

Serrated Spoons

By Don Bickley

EN495W Special Topics in Writing

Thursday, July 12, 2007

Word Count: 3,825

He gently dragged his mother across the floor toward her room. Jon heaved her toward the bed, banging her head against the wall. He squinted and gritted his teeth. She wasn't going to move. Nineteen years old, he thought of himself—what a predicament to be in. He folded the black quilt along the edges of her body and went to the kitchen.

The air was dry and thick with the chemical scent of lemons. “Damn,” he whispered. He put his head in his hands and leaned against the table. Most of the red stains on the black and white linoleum were gone, the night's disaster cleaned. Really, though, what was the point.

The microwave clock flashed two in the morning—he'd worry about this tomorrow.

* * * * *

Blinds slashed the daylight into lines across the tiles. A mop and broom leaned, crossed, guarding the dirt pile that was swept under the fridge. A milk jug rested on the sterile countertop. Jon grabbed a half-washed glass, watching the water marks disappear in the opaque white.

“So you got a job; where is welding going to get you?” His mom leaned over the edge of the table, her elbows resting on a haphazard stack of psychology books. “My son: the failure.”

“Me?” Jon clenched his fists. “Who was the one passed out from red vodka?”

She closed her eyes. “You weren't home on time. What's that ringing?”

“Your head,” Jon answered. “What if I like welding?”

His mom held onto her head. “Stop shouting. What kind of career is that? You have a hard time using a match, how can you use a torch? Who needs a welder? How is the pay?”

“Money isn't everything.”

She stood and glared at him. “Do you know how much money I've spent taking care of you by myself?” She began to shake and sat back down. “I'd like just a little bit of gratitude in return. Is that too much for a mother to ask of her son?”

Jon said nothing, only took a swig from the milk. Sour. He involuntarily spit the warm milk onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” She shrieked, rushing toward him. “I just cleaned.”

“I cleaned up after you,” he corrected. He glanced at the jug and saw that it expired two weeks ago. “Why the hell do we have this?”

“It was still good!” She grabbed the mop, knocking over the broom. “Go to work.”

“I don’t start—” He slammed the glass into the sink and headed outside. The hot desert shimmered along the horizon. Jon took a step back—it had to be at least a hundred ten. Why did they have to live in Arizona? He looked down the row of merged entrances that formed the base of their condo. Sprinklers chirked indifferent to the sun. The grass gleamed. The tar road bubbled. The leaning, rusting frame of a decommissioned train depot guarded the edge of the subdivision. A few stray flowers grew in its shadow where the wind bent them toward the freeway.

Something moved behind the bushes two yards over. There was a glint of yellow and white. Jon stepped forward. An old man hunched over, ear pressed against a house. “Richard?” Jon hissed.

The man scowled and crouched lower. He was wedged between green hedges and blue siding, but his yellow shorts and a white sweatshirt gave him away.

“Richard, I see you. What the hell—“

“Damnit, boy.” He looked both ways to make sure nobody else was in sight before emerging. “Do you want to blow my cover?” He angrily limped his way toward Jon, cane waving toward the bushes. “I almost caught them, Jon. Mrs. Phelps complained about their high power bills again, recommended to Martin that they ‘turn them down a bit.’ What did I tell you, Jon, the Phelps grow pot!”

Jon shook his head. To help deter burglars, and because the Phelps were never around, they turned on every light and appliance to give the illusion that they were.

“You still don’t believe me? It just makes sense, son; with the blank look of his two kids,

you know they're up to something."

Something crashed in Jon's home.

"How's your mom doing?" Richard asked.

"Drunk. I got that job I was telling you about, welding, and came home late. She panicked and got drunk. I'm sick of living with her. She's not grateful for anything when she's drunk. You're her friend, why don't you talk to her?"

Richard put a wrinkled hand on Jon's shoulder. "You know, son, you shouldn't be so hard on her. Life's tough on you when...what did you say happened to your father?"

"I never knew him," Jon muttered, looking at his house door. "And she never says."

"Well, he gave her a lot of mon—never mind; I don't mean to pry. Where're you off to?"

Jon shrugged. "Work I guess."

"Taking your mom's wheels?" He pointed to the 1991 Corsica.

"What choice do I have?" There was another crash inside. "I wish I never had to go back in there."

Richard shrugged, heading to his own home. "Well, good luck."

Jon reached in his pocket for the keys and realized they were in his mom's purse. He faced the door again. "God damn."

Jon worked for an older man named Bob Vileschek, a smith who specialized in welding sculptures. Jon parked alongside a small aircraft hanger. Planes had been replaced by weeds growing in the cracks along the tarmac. Loose metal siding banged in the wind. The hanger door, a grid of torn plastic and dull windows, was propped closed by some of Bob's sculptures.

"Shit hole," he muttered. The joy of his new job faded when he first saw the antique building, gutted and converted into a junkyard smithy. Towers of thick copper pipes were welded around and through plastic. Then there was the tube of iron, its wrench-like tip in the shape of a

fist giving the middle finger. Engraved along the shaft: “Made in America, Ship to China”. Jon chuckled whenever he passed it; it described Bob’s personality well. The job might be shit, he thought, welding junk or the occasional trash bin, but Bob made having the job that much better.

Jon stepped into the side entrance and squinted into the smoke. Sparks spit onto the concrete floor, dying by the next clang and accompanying shower. A shadow hunched beneath the only installed light. The figure leaned. His arms quivered as he raised the hammer. He held it there and, with a roar, brought the hammer down.

“Good morning, Bob.”

The old man swung his leg out to turn, the shorter one it looked like, and hunched to the side. He held a torch in one glove and a metal spike in the other. His blackened suspenders were held up by a bungee chord. His black and red flannel sweater was torn and held together by tape. The edges of his beard were singed. He turned the torch off and lifted his chemistry goggles.

“Jon, you’re early.”

Jon nodded slowly. “I was persuaded to get a head start on things.”

“Persuaded?” Bob set the spike on the ground.

Jon inhaled and closed his eyes. “I was late yesterday and my mom, the drunk, got worried. She gets difficult. I’d like to get a head start today—off the clock, of course. I’m thinking of trying pressure welding since I worked with fusion welding yesterday.” He looked at a brown trash bin that had been split in half the day before, now held together by a rivulet of shiny steel. “How’s she holding?”

“Good as new,” Bob smiled. “You’re a natural, but I can’t let you pressure welding yet. Plastic’s all I got till Charlie drops more scrap at noon.”

“What’s wrong with plastic?”

Bob grabbed a PVC pipe. “The force of compression causes internal fractures, which in turn causes the piece to explode. Then you get a shard in your ass and that’ll ruin your day. You

can help me work on some sculptures, though.”

Jon peered through the square gaps in the hangar door. Cold wind caused the plastic strips to flutter. A tire spun in one square, a spiral of rubber and steel wound around each other in another, and a rendition of “The Thinker” made from wire mesh and solder looked at him with sparkplug eyes. It was a matrix of artistic junk. Just artistic junk. Bob paid ten dollars an hour, but Jon couldn’t figure out where the man found the money. Maybe his mother was right; maybe this job was transient. Jon leaned toward the Thinker. A brown spider stitched a web behind the statues eyes.

* * * * *

“I’m back, mom.” Silence. He closed the front door and walked up the stairs to the living room. His mother was leaning back, crying at the television. Jon rolled his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Jorg got Lisa pregnant, but he’s already married to Sarah,” she sobbed.

“It’s a soap opera, mom. Why do you watch that shit?”

“Don’t use that language around me,” she snapped.

He sighed. “I’m sorry. Hey, how about I make us dinner? What would you like?”

She shrugged.

“I’m serious, I’ll make anything.”

She mouthed the words of the television actors before looking toward him. “There’s a frozen pizza or two, let’s have that.”

“Frozen? That’s not—alright, if that’s what you want, I’ll make it.”

Dinner took ten minutes to prepare. Jon noticed the pile of dirt still under the fridge.

“Adding to your collection, mom?” he joked. She stared at him. “How was your day?”

“Depressing,” she whispered. “Those shows get me every time.”

“Why do you watch them? I never understood the appeal of watching made-up lives.”

She said nothing, only stared.

Jon leaned back in his chair and the floor creaked. The floor never used to do that. He dabbed the grease off of the pizza with a napkin. His mother's fork was still resting on the table. "Well, my day was pretty interesting. You remember Bob, right?"

She moved her fork toward the pizza, toying with the grease that pooled in the folds of pepperoni before taking a bite.

"Well, I'm sure I told you about him. He holds up his pants with a bungee cord and everything. Anyway, I started thinking, maybe you were right about the whole 'where is welding going to lead you?' thing. But this man stopped by his shop today. Bob had made this large steel wrench, but it wasn't a normal wrench, right? The forked end had a large fist. I think Bob said he bent pieces of metal for the fingers first, then attached them to a larger ball that served as the hand—it even has fingerprints, mom, which he chiseled by hand. When you see it, it tells you to fuck off, and has this inscription—"

She dropped her fork. "Don't use such language," she snapped.

"Whatever," Jon muttered. "Anyway, this guy comes and wants to buy it, right? Says he heard about it through a friend of his friend. Guess how much he offered Bob...sixty thousand. He paid cash, too. I think I'm going to keep studying welding with him. There might be something to this—"

"Can't we have piece and quiet?" She threw her spoon into the pizza. "I have to put up with noise all day; I want some peace and quiet when I eat for a change." She shoved a slice into her mouth.

"Fine," Jon stood. "You want silence? I'll just leave. Then you can pick yourself up off the floor next time." He shoved the chair into the table and stormed off.

"You're pizza's going to get cold."

"Eat it," he shouted. "I doubt you'd notice."

Outside, the night air felt frigid compared to the heat earlier. The stars glittered

overhead. A crescent moon hung over the edge of the desert, caught between the iron beams protruding from the ribs of the train depot. Space was everywhere; he felt that this the moon instead of rural Arizona. Only the orange street lights broke apart the black and white lunarscape. His breath curled over itself. Damn spring, he thought, one hundred in the day and forty at night—the season of extremes. He looked at the dark frame of his house wedged between the other condos. The top floor window flickered in Technicolor. Talking, distant and hollow, leaked from the bedroom.

The upstairs light of the Smiths' home two doors down flashed on. There was a yell. Jon turned to investigate. A shadow fell from beneath a ledge under the patio into the bushes. Jon saw a flash of yellow and white. "Ri—"

Richard leaned on his cane and broke into an old-man-sprint. "Hide!"

The two made a quick walk to the side of the building as the Smiths' porch light came on. "I know I heard someone, honey," Mrs. Smith yelled. "No, it sounded like a person. You're probably right." She laughed. "Maybe if you're a good boy we can—" She shut the door.

Richard leaned heavily, laughing. "That was a close one, kid!"

"You're taking this too far. What the hell were you doing up there?"

"Gathering evidence," he whispered. "I had an epiphany. We need to expunge the Smiths from our community."

"What if they aren't growing weed?"

"I don't care about that. They're fat, though, really fat. Who the hell wants to look at that in their community? They lower the value of our property every time they go outside; but do our property taxes go down, too? No. I'm telling you, Jon, fat people are a plague, worse than—" His eyes grew wide. "Are the Phelps fat because they grow weed?"

"What is wrong with you?" Richard had a habit of talking but never acting; Jon could never tell when he was joking or when he was just being Dick. "You don't know why they're fat;

maybe they have a disorder. You shouldn't be such an ass."

"Of course they have a disorder," Richard protested. "Existing. Enough of that, though, I'm not upset with you and I don't want to argue with you. I enjoy your company a lot Jon. Course, if you were fat, I wouldn't talk to you—"

Jon glared at him.

Richard gave him his half-toothless smile as a show of his humor without having to admit to it. He walked with Jon out of the shadows and looked up. The windows flickered. "Had a talk with her today. Told how hot it was and she laughed, pointing to my white sweater. I told her an old man like me only lives in Arizona 'cause all the heat's left my blood. She got'a laugh out'a that, too. Good woman, your mom." He waved goodnight and walked away.

Jon stared upward into the flashing colors. "You don't live with her like I do," he replied. He thought about Richard's comment on the Smiths. Was he himself being too judgmental toward his mother? The rainbow flashes washed along the bedroom windowsill. "Watch their imaginary lives...if that's what you want," he whispered.

* * * * *

Jon yawned. He rubbed at his eyes. His hands haphazardly worked the torch. He'd have fallen asleep if not for the cold wind. Bob had him working outside to make adjustments to his sculptures; a potential buyer was going to be stopping by and he wanted his artwork to look pristine. He made Jon wear his thick gloves and protective visor. "Good way to practice technique, Darth Vader," Bob had laughed. "Bullshit," Jon muttered. He singed the spider that had made its nest inside The Thinker.

He yawned again. Closed his eyes.

Bob shoved him aside. "What are you doing?" he barked. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I was welding."

"You were sleeping. Turn off the torch." He yanked it out of Jon's hand. "Go home."

Jon only mouthed words. Was he being fired? “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry? God damnit, kid, you can’t be sleeping on the job. Maybe you think that you just piece junk together, but you’re playing with a torch that can melt metal.” He pointed to the acetylene tank. “You know what you call a tired welder? Dead.”

“Look, I couldn’t sleep last night.”

Bob folded his arms and glared at him. The edges of his eyes relaxed. “Why?”

Jon cursed under his breath. “Forget it, it’s my problem. I’m fine.” He turned. Bob grabbed his shoulder.

“No you’re not, Jon. You can tell me what’s wrong.”

“But the buyer will be—“

“To hell with the buyer, you’re my apprentice.”

Jon closed his eyes. “I...my mom drinks and watches T.V. I try and talk to her but she gives me this stare like I’m a stranger. I want to leave, be out on my own, you know? But I think she needs me. Have you ever had family problems?”

Bob snorted. “Who doesn’t? My daughter would shut herself in her room so I did some snooping around. A woman’s safe isn’t her purse, it’s her room. She wasn’t too happy, let me tell you. ‘My friends don’t even go through my things,’ she complained. Well, I wasn’t her friend, I was her parent. I found her diary and read the last few entries—had to give her some privacy, you know?—and figured out this boy named Thomas was picking on her. Guess what I did.”

“What did you do?”

“Went to his house and knocked him around a bit. We could do that then.” He chuckled.

“He never bothered her again, though. Go home today and throw her around.”

Jon glared at him.

Bob raised his hands in defense. “I’m kidding. But a woman’s safe is her room. My mother saved everything I did as a kid: my fist spelling tests, pictures I drew, my lost baby teeth;

it was in a large box in her room. I assume her mother had a box of her own.”

“All my relatives are in Maine,” Jon replied.

“Still, you might find something in her room. You better have a damn good reason to invade a woman’s privacy, but it sounds like you do. Just be prepared for what you might find. Go home and get some sleep, hey?”

Jon nodded, heading toward his mom’s car.

The empty countryside crawled past. Dust devils danced along the road before disintegrating. Jon checked his speed; eighty five going on ten, the road ahead straight and lost in the shimmer. There was a comfort, though, being alone on this country road off the freeway—he didn’t feel he was moving. He used the windshield as a projector for his thoughts and watched the clouds glaze past. Was his mother’s sadness hidden in her room?

“I should leave her,” he said aloud. He drifted toward the other lane. “Save up for two weeks, get a car, and go. Fuck her and her alcohol and her soap operas—” He corrected his steering. “Maybe I could I help her. No, I should just leave.”

He passed a new subdivision, Planned Paradise. Its flower-edged road meandered toward empty yards. No power lines or waterlines yet; they had no place in the desert. “Guess some things weren’t meant to be planned, but they happen,” Jon told himself. In the case of Planned Paradise, that happened in a month. The houses gave way to dust. Time passed and Jon found himself at home.

He had to unlock the door. The house was silent except for the scripted din of the television. The living room was empty. “Must be at Richard’s,” he muttered. Jon walked to the hallway where both of their bedrooms were, side by side. He always closed his door but hers stayed open. “There won’t be anything there,” he told himself. The room was empty. He was about to turn when he looked at her closet space; it was the only place in their home that he had

never seen. He edged toward the panel. He leaned. The panel rolled to the side. Clothes. Shoes. Maroon winter boots wedged in the corner.

He bent down and moved them. A box appeared. It was small, no bigger than her boots, but its torn corners bulged. He opened the flaps and dumped the contents onto the carpet. He blew the dust off the flaps and dumped the box onto the floor. Papers, letters, pictures, a flurry of yellowed paper fluttered out of the box.

He grabbed an envelope. From Alma, MI, 48801, to Todd Huhn, PO Box 2991 North Tracy Drive, Seattle, WA, 98101. Returned to sender; no such address. The letter was already opened. He read it out loud. “Todd, if I don’t hear from you again, I’ll assume you want nothing to do with our new baby. I can’t take care of him by myself, I have a life to start, and he’s your son, too. You should take care of him for awhile.”

From Bridgeport, CT 06604, to Todd Huhn, 1265 High St., Sacramento, CA, 94207. Returned to sender; no such address. The handwritten letter was illegible till the end. “I’ll go to the police and sue you for everything you’re worth. You sure as hell deserve it. I can’t take care of him alone any more—where the fuck are you?” Jon was surprised with how nonchalant he read the words.

He spotted an envelope from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. “We are sorry to inform you that, due to your lack of performance since placed on academic probation, your scholarships have been revoked and you will be unable to return to our campus next semester.” His throat caught. The false lives of the television took the place of his voice. He dropped the letter. He thumbed through a thick yellow folder filled with legal documents. “Shit,” he muttered.

The blue teddy bear with Jon embroidered along its stomach peered upward. He held the stuffed animal in one hand and dug through a stack of pictures with the other. Many were of him as a newborn from Denver, Colorado; in every shot, his mother was present. He flipped through the images; they were stacked chronologically. He aged faster as he drew closer to the last image.

Twenty pictures when he was nine, fourteen when he was ten, and his mother appeared less and less. By eighth grade, his mother disappeared altogether. One picture for ninth and tenth grade each, his portrait, and then the pictures were over.

The front door opened. “Jon?” his mother called. “Are you in here?” She called from the kitchen, then from the living room. “I thought I turned this off.” Click. Both Jon and his mother listened to the silence. “Jon?” she called again. “Honey, are you here?” She walked toward her room. Jon held onto the bear and stood, facing her in the doorway.

“It’s time we talked, mom—really talked.”