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# MOVING PICTURES

## BY JOHNNY DAMM

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*Fresh from the butcher.* The phrase ran unbidden through Neil's head, as he stared down at the t-bone lying in the middle of the sidewalk. Did people still even use butchers? Are there still men fitting that description behind the counters of our grocery stores, carefully slicing then weighing our pieces of meat? Cautiously, Neil bent over the steak and sniffed lightly. It did smell fresh, with that near metallic tang of high quality beef, despite its placement on this particularly cracked and worn stretch of sidewalk. The sun was barely visible in the sky—he always liked to take his walk at dusk—but its heat still warmed his forearms. After a moment, he placed a palm on the sidewalk next to the meat. Warm. The steak couldn't have been sitting out here long, not under the day's harsh summer rays, or it would have begun to cook. He swiveled his head and examined the empty residential street only a few blocks from where Meredith and he lived. No other pedestrians, not even a passing car. The houses gave little signs of life outside of the flicker of a TV through a window, a woman's voice yelling for a child to close the door.

Should he take it? The t-bone certainly wouldn't last in this state much longer, a few minutes at most before it spoiled, and then perfectly good food would be wasted. But he wasn't carrying anything, no plastic bag or newspaper to wrap it in, and couldn't quite picture simply picking the steak up with his bare hands. The feel of uncooked meat had always made him a little squeamish, despite the fact that once it was cooked, he'd eagerly bite into nearly any type. On rare occasions, he'd even discovered an affection for deer or, on a visit to a Cajun restaurant, alligator.

When he was a child, his mother had once asked him to help make hamburgers, and when he'd sunk his tiny fingers into the bowl of ground beef (to work in the spices, she'd said) he'd momentarily felt as if he'd put his hands directly inside an animal. It was like in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke Skywalker had gotten caught in a blizzard and had to cut open, then climb into the shaggy, lama-like creature he'd ridden in previous scenes like a horse. Luke had spent the entire frozen night inside the dead animal, and only the warmth of its entrails had managed to keep him alive. At his family's kitchen counter, hands frozen in the bowl, the boy had felt faint and more than a little nauseous, until finally he'd managed to pull out his hands and make it into the bathroom to wash them. He didn't come out until his mother promised that she'd finish the burgers by herself.

Neil did, though, particularly love to eat steak, and it was luxury rarely allowed by their tightly stretched budget. This perfect t-bone, lying on a stretch of sidewalk that he walked down nearly every day, appeared almost to have been left for him as a gift. How could he logically turn it down? He dropped an index finger onto the top of the meat, which felt cool. He was almost ready to pick it up, to rush it home and grill it up for dinner, but something gave him pause. A sensation. Something

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under his fingertip. Movement.

A pulse?

Neil jumped up and backwards, away from the steak. His index finger was a little wet, damp with the meat's juices, and when his thumb unconsciously rubbed against it, he immediately realized his mistake, feeling the pulse that had startled him—his own—the blood which pumped through his fingertip.

That's it, he thought, and turned away from the sidewalk's offer a free dinner. It was too weird. So, he let his long strides carry him down the sidewalk and headed for home.

At the apartment, nothing greeted him outside of the plaintive wail of the cat—Meredith's cat—who, at the sight of Neil, turned its back and imperially strolled away. The animal wasn't allowed outside and exuded a proprietary attitude towards the apartment. If not for him, maybe he should have brought the steak home for the cat. The idea reminded him of *Cape Fear*, not the old version, but the remake with Robert Deniro and Nick Nolte. In the film, Deniro's character had killed Nolte's dog, if he remembered correctly, by poisoning a big hunk of beef.

The cat hated him. Meredith had never seen this. She'd always thought the problem had lain with his own indifference towards animals, but from their first date, when Meredith had invited him into her apartment, he'd recognized the much simpler truth. 'Of course,' he'd argued with her on several occasions, 'animals can hate.' When the cat deemed to look at him at all, its eyes were filled with a clearly visible disdain. What could that illustrate *other* than hate?

Still, before he went into the kitchen to check the fridge for the makings of his own dinner, he checked the animal's food and water bowl. It wouldn't do to have Meredith come home to a half-starved cat, to have the animal's silent accusations of him proven correct. She'd be back any day now, her trip to her sister's having lasted nearly a week longer than she'd originally told him it would, and then the malevolent creature would fall back to her responsibility. He closed the near empty fridge and checked the answering machine, which still blinked with its red '0.' After the way their last conversation had turned out, it wasn't that much of a surprise that Meredith had yet to call back.

Some angel-hair pasta remained in the cupboard, so he filled a pot with water and set it on the stove.

In bed that night, Neil found himself again thinking of the steak. How could it have gotten there? Could someone have been carrying groceries, walking a bit too briskly, when the meat had popped out of a bag? Or could a couple have been arguing in a car on their way to a barbeque, a t-bone thrown in anger, just barely dodged before sailing out of the car's open window? Perhaps the oddest detail was the steak being simply a steak. If it had appeared wrapped in plastic and with a damp Styrofoam backing, then falling from a grocery bag or even from a passing car would almost have made some kind of sense. That, after all, is how we're used to seeing meat—contained, packaged in a way to make its rawness, its inherent nakedness, palatable.

He rolled over to the middle of the bed. It took a conscious effort not to simply remain on his side, which seemed a little ridiculous when he had the whole queen-size to himself. In the middle, the mattress felt different, harder, as if Meredith and he had worn down their two respective sides, while the middle still remained as

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firm as the day they'd bought it. The cat jumped up onto the bed and, after circling around for several moments, settled down onto Meredith's pillow. Neil had to roll back over to keep its tail out of his face.

Too bad he didn't have the number for Meredith's sister. He'd like to call and ask Meredith what she thought about this meat thing. She rarely returned from a trip to the grocery store with red meat, usually opting instead for boneless skinless chicken, particularly if there was a sale. She was proud of her cooking and surprisingly elegant with a knife. Under her long tapered fingers, the blade glided through the chicken, effortlessly creating perfectly uniform strips. Her dishes, with their emphasis on fresh vegetables and extra virgin olive oil, most often ended up delicate and light.

A ridiculous idea crossed through his head. What if Meredith had been the one who'd left the t-bone on the sidewalk? That made no sense—she was out of town—but he found himself grinning anyway: her petite form hidden behind a tree, until steps became audible in the distance. She peeked out to see that it was indeed him coming down the sidewalk, then carefully hopped out from her hiding place and deposited the slab of beef, the whole action taking just a tiny fraction of a moment, before she slipped back behind the tree. Of course, she watched his reaction: the puzzled, slightly stupid expression that crossed his face, that moment when he foolishly jumped back. Neil liked this conception of the scene and kept it in his head, as he tightly closed his eyes and ordered himself to fall sleep.

He woke determined to talk to Meredith. The phone number for her sister must have been in the apartment somewhere. He rolled over and checked her bedside table, then stood up and checked the bookshelf, hoping an address book would pop up. Some papers were on the kitchen table—junk mail, bills, old newspapers—but no piece of paper with numbers scrawled across it. Nothing. On the refrigerator, stuck up by magnets and jammed between postcards, photos of Meredith's nephews, and recipes she'd cut out from gourmet magazines, there was that one post-it with a phone number, so when he'd looked everywhere else and found nothing, he called it.

As the phone rang, he cleared his throat, trying to banish all traces of sleep from his voice, and when Meredith's mother answered, he attempted a hearty greeting.

"Morning, Deb."

"Neil?" She sounded surprised.

"How's the weather up there?" His words spilled out quickly. "Getting any rain?"

"Good," she answered. The woman had a light, airy voice which he'd always found rather soothing. "The weather's good. A..." She paused. "A little rain."

"Great," Neil nodded into the phone. "That's great. I know how much your lawn needs it."

"How are you doing, Neil?"

"Me?" He chuckled. "I'm great. Been a little hot down here but real nice."

"Good."

"Good," he repeated, and they lapsed into silence.

After Meredith's mother gave a little cough, he rushed to continue. "So, Deb. I

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was wondering if I could get your daughter's telephone number from you. Your other daughter's. Emily's." He smiled largely, even though he knew she couldn't see him. "I'm sure you know Meredith's visiting up there, and I just can't seem to find the number."

Silence again. He listened to the low crackle of the phone. When she finally spoke, her voice had deepened a little. "I don't think I can do that, Neil. It's not really my place."

"But I'm sure I have the number somewhere, Deb. I just can't find it, and I sure need to talk to her."

"She'll call you soon." Her voice contained a gentle note of finality.

"Okay," he managed.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Well, thanks so much, Deb," he said. "I hope it doesn't get too hot up there."

She began to speak again, but he lowered the phone back onto its base.

"Okay," he announced to the empty apartment. "Okay."

It was nearly time for work, so he crossed into the kitchen to start the coffee. Some bread remained in the fridge, which he had thought he'd toast for breakfast, but now couldn't find an appetite for it. With only coffee in his stomach and having had barely enough time to splash water on his face and check his reflection in the mirror, he scooped food into the cat's bowl and headed out the door.

In his cubicle, sitting at his desk, staring at the computer and ignoring the small stack of papers that required his attention, Neil suddenly remembered a television show Meredith and he had watched together on PBS or the Discovery Channel. The subject of the program had been New York City's super-rats, and it had followed a governmental inspector who investigated reports of the animals in apartment buildings. The producers of the show had placed cameras inside a family's apartment, and they'd caught a scene that Neil recalled vividly. A plate of pork chops sat out on the stove, and in an instant so quick that it had to be shown in slow motion, one of the giant rats emerged from a hole in the wall, grabbed a pork chop in its teeth, and disappeared with it.

Maybe something like this had happened with the steak on the sidewalk: a rat had stolen it from someone's stovetop or kitchen counter and been in the process of absconding with it, dragging it across the sidewalk, when Neil's steps startled the animal, who'd been forced to abandon its meal right there.

It was possible, he supposed. Of course, why would the rat be crossing a sidewalk at all? 'To get to the other side,' he thought with a grimace, then turned to the papers on his desk.

That evening Neil didn't take a walk. *Key Largo* was playing on television, so he contented himself with staring at Lauren Bacall and listening to the testosterone banter between Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson. In Robinson's first scene, he appeared in a bathtub, chewing on a cigar and glistening like a fatted hog. He scoffed at the hurricane that was heading towards the island, then at ex-war-hero Bogey, who could barely contain his disgust at the sight of the has-been gangster.

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Neil had seen the movie several times, but sitting alone in the apartment and eating the toast he'd rejected that morning, he found himself struck by how claustrophobic the whole thing was, a nearly one set film, almost all of the conflicts taking place in a hotel lobby. That, of course, made the growing presence of the incoming storm (signified by increasingly dire radio reports and howling wind) all the more powerful.

At the storm's arrival, Robinson broke down, visibly shaking and drawing Bogey's famous taunt that he should take his gun and shoot the hurricane, while Bogart was brought to life and finally able to play the hero.

It had been a different film (*To Have and Have Not?*), where Bacall had asked him if he could whistle. 'Just put your lips together,' she'd said, 'and blow.'

In bed, Neil rolled over to Meredith's side, and when he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of sleeping. For a long time that seemed to be about it—unconscious but conscious of being unconscious. But then, the bed.

The firmness of the bed beneath him, stiff and unyielding. Shifting on it, struggling to get comfortable. A dampness in his back, as if sweat had gathered there. But it didn't feel hot. It felt, in fact, quite cool, and the cool dampness wasn't just in his back but underneath his entire body, and suddenly it was as if he was sinking, even while the mattress remained firm. Meat. The meat mattress. The meat mattress on which he slept.

In the morning, he called in sick to work and tried not to listen for the phone. The cat appeared to resent his intrusion during work hours, and no matter where he went in the apartment, he'd find the cat there glaring at him.

"What do you think?" he asked the animal, lowering himself onto the hardwood floor just a few feet from it. "Early evening, a steak sitting on the sidewalk with no one else around?"

"A fresh steak," he added.

The cat continued to glare. *The Big Sleep*, he thought suddenly. That was the film. The one where Bacall had instructed Bogey how to whistle. He reached out for the cat, who tried to duck under his hand but wasn't fast enough. He grabbed the animal by its nape and pulled it to him. Meredith and he had watched *The Big Sleep*, a detective film, on television together. Keeping one hand clasped under the cat's neck, he used his other hand to run over its fur, petting from head to tail. At first the animal squirmed, but after a few moments, it stilled under his fingers, and he could remove the hand from its neck. Perhaps they'd watched the movie on one of those rare nights when he'd cooked the dinner, carrying their plates and wine glasses to the living room couch and television. The cat began to vibrate a little under his hand—purring, he realized. His fingers sunk into the fur, until they could feel the skin underneath. He closed his eyes. His fingers felt a little like they were hovering, as if he could lose concentration and gravity would carry them down and through the skin, into the animal's warmth.

Neil opened his eyes. "Okay," he said to the apartment.

He stood up, knocking the cat off his lap. It retreated into the corner, the hate back in its eyes. With a downward lunge, he re-grabbed the cat, this time clasping both hands around the animal and feeling the bite of its claws. He carried it towards the door, while his ears filled with a howling meow that sounded remarkably like a

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woman's shriek. Keeping one hand firmly around the cat and ignoring the claws, he opened the apartment's front door. Roughly, he threw the animal into the yard and quickly shut the door.

"Okay," he said.

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**Johnny Damm's** work has previously appeared in journals such as *Word Riot*, *Ellipsis*, and *Touchstone*, as well as in the literary anthology *Don't Abuse the Muse*. In 2004, he received an MFA from the Creative Writing Workshop at University of New Orleans. Until the interruption of Hurricane Katrina, he lived in New Orleans and had recently joined the faculty at Tulane University. He now resides in Central Florida, where he teaches at Stetson University. He recently completed his first novel.

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