

THE ROAST

Thick fog rolled back to the bay and the warm sun was showing itself. It was the middle of August 1928. George Hoenisch, a handsome man, five foot eight readjusted his old brown fedora felt hat over his thick black hair, and hurriedly walked home in the early afternoon, to his rented lower flat on Grove Street in Oakland, a few blocks away from his upholstery shop. He was coughing up the dust collected from his work deep down in his chest, wetting his three-day growth of whiskers as the sticky ingredients made its way to the gutter. Passing a few cars and a few children playing in the streets, he heard the familiar sound of the driver of a horse driven wagon, with creaky iron-rimmed wooden oak wheels, yelling, “rags, bottles, and socks.” Collecting junk, that could be recycled. It reminded him of the old days before the automobile when he was a boy. Saturday was his day to go shopping for the week at the market established in a large warehouse in West Oakland by the wharf. He had his mind set on a pot roast for Sunday dinner.

George’s children, Eddie, and Lucille were excited and waiting, they knew they would get some treats at the market, a rarity during these hard times. Eddie, a couple of years older, went to the back yard to get Miggs, a brown and black pit bull with a large white heart on his chest.

The year before, the children found Miggs in the gutter, half dead from being on the losing side of a gambling private dog fight. They nursed the dog back to life and kept him hidden from their father for a week for lack of funds to feed him, but soon the dog was discovered and the children received a bawling out. The dog was accepted into the family. A cable was strung across the yard with a large ring and spring tied to Miggs so he could run back and forth without escaping.

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George parked his truck on the street in front of his home. The vehicle had dents on the grill, bumper, fender and a broken light, caused by George two months before, after he got all dressed up wearing his best suit for a date with a lady and headed for the truck. As usual nine-year-old Lucille with her short bowl shaped flaming red hair and sharp hazel eyes got in the front seat to move the handle, to spark the ignition. George cranked and cranked; the engine backfired. The crank went in reverse and almost tore off his arm. He unfastened the crank and beat the hell out of the truck. Lucille jumped out of the vehicle and ran into the house and hid until George calmed down.

George was in a good mood this Saturday afternoon. He washed up and began singing some of his favorite songs while putting on clean cotton slightly wrinkled light blue long sleeved shirt, tucking it into his baggy brown pants over his slight pot belly. Adjusting his glasses, he grabbed his brown fedora felt hat, dusting it off with a brush, straightened it on his head and hurried for the truck, knowing the children were already waiting. Lucille, nine years old with her flaming red hair, got in the front seat to spark the nineteen twenty- three Ford car converted to a pickup truck that her father used for his business and pleasure. She moved the handle while George cranked three or four times before it started, spitting smoke and jumping up and down, waiting for someone to board to hold it to the pavement.

After the truck started, Eddie wearing a lose billed cap over his close-cut brown hair, and saggy bloomer overall, jumped in the back. George, with the crank still in hand, got in the cramped truck next to Lucille and Miggs.

Arriving at the market, Miggs was left tied to the steering wheel to protect the truck and its contents from thieves. If any strangers came close, he would bark, show his teeth, and was ready to attack.

George knew the closer to the five o'clock closing time, the better the bargain. He was intent on

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purchasing a pot roast, but he also needed to shop for the rest of the groceries for the week. He walked by the meat counter and there sat one last neatly tied little pot roast. He went to where the vegetables were displayed watching from the corner of his eye at the meat counter. If he waited near closing time, he would get it cheaper. If he waited too long, someone else might buy it. The children stood by the glass fountain bubbling with sweet celery phosphate fizz. George bought each of them a drink. It was delicious. George picked up a bag of five heads of lettuce for a quarter. Some potatoes, carrots, celery, peanut butter, honey, a couple pounds of raisins: a big bag of oats, and some broken pieces of chocolate, always on sale for the children.

The time was four fifty- five and George made a beeline for the meat counter.

“Hi George, got just what you want. The last pot roast, tied up and ready to go home,” said Tony the Butcher.

“How much?”

“One ninety-five.”

“Too much.”

“OK, one seventy- five.”

“I’ll think about it,” said George. The butcher looked at the clock, it was four fifty-eight, he could not save the meat until Monday, it would spoil and George knew it.

“One fifty- five,” said the butcher.

“One dollar,” said George holding out a crisp one dollar bill. There was no one else going to buy the roast, it was almost closing time and the roast would have to be discarded.

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“You’re robbing me! How do you expect me to make a living?” The butcher’s hand reached for the money.

George pointed to an almost empty shelf, “ I’ll give ya thirty- five cents for that piece of baloney, how much for that chunk of white cheese?”

“Twenty- five cents, it’s not on sale, oh, what the hell fifty cents for both and get out of here, it’s time to go home.” They both laughed. The butcher wrapped the meat cheese and baloney and handed them to George.

“Enjoy, have a nice weekend. See you next week and try not to beat me up so bad.”

“If I don't beat ya up, I won't eat.”

“Me either if you keep doing this to me,” said the butcher.

George thought he hit the lottery, he had his roast and for half price. His blue eyes twinkled and the red veins popped out on his face, he was going to have his pot roast on Sunday, his favorite meal.

At seven a.m. George woke up after yelling and screaming in his sleep. It was a special day. The day he dreamed of all week. The day he worked and scraped for, it was Sunday morning and he was going to have that pot roast for dinner. He looked at the clock and was relieved that he had not overslept. He quickly jumped out of his late mother and father’s old walnut antique bed with a high back and big rounded carved mahogany posts in each corner. A slight breeze was blowing the old faded dusty thin, light blue curtains, covering the window, that his mother had hung twenty years before. It was chilly, but George could not sleep if he didn’t have fresh air, even if it was bitter cold outside. After going to the bathroom, he lit the wood stacked by Eddie the night before, in the old black and white iron Wedgwood stove, to cook breakfast and warm the house. While the stove was warming up, he

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went to his small bedroom, got on the floor and did his usual fifteen minutes of exercises with his husky body squeezed in between the bed and the wall

In the medium size combined kitchen dining room, he began to prepare his breakfast. George picked up a dented double boiler aluminum pot sitting on the dashboard next to the sink. (Passed down through the family for three generations.) He filled the top with enough water for oatmeal for three, and the bottom with water and set it on the hot stove until the water came to a boil. With his many years of experience, he measured with his thick, strong hands, the right amount of oats in the top boiler, adding raisins and a quarter teaspoon of salt and stirred. When the oats were cooked, he separated the top boiler which held the oats from the bottom boiler that contained the boiling hot water. Pouring the hot water into a cup he added leaves of dried alfalfa, brought home in the summer from the country, that he picked up from a mowed pasture on the side of the road; filling a large gunny sack. Enough to last him for a year. On occasion a few cow plops landed in the back of his truck to enhance his vegetable garden.

George called the children and Lucie came into the kitchen.

“Eddie won’t let me in the bathroom and I have to go pee really bad.”

“Dish yourself up some mush, we got work to do.”

“I have to go to the bathroom real bad.”

George Yells. “Eddie get out of the damn bathroom. Hurry it up.”

Eddie comes out. Lucille sticks her tongue at him.

“It shouldn’t take fifteen minutes to relieve yourself.” Eddy shrugs.

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Eddie puts mush in a bowl and spoons a tablespoon of brown sugar on top drowning it in milk.

“Did ya feed the dog?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, the dog eats before you do.” Eddy scrambles out the door.

After finishing up his breakfast and drinking his tea, George went to the small walk-in pantry, separated from the kitchen by heavy curtains, picked up the roast and set it on the kitchen table.

Unwrapping the roast while, admiring it in the light, the saliva rolled around in his mouth, he swallowed hard as if it was a great gift from God. He checked the contents to verify it was real. His stomach churned and the juice in his mouth rolled around as the sweet smell entered his nostrils.

“Lucie, I want ya to cook up this roast for dinner. Make sure to put plenty of potatoes, onions, and carrots in the pan so they can suck up the juice from the meat and don't forget the salt and pepper. I have to make a couple of deliveries.”

“Should I put some dried parsley and garlic on top?”

“Yes just like you did last week. I’ll be back around two o’clock. Put the roast in the oven at one thirty, it will take about two hours and fifteen minutes to cook and don't let Miggs in the house!”

George carefully rewrapped the roast and set it back in the cool pantry.

Lucille and George got the truck started and George went down the road. Lucille was nine and Eddie was eleven. Their grandmother, (George’s mother) whom George and his two children had previously lived with, took care of the family and did all the cooking and cleaning. She had taught Lucille how to cook and prepare the meals. The grandmother died of cancer the year before, and now it

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was Lucille's job to take over the chores.

Miggs was chained to the cable in the back yard. He barked and stretched the spring on the wire cable and scratched at the back door. As usual the children let him in, even though their father said not to. They wrestled and played with the dog, chasing him around the house. But Miggs had other ideas. He made a bee-line for the pantry; his senses told him there was something good in there. He reach up grabbed the roast and headed for the back door which was partly opened and jumped over the back gate. Banging the roast on the top with his teeth buried with a tight grip, down the street he went.

The two children chased after him barefooted. Eddie wore his overalls with one of the knees torn out and a pocket ripped weeks before by Miggs. Lucille with her one size too small handed down light brown dress hanging just below her knees with curled up white lace stitched on the sleeves and neck. The meat dangled from the dog's jaws scraping along the gutter between Grove Street and Telegraph Avenue: in horse manure, dog poop, spit, oil, cigar butts, garbage, grease and other things. Before the dog could devour the roast, Lucille grabbed him by his tail and then his collar and Eddie grabbed the roast. A tug-of-war started; Eddie pulled and Miggs pulled and growled as the roast ripped leaving Miggs with a tiny piece. Lucille, still holding Miggs watched Eddie gather a few torn off pieces on the ground while holding onto the roast, stuffing them into his pockets. Eddie and Lucille rushed the meat back to the house, with Miggs running behind barking, following the roast.

"The roast looks smaller", said Lucille."

I think it does," said Edie." Oh, I forgot." He takes two small pieces from his pocket. "Here, this will make it bigger."

"Thank goodness."

Miggs was chained and locked outside while the children washed and retied the roast back together. Eddie went to the back porch while Miggs was barking and yelling for his roast.

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“Shut up! Miggs, you’re in a lot of trouble. If Dad finds out, Lucie and I will get a whipping and I will whip you, so shut up!”

Eddie picked up more wood from the box next to the iron stove to keep the fire going. He went down the street to play with one of his friends. Lucille peeled the potatoes, skinned the carrots, and put the contents in the pan with the roast. She sprinkled and rubbed in, salt pepper, parsley and garlic around the roast. At one thirty when the oven heat was the right temperature, Lucille put the roast in the wood burning oven and proceeded to cook dinner watching the roast closely.

George was home at two o’clock. He could smell the pot roast cooking and cracked open the oven to inspect it while Eddie and Lucille watched and worried about their father finding out, and the consequences would be sore butts. George preceded to the living room to read his Sunday morning Tribune newspaper, his stomach growled for the roast, but he remained patient knowing that the feast would soon begin.

Lucille continued to check the roast just like her grandmother had taught her. Eddie stood by and worried that somehow their father would find out what happened to the roast. George could smell the delicious roast and couldn’t resist taking a peek now and then. As it got closer to dinner time, George kept an eye on Lucille, to make sure the roast would not get overcooked. Although, he knew that Lucille could do the job: after all she was taught by his mother, and Lucille had cooked many roasts before with her grandmother and by herself.

“Let me know when you think the roast is ready and I’ll take it out of the oven.” George did not want to take any chances of the roast dropping on the floor and getting dirty since he was the most qualified one to take the roast out of the oven.

Eddie went into his bedroom and hid for fear of being found out. When the roast was ready,

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Lucille watched her father take the roast out of the oven. He set the hot pan with its contents on the counter to let it cool some before taking the roast out of the pan and placing it on a wooden block on the kitchen table.

George admired the roast staring at it. Miggs chained to the cable in the yard, caught the scent and started barking, crying for the roast.

“A special treat and I got it for a song,” said George.

Eddie appeared, creeping around the kitchen. George started cutting the meat and put it in a dish for serving while Lucille removed the potatoes and carrots and put them into a bowl and scooped out the juice from the pan into a container.

“The meat is done just right Lucie, nice job.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” slightly smiling as she looked with some relief at Eddie.

George put a big portion of meat and vegetables on his plate and poured the meat juice on his carrots and potatoes with delight. He was hungry, especially for the roast that he had been dreaming about all week. He skipped lunch to save up for the roast and started eating.

“Have some meat,” said George pushing the meat and vegetables closer to Eddie. Eddie swallowed hard and stared at the plate without taking any, spreading butter on a piece of bread.

“Don't ya want any of this delicious meat?”

“Uh, - no thank you, I, I'm not very hungry.”

“Not hungry? You don't know what you are missin. Pass the plate to your sister.”

Eddy pushed the plate in her direction. Lucille glanced at the steaming platter and reached across the table; picked up a piece of bread and reached for the butter.

“Dish out some meat potatoes and carrots and pour some of the meat juice on top, it's delicious.” A little bit of grease was running down George's chin.

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The children kept quiet looking away from George.

“I don’t understand you two; this is really good, eat some.” George shoved a big piece of potato covered with meat juice into his mouth.

“I know what your problem is; you two ate too much chocolate candy today.”

“Yes we did daddy,” said Lucille chewing on her bread.

George reached across the table, pulled the platter towards him and put another large portion of meat and potatoes on his plate.

“Well, from now on, I am goin to ration the candy out to you.”

After pouring more meat juice over the contents of his plate, he stuffed a piece of meat into his mouth with a rush of overwhelming satisfaction. In his happy mood looking at his children through the top of his stained glasses from the meat juice, he preceded to advise them. ”You both need to eat a good healthy meal, and from now on, no more candy until you finish your dinner.”

Eddie and Lucille looked and smiled at each other, they were out of harm’s way, most of the meat was in George’s belly, and they had passed the test.

After dinner, Lucille cleaned up and washed the dishes while Eddie dried them with a towel. When they were finished, they went into their bedrooms and ate all their chocolate, the final piece of evidence.

Miggs got some of the left-overs; he didn't seem to mind.