

THE DISASTER

By Art Martori
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Ernie Waite bounced down the sidewalk past rows of houses that, pressed close together, looked to him like a sliced loaf of bread, surrounded by more loaves of concrete bread and asphalt jam.

It wasn't often that Ernie left the house. Usually, when he was hungry.

He thought, God thank you for the stir fry place down the street. If I never work again, if I never love a woman for another night and if I smiled long ago for the last time, I'll still nestle down in a double helping of wheat-germ noodles, extra pork, bok choy, carrot medallions and a heavy splash of garlic sauce.

A plastic bag Ernie held in one hand stretched and strained. Gravity caressed his dinner. It pulled at nearly three pounds of food dangling from a chubby fist. The bag rustled as it bounced with each step against Ernie's dimpled right knee. To the fat man, it seemed to issue peals of wispy laughter.

But once, Ernie could look down and see his feet, rather than endless, surging rolls wrapped in a dirty tee shirt. There was a woman. Dark and lean and people's eyes followed her to him. Her eyes burned him. Her body made something burn inside of him.

He thought about her as he walked to get some stir fry. It was a time before he came to flounder in great heaving floods of greasy noodles. Wilted fries, cheeseburgers, egg rolls, milkshakes, hot wings, tempura batter. Hundreds of pounds ago, he'd moved in a definite direction, toward a blurry but fixed point on the horizon.

jasmine

my life fell off your long hair and it's falling still

i'm falling still i'm begging for the ground

please, rush up, finally

On Ernie walked, the entire quarter ton of him. He plotted a course down the middle of the sidewalk, taking up nearly the entire thing. Trails of tiny black ants froze on

the concrete beneath his massive shadow, beneath a lumbering sweating eclipse of the sun. Ant antennae probed the air in his wake, excited by a wafting scent of garlic sauce and a fleeting hint of pork.

Ernie thought ahead to his apartment, where he would plop grunting and sighing into a filthy armchair. Then... Oh! And then he would eat. He would pull the container from its bag and discard the inadequate plastic spoon and paper napkins that always, if not in superfluous fashion, lay tucked in the bag with dinner.

Ernie's special stir fry eating fork lay in its place on the coffee table, between a stained armchair and a television sitting against one wall, on top of an old foot locker. Usually beside his prized fork lay a crumpled and stained, red mechanics towel. Usually saturated with the deposits of condiments past. Ernie always bought the red mechanics towels at a local auto parts store. It cost three dollars for a dozen towels. Ernie dined with each one several times before pitching it and moving on to the next red towel, moving on to the next shrink wrapped bundle of twelve red mechanics towels.

but once we dined on white linen

dare i wipe my mouth?

beautiful spies lost in tinkling silver

and now i wipe my mouth on shop rags.

Ernie was still about fifteen minutes away from a poorly lighted paradise that smelled like dirty underwear and trash. Five minutes, maybe, for anyone who weighed less. Yet for Ernie at that moment, it all lay at the end of his great huffing epic: those red towels and the large fork once intended to dole out salad, and the blissful surrender to bite after bite and hour after hour of splendid, slack jawed television.

On Ernie stomped, and the sun started to sag behind the downtown skyline. Evening crept over the city. Ernie cast wary glances now and again to a park across the street. At night, it hosted the city's day laborers, after the dusty workers laid down shovels and walked away from the heat and strain. In the park Ernie heard a boombox, tucked somewhere deep within the palm trees. The music sounded like a frantic polka overlaid with lyrics sung by a whooping Mexican.

One year earlier in that park, Ernie sprawled on a flannel sheet spread across brown, patchy grass that clung like scabs to the baked earth. Trapped in silence for nearly a minute, he watched sunlight dance on Jasmine's glossy black hair, and he reached up in hunger, starving for her, the sultry woman seated with knees folded under a

pear shaped bottom. Wrapped one hand around her elbow, pulled her down to meet his upturned face.

schnapps from brown bag wrapped bottle
pot selling man leaning sneering selling
sun nearly too hot for your boozy smoky kisses
bouncing basketball echoes that i should never be
happier.

On the sidewalk, dinner in hand, night descending on the sad fat man and his sad fat feast, a wiry stray dog fell in tow. Its reddish coat, medium size and skittish manner made the thing resemble hyenas Ernie saw countless times before on nature shows. Ernie stopped and turned on the dog. It danced away but then paced back and forth from a safe distance, much indeed like a hyena. It seemed to know Ernie's aptitude for an all out sprint, with death and stir fry hanging in the balance.

With a deep wheeze, Ernie started to walk faster. But behind him the rhythm of toenails clackety clacking on concrete increased in tempo, too. The dog remained at a safe distance. A block later, nearly at the apartment, it continued to shadow Ernie. Now the sun had dropped its last few degrees and fell behind the tall buildings. Darkness and mad happy Mexican polka swirled around Ernie and his stir fry and the dog. Then the dog boldly closed the gap

between itself and the fat man to less than ten feet.

Ernie was frantic; some primordial instinct to secure feeding rights welled up within his jiggly body. He stopped and wheeled on the dog. He let loose a short, harsh shout towards the animal: "Ha!" He stabbed and stamped a fat foot, flapping a flip flop against the sidewalk. The dog didn't scurry off like he expected. It paced back and forth a short distance from Ernie, unimpressed. To the fat man, it seemed that with each pass the dog closed the distance between them by a little. Fear gripped Ernie, sending ripples of electricity scurrying over every roll of his body. So he launched into a flurry of desperate shouts and futile flip flop flaps.

"Hey!"

(Flap.)

"Beat it!"

(Slap.)

By now, the dog had really drawn quite near. It seemed to know the extent of the fat man's reach, and it stayed just there, panting, drooling and smacking at its muzzle with a swollen pink tongue. Ernie writhed deep in the clutches of a base need to survive, to protect, to feed. He looked around desperately for anyone or anything to aid him in his fight. In his hand he felt a solid reassuring

weight. And he had, in this most desperate of moments, failed to remember that the weight was the very reason he was preparing to fight.

Eventually after she'd gone forever, Ernie sighed and opened the empty fridge. He stood in the dim glow as escaping frost washed over him. Nothing looked good. So he walked from his apartment to get dinner. The thought scalded him: buying groceries and preparing a meal like they used to do, or even driving to a restaurant they'd liked. Outside, Ernie caught a whiff of grease blowing from down the street. They'd joked about the place when they'd passed it, on their way to the store, where they would pick up steaks, and potatoes, a case of lager and a gallon bottle of cheap table wine.

patent leather stilettos stomping

words running away

chasing the stomping woman

and i'm swallowing everything now

The dog cringed as Ernie turned on it. Quickness it couldn't have expected from such a pile of a man. Ernie lashed out with a wild, arching swing of the take out bag. The bulging plastic was hardly engineered to support the sheer mass of Ernie's ample meal, let alone the centrifugal force generated by a fat man swinging a fat man's dinner.

It ripped open. Everything flew at the stray animal and then hit the ground a few feet in front of the delighted beast. The box slid down the sidewalk. It came apart. It left a trail of glistening noodles shining under the streetlights, like human gore beneath the flashbulbs in a crime scene photograph.

A man screams.

Like the last living Trojan as he looks over the smoldering ruins.

A man disappears in a deep black pool of tragedy.

But the dog didn't seem surprised by its sudden fortune. It ignored Ernie and stooped to snap up the spilled food, all tongue: Glop glop glop. Ernie took a few tentative steps towards the dog. The dog stopped glopping and issued a curt warning: Snarrrr! Ernie wondered if he should forget it.

Probably so. And he's almost finished, anyway. But what about dinner, then? I could go. But the place closes in ten minutes. I'd never make it. Anywhere else to go? No. Anything in the fridge? No. Never.

god why did you let everything happen?

The dog continued to eat, now with a definite degree of smugness. It finished Ernie's dinner. It paused briefly, considering Ernie. Then it licked up the last stains on the

pavement of oil and sauce, its tongue scratching across the concrete, making the sound of sandpaper rubbed over wood.

THE END