

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

Michael Lynch
Spoiled Meatloaf

In a small, cozy diner lived a homemade meatloaf. The meatloaf spent its days lounging on a warm plate with some mashed potatoes and sweet corn. Together they watched television, argued about sports, and ate blueberry pie while waiting for a diner patron to purchase and eat them.

Life didn't stink, but it wasn't good either. The meatloaf felt unfulfilled. It didn't enjoy lounging around and waiting to be consumed; it wanted to scope out unique new seasonings that would enhance its hum-drum homemade flavor.

Then one day the meatloaf's boredom reached a boil. Without warning, the meatloaf said "adios" to the mashed potatoes and sweet corn; climbed off the warm plate; and lumbered awkwardly from the small, cozy diner — never to return again.

The meatloaf ventured toward a nearby urban center. After securing temporary lodging in the basement of an abandoned cookie factory, it set out to find a job. The meatloaf lacked any sort of trade or marketable skill, so finding decent work proved difficult. But after several months of stubborn, dogged pursuit, the meatloaf snagged a satisfactory gig: night shift merchandise specialist at a large department store.

All night long the meatloaf stacked jars, boxes, and sacks weighing upward of fifty pounds; it mopped dirt, grime, and sleaze from the store's wide concrete aisles; and it scrubbed crusty food stains from the employee lunchroom. Most nights passed in silence aside from the perpetual buzzing of the massive fluorescent lights overhead.

Yes, the meatloaf's gig lacked even the faintest hint of glamour, but it paid a tidy little sum. Enough to rent a dilapidated studio in the sketchy end of town. In fact, the job paid more than the meatloaf's rent demanded, and perhaps due to lack of imagination, the meatloaf usually pissed this surplus away on video games and frozen pizza.

Several years passed. The meatloaf worked, played video games, and ate frozen pizza. Once a month (or so) the meatloaf visited a bar to drink beer, shoot pool, and argue about sports with strangers. It was a cozy, serviceable life -- albeit somewhat lonely.

Then one night, the meatloaf's boredom began percolating again. "Why," thought the meatloaf, "did I leave my nice warm plate for this? What was I thinking? I wanted adventure? What adventure? I'm a meatloaf. Meatloaves live in a diner. They're purchased and eaten by diner patrons. They don't rent apartments, mop department stores, and eat frozen pizza!"

After several sleepless days, the meatloaf decided to rekindle its former life and start fresh. The meatloaf quit its job, ditched its crummy apartment, and returned to the small, cozy diner with a triumphant -- yet slightly desperate -- gleam in its eyes.

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Unfortunately, the meatloaf's small, cozy diner no longer existed. In its place stood a trendy new bakery that offered a variety of exotic, healthy sandwiches. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and sweet corn did not appear on the menu. The meatloaf was, understandably, heartbroken. "Maybe," it thought, "I can find a new restaurant -- one that needs a meatloaf for its menu."

The meatloaf wandered around town and inquired within every restaurant, burger joint, clam shack, ice cream stand, and bistro it found, but no one needed a meatloaf. By nightfall, the situation looked grim. The meatloaf felt dejected, exhausted, and ready to keel over. Then, while traveling down a rural road lined with pine trees, barns, and overgrown pastures, the meatloaf's eyes lit upon a diner. Joy!

Dizzy from hunger, the meatloaf hobbled inside, sat its meaty keister on a green vinyl stool, and ordered blueberry pie. Not a slice -- the whole pie. It tasted delicious and reinvigorated the meatloaf's flagging spirit. Shortly after polishing off the last morsel, the meatloaf stood up and entered the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen, a goose was applying cream cheese frosting to a batch of fresh hazelnut cupcakes. The meatloaf approached the goose, tapped her on the shoulder, and said "Excuse me miss, is this your diner?" The thoroughly startled goose jumped into the air and dropped two cupcakes on the floor. After she regained her composure, the goose furrowed her enormous unibrow, set her stern black eyes on the meatloaf, and said, "Yes, this is my diner. What do you want?"

"Well," said the awkward, fidgety meatloaf, "I just passed by here and stopped in for some blueberry pie -- your pie is really great by the way. Anyway, after eating I figured I'd drop by and say hello because I was just wondering whether you might want a new meatloaf for your menu."

The goose folded her wings and eyeballed the meatloaf from top to bottom. This superficial examination revealed an obvious problem: the meatloaf was a sad sight. Years of non-meatloaf-like behavior -- solitude, poor diet, late nights, and hard work -- had significantly deteriorated its quality. The meatloaf was spoiled...to say the least.

"Well," said the goose, "we only serve fresh, homemade meatloaf at this establishment. In fact, homemade meatloaf is one of my signature dishes. I can't serve my customers some random meatloaf from off the street. How do I know your flavor will appeal to them? No, I'm sorry. This is no place for you."

"Oh please" begged the meatloaf, "I swear: I'll work hard to improve myself and become your most delicious meatloaf. Please add me to your menu! I may not be fresh or homemade, but I'm sure my flavor will appeal to someone. And I want desperately to be eaten. If you include me on your menu, I swear that you won't be disappointed."

Well the goose was skeptical, but she pitied the meatloaf and begrudgingly agreed to offer it a spot on her menu. The meatloaf -- its eyes full of ketchup tears -- rejoiced! And the next day, the diner's menu contained two separate meatloaf entries:

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HOMEMADE MEATLOAF

All natural ground beef meatloaf, rubbed with roasted garlic and spices, topped with homemade BBQ sauce and cheddar cheese. Served with French fries. \$13.95.

SPOILED MEATLOAF

Ingredients unknown. Enjoys video games and pie. Awkward but extremely enthusiastic. Assures me that it tastes delicious. Served with French fries.

Free!

So the meatloaf lived at a diner once again. Only this time it didn't sit on a warm plate with some mashed potatoes and sweet corn. None of the other menu items socialized with the meatloaf -- they made it abundantly clear that the meatloaf's presence on their menu was unwelcome.

The meatloaf kept to itself and dreamed about being eaten. The days were long, boring, and lonely, so the meatloaf busied itself by performing janitorial work and handling responsibilities similar to those it had performed at the department store. The meatloaf wanted the goose to understand how much it appreciated her kindness, so it worked hard.

Eight years unfolded in this manner. Seasons changed, customers visited, and countless menu items were consumed -- yet the meatloaf remained uneaten. Instead, the meatloaf developed into a vital member of the diner's staff due to its loyalty and tireless work ethic. It was in far greater demand as an employee than as a menu item.

The meatloaf's responsibilities evolved. Instead of mopping floors it organized the diner's accounts, managed its staff, and launched its new website. Under the meatloaf's careful shepherding, things at the diner ran smoother than ever. In fact, the goose even considered opening a second diner!

Burdened by these new responsibilities, the meatloaf didn't have time to worry about its flavor. And the meatloaf hardly ever thought about the fact that it hadn't been eaten yet and it probably never would be. Then one day, while it was sweeping the diner's new parking lot, the meatloaf was attacked and eaten by a stray dog named Alfie. The meatloaf didn't agree with Alfie's stomach -- the poor dog shat thunder for nearly a month.

A memorial service was held at the diner. It was the first time -- as far as anyone could recall -- that this much fuss had been made over the loss of a menu item. Nonetheless, on the appointed hour of the appointed day the goose stood behind an empty white plate, warmed slightly, and asked the tearful attendees to remember the meatloaf's loyalty, passion, and unwavering desire to be eaten.

"Our spoiled meatloaf was consumed," said the goose, "but it will never be removed from our menu."