

Brass Tacks

Ted the Drug Dealer picked up a fare at the airport who tried to rob him at machete-point. Ted shot him, dumped him out of the cab, and kept the machete, which he later used to harvest marijuana in Kentucky.

He came home that morning from his night shift and put the shiny, dented blade in the middle of our table, where my mother and I were engaged in our daily battle over breakfast. My mother was a visionary; long before everyone believed that breakfast was the most important meal of the day, she fought for me to have it like I couldn't leave the house without it. By forbidding me to leave the house without it.

Mom: "SSSSStace. You have to eat something in the morning. Otherwise your brains won't work. Do you know what happens when your brains don't work?"

Ironically, there was a bowl of some unspeakable hot cereal in front of me that looked like pureed brains. It smelled like hot chalk with walnuts.

Me: "They get steamed up and served in a bowl?"

My mother shook her head. She folded her arms and leaned forward in her chair across from me. It was a pose I had come to know well over the years: she was going to sit there and glare at me until I ate all the food she had put down dead in front of me. Some of her best recipes ended this way:

1. Bone soup with rice. It tasted like the grief one feels for a dead pet. We sat at the table until long past midnight.
2. Turkey legs. Undercooked dark meat on gristly bones. My argument that we weren't feudal lords went nowhere. Ted the Drug Dealer found us the next morning asleep at the table, our heads down next to a rancid heap of turkey legs.
3. Lamb with anything. It tasted like the dried-up sweat of men sentenced to hard labor in a rock quarry. I slept under the table that night.

It was summer vacation, so we had all day to sit there, a bowl of moldering white lumps between us. I was fourteen; too young to emancipate myself and flee her jurisdiction. Ted the Drug Dealer, my mother's third husband, saved me when he slammed his captured machete down on the table.

Mom: "Ted. What the hell is that?"

Ted the Drug Dealer: "A machete."

Me: "Are we going on safari? Harvesting coconuts? Participating in an equatorial jungle war?" Anything better than choking down a bowl of used brains.

Ted the Drug Dealer: "A guy tried to rob me with it."

Mom: "No he didn't!"

Ted the Drug Dealer: "So I shot him."

Mom: "No you didn't!"

Actually, he did.

Ted the Drug Dealer hadn't always been a casually violent, opportunistic criminal. When he and my mother met in 1980, he was a suit-and-tie clad lightbulb salesman who drove a responsible sedan, paid taxes, and kept mostly to the speed limit. I'm not exactly sure what happened after that, but shoving us all into a Winnebago for five years and wandering the country like itinerant folk singers might have had something to do with it. It could also have been my mother's cooking.

After dabbling in a series of ill-advised get rich quick schemes in California, he fell totally into a life of crime once we hit Florida. We lived five miles from the beach; most of the people were on vacation and didn't notice his slow cruise around the edges of the law in his cab. Every now and then he got into something that had the chance of him getting caught. Like picking up a guy in his cab and shooting him in the summer of 1985.

The fare was a skinny, red-eyed, sniffing, twitchy fellow. My mother the doctor would have diagnosed him as "nervous and jerky."

Mom: "You know what's wrong with your cousin Steven?"

Me: "Who?"

Mom: "Steven! Stace! Steven! Aunt Mabel's youngest son. How could you not know Steven?"

Me: "I've never met him."

Mom: "Steven! Mabel's son. He's the one with the girlfriend. The shiksa! Mabel hates her. I can't believe you don't know Steven."

Me: "Well, I hear he's got something wrong with him."

Mom (triumphantly): "That'ssssss right! He's nervous and jerky."

Me: "What does that mean?"

Mom: "SSSSSSStace. Come on. Nervous! Jerky! He's nervous and jerky!"

Me: "Ah."

My cousin Steven was addicted to cocaine. Whenever the family came to visit he had to lay off the drugs. What made him nervous and jerky was withdrawal. Ted the Drug Dealer and I were the only ones who knew what was wrong with him.

This fare didn't come through the dispatch office at the cab company. Ted the Drug Dealer's pager went off, showing a call back number with an extra three-digit code at the end. Ted called the number.

Ted the Drug Dealer: "Louie. What do you need?"

Nervous and Jerky Fare: "I'm not Louie. He gave me his code. He said you could help me out."

Ted the Drug Dealer (warily): “Maybe.”

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “I’m at the Delta terminal.”

Ted picked him up at the airport. The nervous and jerky fare slid into the seat behind him, dragging a leather shoulder bag.

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “Hey. Hey. You know where that empty lot is? Behind the airport?”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “Sure.”

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “Take me there. We’ll do the deal there.”

Ted unsnapped the loop holding the pistol in his shoulder holster and put the cab in drive. He glanced occasionally into his rear view mirror. Nervous and Jerky Fare did not meet his gaze. They reached the field behind the airport in ten minutes. The fare looked around and told him to stop. Ted the Drug Dealer put his left hand on the butt of his gun.

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “So. Can you help me out, man?”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “That depends. What do you need?”

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “What you think, man? I need the same thing Louie needs.”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “Louie pays two hundred cash for what he needs.”

He heard a slight metallic twang an instant before the fare pressed the blade of the machete against his throat.

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “I need to run a tab, man.” He laughed at his own joke. “A tab. Get it?”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “Got it.”

He pulled his gun and fired three times through the seat. The machete dropped into his lap. He got out of the cab, dragged the moaning, bleeding fare out and dumped him on the ground with his shoulder bag. Ted the Drug Dealer drove triumphantly away, admiring his new machete.

Me: “So what’d the guy do?”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “He bled.”

Me: “Wow.”

Mom: “Ted. Eat your breakfast. And get that dirty thing off the table. I can’t believe you shot some guy just to get his machete.”

Me: “Here, Ted. Take mine. The feast of victory.”

Ted the Drug Dealer stared glumly down at the bowl.

Mom: “No way, buster. You’re not getting up from this table until you eat your cereal. Ted. I’ll get you a fresh bowl.”

Ted the Drug Dealer: “That should help.”

It really didn’t.

While we were staring at our hideous, cooling breakfasts, the police were responding to reports of overnight gunshot wounds at Hollywood Memorial. The nervous and jerky fare was plenty nervous but much less jerky thanks to the intravenous painkillers sluicing merrily through his veins.

Detective Vigoda looked down at the man in the bed, his face mournful, which was just the normal downward cast of his bulldog’s jowls. His eyes were another story; he was still counting by ones the days since his wife had died.

Detective Vigoda: “How’d you get shot?”

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “Accident.”

Vigoda consulted a dog-eared pocket notebook. “Three shots to the midsection. You must be very clumsy.”

Nervous and Jerky Fare (blissfully calm): “What can I say?”

My mother was faced with competing compulsions: her renegade son sat defiantly before a congealed bowl of brains, prepared with grim resolve to wait out the day. Her husband sat polishing the machete he had gotten from the shooting, as if he had won some kind of marksmanship prize. She had a number of questions she wanted to ask him, but not in front of me.

Mom: “SSSStace. Just go already. It’s not my fault if your brain stops working from lack of nutrients.”

Me: “Huzzah!”

Mom: “Wait till your cells start dying. Wait till your spleen stops working.”

Me: “What does my spleen do?”

Mom: “It removes toxins from your blood. You don’t eat breakfast and you’ll be flooded with toxins.”

I looked down at the crusty bowl. “I’ll risk it.” I fled outside. “Yippee!” Toxins felt like freedom.

My mother glared at Ted. It took him awhile to notice. The machete was very shiny; the blade was pitted from use. Ted the Drug Dealer gazed at it, mesmerized, imagining cataclysmic hand-to-hand subtropical battles on deserted sugar cane plantations. Eventually he felt the leaden weight of her wide-eyed look.

Mom: “SSSSSSSSo. Ted.”

He looked up.

Detective Vigoda: “No need to lie, son. And no good will come of it. You’re a victim here, aren’t you?”

The nervous and jerky fare twitched.

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “That’s right! I’m a victim!”

Detective Vigoda: “So tell me who shot you.”

Nervous and Jerky Fare: “A cab driver. A drug dealing cab driver.”

Vigoda stepped closer to the hospital bed, flipping his notebook to a new page.

I hid in my room as it got dark, as was my habit, waiting for the unspeakable smell of dinner to come wafting under the closed door, dreading the charred flesh of whatever deranged beast had died to become our supper, waiting for the tangy, weepy bite of the inevitable red onions.

It was nearly seven when I realized nothing was cooking. I left my room. My mother was sitting at the table with Layne the Favorite. The machete leaned against the wall in one corner. I looked in the kitchen. The stove was dark.

Me: “What happened? Health department shut you down?”

Mom: “What are you talking about? What is *wrong* with you?”

Me: “You didn’t make dinner.”

My mother flapped her hand exasperatedly.

Mom: “Layner. Order a pizza, will you? There’s money in my pocketbook.”

My legs felt weak. “A pizza?”

Layne the Favorite bounded to the phone and started dialing. I felt a little dizzy.

Me: “Is this what a stroke feels like?”

Layne the Favorite recited his order into the phone.

Me: “I must be dreaming.”

Mom: “Layner. Make sure you put some green peppers and onions on it. Find out if they have fat-free cheese. And no meat!”

Me: “Nope. All is well.”

Detective Vigoda sat at his desk at the precinct alone. He no longer had anyone to go home to. His notepad was open in front of him, blank except for these notes:

CAB DRIVER

DRUG DEALER

The hunt was on.