bear are good people. It’s you who I can’t trust. And now, I don’t even know if what you’ve been telling me about why momma ran away is true? Maybe it wasn’t my statues. Maybe it wasn’t my fault. Maybe it was you.”

California's Not For Losers

Later that night, when his father had taken his big Sunday hat off and had finally fallen asleep, Bob snuck back into the meat refrigerator and grabbed some burger meat and an egg and the bottle of Elmer's glue that he had stashed. He went into their tiny bathroom and locked the door. Bob looked at his face long and hard in the mirror and then one by one he created long thin strips of burger meat and dipped them into his secret egg and glue mixture and started to line his face. Strip after strip of the cold red meat was painstakingly dipped into the egg and glue mixture and then pressed into his skin until the long lines of red meat completely covered his face. At last, when Bob was finished, and his whole face covered in strips of red burger meat, he gazed back into the mirror and he could no longer see the face of his father. He only saw the restless blue eyes of his mother poking through his bright red burger mask.