

Hundred Dollar Pie

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The Florida scallions are as big and bold as a boy's fist, the strawberries as red as a baby's heart. I run my fingers over the melon-sized tomatoes to reassure myself that they are real. Touch is everything. If you've ever had a lover, you know what I mean.

I grab a lemon meringue pie from the refrigerated case and lay it my cart. It will be my entire dinner. Last night I had a can of chickpeas, the last edible thing in the house.

It's awfully quiet in this dimly lit little grocery store, Dominic's Finest. Maybe it's always this empty in the middle of the day. I have no point of reference, since this is my first time here. It's the first time I've been grocery shopping in six weeks.

My wife Carolyn used to say that we should try this place, but we never did. I'm not sure why. We always shopped at Publix. I used to push the cart behind her and make what I thought were incredibly wry comments about the other shoppers. She mostly shushed me—although occasionally, when I got off a good one she laughed out loud.

Her appetite was incredible after the diagnosis. She made glorious meals for the two of us and for our daughter Stephanie, who came to dinner almost once a month. Stephanie lives 40 miles away from Naples, on Chokoloskee Island, which is next to the western border of The Everglades, which is, according to Stephanie, next to God.

As it turned out, neither my wife's choice of supermarkets nor her encounter with breast cancer mattered a rat's asshole. One rainy afternoon six weeks ago, as she was

going to see her oncologist, a cement truck skidded through a red light on the corner of Pine Ridge and Livingston Road and broadsided her at 50 miles an hour.

A middle-aged man stands behind the cash register near the front of the store. He wears a short-sleeved white shirt and a smudged white apron. There are deep, dark furrows in his forehead. A gold crucifix with an agonized Jesus on the Cross nestles against the dark hair on the top of his chest. He peers over half-glasses at a stack of invoices. His shoulders slump forward, as if something in his spine has snapped.

I nod as I wheel by on my way to the wines. He barely looks up. I could make an attempt to strike up some inane conversation, ask him what sort of wine goes with my pie. I could tell him I'm sorry business is so slow. Or I could say, cheer up, no matter what happens, life goes on. And it does. It just doesn't go on the way you thought it would.

It was a small funeral. Stephanie came with Billy George, the half-blooded Seminole Indian who is her guru and lover. Billy George is as old as I am, mid 50's, and has two black teardrops tattooed below his left eye. Stephanie says living with Billy George is better than rehab.

After we came back from the cemetery, and Stephanie had gone to bed, Billy George and I drank bourbon from the bottle on my front lawn. The turquoise in his bracelets glowed in the full moon. Billy George said the Milky Way shines brightest whenever someone in his tribe dies, to light the way to the city in the sky. I like to believe the bright moon and stars that night were for my wife.

They left the next morning. Stephanie said she had to get back to her dogs. The only thing she took was a box of Carolyn's hand-written recipe cards. We speak every two weeks, mostly about the weather, and her health, which she says is "evolving."

The front door opens. A pretty teenage girl enters. Her dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail. The way she walks through the aisles, I can tell she's no shopper. She stops by Dominic and kisses him on the cheek.

He says, "How was school, Gina?"

"Oh, you know. Anyway, I need a hundred dollars." She goes behind the counter and ties on a clean apron. "It's for class pictures and a deposit on the yearbook."

"A hundred dollars? Christ."

"You want me to ask mom?"

She's a sweet daughter, I can tell, and loyal, just by the way she begins to rearrange the oranges. She shouldn't have to worry about money for a yearbook. My daughter mutilated hers. She cut out her graduation photograph with the same cuticle scissors she used to slash her wrist.

Dominic sighs, "Gina, take the counter for a while. I need to check the delivery. They shorted me last week." He shuffles off towards the back of the store.

I remember the first night Carolyn and I were in bed, after they had confirmed that the lump had metastasized. She asked me to make love to her. When I hesitated, she took my hand and placed it on her breast. I was afraid it would hurt her, and I was afraid to feel it, but she told me it was all right to touch her, and it was.

I move to the front of the store. I put my pie on the checkout counter. Gina bags it. "That's \$9.95, sir."

I hand her a hundred dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

She looks at the bill, then at me. “But you gave me a hundred, sir.”

I put my hand over hers. “Please.”