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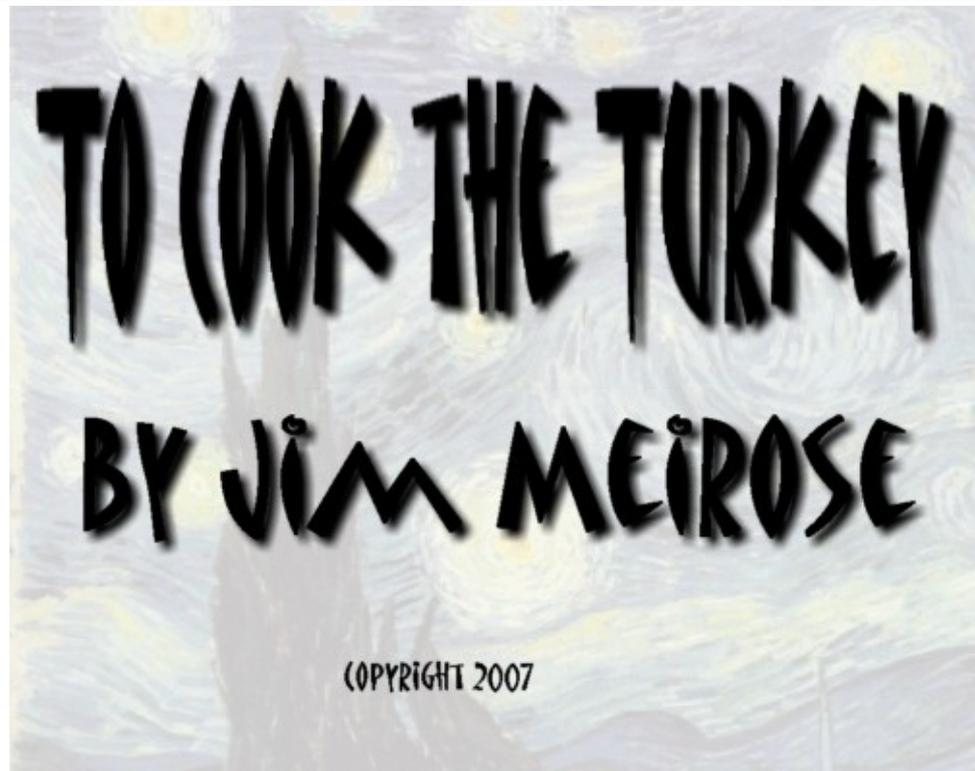
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**Cleaning the bath; scrub and scrub and scrub and scrub, on your hands and knees. Mold and mildew and soap scum coated the fiberglass bathtub, shower walls, ceiling, and glass doors. The fan on the ceiling was circled with rust and sounded hard--sounded rough.**

Roar, said the fan, vibrating.

The problem was hard water. Hard water what's hard water well whatever it is it caused the rust and scum that had to be cleaned away before the turkey could be cooked. He scrubbed with a sponge, using Bon Ami, using a million other products too, scrubbing bubbles, all that stuff. On the can of Bon Ami there was a picture of a baby chick, the cutest little thing the cute little thing, and the phrase, hasn't scratched yet. Young; so young it hasn't scratched yet. Hasn't scratched the ground for worms or seeds. Little pink claws and a little beak and little beady eyes. Today was the day to cook the turkey. Cook it big and golden brown. He scrubbed harder, as time was passing; valuable time before starting the turkey. Now the turkey set naked pale and raw in the refrigerator. The time for starting the turkey was set, the time for eating the turkey was set; but it still had to be cleaned, and rinsed, and stuffed, before it went in the hot oven. But first the bath needed to be cleaned, for the visitors. Visitors have big eyes. Don't want the visitors to see a filthy tub when they come in a take a wine piss. For full of wine they would become, and they'd need to come in here. To take a wine piss. And they'd look in the tub, because they all had filthy tubs at home and were sure that everyone else's tub was clean, and they'd want to see a clean tub. And they'd think it always looked that good; they wouldn't appreciate the hours of scrubbing and rubbing it took to get it clean, just special for this party this get together this dinner. All the rest of the time it was filthy, dirty rotten filthy scummy moldy and black with dirt.

Walter got into the rusted pickup truck. The truck was so rusty that when he slammed shut the door, rusty metal fragments fell from under the truck. The frame was rusted through, the floor, the crossmembers, the bed.

He went to a big dinner once in a big auditorium and got roaring drunk, on whiskey. He went around and ate other people's meals while they were on the dance floor. He drank whisky out of a woman's shoe, up in the front of the big auditorium, by the stage. And he doesn't remember who gave him the shoe. He doesn't remember the woman's face, or hair, or body, or anything--just her shoe. It was a black leather shoe with a low high heel. She must have been standing there in stocking feet or in one shoe. She must have been watching him do it. Where is she now? He would die to know where she was now; and did she remember having her shoe drunk out of the way he remembered drinking out of it, as he knelt in the tub scrubbing and

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rubbing away all the scummy mold that had built up over the--years? Had it been years since he'd cleaned this tub? Jesus Christ yes. The shoe was the thing that connected them. And he must have handed the shoe back to her, he doesn't remember her hand or if their hands touched or anything like that. And on the way back from that big auditorium was when he threw up in the heating system of his friend's brand new car and the car smelled like schnitzel every time the heat was put on, for years afterwards. That was too bad but its good he didn't throw up in front of her; it was good she didn't have that memory. He was just the faceless man who drank out of her shoe, not the crazed man with the writhing face who puked up bloody phlegm and horrid masses of undigested food over the heating vents in the brand new car's dashboard.

Today was the day to cook the turkey though. To change it from a pasty white raw dead bird to a meal fit for a king. Or to have the oven do the work the oven really does all the work you know. But he needed to take a shower in the newly sparkling tub with the shining chrome trim and spotlessly clean smooth glass doors. When he showered the water ran down the front wall of the shower past the fixtures coming through the wall. There had been a big problem with water leaking through those holes around those fixtures and getting into the ceiling of the room below, but the holes were well- sealed now. There was a trapdoor in the ceiling below so you could get up at the drainpipes. The trapdoor was warped and water stained and ugly. There'd been a time when there'd been a pinhole leak in the pipes in the wall upstairs and a jet of water had shot down from the edge of the trapdoor right onto the side of Pa's diaper bag. Luckily the bag was waterproof and the diapers didn't get spoiled. The plumber came all grizzled and rough and pulled out the vanity in the upstairs bathroom to get at the leak in the wall. Dogged and relentless he tracked down the leak and came triumphantly down the stairs and sang out I found it, I found it, I found the pinhole leak, with a great wide smile on his broad face and his wrenches hung at his sides.

Good, said Pa.

Ma smiled.

Meanwhile Lucas sat in the speeding rustrotted truck. They passed the cemetery on the rough washboard dirt road. As they passed old rotten overgrown abandoned conception cemetery the truck blew up a cloud of dust following them and Lucas looked in the rear view mirror and saw the spirits in the dust, come from the cemetery to get him, to take his soul to some hot place, to snatch it out of his writhing body and take it to some hot place of pain and an endless rockhard forever. Forever is a thing to be feared. It's a frightening word, forever.

Drive faster, Walter, oh please, they're after us--

Shut up Lucas! snapped Walter.

They brought wine into the restaurant in a brown bag. The whiteclad waiter took the bottle and deftly removed the cork.

Wine for the lady?

No. Just for him. I'll have a diet coke. I'm not the one who needs to get rip roaring drunk every time we come here. I'm not the one who used to drink vodka and have blackouts and fall down the stairs to where Thomas would smile and say you better take it light, there, boy, you better take it light--and a large round bowl full of red hashish sat there, and long black soft slabs of opium.

Drive through flames, they'll make you do.

Drive through flames.

Take, said Parky.

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Take.

Those are five. And those are ten.

Bowls and bowls of white pills. And red ones.

And those are two each. And those three.

No I'm not the one who's led that kind of life, she repeated to the whiteclad waiter.

The cork rolled on the table and the man accompanying the woman took the cork up into his bulging breast pocket. The wine was poured. The first glass went down quickly.

The salad came.

The second glass went down quickly.

The third glass was poured, the entree.

The glow came up from his core.

He was one who'd led that kind of life.

Amazing.

The shower over, he toweled off quickly. He rubbed his head hard to get off all the tiny unseen flakes of skin. He walked into the bedroom and put on his shorts. He sat on the bed and put on his socks. He got up and pulled on his jeans and put on a t-shirt with a large bird on the front. It was now time to go in the kitchen. To cook the turkey. To start its transformation to crispy brown. To let the oven do its work. The fire, the fire. The fire, the fire tamed. He never knew before they remodeled the kitchen that they put brackets in the floor to hold the back of the oven so the oven wouldn't tip forward when you had the oven door open and the rack pulled out with a twenty five pound turkey on it. The workers knelt by the wall screwing in the bracket following the instructions that came with the oven. They talked about this thing and that while they worked but mainly about a fellow named George.

Damn that George. Were you down at Findon's when he--

I was, I was.

He'll never live it down.

No, I don't think so.

She got him good.

Yup.

The brackets screwed sturdily into the floor and wall.

Annie Wimple put the red leash on her Calico Cat every Saturday and took the cat out into the sun and onto the grass, until finally the cat died. Or, rather, the cat was put to death because it became too much of a nuisance with its incontinence. The large puddle in the center of the kitchen floor was the last straw.

Oh you mean just not take her home, said the vet.

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That's right that's what I mean.

Somehow knowing this was in his future he drank vodka in the barracks and went from door to door pounding on the doors demanding justice, until he passed out and slumped over into one of the gun racks in the main hall. When he woke up he bitterly cried. When he woke up from being at the vet he cried bitterly at the kitchen table.

You'd never guess he used to be that kind of a person judging from how he acted now.

The bottle of vodka set on the floor half full and half empty at the same time.

All his bottles were both at the same time.

He took the thawed but still ice cold turkey from the refrigerator and tipped it up and put his hand into the body cavity. It felt icy cold inside the turkey. He pulled out the bag with the neck from the cavity and took it over to the garbage and the cat came and licked up the drippings from the floor that he had left walking across the room. He took the bag with the giblets from the front of the turkey and put the giblets into the gold bowl and put it into the refrigerator. He salted the turkey heavily because it was a fresh turkey and he was told they had a gamey taste and needed a lot of seasoning. He wanted to make sure the guests would like the turkey. He shook salt freely into the body cavity. Later while it was cooking he'd doubt the wisdom of using so much salt, but during the meal his daughter would say the skin is so salty but its good that way.

This sure is a good turkey, she'd say..

The warm slices would lay on the gold rimmed platter.

Mother sat nursing in the maternity hospital. The child was just a day old. Ice ran in her veins when she thought of all the things that could go wrong with the child. She doubted if she could face bearing such a load of fear for all the days it would take for the child to grow up. The child is normal, she was told. Normal. Just normal. Not exceptional in any way. Not special. Just normal. Now, just one notch below normal was abnormal. Normal was just not good enough. It would be too easy to slip just a bit and become abnormal. She shifted the child to her other breast. Greedily it suckled. Normally. Just one notch below greedy was what? Abnormal.

The olive drab truck tooled along on the autobahn. The soldiers had a bottle of cognac in the back of the truck in the morning, when they were still drunk from the night before.

You can drink yourself sober, said Blackburn woozily.

Huh? said Austin.

You can drink yourself sober.

Give me the bottle.

He handed over the bottle.

Austin spun the top off and drank the cognac straight from the bottle. Blackburn drank next. Then Austin again. They pissed out the back of the truck as it ran sixty miles an hour down the Autobahn and the car following behind braked hard and kept its distance.

He put the turkey in the oven after stuffing it and

trussing it up and preheating the oven to three hundred twenty five degrees. Not three hundred fifty or three hundred twenty. Three hundred twenty five. The young grey tabby cat jumped up on the hot oven and jumped down again just as fast when he felt the heat on his tender pads.

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Crazy cat, said the cat's owner, who was also the cook.

Crazy cat.

Crazy cat with yellow eyes and vertically slitted pupils; alien to the cook, to the owner. Unknowable. Unfathomable. The cat watched from the floor as Father gave out pieces of his veal to the baby. Eggs were cooked into the rice that came with the veal and he ate the rice quickly.

More wine sir? said the sudden waiter.

Yes.

Madame?

Oh I don't know.

Oh go on.

Oh all right.

The wine glasses were filled again. Twice more. The cat slunk from the room it didn't belong in. It had never been there actually. The cat was at home, not in the restaurant. It had forgotten where it should be. So it got out of there fast. The cat had never tasted wine. Never would. Didn't need to. Why do the people need to? The cat knows why. Wisdom. The young man slammed the bottom of the bottle of carbonated wine against his wallet on the wall, and the bottle finally exploded over Harris' bed, soaking the bed and covering it with broken glass. Harris wore a silver peace symbol on a chain around his neck. He punched the man who'd exploded the bottle in the face and threw him out of the room with a bloody lip.

Salt clung heavily caked around the rim of the tequila glass in Doylestown Pennsylvania.

Why all this salt, he said.

To make you want to drink more.

Well--I don't think it makes me want to drink more. I just think it tastes like shit.

His lips burned from the salt. He put the glass in the sink and ran water into the glass and he waited for a new, unsalted, glass of tequila. The cat would never taste tequila. But it knew what tequila tasted like just like it knew so many things. But no one can know what it knows, because it does not speak. The glass of tequila came and he downed it. The cat watched from the corner. Its cruel eye set on the drinker's sallow face. It thought of death, though it did not know what death was. It slunk from the room, thinking dark thoughts.

After the turkey was come out from the oven and had rested for a half hour, he carved it. He used an electric knife with two opposing blades. The slices fell from the pure white breast. The were stacked on the plate to the side. The cat sat locked in the room upstairs. The cat couldn't be trusted around the turkey. It would jump to the counter and begin to eat from the carcass while the meal went on in the next room. Its owner knew this so kept it locked up.

Meowwahh, said the locked up cat from behind the heavy bedroom door.

Meeeeeoowwwahhh!

The smell of the turkey went up to the bedroom.

Tissue lying there on a Weight Watchers wrapper.

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