

Bud hadn't believed Peg would make good on her resolution, but here he was in California sleeping on her couch when what he really wanted was to sleep in her bed. She had already made friends and found a job at Whole Foods. "Just think," she joked, "I might manage the colonics section some day."

She had called him once, a few weeks after her arrival, and told him she was a little lonely. But convincing her to return with him back to River Bend was beginning to look like a lost cause.

San Francisco was definitely not the place for him, an unemployed dropout in a town that ate bachelor degrees for breakfast. He knew people considered him a hick, a lank-haired West Virginian with backcountry speech who wore flannel shirts and torn jeans that weren't a calculated fashion statement. In River Bend, the only important thing about how you were dressed was that you *were* dressed.

Bud had known Peg since they were kids. She was an outright tomboy, just one of the guys until somewhere along the line she became a girl and he fell madly in love with her. They began having sex when they were juniors. He assumed they would get married and proposed. Peg told him that she was going to university in Morgantown and wanted to move to California when she got her degree. They had never discussed this, and as far as he knew, except for Derek Thomas, who was gay, no one from River Bend had even been to California.

Most mornings, he walked to the SOMA Food Park, located in a parking lot under the freeway where a dozen food trucks served fare from every corner of the world. He was blown away by the unfamiliar flavors and incredible variety on offer: Thai-seasoned burritos, quinoa sweet potato tacos, chicken sliders with cilantro slaw, Saigon shrimp ceviche.

The alternatives for eating out back home were McD's and the A & W (closed in the winter) out on Route 11; Sally's Spatula, a greasy-spoon barely surviving downtown; and an all-you-can-eat Friday fish fry at Eddie's bar. The owner (Eddie had died years ago) claimed that the fish was caught locally, but Bud had spotted him one day at Costco loading a shopping cart with frozen filets.

Bud's friends, whose idea of preparing a meal was punching in the time on their microwaves, raved about his lasagna and flash-fried hushpuppies. They called him The Non-Celebrity Chef. So not long after he arrived in San Francisco, Bud offered to make dinner for Peg and her friends. He devised a simple menu featuring one of his specialties, chicken cacciatore. Peg told him that Bi-Rite was the best place to shop, but he was taken aback by the prices there and trolled the Mission for reasonable alternatives. He purchased pasta, canned tomatoes, and parmesan cheese at Lucca's. He found mushrooms, green peppers and onions at a corner vegetable market and carefully chose two fat chickens at a Latino-owned butcher shop.

He cut up the birds and fried them in olive oil slowly over a medium flame until they were perfectly browned. He sautéed the green peppers and onions and added the mushrooms at the end, pressed four cloves of garlic and poured the tomatoes over the

chicken, sprinkling a liberal amount of oregano into the sauce and turning the flame low to let everything simmer and blend for a few hours.

Peg's friends brought the wine and the dessert. Brad and Susan worked doing something in tech, the exact nature of which was a mystery to Bud. Simon and Peter, recently married, had just returned from a honeymoon trip in Morocco. Bud felt intimidated by their expensive, fashionable clothes. Peter opened their conversation with, "So, I heard from Peg that you're quite the chef."

"My mother taught me so I could cook for my little brother and sister."

Simon smiled. "That's so sweet."

Peg declared that if it hadn't been for him, she probably would have starved during her first year in junior college. "We all thought Bud's mac and cheese was gourmet because he added things to it that didn't come in the box."

He wondered if Peg was being facetious at his expense. She certainly had no trouble gobbling down the country breakfast—ham, biscuits and gravy— he prepared for her that morning before she left for work.

He brought the salad to the table and began pouring dressing onto the hearts of romaine, red onion and cucumber.

"Oh my god," whispered Susan. I'm sorry. I can't eat anything from a bottle."  
Bud stopped in mid-pour.

"She's allergic to practically half the planet," declared Brad.

“Myself, I always prefer a little lemon and olive oil,” added Simon. “I try to avoid saturated oils, but fortunately olive oil isn’t on the shit list.” Peter nodded supportively, rubbing his husband’s back.

Bud volunteered to dig to the bottom of the bowl for greens still undefiled by the toxic dressing. “The dressing’s fine for me,” said Peg. “But serve the others first.” Susan and Simon declined.

Dinner went downhill from there. The pasta wasn’t gluten-free, which apparently was an essential factor. Who knew that durum wheat should be banished from comfort food. He was about to inform everyone that the canned tomatoes were imported from Italy, but guessed that ‘canned’ might be objectionable to someone. Brad praised the chicken and asked him where he had purchased it. He glanced at Peg and lied, claiming he had purchased them at Bi-Rite. He hoped no one would recognize the difference between factory-sourced and hormone and range-free or whatever and call him on it.

After everyone left, he surveyed his meal, abandoned on the table, barely touched.. “They weren’t trying to make you feel bad,” consoled Peg. “People just have different standards here.”

“I put a lot of effort into that meal.”

“I know. But you need to understand. My friends are all very committed to their lifestyles.”

“How about being committed to common courtesy?”

“They’re particular about what they put in their bodies.”

“I bet Simon and Peter haven’t always been so particular about what they put—” He stopped, realizing that he was going down a path that wouldn’t exactly win him any points. “They were just plain rude, Peg.”

“People come to California seeking alternative philosophies. It’s a kind of micro-culture here, like living in a special Petri dish.”

“One that’s obviously hormone and additive-free. Remember what our mothers told us when we complained about our food?”

She laughed, and they exclaimed in unison: “Shut the fuck up, you kids, and eat your food!”

Bud gazed at her like a man starving for scraps. He slung his arm around her and drew her close. “I missed you, Peg.”

She took his hand and led him to the bedroom. He watched as she undressed. The curtains were open: headlights from passing cars reflected against the walls and threw bright rectangles of moving abstract forms across her body. His flannel shirt and jeans were on the floor in seconds.

He woke up in bed alone and shambled naked into the kitchen. There was no sign of Peg. She had apparently left for work early after clearing the table of last night’s catastrophe, everything in the garbage.

It must have been mercy sex, he thought.

Bud ate lunch at SOMA Food Park. He had been devising a plan, a solution to his inertia, and asked discreet questions of the purveyors, making special note of the trucks’ cooking setups, sketching ideas inspired by the colorful signage painted on their sides.

Feeling uncertain how Peg would treat him after last night, he took his time returning to the apartment, wandering through the city aimlessly. Everything that had at first captivated and entranced him, now felt like a rebuke. Everyone was too preoccupied with their devices and bogus sense of entitlement. Except to the panhandlers, he was invisible.

It was on one of those quiet little side streets in the Mission where he spotted it. The truck appeared abandoned, covered with a black patina of city grit, rust spreading over it like a rude rash. On its sides, 'TACO EXPRESS' was scrawled in crude letters over an amateurish rendering of tacos, the paint faded and peeling away. The passenger door was dented, the painted image of a cola can looking crumpled, destined for recycling. Bud saw that two of its tires were flat, the rubber dissolved into the blacktop as if the truck had established roots.

Two middle-aged men were sprawled in lawn chairs in a garage across the street, chugging beer and watching him warily, a white guy snooping around the block. He felt as if he had climbed a fence into someone else's property.

"Can we help you, señor?" one of them asked.

Bud crossed the street, hesitating at the curb. "I was just wondering about the truck. It doesn't look like it's been in operation for a long time."

The men were silent.

"Do you happen to know who owns the truck?"

"You sent by the City?" one of them asked.

Bud laughed. "No. I don't even live here. In the city, I mean. I just happened to be walking by. The truck caught my eye."

The man opened a large cooler next to him. “Not from the City? Then I guess you’re cool. You want a beer?”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” The tab opened with a sizzle and he took a swig. “My name’s Bud, by the way.”

The man settled back into his lawn chair. “I’m Jose. My friend here is Enrique.” Enrique nodded and raised his can. This was how things worked back home. Neighborly.

“Why you interested in that wreck?” Jose asked.

“I might be interested in buying it.”

“You must be loco!” exclaimed Enrique. “But, man, it would be good to get rid of that *monstruosidad*. It blocks our view of the young *senioritas* who sit on the porch in the house behind it.”

“Is it yours?”

Jose laughed. “No way, man.”

“Do you know if it still runs?”

“It’s been parked in that same spot for a couple years. I know the engine still turns over. The cousin starts it every so often.”

“Doesn’t it get ticketed?”

“The City put up their parking signs years ago, but the sweepers never come down this street. The City ignores us, so we ignore them. The truck belongs to Benny and Rita. They weren’t making much business no more. Sold their house and took the money back with them to Oaxaca.”

“Too much competition with all the new businesses,” added Enrique.

“Taco trucks on every corner, like the man says.” Jose nudged his friend and they both laughed. Apparently, it was an inside joke. “Benny and Rita cooked traditional Mexican-American. But these days, everyone, even the young Latinos, wants *autentico* and *non hormonas*. It’s mostly gringos who run the trucks now.”

“The cousin—Do you know where can I find him?”

Jose took a long sip from his beer, stood with a groan and pointed down the street.

“Her name is Vera. It’s the house with the blue door.”

“Thank you. *Gracias* for the beer.” Bud inspected the truck once again. If the cousin was willing to sell, it would require an awful lot of work. The interior needed to be completely gutted and refitted with a new cooking setup, the dents worked out and the exterior sanded. He’d have to replace the flat tires before he could even give it a test drive.

Two days later, he was the new owner. He told Peg the news, described his plans and showed her a picture.

“You have to be kidding.”

“The two men I talked with, Jose and Enrique? Jose’s nephew has a garage. He’s going to help get it into good enough shape to drive it back home.

If Peg was disappointed that he was leaving, she didn’t show it. “Is this is some kind of compensatory whim?”

“What do you mean?”

“You bought the truck because I won’t go back to West Virginia with you.”

“It has nothing to do with us. I intend to do something that no one in River Bend has ever done before.”



“No one’s done it because it’s totally crazy. Half the town is unemployed. My mother—she subsists on cigarettes, bitterness and burnt coffee. People there have given up.”

“Did you think I had given up too?”

She ignored his question. “They spend their time buried in Barcaloungers watching daytime TV, their waistlines expanding from inactivity and junk food.”

“I intend to change that. You’ll see.”

He’ll bring good street food to the towns and hollows of West Virginia. People will flock to eat Korean barbeque tacos and Thai-style burritos. Eventually he’ll expand with a whole fleet of trucks. Taco trucks on every corner, like Jose said. *Fortune* magazine will write about the hometown boy who started his successful food empire with nothing but a big dream.

And some day, he was sure, Peg will call to tell him that she was coming home for good.

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