

SEASON TO TASTE

As we've seen before, Robert Reed is very adept at imagining the future of humanity. Here's a tale that demonstrates he's just as good at considering our current nature.

IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, coming across that little recipe box. Chester wanted a camera. Some guy had just called to ask if he had any old .35 mm for sale, and Chester said, "Sure, come on over." Except he wasn't feeling so sure about it now. Somewhere in the house was a nice camera complete with its original leather case and light meter. He could remember putting it in a certain box in the basement. That was where Chester kept most of his inventory, in the basement. He had all kinds of cardboard boxes down there. On shelves, on the floor. Stacked head-high, in places. But the camera wasn't where it belonged, and it wasn't in the box under that first box, or in any of the boxes surrounding it. Later, speaking in her sweetest voice, Evelyn would remind him that he'd sold the camera last fall, for eight dollars and change, and maybe he was remembering things a little cockeyed. Which wasn't all that unusual, of late. But the thing that mattered -- what caught his eye, then his emotions -- was the old recipe box, a tarnished brass clasp holding it shut, cheap pine badly stained and its design simple without being elegant, someone long ago having burned the word RECIPES into its slightly warped, very yellowed lid.

"Where did we get this?" he asked his wife.

Evelyn was chopping up an onion. Her gray eyes lifted for an instant, then dropped again. Her hands never stopped working the knife. "I don't know," she told Chester. "Where did you find it!"

He showed her. The recipe box had been tucked inside a little wicker basket that had gotten shoved behind all of his boxes. He placed the basket and its round lid on the kitchen counter, saying, "One of us must have bought it, then forgot to look inside." That was his current theory, but easily amended. "Did you buy this? Do you remember where?"

"I told you. No." She was watching the onion become a pile of clean white segments. "Why? What's gotten into you?"

"Here, I'll show you!" With a dramatic flourish -- Chester had a gift for drama -- he turned the clasp and opened the box, fishing out a random recipe typed on a stiff and yellowed three-by-five card. With a voice growing louder by the syllable, he read, "Vengeance Stew. Two pounds of meat cut from your enemy's buttocks, plus, preferably, his tongue. Cube the meat. Coat in flour, pepper, salt. Brown in a Dutch Oven!"

"What are you talking about?" Twenty years of marriage, and sometimes, bless her, Evelyn would ignore his ravings. "It sounds like a recipe for stew -- "

"Vengeance Stew," he repeated. He roared. "Meat cut from your enemy's buttocks, plus preferably, his tongue."

Her mouth closed, the gray eyes big as saucers.

"All right. Here's another one." Thick fingers found a three-by-five card worn ragged at the corners. "Meat Loaf from a Loaf. Canned tomatoes. Rolled oats. One egg. Onion. Salt. Pepper. And one-and-a-half pounds of ground chuck from a lazy, no-good man." Chester lowered the card, his face bright and red as if a light bulb burned behind his cheeks. "Well," he exclaimed. "Do you undersand now?"

"Where did you find that? In one of your boxes?"

"Behind the boxes. I told you." He shoved the card into its slot, then pulled out a fresh example. "'Sweet Potato Shepherd's Pie. Onion. Garlic. Jalapeno peppers. Cumin. Chili powder. Oregano. Two pounds of ground young shepherd' -- Jesus! -- 'although any young man from animal husbandry will serve nicely.'"

Evelyn touched the small box, for an instant. Three dabs of onion juice began to dry against the old wood.

"Donner Party Pot Pie," Chester read aloud, flipping wildly through the cards. "Rump Roast. From a well-fed matron. 'I'm getting sick here, Er! 'Swiss Steak and Gravy.' Oh, but we can use an Austrian in a pinch. Thank goodness!"

"It must be a joke," Evelyn whispered.

"And a damn funny one, too." Chester pushed the box away, trying to avoid the temptation of reading more recipes. "Are you sure you didn't buy this wicker basket? Take a good look."

She played with the round wicker lid, then set it on the basket, examining the drab ensemble until she could say, without a trace of doubt,

"I didn't buy this."

"Then I must have." He didn't have Evelyn's memory. For Chester, life had always meant lists and reminders, and since turning sixty-five, it seemed that yesterday and last year were the hardest things to remember. If he had bought this basket last year, which seemed likely, then there were only a few hundred garage sales to choose from. Plus dozens of auctions, too. They bolstered their income through buying and selling other people's refuse. And their inventory was vast, explaining why nobody had opened the basket, why the curse box had escaped their gaze for so long...

Again, but with more force, his wife told him, "This is all a joke. A stupid, childish joke." She shut the box and fastened the brass clasp. "You can't possibly believe --"

"In this day and age.? Everything's possible!"

The chopped onion lay forgotten on the cutting board. Dinner was delayed, which was fine with Chester. He had lost his appetite. He might never eat again.

"I don't know what to do," he confessed. "If I ran to the police, what would I tell them?"

Always reasonable, Evelyn said, "Just what you know, which is almost nothing."

Fighting revulsion, he grabbed the box, flinging it open and pulling out a final card. Like every other recipe, it was typed neatly, the p missing its stem and the k floating above its neighbors. Like every three-by-five card, this card was miscolored and stiff, but its corners were extra frayed, obviously from heavy use. A favorite recipe, he reasoned. Which made it all the more shocking when he read aloud, "'Lemon Veal Scallopini. Flour. Garlic salt. Veal' -- Oh, dear Lord! --'from infants restrained with silk and fed ample buttermilk.'"

"It's someone's insanity," Evelyn whispered. "Leave it alone."

And Chester tried to believe her. He would have given anything to think these were just crazy words on paper, harmless by any measure. Yet he couldn't. He couldn't quit thinking about the recipes -- stewing, so to speak -- until at three in the morning, all of the sudden, he sat up in bed, knowing where he must have bought that box. Of course, of course...of course...!

AN OLD FARMSTEAD some eighty minutes from home, it had a large, unkempt yard adorned with metal sheds and a sagging barn and an enormous garage. Every structure was elderly, showing rust and rot that a careful, decent man would never allow. That was one reason Chester had remembered this place. This county had a reputation for hillbillies. It was a corner of the state that Evelyn normally avoided, where Chester hunted alone for the best deals. But today was an exception. His wife must have sensed something at breakfast. Meeting him at the pickup, she merely shrugged when he mentioned where he was going, telling him, "I don't want to stay home." Why not? "Because that fellow is going to come over looking for a camera, and I don't want to have to tell him that you already sold it."

Chester laughed despite himself. No doubt about it, she was quite a wife. His first and only true love. He found himself thinking about the benefits in marrying in middle-age. All your youth and stupidity is spent and gone, which makes life a lot easier. The truth of it was that Chester was glad for the company, particularly when he pulled up in front of the hillbilly house. Particularly when his nervous energy began to ebb, replaced with a big dollop of fear.

"You said there was a sale here. A special Tuesday sale." Evelyn threw his lie back at him. "It doesn't even look like anyone's home. Not for several months, judging by appearances."

Which might not be bad news, he told himself. Provided there wasn't a pack of dogs waiting in ambush.

"Where did you hear about this sale?"

Chester opened his door, then said, "Maybe I'm wrong. Stay here, and I'll go see."

"Maybe I'll come with you, and we'll both see."

"No." He paused, looking at the gray eyes and the strong plain face. Then he said, "Wait here. I'll just be a few minutes." And after a brief silence, he added, "If anything should happen, get help. Okay? Promise me?"

She sat motionless, and mute. Emotion made her look younger than her years. Chester could practically see the bride whom he had married.

Walking toward the ramshackle house, he played with scenarios. It was possible that he hadn't bought the wicker basket and recipe box here. That he was wrong despite a very clear memory. And it was very likely that the seller had bought the basket elsewhere, and just like Chester, he never knew what he had in his possession.

It was important to give the man his chance to explain.

Being fair was essential.

Jokes or not, those recipes were evidence of a sick, twisted mind. That's what Chester was telling himself, for the umpteenth time, watching a fellow that he halfway remembered, watching him shuffle out onto the broad and sagging front porch.

"Hello, friend," said a thick, unfriendly voice.

Chester offered a quick nod, then forced himself to speak. "I'm out shopping...for a typewriter, actually...and I remembered that you've got a good selection...you know, of all sorts of things..."

The man on the porch was thick like his voice, and strong in a casual, bearish way. Tired jeans and a faded Hawaiian shirt made an interesting fashion statement. He had the bright amoral eyes of a squirrel. "I'm not selling today," he warned. Then some base instinct took hold, and he said, "A typewriter, huh?"

Yeah, I got a few. Out in the garage. What sort you huntin' for?"

They walked in the same direction, but not together. Chester fought the urge to look over his shoulder at Evelyn. "A manual typewriter," he managed. "Nothing fancy." He was volunteering too much, but he couldn't help it. "It's for my grandson, frankly. He wants an old typewriter so he can write just like Hemingway."

If the name meant anything to the gent, it didn't show. A burly arm jerked open a rusting door. Inside the huge garage were maybe half a dozen trucks and cars in various stages of being stripped or put back together again. The lone working vehicle -- an old flatbed truck -- was carrying a big V-8 engine over its rear axle, a greasy canvas tarp thrown over it.

Chester gave that engine a quick look, realizing that it was the youngest thing inside this garage.

Exactly two typewriters were waiting along the farthest wall, buried under dust and the operator's manual for some vanished dishwasher, Chester caught a whiff of unwashed flesh, a thousand uncharitable thoughts coming to mind. He had typing paper in his back pocket. Unfolding it, he realized that his hands were shaking. With a matching tremor in his voice, he said, "Just want to see how they work."

Could a shrewd predator somehow guess his plan?

The first typewriter, a bluish Smith Corona, had very faded, but very normal ps and ks.

Chester began to roll the paper into the big gray Adler, but he already knew it wasn't the right one. And why should it be? Even if this was the cannibal, he would have his own typewriter in the house, or it would have been sold ages ago. Except for the recipes, there was no evidence. After a moment of typing, Chester turned to the man, regarding him in the hard glare of the shop lights. Then with the steadiest voice he could manage, he asked, "Have you ever heard of Vengeance Stew?"

For a long moment, the face was puzzled. Then came the slow flash of recognition, or maybe something else. Whatever it was, the man muttered in a low, distinctly angry voice, "What do you mean, vengeance?"

Chester opened his mouth, his voice stolen.

"Just what the hell do you want here?"

Good Lord, what if this was the cannibal... ?

"You don't give a shit about typewriters." The man walked to the flatbed and pulled the tarp down over the newish engine. "Because I've got a bill a sale. If you think there's something wrong here...!"

"Something's very wrong here," said Chester, feeling it in his bones.

"Oh, yeah?" Now the man came at him. "Like what, you old shit?"

It had been forty years since Chester's last fistfight, but panic gave him the old instincts. Unfortunately, his reflexes were missing. His first swing was diverted. His second swing did nothing but throw him off balance, and his opponent gave him a quick smack in the belly, putting him down on his knees, down on the very hard, very cold concrete.

"It's not your engine," Chester heard, the voice falling from a great height. "And I got a bill a sale to prove it!" Why was he talking about engines?

Looking up, Chester saw an ugly, angry face floating over him. An enormous fist drifted past as the voice asked him, "What do you mean, vengeance? Tell me, or I'll kick the shit out of you!"

"The stew," Chester muttered. "I just want to know...what's in it... !"

"Stew? What the fuck do I know about stew?"

Chester tried to stand, and the fist drove him down again.

"First tell me why you came here. Who told you about my business?" But as the man lifted his fist, he seemed to lose both strength and will. The amoral eyes became unfocused. The fight was visibly leaking out of him.

Another voice fell from an ever higher place.

A familiar voice, it said with ease and purpose, "I know a recipe. Rectums and testicles in a sweet plum sauce."

There was a long, long pause. Then Evelyn said, "If you hurt him, I'll cut your balls off. Do you understand?"

The knife was resting between the man's legs. Judging by the long blade, it had spent years moving from garage sale to garage sale, rusting and dulling along the way, but never losing its capacity to menace.

"I know how to use knives," she told the man, working the blade even closer. "I can butcher you in two minutes. Believe me."

Both men nodded, taking her at her word.

Absolutely.

There were an astonishing number of questions that Chester didn't ask in the next hour. Evelyn drove, and he just sat, mute and exhausted, struggling to come to terms with a revelation that he couldn't have predicted and with which he could never, ever come to terms.

It was Evelyn who finally spoke. Quietly, but with determination and a certain chilliness, she told him, "When we married, we promised not to ask about our pasts. It was your idea, as I remember. You said that we'd probably done things that we regretted, bad things that were childish and maybe even unforgivable. And I don't know what secrets you have, but if you think about it, very carefully, you'll see that you still don't know anything about my secrets, either. Nothing substantial. Just guesses pulled out of a damned box that I honestly thought was lost. Lost, and gone." A pause. "Some stupid little box full of words on paper. Nothing else. Someone else's words, but you don't need to know whose. Do you hear me ? Are you listening? For God sake, say something to me, Chester... !"

"Like what?" he whispered, nothing audible over the rumble of their truck's old engine.

Evelyn was crying. A woman of rare emotions, she made quite a sight, driving with both hands on the wheel and her face wet and her voice struggling to remain in control. "When, when, when have I ever disappointed you? Ever? Just point and say, 'Here you were a bad wife. You were an awful person. On such-and-such occasion, you showed me an evil side.'"

He couldn't point to a day, or even a moment, when anything resembling evil had emerged from his wife.

With a jerk of the wheel, she pulled onto the shoulder, put the truck into neutral, then said, "You drive. I'll

walk around and give you time... and if you want, just drive on..."

He said nothing, watching her open her door and step down.

Watching her slam the door shut.

Chester scooted in behind the wheel, pushing in the clutch and placing his right hand on the gear shift. Then he waited, watching her in one mirror, then the other; studying her as she slowed, then stopped, obviously giving him every chance to leave her. He put it in gear, and he drove.

Backing up eight feet, he opened the passenger door and said, "Come on. There's an auction starting at noon. If we speed, we can just about make it."

She stood in the sun, giving him a wary look.

"What kind of auction?" she asked.

"You never know," Chester replied. Then after a minute, with a grim resolve, "That's the fun in them."