
THE FAT VAMPIRE

by

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When she returned from puking up the meat course in the ladies' room, the deserts were already on the table, enormous platters of profiterole au chocolate--six balls of vanilla ice cream encased in puff pastry and swimming in lakes of deep dark fondant.

"I took the liberty...." Armand said suavely, smiling at her as he wrapped his lips around a dripping spoonful.

Christine had never met a man like Count Armand Kubescu before.

True, Los Angeles was awash in slick continental types laying claim to nebulous titles of nobility, dressing like Ruritanian diplomats, and living it up with no visible means of support. It was an old Hollywood tradition. They fronted fancy restaurants and clubs, pimped for sleazy porn producers, sold real estate or used Mercedes, or gigoloed for ancient has-been starlets flush with the proceeds of their latest divorce.

Like most of these counts from central casting, Armand Kubescu had thick straight black hair impeccably groomed in some unisex Beverly Hills salon, intense dark eyes under dramatic brows, and a light generalized European accent. Like most of them, he was slim, graceful, affected a languid William F. Buckley slouch, and seemed ageless.

Ordinarily, Christine Coleman avoided such creatures like the plague they were. If they weren't gay, they were impotent, and if they weren't impotent, they were into slimy fetishes or dumb bondage numbers. If they weren't out to sell you something, they were out to sell you.

Indeed, in a certain twisted sense, they were a form of competition, predators working the neighboring ecological niche. Christine understood them all too well.

For Los Angeles was even more abundantly awash in beautiful women of a certain age which made them a bit long in the tooth for starlets, with a sprinkling of walk-on credits extracted on low- budget casting couches, a garage apartment in the hills, and a cranky twelve-year old used Porsche. Women just short of enough acting talent to make it as tv bit players, possessed of just enough pride to prevent them from sliding into hookerdom or the fading porn industry, and too indolent, face it, to wait tables in topless bars.

Women, who, like Christine, surfed through life at the fringes of The Industry via affairs with tv writers, minor-league actors, and production managers, odd jobs in Santa Monica boutiques, a very occasional walk-on in a commercial, ectoplasmic this, and crystal-channeling that.

The Count Kubescus and the Barons of Brentwood worked the feminine flip-side of much the same turf, and while the competition from them might be rather oblique, the idea of actually dating one of them had always struck Christine as the moral equivalent of fag haggery. Like, what was the point? To see whose reach for the check could be slowest?

But Armand Kubescu was different.

The man could eat.

It had been fascination, if not exactly lust, at first sight.

Allie Ellison had been one of Christine's closest girlfriends before she married Alex the Plastic Surgeon; in fact it had been Allie who had taught her the art of vomiting. How to tickle the back of the throat with a forefinger, the necessity of brushing after every in between course barf in order to avoid both halitosis and enormous dental bills.

"Bulimia, schmulemia," Allie had assured her, "Everyone who's anyone does it, hon. Jackie Onasis. Jane Fonda. Margaret Thatcher. Nancy Reagan. It's as American as apple pie alamode with chocolate sauce. Or you rather spend the rest of your life on lettuce and Rye-crisp?"

Christine had always had a sweet tooth, had always loved pasta, and barbecue, grease burgers and fried chicken, mashed potatoes with country gravy, huge steaks, slabs of bread slathered with butter or cheese, guacamole, cheetos, anything with chocolate, everything with whipped cream, and it all had a tendency to go straight to her belly and ass.

Having spent most of her adult life on starvation diets punctuated by occasional guilt-ridden binges, Christine had nursed a secret hatred for the sylphan Allie, who seemed capable of cramming anything and everything down her dainty throat without ever gaining an ounce, until Allie had revealed the Hollywood Diet Secret.

Then they had become the best of bathroom buddies, even engaging in projectile vomiting contests for accuracy and distance from time to time. If only men knew what really went on when the girls went off together to powder their noses!

Christine had lost touch with Allie after she married The Plastic Surgeon and moved into the mansion in Bel-Air, hadn't seen her for months when Allie called up to invite her to a garden lunch, and she was amazed and appalled to see what Allie had become.

Allie had turned into a blimp, a veritable globuloid! She presided over the garden party in a white silk muumuu that could have covered a hippo and apparently did. Her arms were hung with wads of blubber. Her face had puffed out into a fleshy balloon.

Gross!

Stranger still, Allie spent the whole afternoon picking listlessly at the bountiful buffet, a radish, a carrot stick, a bit of caviar on toast, a sprig of cress, a stalk of celery.

Was this what a successful marriage did to a girl?

Maybe not. For hovering around Allie, or perhaps more accurately somehow causing Allie to hover around him in a manner clearly indicative of hanky-panky to everyone but her

dorky husband, was this obvious gigolo-type in a costume-party ice-cream suit who Allie eventually simperingly introduced as Count Armand Kubescu.

One sideways glance from Allie towards the Count told the whole usual tacky story. The former hot number about town transformed into a rich bored hausfrau. The oily Hollywood nobleman charming her with his phony European accent and elegant sleaze.

It was, except for Allie's inexplicable state of bloato, cliché city. And yet there was something not at all standard about this phony Count.

Oh yeah, he looked the part, and dressed the part, and spoke the usual lines in the usual accent.

But lord could the man eat!

He didn't slobber, he didn't dribble crumbs, he used all the right silverware, his manners were perfectly elegant, there was nothing gross about his performance at all, but while Allie picked at tiny bits of this and that, Count Armand Kubescu managed in unobtrusive and cultivated style to devour truly enormous quantities of food.

He didn't gulp, he didn't grab, he didn't talk around unseemly mouthfuls, he just ate steadily without pause for at least three solid hours.

Allie found herself fascinated with his performance. She carefully avoided obvious staring, but every time she stole a glance in his direction, Armand Kubescu was eating. Eggs Benedict. Apple strudel. Cheese and fruit. Chocolate mousse. Rumaki. Smoked duck. Italian sausage. French charcuterie. Buffalo chicken wings. He ate and ate and ate.

Christine kept waiting for him to slink off to the bathroom to disgorge this enormous load--with a build like his and an appetite like that, he had to be in on the Hollywood Diet Secret--but he never did.

Finally, Christine just couldn't keep her eyes off of him. Finally, it became all too obvious. Finally, he noticed her, or perhaps finally deigned to notice that she had long been eyeing him.

She was sitting by herself under the shade of one of the umbrella tables when it happened, peering at him over the lip of a champagne glass. Their eyes locked for a moment, and when she didn't look away, neither did he. Instead, he ambled lithely over to her table along their mutual line of sight, balancing a platter of assorted petit fours on one hand like a waiter. He paused beside the table, smiled silkily, picked up a mini-eclair daintily with curved thumb and forefinger, popped it into his mouth, and proffered the pastry-plate to Christine.

Christine, having already consumed enough of this and that to be considering a quick trip to the loo, hesitated for a beat, then selected a tiny pecan pie, and nibbled tentatively at the edge. What the hell, she was going to barf it all up sooner or later anyway, and under the circumstances....

Armand Kubescu smile again, slid smoothly into the chair opposite her, picked out a chocolate gnoli, and devoured it in two bites, never averting his gaze.

"You eat like a bird," he said.

"So do you. Like a vulture."

Count Kubescu laughed. "So I have been told," he said.

"How do you do it?"

Armand Kubescu leered at her like some kind of B-movie vampire. "Comment sa," he said, lifting a cream-puff and sucking it down like a lizard. "One bite after another."

"I mean, seriously...." What did she mean? What Christine was dying to ask him, of course, was whether he was going to puke it all up later. He hadn't disappeared into the john yet, but maybe he just had a big stomach. But how could she...?

"Seriously, I do only what is natural to me, what else?" the Count said. "The lion has evolved on the veldt, where days may elapse between kills, so he can put away twenty kilos of meat at a sitting. The bear may not eat for months while in hibernation, so he dines while he can. The python has evolved the ability to swallow a goat larger than himself. My kind..., well, where my ancestors come from, meals were long few and far between, so we evolved a permanent appetite...."

"Where you come from?"

"Eastern Europe, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania, Transylvania, the way the borders shift, it's hard to tell."

"Oh no, don't tell me you sleep in a coffin and drink blood!"

Count Kubescu laughed. "Not my idea of haute cuisine," he said, picking up a moca éclair, and chewing on it thoughtfully. "Though of course, in a boudin noir fried up with apples and some onion, why not?"

The conversation was certainly in the process of taking some bizarre turns, yet Christine found herself becoming somehow fascinated with Armand Kubescu. She had already eaten enough to require a trip to the ladies, so it couldn't be that all this was putting an edge on her appetite, nor did she feel anything closely resembling sexual attraction to the likes of this Hollywood count.

Yet there was a strange feeling south of her stomach and north of her crotch which seemed to partake of neither and both, a weird warmth that seemed both satiation and desire, though for what, she couldn't imagine. It was a bit like what she felt halfway through a good full-course meal, her tastebuds rosy in the afterglow of a hearty appetizer, her stomach bloated, her mouth salivating in anticipation of the next course--which was to say it felt like it was time for her to ready herself for the main course by disgorging the preliminaries.

She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing aloud at the thought. I wonder what you'd say to that, Armand Kubescu! I find you strangely attractive, you make me want to throw up.

"Something amuses you?" he said.

Christine found herself munching on her pecan pie to cover the moment. "Well you've got to admit this is not exactly your ordinary pick-up conversation," she finally said.

He laughed. He bit into a tiny raspberry tart, the red berry paste glistening suggestively on his neat white teeth for just a moment before he licked it off with the tip of his tongue.

"Well then perhaps we should revert to more conventional behavior," he said suavely. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

"Dinner!" Christine groaned. "After what you've been eating all afternoon?" Armand Kubescu consulted his Rolex. "Barely six o'clock," he said. "The end of tea-time in civilized climes. Shall I make a reservation for 8 o'clock? I believe I've had enough to hold me till then. What about you?"

"I think I'd better go powder my nose," Christine had said.

That had been three trips to the toilet ago. She had cleared her palette into the crapper in Allie's house before they left for the restaurant, a second time after the fish course Armand had insisted they order between the appetizer and the main event--trout stuffed with cornmeal, oysters, and bacon on top of fried buffalo mozzarella on pizza-dough rounds--and now, yet again after consuming tournedos Rossini served with a generous side of spaghetti carbonara.

Only to confront this enormous chocolate, pastry, and ice cream desert. It was enough to make a girl puke, if she hadn't puked three times already, though come to think of it, if she did manage to get the desert course down, she probably would have to stick her finger down her throat again. Armand, though, had gobbled it all up without recourse to the men's room, had gone through a whole basket of bread besides, and indeed ordered a refill, and now here he was, after having polished that off too, wolfing down profiteroles au chocolate as if he hadn't had a square meal in days.

Just watching him was enough to make Christine feel bloated all over again, and though the desert was admittedly quite delicious, she found herself picking rather listlessly at it, as if her tastebuds had somehow become disconnected from the pleasure-center in her brain.

"Cognac?" Armand suggested, after he had spooned up the last drops of chocolate sauce. "It goes quite nicely with walnuts, and perhaps some fresh figs, which are now in season....."

Christine groaned. "I couldn't eat another bite," she said.

"Coffee, then," he insisted, and ordered two Cappuccinos with whipped cream that came with tiny platters of bittersweet chocolate truffles dusted with cocoa.

Armand polished off his candies in four quick bits, arched an inquisitive eyebrow at her when he saw that hers were going untouched. Christine nodded, and he plucked up her portion, one after the other, and popped them in his mouth.

"Don't you ever stop eating?" she asked.

Armand Kubescu laughed. "Occasionally," he said, leering at her in time-honored manner, and running his tongue around his lips, though whether this was meant suggestively, or just a matter of capturing the last few errant grains of cocoa dust was impossible to tell.

Still, he did seem to be regarding her as the next prospective course as the waiter approached with the check, and Christine realized that the old moment of truth had now

arrived in more ways than one. Did she want to ball this character? More to the point, who was going to pick up the tab for this enormous meal?

She decided that the question of the first part be determined by the answer to the second. If he paid for the whole thing, she would certainly have been wined and dined to a fare-thee-well, and the Code of the West demanded that he get laid. If she was going to be stuck with dutch treat, or, god forbid, if he was the kind of deadbeat who claimed he had forgotten his wallet, he could damn well get stuffed, as if he hadn't already.

She didn't need to steal a glance at the total to heave a great sigh of relief when he reached smoothly into his jacket pocket, pulled out an overstuffed credit card holder, extracted American Express platinum, and slapped it down on the service tray with a flourish. Chivalry had apparently not quite expired, and neither had his plastic. "Well?" she said, smiling at him, after he had signed the credit card receipt.

"Well?"

"Well, your place or mine?"

Armand Kubescu didn't actually blush, but he did frown deprecatingly. "Please don't think that...anything is required," he said. "The pleasure of your company as a dining companion has been quite enough. I don't enjoy eating alone."

He sounded so sincere, so suave, such a gentleman, that Christine felt an instant surge, if not quite of lust, then certainly of willing warmth.

Unless....

"Uh.... you're not gay, are you?"

Count Kubescu laughed. "Not quite," he said, reaching across the table to take her hand, "merely content."

#

It wasn't what you could really call kinky, but it certainly was rather weird. Armand gallantly insisted on going to her place, surely much more charming than his grubby bachelor pad, he assured her, and so his Volvo followed her old Porsche up into the hills to her garage apartment.

Once inside, he asked if she had any wine, which didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary, nor, when she told him there was a cold bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge, did it seem anything more than European manners when he volunteered to fetch it.

But when he returned to the living room, he had the open bottle and two glasses awkwardly clasped in one hand, and a big plate piled with bagel chips, garlic rounds, doritos, and an assortment of cheese scraps balanced on the other.

These he proceeded to gobble as they sipped wine, babbled inanities, inched closer to each other on the couch, and let nature take its inevitable course.

Which it finally did, and they moved into the bedroom, though not before he had eaten

every last crumb. Once the foreplay had been concluded, Christine was somehow less than surprised to discover that Armand Kubescu was a master of oral sex beyond anything in her previous experience.

What was surprising, however, was the strange and entirely uncharacteristic lassitude with which she accepted the whole impressive performance. While he brought her to orgasm after orgasm, she just lay there supinely, drifting voluptuously in a foggy torpor, as if it were she who had previously gorged herself like a python.

Nor did all he had eaten seem to have drained his energy for the main event, though Christine's memory was a bit vague on that in the morning, seeing as how she had fallen asleep either during it or immediately afterwards.

What she certainly did remember was waking up in the middle of the night feeling as if she had eaten an anvil. Her sides ached, her gut rumbled, and the contents of her stomach seemed to be pressing at the back of her throat.

Armand seemed quite soundly asleep, and anyway there was nothing else for it, so she stole out of bed into the bathroom, assumed the position, and stuck her finger down her throat.

What emerged seemed hardly anything at all. She tried again, and came up empty. Two more gags proved to be nothing but dry heaves.

When she gave up and slipped back into the bed, she heard crunching sounds from the pillow beside her, an apple, or maybe a pear by the sound of it. While she had been doing her thing in the bathroom, he had apparently woken up, gone to the kitchen, and now he was once more doing his!

Good lord, had he heard her?

In the morning, she awoke to the ordinarily enticing aroma of coffee and frying bacon. Armand soon enough entered the bedroom bearing a breakfast tray. On it were two cups of coffee, and two plates, each laden with eight strips of bacon, four fried eggs, and two thick slices of whole wheat toast slathered with about half a pound of butter.

"Uh...how sweet," she managed to say, for after all, it was. Nor was there any mention of middle of the night events, thank god.

Armand attacked his food in the usual manner, putting it all away before she had managed to get down two eggs and three strips of bacon for courtesy's sake. When it became obvious that she could eat no more, he had no trouble devouring her leftovers too.

"Dinner tonight?" he suggested as he swiped the last of the egg yolk from her plate with the final chunk of bread. "I know a wonderful German place out in the Valley, hunter's stew, then perhaps a Schnitzel ala Holstein, a Black Forest cake, or the most marvelous pear and cheese strudel...."

"Uh...I'm afraid I'm tied up for the next few days," Christine lied, the thought of another enormous meal enough to green her gills.

"Friday, perhaps?"

Christine thought about it. He was a gentleman, he was charming, he had a fat stack of credit cards, and he was a wonderful lover, despite the fact that she hadn't exactly been at her best last night. Considering the usual tapped-out tv writers and Hollywood sleazebags she had been attracting lately, a girl had to be crazy to pass on a man like this, didn't she, a man whose only apparent flaw, if you could call it that, was this unholy appetite.

What was the problem, anyway? He was more than willing to take care of anything she couldn't handle, and besides, she knew the Hollywood Diet Secret, didn't she? The thought that it was Allie Ellison who had taught it to her, Allie, who had nevertheless turned into a land whale, perhaps thanks to the influence of the Count, gave her some pause.

But after all, Allie was married now, she had probably put on all that blubber before she ever met Armand, that's what marriage did to a girl, didn't it, you got lax once you had landed yourself a Bel Air Plastic Surgeon, you let yourself go. A warning for the wise.

So she accepted a dinner date for Friday before she kissed Count Armand Kubescu good bye. And after he left, remembering Allie, she went straight to the bathroom and did her dietary duty.

Nevertheless, when she stepped on the scale, she discovered, to her befuddlement and consternation, that she seemed to have gained two pounds overnight.

It was certainly the strangest affair Christine had ever found herself trapped in, stranger than the coke-head production manager with the closetful of leather and chains, stranger than the transvestite tv writer, stranger even than the agent with the chicken-suit and the brooms.

And trapped did seem to be the word for it. Lalaland being what it was, Christine had certainly dated her share of kinks and weirdos, had found herself in bed with any number of out-to-lunch pervos, and admittedly had continued brief affairs with some fairly bizarre sexual freaks as long as she thought there might be some advantage in it for her. But she had never before found herself unable to extract herself from a self-destructive relationship that seemed to have no pragmatic reason to exist.

Admittedly, Count Armand Kubescu was always a perfect gentleman. Admittedly, he wined and dined her as she had never been wined and dined before. Admittedly, he always picked up the huge tab. Admittedly, he was an excellent lover who seemed interested only in pleasing her. Admittedly, he made absolutely no demands, sexual or otherwise.

But there was something elusively perverse about it all nonetheless. Traditionally, men treated women to lavish meals in order to get them into the bedroom, everybody knew that, it was a mating dance as old as the human species. Armand Kubescu, however, seemed to turn the old game inside out and upside down. He seemed willing and able to provide as much or as little of whatever sort of sex she might desire in order to seduce her into the dining room with him.

That was all that they did. They screwed and they ate. They ate and they screwed. With the primary emphasis on the food. Three dinner dates the first week, five the second, and by the third week, he was dragging her to lunch, too. He always stayed over at her place, and always cooked them a monster breakfast the morning after.

By the third week, Christine was throwing up six, seven, eight, ten times a day. But it did no good. Every time she stepped on the scale the morning after a heavy date with Count Kubescu, she had gained another pound or two. By the end of the third week, she had put on 22 pounds.

She knew that she had to break it off. Already, she was popping buttons on her blouses. Already, she couldn't squeeze her blubber into any of her jeans and pants. If this went on much further, she wouldn't even be able to get into her Porsche.

But somehow she just couldn't. Every time she tried, the words just wouldn't come, and she found herself making a date for the next meal, and the next, and the next. Perhaps the permanent state of overstuffed torpor she found herself waddling through in a glaze was interfering with the processes of her brain.

On the other hand, what could she say? Armand was a perfect gentleman and a perfect lover, and gave not the slightest hint of disgust at the grossly-bloated state of her once-perfect body. And though part of her had long since come to anticipate the next cuisinary orgy with bilious dread, the meals always were delicious, he always did pick up the tab, and the sex afterward never left anything to be desired despite her present unwholesome appearance.

Face it, in her loathsome hippoid condition, how could she attract any other man into her bed, let alone a lover like Armand, let alone someone who would pick up all these enormous dinner tabs for the privilege?

She was trapped. In between meals with Armand, she made endless firm resolutions to break it off, but in his presence, her will always faded away, as if he had cast some weird spell on her, like Tammy and her Scientologist, Erma and her channeler, Tess and her vegetarian guru, like Bela Lugosi in all those dumb old vampire movies.

Finally, on the morning after an eight-course Chinese banquet topped off by Death by Chocolate sundaes at C.C. Brown's and a breakfast of chocolate-chip waffles with raspberry syrup and ham steak, she lumbered onto the scale to discover that she had now put on 33 pounds.

Her panties wouldn't even fit anymore. She couldn't even read the damned scale without bending forward to peer over her gut.

She had to do something. But what?

She desperately needed some advice. And the only person she could think of who might supply anything remotely relevant was the woman she had stolen Armand away from, if that was indeed what she had really done, his previous victim, her one-time best bathroom buddy and present-day fellow globuloid, Allie Ellison. #

Considering the circumstances, Allie had been surprisingly cordial on the phone, and readily agreed to meet her for lunch at the Green Goddess, a Beverly Hills tea-room, whose decor tended towards ferns and potted palms, whose menu featured greens, sprouts, and tofu, and whose clientele consisted primarily of elegant matrons on permanent starvation diets. The sort of place whose ladies' room was provided with chin-height miniature toilet bowls and water-piks for the convenience of the customers.

They met in the lobby and stared at each other in amazement.

"Good god, hon!" Allie exclaimed tactfully. "You look like the Goodyear Blimp!"

"How did you do it?" Christine moaned.

Allie's face was limp and wrinkly, like a balloon with the air let out of it. All the fat was gone; she looked positively gaunt. She wore a tight white pants suit that revealed a figure about a hundred pounds of blubber less than her previous incarnation.

"Alex did a lot of slicing and dicing," Allie told her. "Micro-liposuction on the face, it's the latest thing. Next week, he's going to finish it off with a polish to retighten the skin."

She frowned. "But how did you...?" She held up a hand, smiled. "No, let me guess."

Christine squirmed with embarrassment. "Look, Allie, I'm sorry, I know... I mean...."

Allie laughed. "Hey, hon, I should be thanking you, even Alex couldn't have done anything as long as I was sneaking snacks with Armand Kubescu. The Count's some kind of, I dunno, fat vampire, only in reverse, know what I mean?"

"Tell me about it!" Christine groaned.

Over steamed tofu and romaine salads with vinegar and safflower oil dressing and a bottle of low-cal white zinfandel, Allie did.

"I just couldn't help myself, hon, Alex isn't exactly Mr. Natural in bed, know what I mean, and Armand will do just about anything in the sack to get a girl into a restaurant...."

She shrugged. "Besides which, I dunno, when you're with the guy--"

"I know what you mean!"

"You ain't the only one, hon!" Allie said. "When he took up with you, it was like some kind of spell had lifted. I mean, yeah, I was pissed off for a few days when he dropped me, but after that, well, it was like I was myself again, stopped gaining weight, puked off about twelve pounds even before Alex got to work...."

She laughed. "You gotta give the Count one thing, hon, the guy's monogamous, serially, that is. I sniffed around a bit after it was over, found four other poor fatsoes, same damn thing, one after the other, good luck for Alex, though, least I could do...." "But what am I going to do, Allie?"

Allie shrugged again. "Pass him on, what else can you do?" she said. "Seems like he can only handle one at a time. After which, I can set you up with Alex. One third off, or no nookie for him, I mean, what are friends for, hon...."

Christine thought about it as they finished their salads and treated themselves to a desert of carrot-flavored toffuti ice-cream. It just didn't seem right. She could think of any number of ways to introduce Armand Kubescu to his next victim, but no one who really deserved such a fate, not even, when push came to shove, Patti Kelly, who, after all, had taken up with her Dodger second baseman on the rebound.

The Count was a menace to Lalaland womanhood. The Code of the West demanded

that the buck stop here.

But how?

"What say we powder our noses into the toilet bowl for old times' sake?" Allie said after they had finished their decaffeinated coffee. They ambled into the ladies, and popped their lo-cal cookies.

While they were sluicing the acidic residue into the porcelain with the complementary water-piks, Christine sensed the glimmerings of a vague idea.

"Were you doing this when you were with the Count, Allie?" she asked.

"Are you kidding, hon? A dozen times a day towards the end. Otherwise, I probably would have exploded!"

"Maybe not..." Christine mused. "Maybe he would've exploded...."

"Huh?"

"Look, the guy eats and eats, and we get fat, right? Somehow, the results of all the stuff he crams down his throat goes straight to our stomachs...."

"So?"

"So maybe there's a limit."

"I never noticed one, hon! Have you?"

"Never tried to reach it, did we? I mean, the Count uses his victims like we just used these toilet bowls, right, only somehow he doesn't have to stick his finger down his throat, sort of like ectoplasmic bulimia, or like he's a cow, and we're his extra stomach...."

"Gross!"

"...he eats and eats, and we keep dumping it for him.... Well, what if a cow's extra stomach is stuffed to the gills to begin with? Wouldn't it like maybe back up the system? Reverse the flow? Give him a dose of his own hi-cal medicine?"

"Oh no, Chris, you're not suggesting--"

"I'll bet he's never even learned the Hollywood Diet Secret...."

"Jeez, hon, you don't imagine you can eat Armand Kubescu under the table!"

"It'd be sort of like getting him to do it to himself, wouldn't it? After a certain point, I'm stuffing my face, and he's putting on the blubber."

"After a certain point!" Allie groaned. "By that time, you'd weigh more than an elephant!"

"Maybe not. Not if I did it all at one sitting."

"What are you gonna do," Allie said, "challenge him to a pie- eating contest?"

Christine grinned at her. "After all the meals he's bought me, don't you think it's only fair that I take him out to dinner for once? At Mom's Good Old Country Kitchen."

#

Mom's Good Old Country Kitchen had been in business out in Glendale for something like sixty years, though it had certainly seen better days. You wouldn't think to look at it that it was still one of Los Angeles County's most expensive restaurants.

A single-story concrete building was tackily painted to simulate a Disneyland farmhouse. There was a one-third scale barn and silo out back and the whole compound was surrounded by rustic wooden fencing. Two diseased-looking cows wandered listlessly around the ersatz barnyard, along with half a dozen scrofulous chickens, and four hairy Mexican pigs. The smell, at least, was authentic.

"You're sure this is the place?" Armand Kubescu said dubiously, as a phony hayseed in dry-cleaned bib overalls let Christine's Porsche into the parking lot.

"Just part of the atmosphere," Christine assured him. "It's an old LA institution, you're gonna love it."

Mom's Good Old Country Kitchen had been founded by a family of Okies back during the Great Depression. In those days, it had been all you could eat for \$5, stiff by the standards of the day, and now, at \$100 for the same, likewise.

The original idea had been to appeal to Dustbowl refugees who had made it in The Industry. In the forties and fifties, it was the in place for Hollywood cowboys seeking to establish their country roots. During the macrobiotic sixties, it had fallen into disfavor, relying somewhat precariously on the custom of perverse right-wing producers who used it to inflict their version of power lunches on hapless Beverly Hills trendies.

In these health-and-body-conscious days, Mom's Good Old Country Kitchen was reduced to a dwindling clientele of loyal old lardbuckets and European tourists. Christine had read about it in an old airline magazine someone had left in her gynecologist's office, never imagining that she would ever dare to set foot in such a place.

But it was certainly ideal for present purposes.

The dining room was done up as a giant eat-in farmhouse kitchen. Rough-hewn splintery gray wood flooring. A high red ceiling from which old wagon-wheels ringed with phony kerosene lanterns hung low over round redwood picnic tables draped with red- and-white checked cloths. Electric logs glowed bucolically in the hearth of a big brick fireplace. Low country and western Muzak twanged in the background.

The Good Old Country Kitchen itself opened onto the dining room over a big wooden counter, and inside, the latest version of Mom herself, a huge middle-aged woman tented in gingham dress and white apron and wearing a white chef's hat over a cheap gray fright-wig, was visible bustling about, assisted by three teenaged chicanas done up as midwestern farm-girls.

The place wasn't even half-full--a fat old couple, a family of huge hearty blond German or

Dutch tourists; two enormous Japanese who looked like sumo wrestlers; their American counterpart, a man- mountain who went by the handle of Little Abner, accompanied by a date who looked right off the plane from Vegas; a table of Hell's Angels--and Christine and the Count were seated immediately by a surfer-type in designer bib overalls and an idiot straw hat.

Count Kubescu glanced around the room rather dubiously. "A rather peculiar place to have chosen," he muttered.

"Don't worry, Armand," Christine said with a little smile, "it's as American as Mom's apple pie. Of which, believe me, there is plenty."

There was no menu. Mom and her helpers loaded the goods onto the counter as they came off the stove, the waiters piled the food onto flat-topped wheelbarrows, and offered you everything at your table.

First came the so-called appetizers. Barbecued baby back-ribs. Buffalo chicken-wings. Pigs-in-a-blanket which were actually enormous knackwursts wrapped in pizza-dough. Fried catfish fingers swimming in red-hot tomato sauce. Hush-puppies with melted butter and honey. Scrambled eggs with oysters and bacon. Half a dozen different cold-cuts and as many cheeses.

Armand's attitude brightened considerably as he perused this impressive offering. "Uh, the ribs, and the fish-fingers, and the eggs, and let's see--"

"Oh come on, Armand, this is my treat," Christine said gaily. "We'll just have everything," she told the waiter. "With schooners of beer, and a nice big pitcher of buttermilk."

The waiter began unloading more-or-less human-sized portions of this and that onto the huge wooden platters set before them. "More," Christine demanded. "We didn't come here to eat like birds. Don't be so mingy!"

By the time the waiter had left, each of their plates was heaped high to overflowing with enough food to feed the Rams' offensive line or sink the Queen Mary.

Armand tucked into it in his usual manner, eating everything with his silverware like a European gentleman, but managing to pack it all away steadily like the perfect all-American farmboy. Christine ate a good deal less fastidiously in her efforts to keep up, but keep up she did, even though by the time they had cleaned their plates, her stomach seemed to be pressing against her rib-cage and the back of her throat.

"Quite nice," Armand said, taking a hearty swallow of beer. "Simple, perhaps, but ample."

"Glad you like it," Christine said sweetly. "Let's have seconds."

Armand's gaze may have narrowed a tad, but when the wide-eyed waiter had finished refilling their plates, he went at it again with no noticeably diminishment of his seemingly bottomless appetite.

Christine, though, had to force herself to cram it all down her throat by act of will, had to choke back doing what should have come naturally, and by the time she had managed to

push the last hush- puppy down past enormous resistance, her ears were ringing, her diaphragm was pressing on her lungs, and she was starting to see spots before her eyes.

She was somewhat encouraged by the new look on Armand Kubescu's face. Not that he looked what you could call sated, but he did indeed seem to be eyeing her speculatively, as if he was beginning to realize that something was going on.

"Ah, the main course!" he said when the waiter arrived with a wheelbarrow loaded with roast beef, fried chicken, ham-steaks in red eye gravy, pork chops, legs of lamb, roast turkeys, and barbecued Texas hot-links. He smiled at her as he said it, but there was a certain wolfish edge to it, a stripping away of a certain amount of civilized veneer, and there was something challenging in his voice that seemed to indicate that he now understood that he was in a real contest.

And it was Armand, this time, who told the waiter that they would have everything and lots of it.

Christine's memory of the meat course was to be a bit vague later. She clearly remembered that they started in on the hot links and ham steaks with knives and forks like a lady and a gentleman, but by the time it came down to the pork chops, her brain had entirely disconnected, her stomach had become completely anesthetized, and she seemed to have been reduced to a set of jaws and a pair of hands, gnawing pork off the bone like a hound-dog, ripping apart chicken and turkey with her fingers, even, perhaps, picking up an entire leg of lamb and attacking it like a famished lioness.

The Count, all civilized pretense gone by now, was down to eating with his fingers too, glaring back at her with feral eyes, ripping off chunks of meat with his teeth, fairly growling at her as he bolted them down, as if they were pieces of her own enemy flesh.

By the time the waiter arrived with the side dishes, they were snarling at each other like animals, spitting spent bones on their plates, glaring across the midden-heap of the table at each other with blood in their eyes.

Vast platters of corn on the cob in melted butter appeared on the battlefield. Baked potatoes with sour cream and chives. Boiled green beans. Candied yams. Peas and carrots with pearl onions. Onion rings. Deep-fried mushrooms. Mountains of mashed potatoes soaked in butter and thick country gravy. Someone called for more meat. Someone demanded the bread trolley.

It all took place in a glutinous greasy brown fog. But Christine remembered the moment when it cleared with crystal clarity.

She came back from wherever she had been in the act of gobbling mashed potatoes with a tablespoon in each hand. Suddenly she felt light-headed but magically lucid. The ache in her guts was gone. Her vision cleared. She didn't even feel like throwing up.

Across the table, Count Armand Kubescu was picking listlessly at a turkey carcass. His eyes were glazed, he was slumped back in his seat, his cheeks were puffy, and he seemed to have developed a set of jowls that she had never noticed before.

Christine, for her part, felt like she could eat forever.

"What's the matter, Armand?" she said savagely. "You're eating like a bird."

Count Kubescu moaned, then belched torpidly. The turkey carcass fell from his limp fingers.

Christine leered at him triumphantly as she drew the whole huge serving platter of mashed potatoes to her. Gloriously crazed with the succulent aroma of impending victory, she dispensed with the niceties, leaned over the platter, and proceeded to shovel great gross gobs of the gravy-laden potatoes into her mouth with both hands like human conveyer-belt.

With every handful, Armand Kubescu groaned softly, sank back deeper into his chair, seemed to visibly accumulate fat around his eyes, and jowls, and neck, as if a million years of Southern-fried chickens were all at once coming home to roost.

By the time she was finished with the mashed potatoes, which didn't take that long at all, he had pushed his chair back from the table to accommodate his newborn paunch, his arms were hanging limply at his side, and he had broken out into an oily sweat.

"Ah, just in time!" Christine said.

The waiter had arrived with the dessert wheelbarrow.

Deep dish apple pie. Dutch apple pie. Peach pie. Pecan pie. Chocolate cream pie. Banana cream pie. Boston cream pie. Angelfood cake. Devil's food cake. Strawberry short-cake. Platters of chocolate, vanilla, and rum raisin ice cream. A huge bowl of whipped cream.

The old couple and the family of Teutonic tourists had left sometime during the proceedings, but the Japanese sumo wrestlers, Little Abner and his chorus girl, and the Hell's Angels had gathered in a semi-circle around the table.

"I'm getting a little full," Christine said, "so I think I'll just have one piece of everything ala mode with whipped cream."

There was a spattering of applause.

"No! No!" the Count gibbered in terror. "Not dessert!"

But Christine showed no mercy. She leered across the table at Armand Kubescu, slowing her pace somewhat to savor it, but steadily devouring everything. Beads of sweat poured down the Count's face, then rivulets. His eyes all but disappeared behind oleaginous wads of flesh. His fat cheeks panted. His jowls quivered. Distractedly, as if of their own volition, his hands, with their sausagelike fingers, reached up shakily to grasp at the lip of the table.

Christine was down to the last slice, banana-cream pie with a big ball of chocolate ice cream, smothered in whipped cream.

She slid the whole dripping thing onto the palm of her hand, winked at the Count, opened her jaws as wide as they could go. "Delicious," she said, and crammed it all down her throat in four continuous gulps.

The Count screamed, spasmed, pushed against the table, and went over backwards, to lie supine on the floor, quite comatose, gasping and blowing like an enormous beached whale.

There was a round of applause.

Christine rose shakily from the table, bowed to the audience, and waddled off to the ladies' room for a world-class barf.

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Allie Ellison was there in the recovery room to greet her when Christine came out of the anesthesia.

"All's well that ends well, hon," she said. "Alex outdid himself. Guess I own him a blowjob. Ah well, what are friends for?"

Christine ached all over, but that was to be expected. She reached down to pat her tummy. Sore as hell, but even under the padding of the bandages, it seemed flat as a board.

"Got a mirror, Allie?"

Allie reached into her purse, extracted a compact, opened it, handed it to her.

Christine started at what she saw. Purplish black bruises all over her cheeks and beneath her chin. Loose skin hanging everywhere.

"Don't worry about it, hon," Allie assured her. "The marks will be gone in a week or two, and then Alex'll tighten things back up".

Allie laughed. "You should see the Count!" she said.

"No thanks," Christine said, "I'd rather remember him as he was, laying there on the floor like a mound of slime jello."

Allie laughed again. "Better than that, hon," she said. "These days, he's looking like the second coming of Orson Welles."

She shrugged. "Of course, you've gotta hand it to the guy, he is a survivor."

"How so?"

"Well, he's taken up with a certain blimpoid ex-actress rolling in dough from her twelfth divorce. A match made in heaven."

"Really?" Christine said.

"Sauce for the goose, hon," Allie told her. "Meat for the gander. She's already blown off fifteen pounds."

About The Author

Norman Spinrad was born in New York City, on September 15, 1940. Except for a brief period in Kingston, New York, he spent his entire childhood and adolescence in the Bronx. In 1957, he entered the College of the City of New York, from which he graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor of Science degree as a pre-law major. He decided not to attend law school but pursue a writing career instead. He rented a cheap apartment in the East Village, secured part-time employment in a friend's leather shop, wrote a first novel which has never been published and about a dozen short stories, finally making his first sale to Analog in 1962.

Today he is the author of numerous novels, countless short stories, and the editor of SAVE THE WORLD, a web-zine found at:
<http://www.save-the-world.com>

His life's work is to take this commercial science fiction genre and turn it into something else somehow, write works that transcended its commercial parameters works that could aspire to the literary company of Burroughs and Mailer and Kerouac, that would open a new Way....

For more information on Norman Spinrad visit him on the Web at:
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