

## Christmas Dinner

*BANG!*

I've been waiting for the phone to ring for the past two hours—it won't. The last time I bored holes into the clock's face as it evenly ticks about in my kitchen while it performs its simple life purpose, it was 5:30.

*BANG!*

I've never had a problem breaking down meat for dinner. The heavy cleaver always weighs down my hand like an expensive tennis bracelet some woman will wear every day for two months after December 25th; that is, of course, until someone spots her gleaming diamonds and mugs her on the way to her car in a dark parking lot after work to put food on their family's table.

I, too, intend to put food on my family's table, that's why, each time, I swing the cleaver down *faster*.

*BANG!*

And I find it fair to mention that I've never had much of a like for Christmas.

*BANG!*

The sharp blade slices through tendons, meat, and bone as I aim it directly so. The wet meat glistens and glitters under my fluorescent kitchen lights; the blinding white light highlights the veins and vessels covering the wide expanse of the tender, delicate, moist meat. As my serrated blade bites into the flesh, teeth gnawing and tearing apart softened tissues, juice and blood ooze from worn vessels.

I've never prepared a meat as fine as this before—a meat as *rich*, as *valuable*, as this before. I'm so nervous to touch it, so... so hesitant to swing down and crack this ivory bone into fragments of what it once was, and what it once convinced itself to be.

In the end, we're all mindless cattle.

*BANG!*

But, as I break down the meat, patiently rendering the portions of hearty sustenance ready to become gloriously marinated and cooked to perfection, I find courage and comfort in the fact that this Christmas will be different—I know this because I promised myself so.

You see, I've gotten myself quite the gift.

*BANG!*

The gift of peace.

*BANG!*

It's nightfall, and the phone's still not ringing—the acid in my stomach curdles with unexplained joy. As I shuffle about my kitchen with purpose, my dog, Neo, watches me curiously dance about in my corny, store bought Mrs. Claus outfit, and I feel at great peace.

My chihuahua, my little boy, my little Neo. How I'd move heaven on earth for him and then some. He stares on at me with his buggy, booger wet eyes and I stare back intently. The phone doesn't ring, but that's quite alright: I've got Neo.

His nails scratch across my floor as he scuttles closer to me, his tiny body rubbing against my ankle; little canine leg bones brushing against taught human muscle. His nose picks up, the wetness catching a glint of light as he scrunches it in wild undulations. He smells the meat.

He's never been a fan of raw meat—as I've tried a few times to bulk him up with a protein rich diet—so I find it endearing that he's decided to join my feast this special holiday. My little Neo knows how important this is for me, and I'm quite sure he knows of my promise.

*BANG!*

Neo perks up, his tiny tail slaps against my ankle in anticipation. If it weren't for his little tan body, my dear son would look like an obscenely large sewer rat, one that's been prowling around in the labyrinth of the sewer system that lies beneath our homes, watching you from the gutters at night to snatch your scraps from the dumpster.

Even that I find myself slightly fond of.

I dangle the meat between the tips of my fingers for a moment—just a tease—before it slips out of my hand easy enough and into my hungry boy’s mouth. Albeit small in stature, my Neo’s teeth are the biggest part of his body.

He gnaws and rips at the flesh with his sharp k9s, molars helping to squish and shape the residual meat that’s been munched into near perfect bolus texture. I brush his teeth often enough that they’re a gorgeous white, and his breath is one you’d find yourself more inclined to take a second whiff of.

Not of enjoyment, but out of confusion—does this sewer rat’s breath smell... good?

I stand there, paused, watching the heartfelt scene unfold before me: Christmas music filters in gently through the dining room, some song I recognise from my time spent forcibly entertaining my husband’s colleagues during the holidays; the fluorescent light washes out his ugly tan coat, making him look sickly pale and morbidly shadowed; and he’s absolutely devouring my precious meat.

I could cry.

*BANG!*

As I finish up my parting out in preparation for my husband’s annual Christmas feast tomorrow, I absentmindedly drop Neo some more scraps; just things I find myself not inclined to eat. I like *meat*: big cuts, thick slices, or healthy portions—whatever you like to call it. The texture of meat as the fibres give under the dedicated force of my teeth is overwhelmingly sublime, and so then the best parts of this Christmas dinner’s main course will be reserved for such.

I glance up at the clock again as the song transitions on to something new, something fresh and funky—something beyond my years and then some, but something I can’t say I don’t enjoy.

It’s 8:36 PM and I’m sliding the meat into vacuum sealed bags as I swing my hips to the beat of a song that’ll never make it to next Christmas season. I hit the on button and Neo runs away, threatened by the loud roar of the air-sucking machine I got three Christmases ago from my husband’s co-worker’s wife, Belinda.

*Thank you, Belinda, I said to her. I'll be using this for years to come.*

And so I have. So thank you again, Belinda.

One-by-one and piece-by-piece I pack the meat into its bag and suck the air out. Neo is hiding somewhere in the Hallmark home that is my house, most likely burrowed under the cushions of my sofa.

My husband hated when my little Neo would run and hide under the cushions, face fire red as he cursed my little boy for “messing up the living room.” If it is a living room, then it must look lived in by the living things that reside in this house. Our way of living, and Neo’s way of living, simply look a little different: but they’re both ways of living, nonetheless.

The amount of the meat I sordidly underestimated, and as of now I find myself wondering how it is I plan to stuff it into my deep freezer. Once the machine clicks off, I place my last sealed bag precariously on top of a pile I started in my sink and give my work a once over.

Twice over.

Thrice over.

The bells from the radio jingle and chime in a way that sounds like what I’d consider to be what snowfall sounds like; and I soon-after hear my little boy’s collar clink around as he unearths himself from the couch, knocking the cushions into the floor in the process, and gallops into the kitchen.

Back and forth his tail wags and back and forth I toss bags of meat into an oversized trash bag. Neo cutely pretends to help me as I drag the bag across the floor on our journey to the basement. My arms are much too weak to carry this all at once, but that’s never stopped me before. I’m a dedicated woman, one who’s never tired enough to give up: that’s why my husband fell for me, you see.

Innovative-ly so, as a method for me to move the precious cargo with ease, I haul the black bag while it rests atop a blanket that functions to provide a cushioned barrier between the black bag, the treats inside, and the floor. In my Mrs. Claus costume I transport my sack from one floor of the house to another, and here I stand against the task that is my deep freezer.

Neo sits near the trash bag, head cocked to the side. *Don't worry*, I pleasantly reassure him and mostly myself, *I'll figure it out, boy*.

We don't use the deep freezer for much, only to store meat. This last season my husband went on an annual weekend getaway with friends whom I don't ask much about, and whom—I'm assuming—don't ask much about me. High school buddies, ruggedly handsome men with no tolerance for nothing but work, work, work. My husband tells me he goes on these trips for peace, just as he's told me he has Christmas dinners for peace and has an office in our house for peace. It's admirable, this concept of doing things for yourself for the sake of personal *peace*.

As I open up the deep freeze, I'm met with eyes of a deer.

Originally, I found myself arguing that this manifestation of peace, his search for something greater, had tunnelled his vision and there he finds himself caught within headlights, unable to see the reality in front of him.

The deer's eyes look dead. They are dead.

Neo sneezes behind me.

He is not dead. I am not dead. But my meat?

My meat is dead.

I roughly grab the head and toss it over the side of the freezer, and it hits the floor with a heavy clunk. I hear Neo's nails scratch against the concrete floor of the basement as he trots to the side of the severed head to get a closer inspection.

The first hunting season I spent with my husband, he taught me to break and process down a deer. First, the hide as it dangles from the gambrel—from the top and then you work your way down, taking delicate consideration of the spine and precious musculature. Then, you butcher the shoulder, tugging the thick flesh away from the torso to reveal the coveted "pass through cut zone."

As I throw everything out of my freezer, preparing it for my meat, preparing it for a fresh start...I remember the warm press of my husband against my back as he taught me to cut with my knife parallel to the

rib cage to pass through the shoulder joint, or how it's better to pull the front leg up and away from your view of the torso if you can't get a clear sight of where to cut.

Butcher the back straps, the neck meat, and the excess front meat in that order, because the next part requires a clean view and a clean cut: saw off the body at the hips. Cut the sirloin, remove the rest of the hind quarters starting at the Achilles' tendon before cutting upwards around the knee in order to free the succulent meat from the leg and pelvis bones. Then, you bone out, trim, and pack.

As the body parts of unprepared animals rain on my concrete floor, I look up to check the time, but my clock isn't there. Is it 10:00 o'clock now? Perhaps 10:30? My stomach churns but I catch a glimpse of Neo licking at the eye sockets of the deer and my blood rushes to my face in joy. He's so small, yet here he triumphs even the mighty buck. Like his mother he powers on, small but mighty; determination running through his veins.

I choose not to shoo him away, as it's my intention to rid my freezer of this grotesque meat. This meat that I've butchered, this meat my husband killed for peace but left me to maul in anything but a peaceful fashion. This meat that I've prepared for my husband's colleagues and their brain-dead wives, all in the name of holiday *peace*. I served, I cooked, and I slaved away but it was for *peace*.

One-by-one I throw my meat into my barren freezer, free from the oppressive weight that is my husband's baggage, full of the new weight that is *my peace*.

Neo licks and gnaws at the head of the deer, and the phone will not ring tonight. It'll ring tomorrow, perhaps around 8:00 when I wake up to prepare the rest of my Christmas feast and return the plug from the landline back into the comfort of its home that is an outlet in the wall. White and off-white packs of meat cover the floor in a sea of flesh, and my dog skips about it and rolls around in it as if it were as soft and plush as snow.

Without my digging around in the freezer, the sound of Christmas trickles downstairs from the radio, and then swarms my ears a tune my husband loved more than any other Christmas tune—“(There's No Place Like Home) for the Holidays.”

It's as gentle as he wishes he was and as loving as he considers himself to be. The phone won't ring, and he won't call; and it's not snowing in here, but Neo sure thinks it is. The "is" and "is not's," the uncertainty but certainty about all that unfolds before me as it supposedly exists, the scepticism, this is my peace. The reclamation of my identity, myself, my freezer, and my god damn kitchen lights is my peace.

To hell with florescent as it washes out the life in a room that's already used to prepare death. To home death, to house it in the freezer or the fridge, to house death in the acids of our stomachs. In the headlights of our cars and the tunnels within our vision.

My stomach grumbles and Neo looks up at me. I'm not sure when the last time I had eaten was. I've been worried sick over my meat, over my Christmas celebration, over my peace. I make no move to clean up the mess as I manoeuvre around the mess of meat and hurry up into the kitchen to put some food on my stomach. Surrounded by all this meat, preparing all the food, and not a bite of it myself to eat—how foolish am I, how foolish indeed.

Neo sticks to my side in hopes of nibbling on some more scraps, but the fingers he's stripped clean, and the toe's he made quick work of already. His hunger for this meat is insatiable, but as is mine because above all things, it is this meat that is the greatest testament to my gift of peace this Christmas holiday.

Quickly, I pull open my freezer door, grab a freshly cut steak marinating in the potent mixture that once made my husband drool and quickly sear it up on the stove with expert hands. I've been trained to wait on my husband hand and foot, cater to his needs to matter how morbid, therefore I move quickly, and efficiently—every decision made for perfection.

I shuffle to my dining room, walking into a mirage of the North Pole and there sits my husband, eyes fixed on my seat in waiting for my arrival. My steaks on hand, nearly rare, perfectly tender and bloodied. Neo nestled close against my crossed ankles and I stare my husband down while I cut into my steak and slip a piece in my mouth, teeth shaping that bolus, eyes rolled back in pleasure.

The seasoned juices dribble down the slightly cracked corners of my mouth as I gnash through the tenderly cooked meat. The pink interior peaks out within the sliced cut of steak, and I bring my knife down again, cutting back and forth in an excited rhythm: the fork can't reach my mouth fast enough.

From under the table Neo licks at my ankles and I peak down to see his little face, bug eyes wide, wet nose flaring in want. My sweet little Neo leans into me as I scoop him up, nestling him close to my chest. He wiggles and squirms, tongue making quick work of the left-over sauce on my face as I prepare a slice big enough for him and his teeth *clank* as his mouth snaps shut around the cut of meat. I press obnoxiously loud, wet, meaty kisses all over his flesh covered skull as he munches down before I submit another piece of my peace into my mouth.

“Oh, it's divine.” I moan.

My husband says nothing in response. His head rests upon the cherry wood table I'd gotten for Christmas six years ago, eyes once tunnelled, now frozen in time, caught like a deer in headlight in search of his precious peace.

My husband's eyes look dead. They are dead.

Neo sneezes under me.

He is not dead. I am not dead. But my meat?

My meat is dead.