



Excerpt from Danny Huggett

New York, December 1968. Sylvia was in the kitchen, preparing pickled tongue. ‘Perfect for the festive season,’ she said; ‘a dish for gourmets.’ The tongue – a slimy, uprooted thing – filled the sink with its bumpy, black-streaked pinkness. Water splashed, as Sylvia scrubbed with a bristling brush.

Why hadn’t the tongue been left in the poor cow’s mouth?

And why did she have to come home for Christmas? Now that Danny was into her third year at La Rue, returning to the apartment had become even more difficult.

‘Do something useful and get me the peppercorns.’

‘Yes, Mom.’ Danny searched the ordered shelves.

‘On the top... Where they’ve always been.’

As Danny stretched, the box slipped through her fingers. Peppercorns sprayed onto the floor, bouncing like demented ping pong balls.

‘Imbecile!’

Oscar strolled into the kitchen. ‘What’s this?’

‘Your daughter has made a mess, as usual.’

Oscar fetched the broom.

‘She should do it herself.’

‘Ah, I enjoy it.’ Oscar beamed at his daughter. ‘How old are you now, sweetie?’

‘She is going to be twenty in June. Really, Oskey, don’t you know how old your own daughter is?’

‘Nope. I dunno know a damn thing... But since you know everything, we make a perfect couple.’ Oscar inclined himself towards Sylvia, who plonked the oozing tongue on the countertop between them.

As she watched her father lean towards her mother – and her mother draw away – Danny thought about sexual intercourse. Long ago, right after she had found out what sex was, she had imagined that her parents had done it once only, with the object of producing her. Now she knew better. Now she understood that they had probably done it dozens of times, although they could hardly be at it any more. Not at their age.

Sylvia seized a wooden mallet. A sodden, thwacking noise filled the kitchen, as she walloped the tongue. ‘Why do I waste my time cooking *Cordon Bleu* dinners for you,’ she complained, ‘when I should be travelling in the south of France with a *chevalier* who would dedicate his poems to me?’

‘Say the word, and I’ll read you Longfellow.’ Oscar struck a pose with the broom handle.

*By the shore of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
At the doorway of his wigwam...*

‘Shut up, Oskey. When I say poetry, I don’t mean Longfellow... Now pay attention. I have something important to say. In a couple of

months your daughter will no longer be a teenager. The fact is, she is too big to spend her summers with us. She needs a proper job.'

'But I've *had* proper jobs,' Danny protested. One summer had been spent dishing out hamburgers at Friendly's, and another minding kids at Badger Point Day Camp.

'*Mon Dieu*,' Sylvia sniffed, as she bashed the rolled tongue into the enamelled pot. 'You need to learn what real work is. It's time that you made something of yourself. You should try for a job at Leatherton.'

'Leatherton?' It was a summer playhouse, about 30 miles from Badger Point.

'Yes, Leatherton. Why must I repeat myself, Danielle? Reading books all day seems to have given you the wrong idea about life. You need to focus on *doing* something, although it will be a miracle if Leatherton will have you.'

The familiar well of resentment bubbled up. What did Sylvia do herself except assault the tongues of poor cows, and create an unbearable order in the household?

'Hey, Danny, look at this.' Oscar was peering into the pot with interest. 'You see those bumpy bits?... Papillae – that's what they call them – the papillae hold the taste buds.'

Danny shivered. The pink bumps were not unlike those on her own tongue ... except her mother expected her to eat them.

Papillae. To be found in cow or man. Or woman too.

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