

Sample
by Julian Tucker
2018 Royal Nonesuch Humor Writing Contest
Young Writer - Honorable Mention

“Mmm, these are delicious. Where can I find them?” An old man in a beige rain jacket looks up at me through glasses the size of mini oreos, the kind we sell in boxes of 500 in Aisle 6b.

“Aisle 23 sir,” I reply.

“Macaroni balls -- such a good idea,” the man grins to himself as he slips a second ball under his palm and skips away toward the rotisserie chickens.

I do not say that I personally could not take a bite of them without being overwhelmed by nausea and regret.

“Macaroni balls,” I say to the heavy Russian woman in a plaid dress who asks me about the oily submarine-shaped objects. Looking at them now as I imagine they appear to her, I suddenly notice that they are a color that is disturbingly similar to the urine of a mildly dehydrated person, white with heavy tints of yellow.

The woman takes a mini paper plate with a spork protruding out of the side of the oil-heavy mess. She takes a bite of the ball and quickly throws it away, shaking her head.

“No, no, no. Zis is ze vorst food I haff khad at Costco for a very long time,”

The 13-year-old girl standing next to her says in a quiet voice, “Mom, don’t be rude. You are being rude.”

“I am not being rude. I am allowed to speak my mind.” She stares at me. “Am I not allowed to speak my mind?”

“You are allowed... to speak your mind.”

“You see if I vas in Rasha, I vood nat be allowed, but khere I am.”

“Yes.” Rule number one of being a Costco-sample-server: Avoid get into an extended conversation with customers.

“Vell khaff a good day,” the woman says. “Come on, Evgenia,”

“Sorry ma'am,” says the girl. Rule number two: Do not act like you loathe being called ma'am, and that if someone calls you that again, the Aisle 16 of Costco, Flushing, Queens branch will be filled with flying balls of pasta, cheese, and oil. Also, do not throw macaroni balls at your customers.

In the breakroom, so close to the food court that the odors of pepperoni pizza and hot Italian sandwiches can never be covered up by Febreeze and Mojave-Cactus car freshener, I plop down on a moth-eaten couch. Wanda, a short Bosnian whose aggressively spiked tangerine hair is barely concealed by her hairnet, sits down next to me. Her face is covered with cheap Kirkland makeup which makes her resemble a dead person being prepared for her funeral.

“Whatcha get today?” she asks. She is flipping through a worn-out People magazine from 2007.

“Macaroni balls.” I pick up an US magazine from 2008. Its headline reads: Meet Hillary Clinton, First Lady, Senator, and now the Frontrunner for the Democratic nomination! “What did you get?”

“Extra (With an X at the beginning) Hot Boneless Wings,” she replies with faux-enthusiasm. They’re about as hot as Hillary was after that article.” She laughs at her own joke until her shoulders begin to shake.

“Well I bet you those wings are better than my macaroni balls,” I answer.

“Britney Spears...ugh,” Wanda mutters and furrows her drawn-on eyebrows, thin brown lines that slant upward above her pupils. “This one is from her shaved-head period,”
“But she’s better now. No?”

Wanda shrugs, turns and walks back onto the floor and her station.

Back at the stand, I shove a package of the balls into the microwave. Thirty seconds of high heat is all it takes to turn the balls from tasteless bits of ice to “delicacies” worthy of at least a five aisle detour. I take a bite of a cold one that I am about to throw out, deciding to sacrifice my breakfast and job. Luckily I do not vomit. Unfortunately, I gag, loudly. “I told you zat ze bolls are terrible,” I slowly swivel my head around. It’s the Soviet snob. “In fact, I saw an old man with some very red pants vomeet from eating zose bolls. Khee got the vomit all over khis rain jacket.”

“Mom.”

“Vat is it Evgenia?”

“We are here to get the pie crusts. You are be-

“No, I am not being rude. Vance egen, I am allowed to say vat I vant to say. I saw zis voman nearly vomeet from eating ze bolls. So I am simply vondering if zer might be something wrong vith ze bolls.”

The woman stops to look at me for a minute and then continues.

“My name is Vega Vorgachevsky. I am khealth inspector for ze New York department of ze Khealth,”

I smile with what I hope the woman in front of me will understand as kind and understanding, and then stare up at a crate filled with Nature Valley oat bars. Layers of wrappers, green the color of a pine forest. My eyes curve sideways upon giant jars of Vlasic kosher dill pickles. Swamp green. The jars are piled on the shelves in stacks so high they resemble boulders. I look back up at Veyga and reply feebly, “Oh hello miss... pleasure to,um... meet you.”

Sweat pours down my neck. I smile again, my friendly smile, warm and friendly.

“Vell, I suppose I shood geev you my card.” She hands me a gray business card. “Khav a good day.”

As she turns to go, I notice her rosy cheeks, button nose, and gray hair so wispy it looks like smoke, and suddenly she appears to me harmless, even kind. Her daughter, Evgenia, wears way too much green eyeshadow, so her eyes give off the impression that someone has dumped finely ground grass on them. Below, the younger woman’s lips are coated with clementine-colored lipstick. Her body is covered in all the latest fashion, as if she is willing herself to be a walking magazine.

On the walk home from work I find myself gnawing on my nails the same way a beaver gnaws on a log, obsessively. What will happen if I lose this job? Will we have to move into an even smaller apartment? I have been working here for 18 years. Since I was 23, I have been serving samples. I have had to deal with 5-year-olds, entitled children of 65-year-old venture capitalists, drunk people, and hipsters who bombard with questions about gluten and dairy levels. And my children, all four of them, keep needing food, clothes, a semi-leaky roof over their heads, and of course, every new Playstation. Four kids shoved into one bedroom. It will be seven if we need to move into a smaller place: Me, Bert-my-husband, Bert’s mother Deanne. My salary and Burt’s salary combined are barely enough to pay the current rent.

What will happen when the kids have to go to college? Assuming they can even get in. My 14-year-old son thinks that Russia is in Brooklyn! Veyga Vorgachevsky would eye him with even more contempt than she had for my macaroni balls.

I stare at the decaying houses on Union St. Once beautiful, the red brick and marble now look like globs of rotting sugar. Weeds sprout out of the concrete stoop, and an eviction notice hangs on the door of 1920 Union, a notice that may soon be hanging on the door of 182 34th Rd, if I lose my job.

At home I set tonight's dinner, KFC's 20-dollar-bucket, picked up 3 and a half tree-less blocks away from work, onto the chipped blue tile counter.

"Dinner's here," I shout although I know no one will come, since what I know without checking is that they are all playing Fifa on the Playstation. I stare around the kitchen. Near the stove, the yellow paint peels onto the unframed photos of my daughter and three sons. The brick that used to hold up the broken leg of the kitchen table has slid out of its place, and the ash-colored table is dangerously close to toppling over. I slide the brick back under the leg, and notice that it leaves a mark on the blue linoleum. I sigh and climb up the stairs to the kids' room. I find my Ethan, who is fifteen, lying on his back in pale blue boxers and an undershirt. He's on his iPhone, a 4S.

"Dinner is here," I say softly. He seems to be in a miserable mood.

"What is it?" He does not bother to look up at me.

"KFC. Where is everybody?"

"Marina is at the library. Seth and James are probably out scaring old Chinese ladies with empty Budweiser bottles"

"Please tell me you are joking,"

"For now,"

"Where's Deanne?"

"Bridge club," He smiles faintly, thank god.

"Well... get dressed, and then come down to dinner. The chicken is getting cold,"

"Kay," As I head downstairs the door bangs open and slams against the wall, leaving a small dent the shape of Delaware. It's Marina, my seventeen-year-old daughter, looking like she just ran a mile trying to keep up with an ostrich.

"Mom, mom, mom," she yells. "I got into Rutgers!"

"Oh honey. That's so great. I'm so proud of you!" I reply half-heartedly, looking away quickly, so she won't be able to read in my face that we can't afford Rutgers without financial aid.

"Luuuuuucky," It's Ethan again, this time only in his boxers.

"Cloothes, Ethan."

"Oh yeah, soooory."

"Marina! That's so great! But... Have you heard back from Buffalo?"

"Nope."

"Albany?"

"None of the SUNYs have sent out results yet," she says, now bored. I'm worried I'm spoiling her fun. "I know that in-state schools are more affordable, if that's what you were going to say,"

"No,no, no," I say. I try to sound cheery, "I'm just so happy for you!"

"Okay Mom," she sighs. Typical teenager.

"Hey, by the way, where are Seth and James?" I ask, now getting worried.

“Out scaring five year olds,” She says, smiling at her own joke.”J.K, mom, they’re at the library, doing research for some history project,” She pulls out her phone, laughs at something and then heads upstairs. She opens the door to the bedroom and then slams it quickly.

“I forgot that Ethan is changing,” she mutters sheepishly as she heads back downstairs and towards the living room.

I hear a vibrating noise and look down. Oh no, Is that the number of the Russian health inspector? Veyga Vorgachevsky? How does she have my phone number? She must have spoken to the manager. I reluctantly pick up the phone. Before I can Even say hello. A loud voice says, “Khey, Moneeca, khiya doin?” How does she know my number? How does she know my name? “Oh hello Ms. Vorgachevsky. How are you?” I reply, trembling with fear.

“Please, please,please, coll me Veyga. My onyon-samon soup dyid not turn out so vell, so I am disappointed,”

“Oh I am sorry to hear that, Veyga,”

“Who is Veyga?” It’s Marina.

“Oh... You khav doter, khov nice,” Veyga says. “*Yes*” I think. “*If you get me fired she won’t be able to go to college. In-state or not,*” “Vell,” Veyga continues, “If it is okay, I vood like to skejwell a meeting vit you. Does tyo pee em vork?”

“Two is great,” I reply faux-cheery, never would be great.

“My address is on ze card. Khav a good evening,”

“You too,” I reply faintly. I end the call and slowly place the phone back on the table.

“Who was that?” Ethan calls out from the bedroom.

“Veyga Vorgachevsky,” Marina replies, trying to restrain her laughter.

“Who’s that?”

“Dunno. Ask Mom,”

“Mom who’s Veyga Vorgachevsky?” What should I say? The woman who might get me fired and ruin our lives permanently.

“She is... a health inspector who checked out the store today,” I stare at the wooden stairs brown but yet also the color of cherries. “Marina,” I shout across the house.

“Mmm hmm?”

“You’re gonna have to walk to school tomorrow,” I say, bracing myself for her reaction.

“What? Walk? But I take the wagon. Why can’t I take the wagon?” Oh I knew this was coming.

“Yeah,” Ethan pipes in, “Why does she have to walk. That means we all have to walk,” What do I tell them? I have a meeting with a person who will likely interrogate me and then get me fired.

“I um... have to go to a... Costco-workers-union meeting in Manhattan,” If such a thing exists, I have never heard of it, much less attended a meeting.

“Mom, I’m hungry,” Ethan wails from his room. I don’t tell him that it’s not the last time he will be hungry.

“We have to wait for Seth and James to get home,” As if on cue, I hear shouting and taunting on the sidewalk. A few seconds later the black door bangs open leaving, no doubt, another dent on the wall. Burt once called it “wall a la dente.” Seth and James, 14 and 12, walk in, both wearing Mets caps, Seth is wearing blue sports pants with a tank-top (No dress code at his school. That’s for sure) James is wearing red sports shorts with no shirt at all and I really don’t want to know what happened to it.

“James, go put on a shirt,” I say, rolling my eyes. Seth smirks,

“You really don’t want to know what he did to his shirt,” he says. “What’s for dinner?”

“KFC. But I have to reheat it cause it got cold while you were out fooling around,”

“Hey we were at the library. Ask Marina,”

“I know you were at the library, but where you went afterwards is a mystery,” He’s already bounded up the stairs and disappeared into the bedroom.

Veyga Vorgachevsky’s office is on Park Row, in an office building across from City Hall, with red brick columns above a painted black stairway. Each window seems to be surrounded by a Roman temple with columns, inscriptions and a triangular roof. Her office is on the twelfth floor. I immediately enter to find that the wall behind her desk is completely covered by posters about food-borne illnesses and how to prevent them. Veyga herself sits behind a metal schoolteacher’s desk. With her is a tall woman with skin the color of coal dust, and hair so smooth and processed it resembles a graphically-designed picture of hair more than actual hair. She smiles at me, showing off her pearly whites and 300 dollar lipstick.

“Khello, Moneeka,” Veyga Vorgachevsky is wearing a lime-green pantsuit. She seems gruffer than usual. “Plyease seet down. Zis is Inspyktor Mosely, she is khead of ze department.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” the Inspector says. Her voice sounds like a bassoon, much deeper than I would have expected it to be.

“Pleasure to meet you too Inspector,” I reply. My voice quavers as I look up at her. She is wearing a blue pantsuit, also Hillary-certified. I however, am still in my Costco uniform, complete with hairnet.

“So,” Veyga says, and stops.

Is she angry?

“In ze last five dyays, seventeen pyeople een ze Greater New York Area khave gotten seeck from eengesting Keerklend Macaroni Bolls, veech you served yesterday at ze Flushing branch of Cosco. Four of zem have pessed away,”

Wait what? People have died from eating those balls?

“Now, before I continue, I vood like to syay zat not oll ze pyeople seeckened eengested ze bolls at ze Flashing brench, so zese events, are in no vay your fault and your job khas no reason to be threatened.”

Ohhh... Thank god. Thank the Buddha. Thank whoever makes things spin around here. I want to jump up and cheer, but instead I just ask, “People... died? Eight people?”

Inspector Mosley clears her throat and speaks. “Yes, very quickly, and unfortunately quite painfully, 14mk people are in intensive care. It’s quite simply, a terrible situation, and we at the department have been working with the people at Costco to put an end to this. Costco has ordered an immediate recall of the product in question. Thanks to a thorough investigation being led by myself and Inspector Vorgachevsky, we have come to a hypothesis in which we believe that something was wrong with the dairy supplier. We just need you to answer a few questions about the product,” she folds her hands and smiles.

Veyga looks down at a piece of paper and asks, “Vat vas ze color of ze frozen boll?”

“If I remember correctly, it was white with heavy tints of yellow,”

Veyga and Inspector Mosely look at each-other grimly.

“Is something wrong?” I ask. That was a dumb question, people are dead! Of course something is wrong.

Inspector Mosely grimaces and says, “The color of the balls was the same color of the milk that was used. Which means...-

“That the color of the milk was white with heavy tints of yellow,” I say quickly

“Precisely. This means that there is something severely wrong with the dairy. This also means that products containing dairy from the same farm or company may be carrying the same disease,” Inspector Mosley smiles. “Although the microwave should have killed of all foodborne illnesses,”

“Do you know where the dairy came from?” I ask her.

“We are currently trying to figure out where the dairy was sourced,” She pauses to furrow her eyebrows. “Unfortunately, we have inconclusive results of where the dairy came from. There are multiple locations that we can trace the dairy back to,”

On the way home, I stop by a clinic in Long Island City, complete with dim, flickering fluorescent lights, the sound of coughing mixed with the sound of children crying, plus a nice smell of disinfectant thrown into the mix. The whole setting gives me violent nausea, or is it just the food poisoning that brought me here. After a forty minute wait, the doctor, a tiny Indian woman, gives me some antibiotics, in the form of sky-colored capsules and tells me to take them for at least a week. If I get any signs of illness go to the emergency room immediately. If I don’t, the woman says widening her eyes at me and holding my hand to her chest, I could easily die. I drive home, with that “nice” and “pleasant” thought. I stop at the grocery store on Union, not a Costco by the way, and wander the fluorescent-lit aisles, picking up, cabbage, tomatoes, eggplant, pasta, basil, and a nice healthy gallon of milk balanced out with a giant bottle of Pepsi for only seventy-five cents! (What a great deal for diabetes and sadness!) I load the bags into the station wagon, faded red after 14 years of rain, shine, and a miserable hailstorm in 2009. The whole car creaks like an old floorboard every time I put a bag in the trunk. It vibrates like a violin string every time I step on the gas, so by the time I get home, I am shaking and shivering like a hypothermic who is electrocuting herself. I open the door, careful not to leave another dent in the wall. For my trouble, I am welcomed by a flying soccer ball. I have only just formed the individual letters into the word ITALIA when the ball smacks me in the face.

“Oh honey,” cackles Burt’s mother, Deanne, “Did you get hit in the nose?”

“Yes,” I mutter as I grab an ice pack and hold it over my bleeding nose. “I have so many fantasies about puncturing that ball with a kitchen knife,” I say to Deanne as I watch Marina nearly destroy the chandelier with a drop-kick. The ball hits the table and knocks the brick out from underneath the table leg. The table teeters dangerously as a science project slides to the floor, then the broken leg hits the linoleum with a loud crash as the entire leg splinters. Suddenly everything is silent, except for the sounds of the ball bouncing off the dishwasher. As I watch, the ball silently spins to a stop. I stare at Marina, her frizzy hair twisted into a haphazard bun. As I watch her, Marina turns the station wagon’s reddish color and whispers sorry, as she lowers her head at the splintered leg.

“Marina. Get a broom and clean up the mess,” I say coldly as I turn to Ethan, “Have you done your homework?”

Ethan stares at his overpriced shoes -- what had I been thinking when I bought those as a birthday present -- and whispers, “We have... They haven’t.” He nods at Seth and James.

“Seth, James, do your homework. Ethan help Marina. Deanne, the news is starting now in case you’re interested. I have to make dinner,” I wander into the kitchen and place the ice-pack back in the freezer. The grocery bags have spilled, leaving the produce in the sink and the milk and soda on the floor. Sighs are released from my chest as I pick up the drinks and shove them into the fridge.

Seven-thirty brings about the arrival of Burt, in an overly-jubilant mood, the usual. Burt is immediately greeted by James with a loud, “Marina destroyed the table and we are going to have to eat on the floor like poor people.”

Burt and I exchange a look of exasperation and mild annoyance. *We spoil them waaaaay too much* I mouth. Burt nods sadly, and then asks,

“Whaddya mean? She destroyed the table?” Burt asks looking alarmed.

“I kicked a soccer ball that knocked the brick out of place,” Marina says quickly, glaring at James. “The leg hit the floor and completely splintered,”

“You’re making it sound like it’s not your fault,” James whines looking at me. He silently pleads me to back him up. “But it’s alllllllll your fault,” He sticks his tongue out at her.

What follows is a string of curse words are flung back and forth between the two. Words so severe that both James and Marina seem to be seconds away from attacking each other with the largest throwable object, Deanne, who is in tears after hearing the hideous collage. Have I raised them to be like this? Is this how they’ve learned to speak? What is wrong with them? What is wrong with me? I’m sure Veyga doesn’t have to deal with this. Inspector Mosley would never have to worry about her children screaming the most derogatory terms in the dictionary at each-other. Instead of weeping and screaming I take a breath and slowly say, “Marina, go to the bedroom. Tell Seth and Ethan to get out. Politely. James, go to the attic. Do NOT touch anything. You two will be receiving what is left of dinner. If either of you escape, you will receive the worst beating of your entire life. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” they reply in unison. James hits Marina on the arm, imagining, somehow, that I won’t notice he’s done it.

“Touch me one more time. I dare you,” Marina hisses.

I personally would not accept that dare. I watch them climb the stairs, glaring at each other. A few seconds later Ethan and Seth come bounding down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Whaaaaat the fu-” Ethan says.

“If someone says one more curse word (Italian or English) I will scream until we are all deaf,” Burt shouts, glaring at Ethan.

Seth clears his throat and asks, “What happened?” He swallows and looks at me nervously, as if I’ll smack him for asking a question.

“I’d rather not discuss it.” I try to ignore Deanne’s wailing as I start to peel a zucchini.

“It sounded like a bad soap opera,” Seth offers. “Really bad.”

I am not in a good enough mood to tell him that all soap operas are bad. Nor do I want Deanne’s wailing and squealing to increase, so I focus on the zucchini instead. I order Seth to make sure Marina hasn’t escaped, and tell Ethan to check on James.

“But I wanted to watch *Keeping up With the Kardashians*,” Ethan begins to object and then stops. He tosses a tomato into the air.

Burt snatches the tomato out of the air and sets it down angrily. “I have had enough with flying soccer balls. I don’t need flying tomatoes too,” he yells as he marches off to the living room. “Come on Mom,”

Deanne hobbles after him her face blotchy with tears and heavily applied mascara. Seth and James are still standing in the kitchen staring at the tomato.

“Well? Go check already,” I say. They disappear, both with confused expressions on their faces. I sigh and begin to dice the zucchini, pausing at thirty-second intervals to rub my fingers. About five minutes later, Seth runs into the kitchen, a scared expression on his face.

“Somum iner roo,” he pants quickly as he grabs his foot as if he has injured it.

“Someone’s in her room?” I ask slowly, scared. Seth nods, still clutching his foot. “Who?” I ask.

“Dunno. A human,”

“Very funny,” I say as I rush upstairs, Seth trailing behind me. I reach the door and push it open, fearing the worst. No one is there, no intruder, no Marina, no nobody. I stand there, listening to Seth’s breathing. “Get Dad,” I tell him quickly.

“Bu-

“Get him. Now,” Seth rushes off. I’m using him, in the same way Macbeth ordered around his servant, Seton. But that’s what kids are for, right? Right or wrong, they are definitely not for running off and cursing at each-other in Italian. I hear panting again, and see Seth climbing back up the stairs with Burt at his side.

“What are we going to do?” I ask him nervously. Burt has always been the calm one, the pragmatic one. He has to have some solution. But Burt looks as confused and scared as I do. He takes a breath and says, “Call anywhere she might have gone?”

“Call her friends’ parents,” Seth butts in.

“Most of the parents only speak Korean or Cantonese,” I answer. “Does anybody speak any of those?” I know nobody does. Seth speaks Mandarin, but not Cantonese. “How similar is Mandarin to Cantonese?” I ask Seth desperately.

He shakes his head and says, “We are just going to have to look for her. Randomly.”

We’re never going to find her. In a couple hours she’ll probably just come home. Or she won’t...

Marina doesn’t come home that night. I lie awake all night, staring at the flaking plaster on the ceiling, hoping to hear her footsteps. We search for her for 4 hours, until midnight. No sign of her. We look everywhere in Queens and Brooklyn. We split up. Burt takes the north-south streets; I do the numbered east-west streets. Nothing. I stare at the ceiling, at the fan, before getting up and wandering the house. I go down stairs.

At breakfast, no one talks. Seth asks if we should call the police, and as I open my mouth to answer, the sound of keys, rustling fills the air. Five seconds later the door slowly opens, and in steps Marina.

Before I know what I am doing, I find myself standing and shouting, “Where the heck were you?”

“Gyeong’s house,” she replied nonchalantly. “Any extra breakfast?” I want to starve her so she learns her lesson. I want to feed her pork scraps, but instead I just say, “Waffles on the counter. Butter on stovetop... Help yourself,” Seth shoots me a look and mouths, *She’s lying*. I give him a look that I mean for him to understand as, *We’ll talk about it later*.

At work, macaroni balls have been replaced by Cheeseburger bites. Tiny buns the color of dried corn, filled with ground beef, ketchup- flavored cheese, and chopped pickles. I don’t try them, for fear that they are also contaminated with some disease that kills people with almost no warning. I shiver as I feel the sub-arctic breath of the produce section, crowded with bulk boxes of Driscoll’s raspberries and figs with permanent frost. I watch carts the size of small SUVs push through the heavy translucent streamers rendered opaque by condensation. I stare off at the pharmacy. “Hearing Test!” the blue, block letters read. “Performed by a Certified Professional,” they promise.

“Oh look khoo eet ees,” a brutally harsh Russian accent fills the air. For the first time, I am happy to hear it.

“Veyga Vorgachevsky!” I beam at her, My eyes fall on her face and I immediately stop speaking. The coming-together of her brown lipstick, green blush, pink mascara, and yellow eye shadow make her look like a Picasso painting.

“What brings you h-h-h-here,” I ask, trying not to laugh at her makeup. She is wearing an orange pantsuit.

“I khav a meeting vit ze manager een thirty minutes so I wanted to do some browsing. Montgomery shood be around khere. Although she ees probably jast sneefeeng ze roasted cheeckens. I tell you, shye ees obsesed,”

“Who is Montgomery?”

“Montgomery ees Inspyektor Mosley. Oh zere is Montgomery. Come Montgomery I found Moneeka! By ze vay, vood you like to join us for lanch?” Veyga natters as she waves to Inspector Mosley, who hurries over.

“Monica. Such a pleasure to see you. Now I had some divine avocado quesadillas as a sampler a couple aisles away. Have you tried them?”

“No, I haven’t, Inspector Mosley. However, I can offer you some Cheeseburger bites if you are interested,”

“Hmm. I suppose I will try one of those... things,” She takes one, breaks it open, and frowns. “Why is the cheese red? Is there blood?”

“It’s ketchup flavored,” I reply watching her disgusted face contort into relief.

“Oh, well that’s better than blood. But not much better.” Inspector Mosley frowns as she places the snack onto her tongue. “Oh god. What evil creature came up with the idea for this?” she says, gagging.

“Ees zere enee suspicious signs?” Veyga asks carefully.

“No. It’s just bad food... Really bad food,”

The restaurant is in Forest Hills, a Russian place, with crystal chandeliers, tablecloths the color of synthetic snow, and Russian opera blaring from a radio somewhere in the depths of the kitchen. A tuxedo-clad waiter with a handlebar mustache leads us to a table and speaks to Veyga in rapid fire Russian, reminiscing, I can only suppose, about half-frozen potatoes, and mocking Americans. After five minutes, the waiter walks away, bowing to Veyga but ignoring both me and Inspector Mosley.

“I’f that’s a race thing,” Inspector Mosley mutters to me. “I swear to... I will not be a happy woman,” I stare at the tablecloth feeling uncomfortable.

“I ordered as e feast for ze zars. Ve vill khav caviar, borscht, stafed peppers, sturgeon, and

“I think we understand,” Inspector Mosley interrupts severely looking annoyed.

“Montgomery, vat is wrong?”

“I do not care for that waiter. I think he ignored me because I’m bl-

“Oh Montgomery, Dmitri ees not a racist. Vy do you sink khe ees a racist?” Veyga frowns and then asks me, “Do you sink khe vas being racist? What am I supposed to say?

Whatever I do say, someone will get mad.

“Maybe a little bit,” I say softly, bracing myself for her reaction.

“Oh... Vell maybe khe cood khav been more gracious to Montgomery. I vill talk to ze owner about zis.”

Right then, I am sure misery will likely ensue. Once again I feel uncomfortable and out of place. Veyga and Inspector Mosley are fighting with each other, and I have nothing to say to them. Why didn't I settle for a slice of pepperoni pizza in the break room?

"So Moneeka, you went to ze doktor to get checked out?" Veyga asks me, trying to move the conversation along.

"Yes, I went to a clinic. I'm supposed to take some antibiotics for a week. These blue pills," I pause. I ask Inspector Mosley, "Did you happen to eat the balls?"

"Oh no. I never shop at Costco. I'm a Dean and Deluca gal." Inspector Mosley smiles coolly, then frowns at the ice cubes in the sweating goblet. I gaze around the room like a kid on a field trip. A haggard man wearing a pale blue button shirt and khaki pants sits with a woman whose camel-skin colored hair has been yanked backwards to reveal graying roots. She is wearing a skirt made out of gray fabrics and a green cardigan. The waiter reappears holding a platter loaded with a giant bowl and three smaller bowls, . each one a diluted lime green.

"Byelorussian borscht," he says as he places the platter on the table. A wave purple soup with chunks and shreds of beets topped off with a glob of sour cream and a wilted sprig of dill rushes toward the edge of the bowl and then slides back just as it is about to rush over the rim. Looking at it makes me feel a wave of nausea. I run my hand over the lymph nodes under my chin, each one inflated like a beach ball. As I do this Veyga stares at me alarmingly.

"Vat is wrang, Moneeka?" she asks. I notice she is glancing toward Inspector Mosley.

"Nothing," I mumble. "Just a little under the weather,"

"Oh no. Zees ees not good. You khaff to go to ze emergency room. Dmitri, can you pl-

"Now Veyga, let's not overreact. Monica is simply not having her best day." Inspector Mosley interrupts. I wonder whether I am wrong to detect a note of condescension in her voice.

"No. She looks like she just on ze permafrost in Novosibirsk, sleet, fell, and kheet her khead on telephone pole,"

"That was the most confusing description I have ever heard."

As they argue my nausea suddenly vanishes without a trace.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," I say quickly before Veyga can lift some new Russian analogy into the air.

"Maybe you just had a slight migraine," Inspector Mosley offers, "After my third plastic surgery procedure, I had very sudden migraines that only lasted around a couple minutes. I am very familiar with the ordeal. Now tell me did any light-

"I have had migraines before," I interrupt. "This was not a migraine," I stare at the borscht and I once again feel nauseated.

"Moneeka, I don't mean to be rude, but khow old are you?"

Why is she suddenly asking me my age?

"I'm 41," I answer, frowning as I sip the borscht.

Veyga purses her lips and then mutters,

"Khope you are nat pregnant,"

Upon hearing this, Inspector Mosely spits out the borscht and shouts, "Veyga. Don't be ridiculous." She picks up a soggy piece of rye and then dumps it in her borscht where it bobbles like a buoy.

“I em nat being redeculous. I em trying to rule out oll poseebeelitees. Weech has proven to be successful contrary to your byeleeefs,” Veyga snaps back. “Moneeka, do you use microwayve to prepare your food??”

Her sudden question blindsides me.

“Yes. Usually... sometimes a crockpot. Occasionally I don’t need to cook anything. Like with crackers,” I stumble awkwardly. I am searching for the right answer, but I don’t know where she is going with this line of questioning.

“Yes, bat you used e microwayve for ze macaroni bolles?”

“Yes,” I slowly say. Oh, so this is the true reason for this meeting. “I’m confused. Why are you worried about the way I prepared the samples? Did we not already discuss this?” I have to stop. I am getting too aggressive. I can’t sound defensive. Defensive is suspicious. “I mean what are the implications of your question?”

Nope, still defensive.

“Vell, zere ees e possibility zat aere vas a flow in ze preparation of ze food zat ve might kaff missed... bat don’t bye elarmed,” Veyga says slowly and then half heartedly adds “Eet does not myean zat you are to be kheld reespeebil for zees events,” The last part punctuates her statement like a deflated balloon left over from a first grader’s birthday party.

All next day the manager floats around my shoulder circling and circling like a hawk... or a panther. Some predator stalking its prey. Every so often, I glance at the rotisserie chickens bathing in the cases under flat yellow light. Next to the chickens, a pile of nova salmon lies haphazardly. Occasionally, I hear the scraping of a cart near the nova and a whole group of the fish tumble onto the linoleum. A child the size of the cart pushes another cart over the salmon as it speeds towards the candy section. “Oh it’s just something we do every so often,” the manager explains while giving me an synthetic smile. “Just to make sure everything is going all right.” ‘Every 18 years, interesting choice of interval,’ I think with sarcasm. I almost say this aloud but I know that I am standing on paper-thin ice. Ice with cracks spreading.

“Oh, of course... I completely understand,” I say. “Makes sense,” I wonder how much time unintentional manslaughter gets one in jail. ‘I have nothing to worry about,’ I tell myself. ‘There is nothing I could have done wrong,’ I put a dozen balls on high heat for 30 seconds. That’s all there is to do. Well, besides placing them on mini paper plates, stabbing them with sporks, and watch the grease seep out. I sigh as I shove mini-pizza-dumplings into the microwave. High heat for 30 seconds. I stare at the rotund, possible U.F.Os, rotate in the dim light. Was the light always so pale and paltry? Like spoiled milk, like a seedy abandoned bus stop in Jamaica Plains. The rotating disc slowly comes to a halt, and I press the white button to open the door. It does not budge. ‘Great,’ I think, ‘Another petulant teenager I have to deal with,’

I press the button again, and the door loudly swings open, banging on the pepto-bismol colored linoleum countertop. I shove the protective mitten onto my hand, feeling the torn rubber scratch my wrists. I carry the plate to the display where a small crowd of tired onlookers gaze at it hopefully.

“Mini pizza dumplings,” I call. “Aisle 23. Mini pizza dumplings,”

“Excuse me ma’am. Are these snacks supposed to be cold?” a man resembling a paper clip with a wiry frame, silver hair, and a metallic tint in his voice asks.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” I reply even though I am aware of everything he just said.

“These pizza things are cold. I don’t think they should be cold,” the man snaps. “Are they supposed to be cold?”

“Oh, no sir. There must be some mistake. I am sorry for the inconvenience,” I stammer, panicking. This has never happened before. Or at least I don’t think it has. Has it? How long has this been going on? Is this the first time? What about all the other foods? What about the macaroni balls? The macaroni balls that killed seven people. The old man with the bright red pants whom Veyga watched vomit on his pants. Dead because of an industrial microwave that didn’t actually heat. The 5-year-old girl wearing green overalls with a pigtail sprouting from the top of her head. Or because of me. Sliding twelve balls onto the plate in the silver Panasonic microwave. Smelling the cheese cook. I did what I was supposed to do. The plate rotated. No smell. The cheese never cooked. The smell of no cooking. I did nothing. That tiny girl who grabbed a plate from the stand and laughed at the tiny fork, a her-sized fork, just before she used it to scoop up the food that smelled no smell at all.

I lay on the pink velveteen couch at home. Staring into space. Will the police believe me? Everyone is out. Out bowling, or doing some other secret thing I’ll never know about. I wonder when the police will come. As if on cue, I hear a banging on the door. I feel myself getting up and wandering to the door. The knob is warm in my hand.