

Black Olive Eyes

In the fall, they moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, and Mom took a job as a cashier at Jimmy's Sausage and Pork Outlet. Boy was young, Girl was younger, and both their fathers had disappeared.

It was in Charlotte that Mom invented *Charlotte's Web*, a piece of thinly sliced pork from the discount meat bin with mustard squirted on top in the outline of a spider web. *Charlotte's Web* was garnished with a single piece of broccoli or buttered cauliflower, with a trail of mustard connected to it to represent the dangling spider.

"Who's hungry?" she'd always ask, just before setting the food on the table. Girl could talk by then, but she couldn't quite pronounce Charlotte. Instead, she'd yell *Char-load!* and slap her fists against the table.

Mom, who had grown thin since their move from Florida, would watch wearily as Boy and Girl ate the same dinner six nights a week. Sunday was Different Day, her only full day off. She'd routinely get creative on Different Day, after they arrived home from church, of course.

Oscar the Grouch was the name of a mound of lettuce with two black olive eyes and a frowny face made of ranch dressing. *Michelangelo* was the name of a circular pile of lettuce sectioned off by a strip of carrots topped with black olives for eyes. *Kermit the Frog* was the same basic design as *Oscar the Grouch*, except that Kermit had a ranch dressing smile. *Rush Limbaugh*—Mom's favorite radio personality—was the name of a pile of angel hair noodles fried in pork fat and decorated with ketchup.

Making just ten cents above minimum wage, Mom worked tirelessly six days a week at Jimmy's Sausage and Pork Outlet just to keep up with the bills. A few of the women she worked with confessed to her that they'd recently started receiving food stamps. They talked about how their family's diets had improved, how they weren't paid enough at Jimmy's. They tried to convince Mom to join the program on more than one occasion. "You deserve it," they'd say. "Ain't no shame in applying," they'd say.

Eventually, one of the ladies printed out an application for Mom and gave it to her in an envelope. Mom brought the envelope home that night, her head pounding from a recurring migraine. She asked Boy to prepare some cereal for his sister while she rested.

"Char-Load!" Girl said, growing angry when Boy handed her a bowl of generic Fruit Loops.

"Not tonight," Boy said.

"I want Char-load!"

Mom could hear them from the other room but was too tired to say anything. She was thinking of Santiago, Girl's father, and how much things had changed in the three years and a half since he'd left. She was thinking about day care costs, bills, the clicking sound her car had been making, the clothes that needed washing. She was a woman with two children, from two different fathers, with a whole slew of problems.

The next morning, Mom made each of her children a *Madonna*—a plate of scrambled eggs arranged like the pop singer's hair around two black olive eyes and sliced apples for lips.

“What’s this?” Boy asked, holding up the envelope with Mom’s name written across it in cursive letters.

“Oh, I meant to throw that away,” she said.

“*Madonna* is yummy!” Girl said, smiling with her mouth full of eggs.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Mom said.

Boy opened the envelope and looked over the small stack of papers.

“Application for Food and Nutrition Services. What’s this?”

“Look, I want you to remember this, ok?” Mom said, snatching the application from him.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Just because we’re poor, doesn’t mean we should ask our government for anything.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This here’s an application for free food, but it ain’t free. Somebody’s got to pay for it, and that somebody is the American taxpayer. Some of those black women at work think I qualify. But I ain’t signing up. Our government is already in our business enough. To hell with all of them.”

“It’s a free food application?” Boy asked.

“Nothing’s free, you remember that,” Mom said. “There are too many people asking for a handout in this country. You’ll learn this one day. No such thing as a free lunch. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mom tore the application in half in front of Boy and Girl and tossed it in the trash can.

That afternoon, Boy picked up Girl from daycare and they walked the three blocks to their duplex. While Girl watched TV, Boy retrieved the free food application from the trashcan and smoothed it out on the table. He went into the bedroom that he shared with Girl and pressed the two crumbled halves under their bed, alongside a few shark drawings he'd been working on.

Mom came home that night with a paper sack brimming with groceries. She prepared *Pinky and the Brain*: two pizzas, one round and one long and thin, topped with mozzarella and tomato slices for eyes. For dessert she made blue Jello with cottage cheese eyes, which she called *The Tick*.

“See,” she said as Boy and Girl ate dessert, “we don’t need any damn handouts from anybody.”

“Bad word,” Girl said.

“That’s right, Honey, and I don’t want you saying it.”

The dinners that followed were lavish and extravagant.

Saturday they ate *Reading Rainbow*: a plate full of tomatoes, cheesy macaroni, green beans, pork, and eggplant arranged in arcs above one another. Sunday they had *Ghostbusters*: a green soup made of pork stock, peas, cabbage, cucumber, green onions, and spinach. Dessert was an obligatory *Marshmallow Man*: a plate of marshmallows arranged in the pattern of a face, rimmed with chocolate syrup, and blue sprinkles. Mom was doing her best to drive her point home.

Monday they had *Ren and Stimpy*: a piece of sliced ham with pineapple eyes, carrot slice eyebrows, and a cherry tomato nose. It was served alongside a plate of pork and beans topped with black olive eyes. Tuesday was *Angelica*—a variation on the *Madonna* with eggplant bows in her hair.

“See,” she kept telling Boy, “we’re doing just fine.”

Wednesday night she made each of her children a *Ronald Reagan*: a scoop of refried beans for hair, Mom’s trademark black olive eyes, slices of grilled pork arranged to form the rest of his face. A bowl of Jelly Belly’s was served for dessert.

Thursday was *Tom and Jerry* night. *Jerry* was crafted from a slab of pork loin covered in brown gravy with tortilla eyes and an asparagus tail. *Tom* was a small chocolate cake for dessert decorated with dark purple icing.

On Friday afternoon, Mom got called into the manager’s office at Jimmy’s. The office was frigid, and the air condition rattled like loose pocket change above the windowsill. The manager sat next to a shriveled man with a shaved head and a tattooed scowl. The little bald man began speaking and the manager crossed his arms in front of his chest, shaking his head with disappointment.

She tuned both men out, hoping it would be over soon. The bald man turned a little gray television towards her and made her watch herself transfer money from the register into her apron. “That’s called stealing,” he said. She watched the video with a blank expression on her face. She wanted to cry, to scream, but all she could say was, “I was planning on paying you back after payday.”

Mom was escorted outside by the bald man. As soon as she shut the door of her car, she lost her composure. She slammed her fists against her steering wheel, crying savagely and cursing herself. On the way home, she spent the rest of the money she had in her purse on groceries. That night, she made *Jesus Food*: fried trout, bread glazed with honey, and grape juice for wine.

“I want Char-load,” Girl whined.

“This tastes strange,” Boy said, poking at the trout.

Mom started crying and left the table without eating. She went to her room and lay down on the bed. Soon, Boy and Girl joined her. They crawled under the covers and pressed themselves into her frame. She fell asleep with her nose pressed into Boy’s sandy blonde hair. On Saturday, they were back to eating *Charlotte’s Web*, which they also ate for dinner on Sunday night after church.

Mom left for work the following Monday, which was the last lie she’d tell, or so she promised herself. Girl had a cough, and Boy was instructed to stay home and look after her.

While his sister slept on the couch, Boy began tidying up their shared room. After making the bed, he decided to take another look at the free food application.

He taped the pages back together, and after double-checking to make sure Girl was still asleep, Boy began filling out the application with a red pen. *Social security number?* Boy wrote in their home telephone number. *Gross monthly income?* How could income be gross? He scribbled a question mark in that box.

Was anyone a migrant or seasonal worker? Boy wrote ‘yes.’ Mom worked in every season and sometimes she got migraines. *Yearly shelter costs?* Again, Boy wrote in a question mark. *Total household cash/savings?* This he could answer!

Boy climbed onto the counter and opened the old Danish cookie tin on top of the refrigerator. *Mom’s savings.* The smell of coin and paper met his nostrils. Standing on the counter, he counted out the money, separating the coins into matching amounts. Forty-two dollars and twenty-three cents.

Does everyone in the home buy and cook meals together? Why wasn’t there a box for sometimes? He wrote ‘no.’ *Does anyone have an EBT card?* Mom had a bank card, so ‘yes.’ *Is anyone a migrant or seasonal worker?* Why did they keep asking this question?

Boy fell asleep at the kitchen table once he came to the *medical bills for persons over 60* section. He awoke thirty minutes later to find girl tugging at him and coughing. He picked her up and carried her into the living room and turned on the TV. He hid the application back underneath their bed and returned to watch *Sesame Street* with his sister.

That night, Mom hardly said a word as she made a variation of *Charlotte’s Web* using ketchup instead of mustard and the rest of the trout instead of pork. They ate silently together, both Boy and Girl keeping quiet about the slightly soured trout. For dessert they shared *Cookie Monster’s Snack*: a stack of off-brand chocolate chip cookies warmed in the microwave, drizzled with sweeten condensed milk, and served with a glass of two percent milk for dipping.

After dinner, as they watched *Nick at Nite* together, Boy noticed a few silver tears sliding down Mom’s face in the lightwash cast by the television. He reached for her hand.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, squeezing her hand.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“You’re crying,” he said, growing confused.

Girl looked up at Mom and started to cry too. “Mommy’s crying,” she said through her tears. Seeing his mom and his sister cry, Boy started wondering if he too should be crying. Another look at Mom and he decided there must be a good reason. Boy started to cry, and all three of them cried together while the theme music for *Dragnet* played on the television.

The next day, Boy and Girl stayed home again while Mom left silently to continue her search for a new job. For lunch Boy made *Wal-Mart Face*: mac and cheese arranged in a circle around black olive eyes, and a smile made out of purple grapes. Girl grew tired at her usual time and Boy tucked her in on the couch after giving her a spoonful of cherry flavored medicine.

After she’d fallen asleep, he searched Mom’s room until he found her pocket dictionary. He retrieved the free food application from under his mattress and ran to the kitchen table.

Does anyone in your household participate in a Food Distribution Program on an Indian reservation? Boy looked up the word reservation: *the act of reserving something*. Boy then looked up the word reserve: *refrain from using or disposing (of something)*. After thinking for a minute about what any of this could possibly have to do with Indians, Boy wrote ‘no’ in the box.

What assets do people in your household have? Boy looked up the definition of asset: *a useful or valuable thing, or property owned by a person or a company*. He wrote ‘TV and car’ in the appropriate box. He wondered if he should count their beds, but decided against it.

Mutual fund? He looked up both words and guessed that Mom didn't have a mutual fund. He sure didn't. *Prepaid burial contract?* Ditto. *Stocks or Bonds?* Mom did say once she had a savings bond, but Boy didn't know how much it was worth. He wrote 'yes' in the box followed by a question mark for good measure.

Rent or mortgage? He looked up the word for mortgage: *the charging of real (or personal) property by a debtor to a creditor as security for a debt.* Boy thought for a minute and wrote 'no' in the provided box. He then remembered Mom saying something about paying rent and scratched the 'no' out and wrote 'rent' instead. *Has anyone received a Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) check?* Mom never said anything about it, so he guessed 'no.'

By signing this application I am saying that I have told the truth on this form.

Boy signed his name on the top signature line. On the witness line, he signed Girl's name. He read the application over once more, making sure he had filled in all the blanks. Now he just needed to figure out whom to give it to.

Girl stirred in the other room. She'd had a nightmare, and cried and coughed until Boy came running. The free food application remained on the dining room table.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "We have some *Bugs Bunny Food.*"

"No, I want Mommy!"

"She'll come back soon, I promise."

Girl sat up and hugged Boy. He wiped her tears away with his t-shirt and kissed her forehead.

“Want a piece of gum?” he asked.

“I want Mommy.”

“She’ll come home soon, after her work finishes. Just a few hours, ok?”

“I want her now!”

“It’s ok, it’s ok. Hey, *Sesame Street* is on...”

He turned the TV on. Girl settled in next to him, her eyes fixated on the screen. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and began sucking. Soon, she was smiling and nodding her head up and down to a song about the letter S. Boy held her hand, occasionally wiping the sweat away on his pants. The bolt on the front door turned to the right.

“Mommy!” Girl yelled. She hopped off the couch.

“Hi,” Mom said, opening the door.

“You’re early,” Boy said, standing.

Mom ruffled her hand through his hair as she walked to the kitchen. Girl followed close behind her, coughing. Boy sat back down on the couch, mesmerized by the TV.

“It’s close to dinner time!” she called out. “What do you guy’s think? We could do a *Barney?*”

“Char-load!”

From the kitchen he heard Mom say, “We had a Char-load last night. We could also do a...hey, what’s this?”

The free food application. Boy froze, unsure of what to do.

Boy ran to the kitchen and found Mom looking at the application. “Did you do this?” she asked. “Did you fill this out?”

Boy started to cry. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“*Why don’t you ever listen to me goddammit!?* I told you we’re not getting food stamps!” She threw her purse onto the kitchen table. It slid off the table, taking the salt and pepper shakers with it. “Do we look like a bunch of goddamn beggars to you?” she yelled. “*Do we!?*”

Girl started to cry after the salt and pepper shakers shattered onto the floor.

“*I told you NO! That’s not who we are GODDAMMIT!*”

“I’m sorry, Mom!”

Mom ripped up the application into tiny little pieces. The pieces fell onto the floor like dirty snowflakes. She grabbed Boy by the shoulder and led him to the bathroom. “Put your hands on the counter and pull your pants down!”

Boy struggled to get out of his jeans.

“Now! Dammit! Now!”

“No!” Girl yelled from outside the bathroom door. Mom removed her belt and wrapped it once to form a loop.

“Mom, no!” Boy pleaded.

Mom raised her hand, the belt high in the air, the shiny belt beaming under the bright bathroom light. She raised her hand a few inches higher, clenched her fist tightly around the looped belt, looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, saw her son's tears, saw her daughter screaming in the hallway, saw her own tears, and dropped the belt.

She whispered, "I-I-I can't do it."

Mom sat down on the toilet, sobbing uncontrollably. Boy joined her first, hugging her neck. Girl crawled into her lap.

"I'm sorry," Boy kept saying. "I was just trying to help."

"I know, Sweetie, I know," Mom cried. "Jesus, what have I become?"

"I'm sorry," Girl said, mimicking Boy.

"It's ok. Both of you, it's ok. I love you both."

"We love you too," Boy said.

"I want you both to know the truth, ok?"

"Ok," Boy said.

Mom looked at her two beautiful children spawned from two different men, and started kissing their tears away. In their little black olive eyes she saw her own pitiful reflection.

"We're moving soon," she finally said. It was as close to the truth as she would come.