

“Poor Man’s Fondue”

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Wilma enjoyed everyday driving across Chicago to care for a diabetic cat named Sasha. It kept her active and afloat, alongside the day job as Ms. Gersch, L.S.W., and discreet paid cosmetics trials. It was a living. She earned enough to rent in a decent area, cater to a gas-guzzling S.U.V., buy insurance, budget a hefty portion of discretionary income, plus keep plenty in a private portfolio. She listened to her alma mater’s radio station podcasts, nonstop, during the stop-and-go commute.

On the Belling U podcast: “Arc of Bar” by the Japandroids.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” sang the social worker.

Stuck to her dash was a placard: “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind, always.”

She had a duplicate one in the welfare office hung behind her huge cluttered desk. Everybody ignored or missed it: the unattributed summation of a reason for her career choice; in college, she’d shelved passion and talent in art and design because she’d realized the art industry to be wildly unkind at core. Social work gave better karma.

Some commuters turned on their lights due to rush hour dusk, and Wilma surprised herself by letting go the wheel to clap-twice-raise-the-roof at a perdidle—the solo headlamp inspired good luck, if acknowledged. She figured she needed all the luck she could get, being single. Rather than superstitious, the woman was trapped in habit, at 28. She was between lovers.

She arrived at Jack’s building, eager to look after Sasha and collect any tips for extra work that Jack might’ve configured for her. She pulled into a street spot, parallel, wheels turned toward the curb. It was a still, foggy night in the Windy City. The upscale community usually bustled with pedestrians yet was bleak tonight.

On the way into the building Wilma wondered if Jack’d left her a goodie. The elevator up to his penthouse – one of four on that floor – played a muzak version of “Money” by Pink Floyd and she enjoyed the piece, knowing it only from her college years of

excessive partying, due to the smart/dirtball people she met there. She was careless and carefree, back then. Even today she tried to stay true to her core.

She admired Jack, a man who she suspected cared only for his obese runt of a cat because of extreme adherence on his commitments. It was maybe a promise he'd made long ago, looking after a dumb animal ("dumb" meaning unable to talk). Wilma could not guess. He would talk falsetto and funny to the cat, never petted it, yet spent over a grand a month paying for it to be looked after by her.

Wilma used her key to enter the penthouse. Opposite the front door stood a Banksy; the graffiti was painted on an exterior chunk of wall torn from a building in England. It struck a bold hobo profile in lavender over a square of beige backdrop. The silhouette depicted even a hobo bag at the end of a stick, slung over the shoulder.

The whole place was decorated around the black-market objet d'art, with variegated tones of purple and tan imbued into every piece of furniture or rug. Its walls were all done in "diamond finish," which meant that Jack screwed few items into his walls, which gave the space a somewhat transitory sheen (although he'd lived there five years). Several Italian balconies could be opened to the outside, in nicer weather. But it was the kitchen she liked best, modern and enormous.

Three notes stood folded into origami birds on the table between a bowl of peaches and a vase of daffodils she'd splurged on as a birthday gift to him. Wilma loved when Jack left special instructions; it meant a bonus in the week's cash bundle. Careful to snap a few pix of the intricate paper sculptures for her facebook page, she anyway tore the first one, getting it open. Jack regularly placed them in order, keeping those ducks in a row. The last sculpture was always greenish and a tip—delicately folded cash.

It took a moment to sync her podcasts to Jack's bluetooth house-speakers. Up next: the inebriated rapper Teka\$hi 6ix9ine, live in-studio, defending his name against the blatant and conniving host calling himself Kid Keen. He was her favorite host, after being the only "voice" on campus to keep silent about her criminal charges and then the civil suit she and Greta had filed against Professor Huxley, followed by her attempts to sue the school itself for negligence. She and Greta Klopp (now Greta Rutherford) became the fabled campus pariahs their senior year. It was a wonder either of them graduated.

Wilma anyway felt she should listen to 6ix9ine, because he was so unique and aberrant, so set a reminder to hear that program later. "Satisfaction by Benny Benassi Pres. The Biz showed up next on her podcast, followed by "2 Wicky" by Hooverphonic. It was Kid Keen's apprentice, Trenton Traffic, doing the podcast. She enjoyed him almost as much as Kid Keen. Traffic was modern, the Kid was classic. Both men entertained.

Today's first bird said:

POOR MAN'S FONDUE (a protein gazpacho)

- 1 pound cooked tuna (shredded)
- 1 pound cooked pinto beans
- 10 ripe red tomatoes (diced)
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 cup cream
- 1/2 cup salsa (optional)
- Garden herbs (to taste)
- 1 loaf bruschetta (for dipping)

She tried on an apron but wanted to get out of her work clothes; she changed 4 or 5 times a day, liking to carry a thick tote instead of a purse. From her night gown to her dressing gown to her work clothes to her gym clothes to her casual clothes to her dinner clothes to her travel clothes to her evening wear to her club gear to her night out as a prude clothes, she changed often, every day. (Instead of clubbing, Wilma had lately become a video-gaming spectator, hitting up those hotspots and avoiding the bars and ensuing pain, by wearing prude clothes while keeping an open mind.) She had a footwear fetish, branding herself. (Recently she'd traded in her hippie Birkenstocks for mainstream Clarks, after a brief flirtation with Reebok until she found out it was the name of a demon that raped women.) Jewelry was plain and small, a simple gem or even a stud in each ear, a matching ring on each pinky; she wore the same pieces all day long. Her hairstyle lately was the "Psycho" crop popularized in the film and its remake, always looking the same.

Jack's house was laid out like an old railcar (double-wide) bent around two sides of the building; each room led to the next, often sans doors. Three bedrooms off the jag in the "L" shared two bathrooms. She chose the bedroom and bath with the largest mirrors, as per usual. Wilma was narcissistic in that every time she changed outfits she liked to muse at her (sometimes) nude or (half the time) bra-and-pantied reflection.

She traded tweed skirt and turtleneck for bell-bottoms and a faded "BELLING UNIVERSITY" sweatshirt. She thought the shirt might be too grungy for Jack's place, but would hide her bursitis ("tennis elbow," though she played racquetball); the "Popeye joint" resembled the elbows and knees of the cartoon figure... after having grown up with "Mrs Flintstone" attached to her name, Wilma despised cartoon drubs. For some reason the bursa kept puffing up. She wore a snug elastic cuff over her elbow when this happened, usually. She'd failed to bring one along today.

"Above the Clouds" by Little People began to play, followed by "Little People (Black City)" by Matthew Dear, followed by "Safe and Sound (Discotech Remix)" by Capital Cities...

"Sasha? Where are you hiding today?"

Wilma shrugged and got back to work; no doubt the thirsty feline needed water soon; it was drank at least a bowl per day. As she listened to the podcasts and readied the fondue ingredients and chose herbs from Jack's indoor garden (cilantro leaves, dill needles, rosemary sprigs) the origami bill called out in silent pulses. Of course it would be a fifty, maybe a hundy, with this hour of extra work!

Next origami duck:

CHILLED WHITE SANGRIA

Peaches (sliced, pitted)
Basil (whole leaves)
White wine (jug)
Seltzer water (cans in fridge)
Cinnamon (sticks)

After mixing the drinks she took a break, and ate a slice of leftover birthday cake. "Happy 5" was quaint, appropriate scrawl on the remaining pieces; he was probably 50 or 51, though who knew, with modern medicine. He could be a 500-year-old vampire. She hadn't been invited to his party. The ice-cream cake anyway gave her immediate halitosis. She took a mint, wanted to brush her teeth. Next she did brush her teeth, dribbling paste over the "LL" on her sweatshirt.

Wilma hummed along to "Technologic" by Daft Punk as she removed the soiled sweatshirt and danced toward the mudroom, where she could do laundry. It was then that she remembered Sasha was still absent.

"Where are you hiding, pussy cat?" She paused the podcast. "Sasha?"

In the mudroom, the cat was belly-sprawled in its litterbox. One eye was open, the other closed, like a perdiddle on winter commutes. Even a glance told her it was sturdy with rigor mortis. Grimacing, she spied and donned work gloves, readied a plastic bag. Evidently, it'd expelled a large volume of urine with its last gasp, wicking chunks of litter into its fur—half the box was one giant brick too heavy for Wilma and her bursitis to lift. She quit trying as the pet's back began to snap, gently lowering the belly then the skull into the box before trying to close its stuck-open eye with an index finger.

"How dare you die now," was what Wilma said, thinking that the animal should've been put on insulin. She clapped twice then raised-the-roof, in mourning.

After that it became a test of intelligence. First she took a shower, to wash off any Sasha. She felt the tingle of urgency and panic as she slipped into a spare oversized hoodie of Jack's, wishing she had something black to wear.

Then she searched "dead animal removal" on the 'net: it would cost \$250; she would also need to paint it to look like a skunk or raccoon or some similar wildlife, maybe a

large rat? Tiny fat Sasha could possibly resemble a rat with cosmetics on its fur. She considered dabbing the carcass with her make-up trial.

For the life of her she was unable to find a service to remove the dead pet. Jack would probably cry if he saw Sasha expired in such a way, she thought. She threw a mudroom towel over the body. She sat a moment and considered her predicament.

Determinedly, she turned on “Something for Your Mind” by Superorgasm.

Next she located a Xanax in her coin purse, breaking it into a folded bill. She used, as per usual, a ziggurat paperweight to crush the bar into a fine powder. Finding a straw took more time; Jack had a drawer full somewhere in his immense kitchen, yet where? She decided she could roll up the bill; she wondered if she should’ve simply eaten the pill instead of all this prepping for the insufflation. But it increased the potency of the bar so she had to do it, to conserve. Plus it hit faster. Besides, Jack had such an array of stone surfaces upon which to snort! She chose a beige end table, kneeling as if before an altar on a brown zafu in the parlor.

Some bliss overtook her. She deliberated awhile on how to break the news to Jack. For a spell she considered calling, or leaving a note. A video chat seemed invasive, evasive too, somehow. She thought she might skip the gym and nap until he got home, then tell him in person. What was the etiquette? She had no idea what to do. She looked at the pix of Jack’s origami and guessed again that the last duck was a fifty.

She snorted another line and reminisced:

It’d been years since she last spoke with Greta, hearing about her marriage to Agent Rutherford but never receiving an invite. The law suit had mostly been Greta’s plan, to pay off their gargantuan student loans, alongside assuaging the humiliation of their threesome with the professor. Although she resented being lumped in with the #metoo movement—a clique of braggarts, whiners and Ugly Betties, in Wilma’s mind—it had erupted and saved her from further ostracism; she had supporters. Wilma never dropped acid again after the scandal, those days being a Dopey Daze, preferring now to use pharmaceuticals recreationally on occasion. As it turned out, neither she nor Greta got any money from civil suits. But they did get Huxley convicted as a Sexual Offender.

Then she craved smoke. Societal pressure made her want to quit, despite citing old-school celebrities such as, say, Bette Davis, who smoked like a chimney til age 81. Contrary to popular science and media propaganda, smoking was not a definite killer, was it. It chose its victims. George Burns smoked cigars and lived beyond 100. The oldest people in the world—Smucker’s jam types—were often smokers.

She got up to check on the Poor Man’s Fondue, again read through Jack’s instructions. Was she missing anything? Was the recipe actualized satisfactorily? She had no clue, now. Her taste buds were nasal-drip dull. She added a sprinkle of

chopped chives for aesthetics. She began to giggle; she wanted to rename the appetizer Po' Man Stew. It struck her funny bone.

She pondered how to tell Jack about Sasha, recalling his anecdote about his pet being Schrödinger's Cat in the flesh; everyday every day he lived a paradox; will Sasha be alive or dead? Wilma looked up the details about the thought experiment, about a cat being locked inside a box with a cyanide crystal.

She tasted the name of the fondue and wandered back into the parlor to inhale another toot, and reminisced:

Her high school nudist club, Naturistic Tendencies, lasted only its founding year before too many parents kept objecting to minors roaming naked in parks. She giggled again as she remembered Mona, her old babysitter, giving her a call after seeing the org exploited on local television.

Hey, the song is over, thought Wilma, moments later. She inhaled the remainder and prognosticated:

Without a pet to brush and feed and look after, would Jack have any use for her? It could go either way. She would miss the origami bonuses more than the cat or even Jack. She rarely saw him anymore. A similar under-the-table job would be difficult to find. Maybe she could convince him to buy a kitten? Except, it would be unethical, burdening him with another pet. Gods knew, she had no use for one in her busy life.

Then she bawled awhile because she would miss the cat least of all. Finally rid of its dandruff and fur-flurries and stinky food and stinkier crap-box, she stopped.

Wilma knew the Po' Man Stew must be perfect. New title and all. She wrote the new name for the recipe down on parti-colored notepaper, with a peuse gel pen, alongside the hour it went into the fridge to chill. Again at the spice garden she culled more herbs to garnish the dish. Upon inspection, that final origami duck was a hundy so she felt even worse.

Too zonked for the gym, Wilma packed up her strewn clothes and prepped for the commute home. After leaving a note about Sasha she tore up the one about renaming the fondue. She guessed Jack might get upset if she changed the name of his recipe alongside reading the day's macabre news. She laid down for a quick nap, hoping Jack would come home and she could tell him about Sasha and ask about the dinner party.

When she awoke, the silence and gloom disturbed her. Maybe the fog was buffering all sound, all life? Who knew. She turned on "Paradise Circus (Gui Bottaro Remix)" by Massive Attack, then muted it to call Jack.

"You've reached the voicemail of Jack Catch. Leave a message if necessary. Then go get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B, if at risk."

Wilma hesitated, then plunged ahead with: “Hi, Jack. Greta Gersch. Something’s happened and, oh, I’d rather talk to you live. Call me A.S.A.P.”

He called back a moment later. “Lovey, have you started the fondue? I just heard that one of my guests is a former homeless. I can’t have any hurt feelings! We’re going to serve something else... can you stay late?”

“The fondue is chilling and actually, I’m wiped out. Jack, you need to know that Schrödinger’s Cat finally ate the cyanide crystal.”

“That is upsetting. Goodness. I should cancel the gathering tomorrow. What do you think, Miss Gersch? With all that’s happened today. I would still pay you, you know, for those scheduled hours.”

Wilma agreed and gave condolences.

The fog was heavier when she stepped outside, a damp winter chill working its way beneath her borrowed hoodie and heeled loafers. But traffic would be light. Shivering in the S.U.V. she selected a newer Trenton Traffic podcast by musicians that worshipped gods other than the norm. She knew anyway that the lyrics to songs meant nothing... in the long run. They were only words, rather than deeds. Music kept her one step ahead of karma.