

THE MEATING

Chris woke up and slid his cottony tongue around the inside of his mouth. He tasted the stale beer underneath the menthol/spearmint film on his palate and tried to make his mind click. He stared at the ceiling from the bed. He rubbed his eyes then closed them again, finally remembering the day before.

His head had spun then, too, as he stood in the midst of the swarm in the airport terminal.

Five hours before that? He was in his apartment packing after having called in sick to work. A week before? The whole thing seemed unreal when he read the email flight confirmation. A month ago? He never thought he'd actually send his profile through. And a year ago? He would never have believed he was the type to even consider it.

People buzzed past him in a thick blur. He didn't know what Mr. Paddington looked like; Chris had posted his picture, but the man who responded had not.

His stomach tightened and his throat was dry. He had stopped second-guessing his decision when he boarded the plane in Chicago – he was into fifth and sixth-guessing now. He looked at his phone: one forty-three...no message, no email, no text.

“Fuuuuuck...what am I doin' here?” He thumped his head against the plaster wall a few times, leaning against it underneath the men's room sign, and closed his eyes.

“Chris! Chris! I recognized you from your picture!”

Chris pressed his fingertips against the wall and pushed himself forward. He saw the smiling, statue of a man extend his hand. “Mr. Paddington! Hello...uh...” Chris wiped his hand dry before shaking.

“No worries, Chris. Always in control! And call me Raul. Come on; let me take your bag. You’re probably hungry by now – all day flying without shit except a complimentary beverage isn’t gonna be too satisfying for a young man like you. There’s a bar right down this way. When we’re done my car will take us to your audition. We’ll get dinner later on. Follow me...excuse us, please...comin’ through...Right this way, Chris.”

Chris fidgeted with his tie as he scanned the bar. The sweat trickled down his side, he tugged under his arm.

“What d’ya drink, Chris?”

“Um, beer, I guess. Thanks, Mr. Pa– I mean, Raul.”

“I’ll be right back. Take a look at the menu and order whatever you like.”

Chris’s stomach was as tight as the fishing line the time he snagged the twenty-pounder with his dad.

“She’ll be right over with the pitcher.” Raul fixed his tie and sat down.

Chris straightened his tie again. He sat in the chair, rigid as he used to sit at those steamy Sunday morning services; his mouth was contorted into a smile, his fingers interlocked and pressing together.

“Nervous?”

Chris scooted his chair close to the table as a bead trickled down his back. “Me? No!” The ends of his mouth curled in nervousness.

“You know this won’t be anything out of the ordinary. I’ve taken a look at what you

sent – your profile is great – a perfect match!”

Chris drank some water.

Raul smiled. “Thirsty?” He looked at the waitress. “Perfect timing! My friend here, I think, is suffering from a little jet lag and dry mouth.”

Raul poured the beer. “Cheers!”

Chris stared into his mug.

“You gonna drink it or just play with it in your hand?” Raul chuckled.

“Huh? Oh, yeah–” Chris grabbed it and drank, then wiped his chin.

“Chris, this’ll be great for you! Not many people in your position would do it. It’s gutsy...risky, I mean.” He winked. “And you’ll have some fun, too, I think.”

Chris shrugged and drank again.

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that I don’t know how it’s risky if I’ve got nothin’ to lose.”

“What do you mean nothing to lose? You’re a college grad and a successful marketing rep. You’re risking the familiar, taking that step into the great unknown.” Raul bellowed, “You might lose that small town boy respectability!”

Chris looked around at the nearby tables. “You make it sound like it’s illegal or something.” He scooted back in the chair.

Raul smirked, “You’ve never done anything like this before have you?”

Chris shook his head and poured more beer into his mug.

“So why now? Why not when you turned eighteen, or when you graduated, or even last year?”

“I dunno. I guess back then I never thought it was an option...um, the risk – you know. I was okay with normal. Now, I want somethin’ different.”

“So after almost thirty years of the same ol’ shit, you’re tired of it, huh?”

Chris chuckled. “Yeah. Real tired of it!”

“Very dead end, I know.”

Chris felt the table jostle as Raul rapped his foot against the base. Chris counted six taps.

Raul drank and then said, “Time just ticks on by, Chris, and pretty soon you look around and what’ve ya got to show for it? Not a whole helluva lot! You’re on a train headin’ to the end of the line with no chance of switching tracks. You gotta get off when you can.” He smirked again.

Chris emptied the pitcher into his mug and stared at Raul’s thick gold ring.

“You like it?” Raul twirled it around his finger.

Chris shrugged.

“This is nothin’. With the money you’ll have? Shit, Chris, this is peanuts!” He waved for the waitress. “Another pitcher, please...So, Chris, you got family?”

He nodded.

“They know?”

“They think I’m on a business trip.”

“Any significant other?”

He shook his head.

“Then why so uptight? Chris, you’re a great lookin’ guy, livin’ on his own! Fuck – the people you’re gonna meet, you won’t have time to sulk!”

Chris smiled and retreated to his empty mug.

“You’ve got a great build. That’s what people wanna see! And that suit – shit, it’s cut perfectly for you...very hot.”

Chris’s face burned and the sweat streamed down.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You got the goods – flaunt ‘em!” Raul winked and leaned forward.

Chris inhaled the menthol/spearmint blend of Raul’s breath and eeked out a nervous chuckle then tugged on his shirt.

“This can be the best time of your life! You like to travel?” Raul sat back and stared.

Chris smiled and looked at him.

“Great! I’m talkin’ all over – New York, L.A., Rio...Bangkok – I’ve always loved that name! You’ll see all the hot spots.”

“What about my job?”

Raul roared and drank. “Are you serious, Chris? Wake up! Fuck the nine t’five! This is life – you gotta live it. Let the hicks in that small town shithole you grew up in and the holier-than-thou’s sleep through their lives in blissful oblivion. You sleep much longer and you’ll miss the whole goddamned thing. It’s what you really want, right? You contacted me, didn’t you?”

Chris stared into his mug.

“What d’ya think – opportunity’s gonna just knock on your door and sweep you off your feet? Please! Grab life by the balls!” Raul laughed and waved for the waitress again. “My credo, Chris: I see what I want and pluck it off the tree and let the juices drip down my chin.”

Chris swallowed.

Raul stared and jostled Chris’s leg with his foot. “From your email I assumed this wasn’t a big deal.”

Chris wriggled in the chair and leaned over his mug.

“It’s not. I’m okay with it...really. It’s just...” He poured more beer from the full pitcher. “It’s just happening so fast. I guess I didn’t expect an answer so quick.”

“Ya gotta love Generation E!”

Chris smiled and looked up. “Yeah.”

“Let’s order – I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Chris stared back at the menu.

“Chris, what did you decide?”

He shot up a glance at Raul.

“About lunch, Chris – what did you decide about food?” He pounded the table and threw his head back like a whinnying horse. “You are priceless!” He wiped his eyes.

“Um, I guess I’ll just have the burger ‘n fries...medium, please.”

“Same for me, hon – just make mine rare.”

Raul sat back, his face serious for the first time. “If you’re having some doubts, I’d understand. This is a little beyond your comfort zone. The last thing I want is for you to decide on this and then regret it.” He smiled. “...Although I can think of worse things to have to stew over.”

“What would I have to do?”

Raul opened his mouth in feigned shock and then reached into his breast pocket.

“Here’s the contract with VideoInfusion – a year to start, renewable after that.”

He reached for his briefcase. “Here’s a copy of our catalogue – comes out next week.”

Chris stared at the cover.

“That’ll be you in a very short time – I’ve got a good feel for these things!”

“When would you want me to start?”

“Years ago!” Raul laughed.

Chris looked around at the people turning to them.

“Chris, relax! Get used to the attention. We shoot at ten tomorrow morning. We’ll have a car pick you up at the hotel and take you to the studio.” His eyes penetrated Chris as he leaned in and whispered, “I’m sure your audition tonight will be flawless!” He sat back, grabbing his burger. “C’mon – enjoy your lunch.”

They finished eating and left the airport.

Chris stared out the window, the billboards swimming in his mind. DRINK
BUDWEISER! GREAT SELECTION AT BART’S CARMART! CHECK OUT THE
HOTTEST NEW SERIES ON CABLE!! CUM PLAY AT CUPID’S ADULT PLAYHOUSE!

Raul reached into a side compartment and poured two glasses of scotch. He nudged one into Chris’s hand. “For your audition...It’ll help you relax.”

Chris drank, the thickness coating his throat, and he sweat more. He coughed and wiped the spittle from his coat.

Raul laughed as the limousine pulled in front of the hotel.

“Here we are! Let’s go!”

Chris took his bag and followed Raul inside.

Lying on the bed, Chris remembered everything. He brushed the bottles off the side stand with the back of his hand and looked at the clock. "Six-fifteen," he mumbled. His head throbbed as he stood and he moaned as his legs dragged him into the bathroom. He leaned on the sink and looked in the mirror. He threw water at his face and scrubbed it dry, trying to get the smell out of his system.

He saw the envelope taped to the mirror with his name on it. He tossed the towel on the floor and opened the envelope. The five one hundred dollar bills slipped into the sink. He grabbed them and read the note.

Dinner was great, dessert even better! Breakfast is on me. See you at the studio!

Chris tossed the note in the trash and put the money in his bag. Walking back into the bathroom he looked in the mirror again and saw his smile flitter into a smug grin.