

FICTION

Eat

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Excerpt from the novel *Eat*.

Coming off the Seventh Street ramp, Pauley poked metaphorically, testing herself for dissatisfaction the way she would a chicken for doneness. She was content. Even her worries were small. Could she afford the two-week cooking school on the California coast she'd read about in *The New York Times*, and perhaps persuade Charles to accompany her? Might he someday be willing to move, if not to a smaller town, at least into a house? On the crust of fifty, she was food editor of *¡Miami!*, a slick, local magazine, and she was on her way home to a man who, after twenty-five years, still looked upon her fondly. Most delectably, she'd turned in a piece entitled "Athens Without Airfare" to the pickiest editor on the planet, who pronounced it "Topnotch."

A hot Tuesday night, with light rain blurring the windshield and side mirror. When the light changed, she couldn't see if she was clear to move to the left lane. That's how she explained it to Charles. She rolled down the window to wipe off the mirror and the beggar's hand appeared.

She should've seen him, would have if she hadn't been swollen with self-satisfaction. He waited on this corner every day, tall and bony with a matted beard, leaning on a crutch, holding a cup and a cardboard sign. She never allowed herself to read the sign, fearful of being pricked by shame. You couldn't give to them all.

The arm he thrust through the car window was thick with brown hair. A filthy hand wiggled fingers in Pauley's face. Her head snapped back as if she'd been slapped.

"Spare change for a homeless vet?"

Black hole for a mouth; breathing on her, leaning into the car.

"Sorry." Her standard response, holding her breath to keep from inhaling his germs, refusing to look at his face. She stared into the middle distance where the light made red beads on the glass, and fumbled for the window handle, cursing herself for not having power windows. This was what she got for being sanctimonious about the environment, hanging on to the old Volvo to save energy. Roll-down windows were about to get her killed.

"Then give what thou canst." The man grabbed her left breast.

Pauley screamed. That's what she told people afterwards: she screamed and drove away. The actual sound was a dog's howl of fear and wounded vanity.

He said something that sounded like, "Gotcha."

Heart knocking in her chest, she managed to find the accelerator and lurched toward Eighth Street with the light still red and the car not in first. She saw him through the rearview mirror, a dark figure under the street light, waving at her.

Maybe she'd heard wrong. Maybe he'd said, "God bless." This was what happened when you got pleased with yourself. Fate sent a pervert. Shaking, she pulled into the gated entrance of her condominium. In the lobby, she punched the elevator button, holding her arm away from the place he'd touched. She should have shoved her fingers in his eyes the way they taught you in the women's self-defense courses. She wished she'd taken one of those courses.

"You were not in the moment." Charles stood behind her, watching in the dressing table mirror as she brushed her hair. "Bad things happen when we don't stay in the moment."

She studied her husband: tall and thin with rounded shoulders. The hair that had been thick and brown when they married now gray and fleeing his forehead. In back, he had a small bald spot, like a pond in the woods. She never mentioned this. The rimless glasses

he began wearing at fifty gave him an owlish look. She found him attractive and looked forward to seeing him each evening. Except when he said something stupid like now.

She turned to face him. She didn't like for him to stare at her reflection, afraid the mirror revealed flaws he didn't notice straight on. "When did you start saying things like 'in the moment?'"

He flushed and she changed the subject. "It's living in this town that does it. If we moved..."

"It's not Miami," Charles said. "This stuff happens in any big city. The guy was probably drunk." His voice cracked, the way it did when he wanted to make a point. "He was angry with you for not giving him money."

"Why are you taking his side?"

"I offered to call the police." He pointed to the phone on the bedside table. "I can still call them."

"They don't even come when your car gets stolen." She turned back to the mirror and spread cream on her face. "I can imagine what they'd say about this: 'Show me again, ma'am. Exactly where did the guy grab you?'"

"I'm not taking this lightly."

"It's probably a message from the universe telling me to give more to the homeless."

She'd showered as soon as she got home, standing under the hot water, scrubbing herself with a luffa, soaping twice. Under the silk robe, her breast stung, as if the man's hand had burned through her clothes.

"It must've been horrible." Charles touched her shoulder. She saw him struggling to get it right, say the thing she needed to hear.

She covered his hand with hers. "It's not as if he actually hurt me. More wounded pride than anything. If I were an Amazon, I could lop it off, except it's on the wrong side." She pointed to the offended breast.

Charles jerked his hand away. "What are you talking about?"

"To pull my giant bow." She demonstrated. "Amazons cut off a breast to get it out of the way of their bow arm."

“I knew that.”

She'd offended him, insinuating he wasn't well read, that engineers didn't get the same education as English majors. She wondered if all marriages were this way, everyone meaning well while the messages flew by each other like strange birds.

“Are you hungry?” She offered the placation of food. “The restaurant sent me home with some delicious pâté and a caramelized apple tart.”

“I had a peanut butter sandwich.”

“With cheese and mayonnaise?”

Charles shrugged, meaning yes and why not.

“If you want to lard your veins, you should at least do it with decent food.” Who was this speaking—Mrs. Harsh, the dietician?

“I like peanut butter.”

“If I got home at a decent hour, you wouldn't have to stand over the sink and eat junk.”

“I can take care of myself.”

He refused to be placated. Definitely not the night to bring up cooking school. Pauley stood and put her arms around his chest, pressing her face against his shirt. “I love you.”

“I never say the right thing.”

“You are the right thing.” She leaned back to see his face. “I'm going to my office. You watch your movie.”

“I don't need to keep watching this thing.” He indicated the bed. “Stay here.”

“It's okay. I sleep better by myself.”

Behind the closed door of her office, with the TV grumbling through the wall, Pauley pulled the curtain half shut, blocking out the building next door, leaving only Biscayne Bay gleaming under a sliver of moon. She took off the robe and stared at herself in the full-length mirror.

The breast still burned. She leaned closer. Was the skin red? The man's fingers were probably diseased. Charles thought she over reacted. No man knew how it felt for a woman to be groped. The disgust, the violation.

She sucked in her stomach. Turning fifty in April seemed momentous, a continental divide, as if everything in her life needed to be rethought. Until now, she'd told herself she was middle-aged, and not even deep into middle age. Coming up against the half-century mark put an end to that. She was not going to live another fifty years. She wasn't in the middle of anything.

Turning, she craned to see her back side. Men no longer looked at her the way they once had. Their eyes passed over and away as if she were a door or a piece of furniture. At first, she'd been dismayed, but she was used to it now. Walking through life unobserved was like being invisible. She was free to watch others. She saw things more clearly without the distraction of being a distraction.

Facing the mirror, she leaned closer. She wasn't ugly; the face looking back was pleasant. She pulled the skin on her cheeks toward her ears. She hated the wrinkles and her failing neck, and played with the idea of plastic surgery. On their morning walks, she and Charles passed a plastic surgeon's office, done up like a Spanish hacienda with arched doorways and barrel tile. Large, expensive cars began arriving as early as seven. She pictured what must be going on inside: scalpel slits into soft necks, skin pulled up like a stocking and reattached, the extra snipped away. On garbage day, the curb was piled with boxes and plastic medical wrappings. Along with the parings from women's faces? There was a cat in the driveway, a fat, contented cat. Surely not.

The fact was, she wanted to look younger and disliked herself for wanting it. If she were the kind of person she wished to be, she'd let nature take its course and settle into a dignified old age like her mother Sarah, who sailed through her seventies as if age were a following wind. If Pauley was the woman she wanted to be, anyone seeing her would know she didn't mind growing old. Besides, if she had the surgery, she might turn out like Elizabeth who couldn't completely close her eyes for a year, or Lindsey, who spent \$15,000, and came back looking like Truman Capote.

At least she was tall. Taller than she deserved coming from two short parents. Was this the result of milk and cod liver oil, or a

throwback to some past generation? Their son was tall, but then so was Charles. Pauley hadn't known her father's parents, but in photographs they looked small and tidy. Her mother's mother Grandma Larkin had been a cushion of a woman. Pauley couldn't remember if she'd been tall. When you're a child, everyone looms, and Grandma Larkin—in memory at least—lived life sitting down.

She pulled her hair back and tied it. The red hair was her pride. As red as orange peel when she was a baby, curly enough to make people stare. When she started going gray, she devised a homemade dye mixture—golden blonde and auburn—which covered the gray without making her look like a lamp someone left on.

Staring at the mirror, she held her head high. No double chin. But she'd seen photographs, dreadful pictures with chins and sagging skin, taken at moments she thought she looked grand. Age was humiliating. What she really wanted was a secret face-lift. A machine with lasers or some other magic. Walk in and come out transformed. Tight and taut. No bruises or scars, no mutilation. In the meantime, she must keep her head up.

Getting skinnier would be a solution. She'd gained a pound for each year of marriage, which didn't sound terrible, except she now weighed 150 instead of 125 and, if this kept up, would weigh 175 on their fiftieth anniversary. The problem with dieting was that it involved deprivation, and she did love food. The food writer M.F.K. Fisher kept herself thin. She said if you ate well, you didn't need to eat much. Pauley adored Fisher, but she thought the comment sounded a little snide.

She remembered watching Oprah, who at one point lost over a hundred pounds. Even skinny Oprah had upper arm skin that hung over her elbows. Her trainer had been a man with the glittering eyes of a fanatic. He used to tell viewers to connect with the void food that filled in their lives. Pauley disagreed: some people simply loved to eat. Food was the pleasure, not something to fill a void. But assuming the man was right, was food her substitute for love? She felt loved. Was it a substitute for pleasure? Food was the pleasure. Did she eat to escape reality? Not likely. Food was her business.

In the old days, she could gain three pounds and throw them off with a day's abstinence. Not since menopause. The pounds now sat on her hips and snickered. "The little estrogen I have left is in these fat cells," she'd told her friend Lottie at lunch last week. "Then enjoy," Lottie said. "This isn't a rehearsal." But Lottie was shaped like a sausage. Not the person to turn to for beauty tips.

Pauley examined the insulted breast. There was no visible difference, but it felt heavier and tingled. The man's touch had marked her.

She turned out the light and opened the curtain. The moon hung like a silver fingernail. She crawled naked between the cotton sheets. She liked the feeling of sleeping alone, which did not mean she didn't love Charles. Quiet on the other side of the wall. He'd turned off the television. She pictured him keeping carefully to his side of the bed, leaving room for her to return.

When you were young and newly married, cuddling felt grand, turning together in the night like nested spoons. No more. She wanted an entire mattress to herself. The whole early menopause thing had been a shock. The drying skin and falling libido, the insomnia, heat boiling up inside as if someone had turned on a gas burner. Genetics, her doctor said, but her mother had never mentioned going through it. A bed of her own was the answer. When the internal thermostat woke her, she turned on the light and read.

She didn't admit this. Sleeping alone didn't sound like something a caring wife would do. In the daytime, the narrow bed with its stack of pillows looked like a couch. This is my office, she said to visitors.

She plumped the feather pillow and sank into it. The nice thing about so many years together was that she and Charles no longer fought. The screaming of the first years had faded into compromise. Actually, she'd been the screamer; Charles got stiff and furiously silent. After twenty-five years, it seemed easier to ignore their differences. Silence had expanded the space between them. What started as a crack, on some days felt to Pauley like a chasm neither of them bothered to shout across. She yawned, cradled the pillow, and

stretched her legs under the sheet. The moon sailed overhead and bent itself in the black water below. Many married people must feel this way—that they live with a pleasant stranger.