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SLICE OF MEAT PIE

SARAH COLVERT

I work in a meat pie shop, making the meat pies, rolling the dough, filling them up with various animal. We sell bacon pie, Beef Wellington pie, barbecue chicken pie, and mixed meat medley pie. I've suggested that for the whole month of November we sell a turkey, dressing, and cranberry pie, but by ignoring my suggestions, my boss, Karen, increases her sense of self-worth.

Despite the vast array of filling options, meat pies are not in high demand. So for most of work I hang out behind the counter and look out the windows. There's a residential neighborhood behind the shop, and I people-watch the homes. In particular a gal who looks like she could hurt me.

Not so long ago I had a girlfriend named Christine. She gave me a black eye once after she counted the number of condoms in the box and found one missing. She beat my eye with her fist and screamed, "I'm in love with you! Don't you know that I'm in love with you?" I don't understand that love, and I don't know what happened to that condom. She could have miscounted. I don't know. Now I don't see her anymore. She left me for an ape named Edward.

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I wake up in the morning, and the first thing I think to myself is, how do I get out of going to work today? I tell myself that after I shower, I'll call in sick. After my shower, I tell myself that I'll get dressed and then call in sick. After I have breakfast, I pick up my cell phone and stare at my boss's number with my thumb poised over the green dial button, then I click the phone closed and start my walk to work. I try and tell myself truth on my walks. I tell myself what Christine told me. You are egocentric and negative. You are a shitty lay. Her words become dead when I make them my own.

In the mornings lots of gals walk to their classes at the university. They are cute in summer clothes, all thighs and cleavage. I create relationships with them in my head. Within a block we are at the end,

where they punch me in the face, kick me in the groin, and leave me broken. The end is more satisfying than imagining the sex. I walk to work a zombie, looking for lives to eat from a distance.

My boss is always there to open the store in the mornings. She doesn't trust me with a key. That's not speculation either. She's told me straight out, verbatim, "Aaron, I don't trust you with a key." I'm the most honest person I know. Not to myself, but to others.

Sometimes Karen will leave after she's unlocked the store and fucked about uselessly for a few minutes, but most of the time she sticks around and makes my morning anxious. She's real fussy about how she likes the pies made. She has this standard technique for pinching the corners of the crust closed, so that all the pies look the same. "Customers expect the product to be reliably predictable," she says to me. "That's redundant," I tell her. She doesn't know what that word means, so she just continues on with her diatribe on pie uniformity as if I'd never spoken.

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If I know she's not likely to come in, then I pinch the pies closed however the hell I feel like it. Sometimes I fold the crust over itself, sometimes I use all five fingers on it, sometimes I use a fork's tongs, sometimes a spoon. I've never once had a customer say, "Hey, this pie's edges are different!" They don't even see what they're eating. They just shovel it in, mouthfuls of animal instinct. Watching them makes me want to be more than animal and never eat or fuck or fight again.

The girl by the pie shop sits on her porch and whittles wood. I can't see what she's making. She's intent on it, though. And I want to know, so I decide to buy a pair of binoculars. There's a small voice whispering, in the back of many others, that maybe that's going too far, but I ignore that voice. That's how I know that Christine is fucking the ape, by ignoring the voice and climbing a drainpipe.

I tell the lady at the sporting goods store that they're for bird-watching.

“Uh-huh,” she says. She’s not interested, so I go on.

“My uncle is taking me up to the Catskills this summer. He writes for *Audubon* magazine, and he’s going to get me a job, but first I have to learn how to recognize all the different birds in North America.”

“Cool. That’ll be twenty-two nineteen.”

“That was a lie,” I tell her. “Really, I’m just going to a Cowboys game, and I have nosebleed seats.”

“Whatever, man.”

I lean in real close to her and say in a stage whisper, “There’s this girl that whittles. I want to see if I can look in her house.”

She sticks the receipt in the bag with the binoculars, hands it to me, and turns to the person behind me in line.

Sometimes I drive past Christine’s work and find her car in the parking lot. I’d like to know what’s going on with her, but ever since she saw me looking at her through her bedroom window while she was getting pummeled by the ape, she refuses to answer my calls or acknowledge me when I run into her on purpose.

When we first started dating, sometimes I’d meet up with her and her co-workers at the bar. They talked nothing but inane bullshit. Who’s fucking who, who fucked who, who’s going to fuck who. I could have shifted the conversation around by saying something like, “Who the fuck cares?” But out of some personal sense of etiquette, I just sat quietly at the table and built geometrical patterns out of the coasters, glasses, and whatever else was lying around. She told me once that it embarrassed her.

“They think you’re odd,” she said. “Why do you have to mess with the stuff on the table like you’re some child?”

“Let’s have a little dance,” I said, wanting to hold her.

“There’s no music.”

“It’s right in here.” I tapped her head, then mine.

That made her laugh. She gave in and pressed close to me. Told me I felt soft. I sang a little. The very thought of you. The mere idea of

you. When we danced with no music, she loved me. She didn't love that I was lacking what she thought were basic social skills. She couldn't see that those two parts of me were responsible for each other.

The girl whittles body parts. They hang from the tree in her yard and stand like broken statues in the grass. She has to have carved wood for years to get the detail she does. Hands with delicate nails, veins and knuckles, fingers splayed, ears and eyeballs severed from faces, inner organs, twin kidneys, the pump of the heart, valves stretching into air. They're all life-size. The best, I think, is a foot. It stands on the second step of her porch. It's a man's foot, shoeless. Hair on the big toe. It makes me uncomfortable, naked there. I want to find out what size it is and buy it a shoe.

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Work was easier when I had Christine to go home to. I felt like I was building a lasting relationship, so I didn't much care that I had to wear a shirt that says, "All of the five food groups in one meat pie!" Now, without her, I see that I am a twenty-eight-year-old man in a meat-stained shirt with the dumbest of all dumb lines on the front. To make myself feel better, I start wearing my shiny black shoes to work. I wear these shoes when I'm flying somewhere, so that I can stop at the airport shoeshine stand and get the guy to give them a rubdown. I wish those stands were all over. I'd buy twenty pairs of black shiny shoes, scuff them all to hell and spend hours just traveling from stand to stand, paper tucked under my arm, changing shoes each time, so I could sit up high and feel like somebody.

At work no one even notices my shoes. My feet are behind the counter, and Karen is always looking ahead, telling me to quit leaning on the counter and to quit staring out the window. She finds things for me to clean that are already clean. I scrub walls while she's there.

"Meat pie all day long meat pie in my song meat pie when I'm at home stuck to my skin like a long lost friend. MEAT PIE."

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"Are you singing?" Karen asks.

"I guess so."

"Well don't."

I don't like looking at my boss. I don't like what she thinks she sees. So I look at my shoes when she's talking to me. My shoes make me think of love. If I loved Christine, then I'd be happy that she's happy with the ape. I am not happy she's with the ape. I want to wrestle the ape to the ground and stick bananas in every one of his hairy ape orifices.

A few customers have caught me with the binoculars, but I tell them there's a nest of eggs in the tree outside the shop and that I like to keep an eye on them to see when they'll hatch. One smartass said, "It's winter. There are no eggs in winter." She wanted a lamb pie, but I told her it was winter and there are no lambs in winter. Wait until spring and come on back. She wrote a letter of complaint and put it in our suggestion box. Now Karen has me on probation. Meat pie probation. This job's like a bad relationship, only a missing condom won't get me fired. And I'm no quitter.

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For a few weeks now she's been carving and polishing a pair of wooden testicles. Life-sized scrotum with waves of wrinkles and the seam running down the middle. They don't connect to anything. They stand alone. I watch her running her thumb along the wrinkles of wood as if her carving is as delicate as the real thing. I wonder if she's seen me looking at her, and if the balls are some kind of a hint. Every day that I watch her, I feel more and more that these testicles are a personal challenge to me alone. I go in the bathroom at the pie place and try to give myself a pep talk in the mirror. "The past is dead," I say to my reflection. I look weak in the mirror. The skin around my eyes is delicate and my stubble is patchy. I don't go over there.

The heels of my dress shoes make a nice kind of click against the tiles. If I'm in the store by myself, I like to tap dance a little. I get really

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into it one day. I'm tapping to beat all when a customer comes in and catches me. She doesn't even laugh. She gives a patient, condescending smile, which is worse than a fuck-you in my book, and then asks for a slice of chicken pie.

"We don't sell them by the slice," I tell her. "Whole or not at all."

"I just want a slice. Can't you just sell me a slice?"

"No go. You have to commit to the whole thing."

"I don't want the whole fucking thing," she says. Condescension to rage in 3.5. She storms out of the store. I look at my shoes. There's a scuff on one of the toes. I lick my thumb and bend down to try and wipe it off, but it's going to take polish. One quick conversation. That's all it takes. The girl is out with her balls. The store is empty. I pull off my apron and put the "Back in five" sign on the door. Hi, my name's Aaron. I cross the street. Hi, I watch you from the meat pie place across the street. I turn up her sidewalk and stop right in front of her porch where she's hunched over the balls. Hi, have you ever lost an entire person? She looks up and shields her eyes from the sun. I must be nothing but a shadow to her.

"Nice scrotum," I say.

"How long have you been waiting to say that to a girl and have it make sense?"

"Since I learned the word scrotum."

"Thought so. You work in the meat pie place. Your pie is stinking up my neighborhood. It smells like dog food."

"Try working in there eight hours a day."

I glance up at the heart hanging from her tree and try to figure which valve it might be that's pumping the pressure into my own.

"Those shoes are pretty pimp," she says. "You selling the real meat pie over there on the side?"

She's vulgar. I laugh. "I like to tap dance."

She squints into the sun. "But that's not why you wear them."

"No."

"Why do you wear them?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Karen's car pull into the parking lot.

"Fuck!"

"Is that a question?"

"My boss. I have to go. Come in the shop." I'm already running towards the store, but I can't move very fast in these shoes. Damn my pimp style. I turn back and yell over my shoulder, "Christian name's Aaron. I'm Jewish."

"Molly," she yells back. "Agnostic."

Molly. Unsure of the truth. I could drown her in me, and then her bloated, waterlogged body could wash ashore and be discovered by a land-bound animal who has learned to please and assimilate.

Molly comes in the shop. She doesn't order a pie. Her hair isn't brushed. It has great big tangles in it. I want to lie down naked with her and gently take all the knots out before I fuck her like an animal.

I rub the back of my neck. "So, maybe sometime, you'd like to go out somewhere that doesn't involve eating?" I ask.

"I hate movies," she says.

"I hate ice skating."

"Coffee is a cliché."

"So is alcohol."

"There's a drainpipe on top of a bar downtown," she says. "It leads up to the roof. We can look down over the ants there."

That Saturday we go to Sixth Street. Three blocks of road are closed off to accommodate the drunkenness. Cops on horses stand sentry at every cross street. The university's entire supply of sorostitutes and frat boys are out wandering in the road from bar to bar. She leads me by the hand into the Chuggin' Ox, squeezes up to the bar and gets four beers before I even have time to think about what I'm drinking.

"Not clichéd if it's not our primary purpose," she says, handing me two of the bottles. We go outside and up a set of stairs to an empty

iron patio. She's small and dark and her socks don't match. I want to grab her waist and pull her to me, but it would take me months of deliberation to act on that thought, and she immediately sets her beers on the ground and scales a brick wall that leads to a lower roof. I hand her beers over, then mine. I'm less agile than she is. She watches me up the wall, and I hope she's not mentally associating coordination with the kind of lay I might or might not be. When I'm over, she sets her beers down again and shimmies up a drainpipe. The tops of her ankles show where her pants hike up.

"You weren't kidding about that drainpipe. The last time I climbed one of these, I got to the top and saw my ex-girlfriend fucking a very hairy, very muscled monkey man."

"The top of this climb is better," she says.

"It doesn't have very far to reach."

The drainpipe scares me a little. I was drunk with the last one. I was obsessed with what I'd lost. I barely noticed the climb. This time, though, I take a glance down and am immediately hit with vertigo. The desire to fall.

Once up, we hop a low wall, and there's a great expanse of roof around us. I follow her to the edge, and we look down about a hundred feet to the street below.

Shrill muffled laughs carry up to us. There's lots of cleavage below us. I can look right down into the nest. To the east, a building is being constructed, welders on the roof, working night hours to get her done. Sparks fly off into the black.

"Private fireworks," she says, looking at me.

This is an invitation. I raise my bottle of beer to my mouth. I look at her over the lip. She looks right back.

"Step up onto the edge with me," she says, and in an instant she's climbed onto the low brick wall dividing the roof from the drop, and she's standing with her toes hanging over into air, her arms spread out on either side.

"Are you coming up?"

"No. I don't know."

"You have a lot of anxiety." She holds out her hand to me.

"Yes." She's making me nervous up there. She climbed up without a thought in the world. "Come back down for a minute, huh?"

She smiles and steps back down onto the safe portion of the roof.

"Maybe I'll get up there with you another time," I say.

"What else is it besides anxiety?"

A desperate sense that the last years of my life have been wasted ones. The sinking awareness of eventual demise. Torn fragments. Overwhelming fear.

"Timing, I guess."

"Timing matters," she says.

Timing. Choosing acts and reacts with precision, thought, logic. There is no passion in timing. There is no fire. There is no pleading for love while I hunker down with blood in my eye.

We climb back down the drainpipe and over the wall and amble out into the middle of the road, maneuvering around the jerking drunken puppet bodies. She uses her feet to gracefully avoid them, spinning, dancing. None of them notice her. I can't stop looking at her.

"Why do you carve body parts?" I ask.

"I don't know. Human pieces, they're more whole than the whole thing."

I want to hold her like I've never learned to hold a woman, but all I can manage is to stare at her with a wonder.

I picked her up in my car which means I have to take her home, too. On the drive she puts her hand on my thigh. Warmth from the point of contact spreads out in spider veins along my whole body, centering in a clump right in my groin. I am not thinking about Christine. I am not. I am thinking about not thinking about Christine. I walk her up to the porch. She leans in and bites my neck.

"It's been a long time since anyone's bitten me," I say.

She smiles, pleased with herself, grabs my hair, pulls my head back and bites me again. A shot of pain and sex jolts through me.

Her roughness makes me nervous. I don't want her to want what I'm not.

"I'm not very aggressive in bed," I say.

"You don't have to be." She kisses my cheek and goes in her house. I'm left on the porch with the foot and a rapidly diminishing erection.

That night I don't drive by Christine's apartment. I go home and jerk myself off to hot rooftop sex and forceful action that is the antithesis of my constant reasoning. Christine only appears once. She throws a handful of steaming beef at my face and tells me to stick my dick in a work pie. I ignore her suggestion and cum on my belly.

The next day at work, I take out my binoculars to watch Molly whittle, and she's looking right at me. My immediate reaction is to duck behind the counter. Shit, I say, crouched down. Shitty shit shit. I can't get up. I stay crouched to gather my thoughts. The door chimes ring.

"Bird watching?" she says above me.

Shit. "There's a nest of eggs in the tree," I say.

"I thought you might stop this binocular business after we'd been out."

"You've seen me?" I stand up. She's holding her jackknife and the balls. She doesn't say anything. Say something. I start to babble. "My ex-girlfriend collected miniature windmills. From Holland. She had over fifty of them. Or has, I guess. She used to display them on her dresser, and if I moved one, or took one away, she'd notice immediately. I liked to hide them around the house. It enraged her. She got enraged when things went missing. She was just like that, you know. So I wonder, if I took one of your body parts, would you notice?"

"Probably immediately. They'd hurt coming off. Here." She hands me the scrotum. "This is for you. Gimme the binoculars." She holds out her hand.

"What for?"

"So I can watch you sling pie from my porch."

I hand them over.

I go home that night and I hang the balls from the ceiling fan over my bed. I turn it on low speed and watch them circle around, then I take out one of Christine's windmill figurines, and I spin the miniature airfoils. Her nanna got it for her. It's silver and has etching all over the base. Sometimes when she got upset with me, Christine would take a windmill and sleep with it clutched in her hand. Before she left I hid this one in the bottle of aspirin in the medicine cabinet. She's never even asked about it. She just chalked it up as lost, I guess. That's how she is. In the end she's perfectly capable of just chalking things up. I never chalk things up. Sometimes I dream that her windmills have turned into giants and are enemies worthy of battle. Sometimes I count the seconds by spinning the airfoils. I tear one off. A tiny sliver of silver. I stick it in my mouth and swallow.

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If I'd have thought Molly would really start watching me, I wouldn't have given her those binoculars. But she does. She starts watching me. I see her break from her whittling and hold the binoculars up to her face, pointed in my direction. If I look at her, she waves. At first it makes me uncomfortable. I start hiding in the kitchen until a customer comes in. I place myself behind the soda fountain, obscured from her view.

"Can't take it when it's turned on you, huh?" she asks me after work, as we're sitting on her porch together. "Afraid of what I'll see?"

"I'm not a good person," I tell her.

She stares at me and doesn't look away. Eventually I forget that she's watching. It's a slow forgetting. Time. I take small steps. One day when I know she's out, I go by her house and take the foot. I go to the shoe store and put it on the foot-measuring device. It's a men's size twelve. Two sizes bigger than my feet. I buy a pair of black shiny shoes and slip one on it. It looks good. Dapper. Elegant. I start wearing tennis shoes to work again.

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And I'm scrubbing walls, but that's fine because I'm thinking about the walk across the street after work, sitting on her stoop and watching her whittle. And I'm okay. I'm thinking about being okay, and that's when she comes in. Like I willed it with my momentary contentment. She's brought the ape. He's disguised in a pair of khakis and a peacock collared shirt. Some bright offensive color. His collar is popped. Hairy simian sub-human fuck. I look at his shoes. Boat shoes.

"Aaron, it's so good to see you. I wondered if you still worked here. I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Edward."

Edward sticks out his hand. Hairy knuckles. I grab it like a fem, placing just my fingers in his palm. It throws him off.

He stares at the menu and rubs his hairy chin. "What do you suggest?" he says. He's amicable. I realize she hasn't told him anything about me, about watching them that night.

"Starving yourself into enlightenment," I mumble. I turn to Christine. Almost a year later, and she's no different. There's no "I'm starting a new life" haircut. No dye job or change in style. She's made a smooth transition. I shaved my head, then my whole body. I rid myself of every hair.

I stare at Christine, not really seeing all of her, until my eyes decide to focus and are immediately drawn to the round pot of her belly protruding from beneath her cotton dress.

"You put on weight," I say, hopefully.

She looks down and rubs her belly. "I'm pregnant, Aaron." She keeps staring down. I look over at Edward.

"Unexpected, you know." Edward shrugs. "But hey. I'm twenty-eight. That means when my kid's fifteen and starting to get all athletic, I'll be losing my edge. I mean, I don't want to be fifty-two when he starts playing sports."

Reason. Edward is reasonable. She smiles kindly at me, like she pities me, or has forgotten who I am, and she puts her arm around Edward's waist. She's waiting for me to congratulate her. I just stare

at her, and she asks for two bacon pies. I double wrap them and the grease still leaks through the brown bag. I feel like vomiting.

“Who is that dude?” I hear him ask on the way out.

“I used to fuck him,” she says, her hand still on her belly. Edward doesn’t even look back over his shoulder. I glance across the street and see Molly with the binoculars. She waves.

That night I awake to darkness. I put pants on and walk outside. The streets are quiet in the outskirts of the city. It’s late, or early. Early morning darkness. I walk without destination, and there are no girls in summer skirts, there are no distractions, no lives to eat, only me. And I am a twenty-eight-year-old man who works in a meat pie shop. There’s no getting away from all that meat.

Not even realizing where I’m headed, I wind up on my work street, on Molly’s street. Her house lights are all off. A moon lights the yard. I stand there with all the broken parts, the whole parts that were never broken. A wind chime made of wooden fingers clicks against the breeze, and a face mask lies in the grass. City stretches away to the south. Christine is somewhere in that tangle of light, in her apartment, maybe with Edward, growing a baby like it’s her job. But time will take her and the city both, and me and what’s left of my love for her along with it. I toe my sneaker into the lawn and sit on the stoop with the foot. The shoe has lost its shine out in the weather, so I spiff it up with my shirttail while I wait for Molly to wake up.