

Eggs are Eggs

John Maloney

I was twenty-six and living in Pilsen with Marcos, the food videographer. He was in the middle of a contract shooting commercials for a corporate chain restaurant. His artistic purview was the glistening droplets of water rolling down the skin of a plump tomato. It was the rich glimmer of romaine peeking out from beneath a sesame bun. He was well-known in his line of work because he had invented a mechanical technique for capturing an onion being sliced in half midair, this catapultlike contraption that would launch the allium through a blade so that both halves would arc downward onto the cutting board with delicate, saucy, inviting little bounces. He was making steady money, which felt like a novelty. I hadn't realized how little my other lovers had had until I was with someone who had a little more. There was a beguiling comfort in it, in being able to order what I wanted from menus. With Donny we had mostly gone to the Mexican bar around the corner that served you free chips and salsa with your beer. We'd leave the Mexican bar weighted by sodium and chile heat and tipsy from having called that dinner, and he'd sink down onto me on the deadspring couch in the freezing living room, which was always freezing because one of the windows wouldn't shut, and it would be dizzying, the chile heat, the icy fingers of wind along my skin. I couldn't say exactly when that stopped feeling like heady, youthful, rushing fun. Donny has asked, since then, desperate to know, and I've found that I couldn't say.

Marcos had also used to go to the Mexican bar, though for him it had not been around the corner, but three blocks down. I'd seen him in there in the beginning, when I was there with Donny. He liked to test the strength machine in the back of the bar. It was a video game strength tester. You punched a padded bag and it told you how hard you'd punched it. I sat with my beer and chips and watched the coiled rivers of his muscles flow beneath his skin as he swung. He looked like a boxer, I thought, though I hadn't seen many to compare. He looked like he had had some training, and later I would find out that he had been an enthusiastic amateur as a younger man. He had given it up after he'd seen one of his idols give an interview. The idol was sixty, face a swollen tumor and mind like softened butter. Marcos gave up the gloves almost on the spot.

He bought a video camera. He began filming everything. He filmed the first time he met his

ex-fiancée Tina, and he filmed when he proposed to her, gone six months pregnant, with a ring in a glass of champagne, and he filmed the birth of their kid. The kid altered Marcos. When he had the kid, Marcos said, he looked at the kid's little squished face through the camera lens and he recognized in a solitary instant, as if on a supreme mind-bending high, that every human alive had once been like this, and that the ways they turned out afterward were all the world's doing. He became overwhelmed. He could hardly look at another person's face on the street without sobbing. When he and his fiancée had disintegrated, they fought over the kid. She won two-thirds custody and he went for heavy drinking on the days he didn't have the kid. Then he woke up one bleary throbbing day and found that he had had enough of that brand of self-destruction. Just like that? I asked, incredulous, familiar with the power of addiction, with its hold. Just like that, he said. He renewed his commitment to video. He dreamed of making a documentary that would humanize the world, that would show everyone precisely what he had seen when he looked into the kid's squished face. This was a grand idea in which I never heard specifics. I found it endearing. It resembled, to me, innocence. If I were my younger self I would have challenged him, called him out for naiveté. But something was happening to me, too. I hadn't looked into any squished faces, per se, but something was happening to me all the same. Like I'd been riding in a car with the windows rolled up for a long time, and suddenly the windows had all been rolled down. That's kind of a dumb way to describe it, but the more I'm thinking about it, the more accurate it seems.

So I hadn't seen him in the Mexican bar for a while, though I didn't know why yet, or think about it in any meaningful way yet, and then I had stopped going to the Mexican bar because I had moved into a different place and because Donny was still going to the Mexican bar, and eating chips and salsa alone, and I didn't want to have to see that, and then one day I saw Marcos at the corner grocery store when I went to pick up some noodles in a cup. He was buying an armful of their decent produce, avocados and salad greens. My body suddenly felt starved for that kind of nutrition, hollowed-out and tattered. I went up to him at the checkout and asked, what was your high score? What? he said. Your high score, I said. On the strength machine. Oh, he said, and laughed. That? That was just something to do. Just something to hit.

We would eat regularly at the hip Italian place on the corner that handmade their pasta and had a whole pig's head for two on their menu. We never ordered the pig's head. Marcos was a conflicted foodie. He relished decadence, but it made him self-conscious about his place in the world, his privilege. This, too, I found mildly charming, the way that any complexity, properly

expressed, can seem charming, maybe. He wanted to film our sex, but I said no. I said, maybe in a year. I said, maybe if the internet burns down. I said, maybe if you didn't belong to that despicable race of creatures called men. He said, you're funny. Then he asked again the next night. He touched his lips to my ankle, his cropped hair buzzing my thigh. He said, why not? I said I'd told him why not plenty. He said, those are big reasons. I want the small reasons. I said, I don't trust you. He said, OK. For breakfast he liked to make us omelettes in a special pan he'd bought from France. He said the pan made all the difference when it came to quality. That and the eggs, I said. Eggs are eggs, he said. For some reason this broke my heart.

On the days he had Edgar I usually kept away. I liked him fine, the kid, but Tina would set the back of my neck tingling. She wore tight skirts made of shiny stuff, thick strata of makeup. She had something like poise, but it was that of a gargoyle teetering at the edge of a baroque skyscraper. I feared being caught in her stone claws and rent to shreds. Who this, she'd asked the first time I'd been there when she dropped Edgar off. Jutting her chin in through the doorway toward me. I felt like I could hear the word bitch being left off the end of the question, intensified by its own absence. The double-sharp inflection of it leaving little room for doubt. This is America, Marcos said. I was on the couch, unsure whether to get up or stay in the background. Wondering what title I had in this small fiefdom. I know what country this is, she said. No, America, he said again. It's her name. I don't want my boy hanging around no skanks, Tina said. She's not a skank, Marcos said, more gently than he might've. Come on in and say hi, he said to the boy. To Tina he said, I'll drop him off tomorrow. 8 A.M., she said. Don't go being late.

The kid and I didn't have much chemistry, if you'd call it that. He stuck to his dad, who was always touching his head, running his big fingers in the kid's wispy hair, kneading the kid's little shoulders in his palm. They talked about TV cartoons and what the kid was doing in preschool. Marcos would show him the mechanics of the lever arm that he'd invented, or unscrew the handheld camera's body and reassemble it, like a rifleman learning the intimacies of his weapon. The kid was four, I think. When he remembered I was around he would shoot me a look and then look away quick, his brown eyes glimmering with something, I don't know what. I hung out with them maybe a few times. Eventually, without saying it, we decided I'd stay away on their days. I stuck to the bedroom and pretended to read or just lay there imagining a remote shore.

Most of the friends I'd had had started buying roomy cars and packing them full of stuff and taking them out to Oak Park and Rogers Park and Evergreen. They'd evolved away from belief in the importance of high-contrast photography and the concept of cool. They took their terminal degrees and turned them into square footage, parlayed them through modern alchemy into paid time off and full medical/dental. They found newer versions of their old lovers, versions that had had the more desperate bits filed to blunt nubs, and they bought circular tokens of eternity for one another, and all their friends watched them put them on one another. Me too, I watched too. And I cried every time, too. It's so beautiful, two people professing something that seems so impossible, making wild promises, believing it, convincing us all. I love to believe. I do.

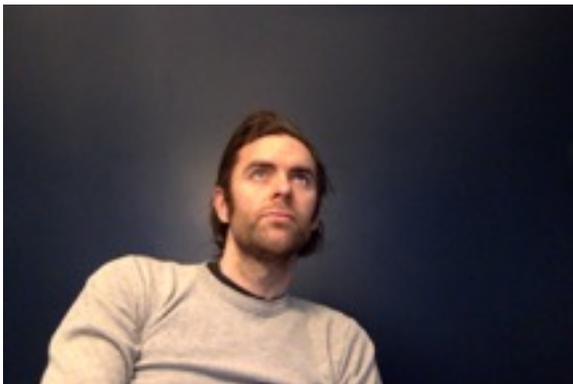
One friend had even become a doctor. We used to snort crushed-up Adderall in skeezy house party bathrooms back when, and now she was prescribing it to kids. If I thought too much about it I felt dizzy and almost nauseous, like standing at the edge of a yawning hole. I heard once that that feeling isn't because we think we'll fall, but because we realize nothing's stopping us from jumping. Do you ever write prescriptions for dilaudid? I asked her at the reception bar, handing her her gin and tonic.

While Marcos worked I played the keyboard and sang into his computer's high-quality webcam, but I rarely posted the videos. I always felt that I was missing something in my own performance, that the essential thing I was always hiding from people had gotten lost, and that it couldn't come out now, even when it was supposed to. When I wanted it to. Even needed it to. I experimented with hairstyles, went pink, went blue, went black. Buzzed half my head and styled the other side. Bought a ton of costume jewelry at the flea market. I Googled people I'd known. People I didn't know. Read the news and got depressed. Read about the environment and got so bad I was gasping for breath, like some ridiculous avatar of the Earth. Went into the bedroom, popped the cap, crushed three of the pills to circumvent the time-release, and crawled into bed, under the covers, with the lights off, waiting for the warm soft thing to cover me in an amniotic embrace.

We stopped going out to eat after a while. I never seemed to be hungry enough for it, all of it, the whole production surrounding the simple act of sustenance. Maybe I was just tired. His contract with the corporate chain ran out, but the royalties from the shoot would be coming in shortly, so he thought it was a good time to start work on his overarching project. He spent hours

watching quick-cut videos on the internet, which I guess was research. He still went to his meetings every Tuesday. I ached with respect for his ethic. It hollowed me out to be around it. His everyday decency made me feel a perverse need to be worse, as if he was throwing off the cosmic balance and I was the only one who could right it. Then again it also pissed me off, how easily he had turned away from it. It made me skeptical. Like he hadn't been a real addict. Like he was a tourist in my world, acting like he'd been to the depths I'd been to. He was in the kiddie pool. I locked him out of the bedroom sometimes. Staked it out as my territory. He slept on the couch. He tried to talk to me through the door, but the consonants bent like soft tines of metal against it, slid down and puddled at the threshold. It made me sad to think how they were being wasted like soldiers charging out of a trench straight into the machine guns. I'd heard about that once, too. I'd nearly puked on my shoes in class. Yet we talk about it like that, like facts.

Marcos wouldn't throw me out, which was what I was asking him to do, I think, and I'd ruined my ability to leave on my own. My teeth were starting to sing discordant harmonies. I thought only of silencing them. It seemed weird to me, when I thought of it, that so much of what was us together had revolved around food. Like our relationship was nothing but mutual sustenance. I called Tina from his phone while he was in the shower. Tina, you dumb cunt, I said, singsong, and the words made me happy, just the cadence of them, even though I didn't think I thought Tina was a dumb cunt. Oh hell no you did not, I heard from the other end of the connection. Her voice compressed and fuzzed with anger. I'd never felt so happy in as long as I could remember.



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