

A Literary Road publication

Knives and Forks and Other Stories written by Gabby Hyman

MS Reader (LIT) ISBN pending

Adobe (PDF), ISBN pending

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Contents

Knives and Forks

The Light of the Body is the Eye

Before Hanamoto

Oh, Burning Power of the Yes

Music from a Farther Room

The Other Man

An Easy Corruption of Desire

My Work in California

KNIVES AND FORKS

“There is no love sincerer than the love of food.”

— G.B. Shaw

In life, the tests come first, then you get the lessons. Even now, sometimes I feel like I'm holding my breath, waiting for trouble, so I pray for patience, tolerance, compassion and love. Every day, I get out of bed and pass through the kitchen with my eyes half-closed, and go straight to the porch if the weather is kind. I sit and light my pipe and talk to God. If it's snowy, or cold and wet, I roll out of bed and go right to my knees.

I moved to Canton this year after bottoming out in the city. You should know what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now. I was eating toast and granola for breakfast and two crullers at my office at ten. My brother Aaron usually took me to lunch at an Indian restaurant on the Lower East Side, then I'd meet my Meg for sturgeon and cheesecake at Wolf's on 6th Avenue. Often, if I had an author to meet, there'd be cocktails and snacks at the Top of the Tower, or an early dinner someplace. Later in the evening, I'd take my manuscripts with me on the N train for a supper of spanikopita or rizogalo in Astoria, and then finish it all up with a wedge of pie or an egg cream near my apartment in Henderson Place. Days, I'd work my way back and forth across the city on salted pretzels and gyros and potato knishes with spiced mustard. My favorite meal was the next one.

I was a food semite, banished from the kingdom of my loins. My relations with Meg tended toward failure — a sexual marasmus exasperated by the very gorging that abated my pain. Saturdays, for instance, I'd leave her in bed and put on my stereo, and if Ruben Blades was playing, I'd smear my toast with Nutella and dream about chicken and rice at this place on 37th Avenue. El Tata. How I roamed the feline streets. Always, late at night, take-out bags nested in my lap, I ate in the third person: *When the manuscript work is done, He sits before the TV and eats. He feels ugly, but the hand moves anyway, down into the bag of cheddar fries until the last one has disappeared into his moist and moving lips.*

All winter long, I was eating this way, trying to package Shawna Hatchlette's *Secrets of the Iroquois* to Knopf and parcel out the rights to a fellow I know at Tri-Star. The Disney man and I had shared a journalism class at U-Mass in 1973, and we'd bought weed together, and for a while

we were hung up on the same freckled, most-Lutheran blonde. I had about quit on her when she fell into my lap. The fellow who is now at Disney surprised the hell out of me — he said he was relieved. We neither of us know where she is today; we joke about her, imagining that she's the kind of woman who breaks into celebrities' homes and sits in their beds.

In March, Knopf finally passed on the novel, but my friend at Disney bought *Secrets of the Iroquois* as a matter of taking the project out of the stream. I decided to use the money as part of a down payment on a three-room house in the hills northeast of Canton.

In the summer of 1987, I had stopped there on my way to a booksellers confab in Montreal and loved the place. Around that time, I'd been reading Wolfgang Leppman's biography of Rilke — you know, the child once bent becomes the bender — and I decided it was time to stop bending.

Call it grace, Canton. I fell in tune with the orderly rows of paper-barked woods, the little gems of lakes and the quick and steady rush of the Grass River. Black-and-white cows dotted the hills. It was a painting I could move my life into, and back in New York I saw myself chopping wood by dusk, my body lean, my shirt spread dark with sweat.

After the check came from Tri-Star via Hatchlette's attorney, I closed the office and drove to Canton while snow still clung to shadowy streambanks. Out the window there were knuckled sprigs on the branches. Starlings tzeered right and left across the windshield of my car. You have to like omens.

In town, I found a cafe called Cinnamon Girl where they served fluffy walnut pancakes with Vermont syrup and you could buy homemade blueberry muffins. Just down the road this couple, Holt and Carolyn, ran a dairy farm and made honey yogurt laced with flecks of coffee. There was a decent bookstore (nothing like Books and Company on Madison, but serviceable). And I found a rustic tavern, a movie house, and the capable library at St. Lawrence.

I set up my nest. The realtor handed over the keys; they came and installed a fax and a telephone with an 800 number; and then I knew I could drive back to the City to retrieve my files and to mend farewells to Aaron and Meg.

Aaron said he'd miss me, but he'd phone. He gave me a hug and an uneasy smile. Later, he faxed me the menu from Bombay Vista.

Over a cream-cheese and Cell-Ray at Wolf's, Meg seemed unrattled. She would not be driving up for a visit. It was a good thing, she said, us

separating, and it didn't really bother me until I'd lived in Canton a few weeks and had to look back. We'd had only our poor habits to hold us, but I surely missed them.

This was back in June. I spent six hours on the phone every day, and then went grazing around Canton for snacks. In the organic market, I found sugared dates and bananas shipped from gas-free environments, and dull rice cakes that I smeared with almond butter, and I ate myself to sleep each night in front of the Arts and Entertainment channel. My narrator said: *He is eating just as before. He is doing it. He is lonely.*

After a while, I even missed the feeling of missing Meg.