

Range Fed Chicken

By Bruce Payne

SUNDAY MORNING, a little after nine, the Alpha Beta market was empty; it had just opened. A bleach-blond checkout lady sipped coffee while another filed her nails. The one with the coffee laughed, “here he comes,” she chuckled, “look at him go.” The other checker put down her nailfile. They watched with amusement as Mike Haywood ran across the parking lot, splashing through puddles in pouring rain.

Mike Haywood stood inside the entrance, out of breath, looking for a dry grocery cart. A rangy teenage boy nodded to Mike with a toothy grin. Mike recognized the box-boy. “How ya doin’?”

The kid dried a grocery cart then rolled it in Mike’s direction. “I’m well,” the boy grinned, “and my pants are dry.”

Mike thanked him for the cart. Everyone in the store knew Mike as a regular. The boy tried to compete with Mike’s corny jokes.

The bleach-blond waved at Mike and said, “hi Mike.” She turned to the other, saying something about Mike’s puzzled expression. “He always seems to be looking for something not in the Market,” she said, “ever notice?”

The other checker put down her nail file and smiled. “Mike’s like a lost river searching for the sea.”

Mike should have been concentrating on his grocery list, but his mind was on the Forty Niner game. Kickoff was at ten. Mike slipped the list from his pocket. Even then, he could only think how badly the ‘niners played in cold, wet weather.

The box-boy caught Mike’s eye. “Sunday,” the boy said with a grin, “niners gonna get their butts kicked.”

Mike shot him a tolerant smile, fished a wrinkled dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to the kid. “Niners by fourteen.”

The boy tucked the bill in his apron pocket. “You’re on, pal.” The boy winked then cocked his head. “Gotta get back to work.’

Mike stood in front of the meat counter, glancing once more at his list. “Pop corn,” he

mouthed, “Q-tips, fruit, veggies, pasta, bagels, oh—and honey.” Mike penciled in broccoli and pesto. “English Ale?” he asked himself, “Hell, why not?” He’d be thirty-four tomorrow.

A hefty butcher-lady craned her neck over the meat counter. “Somethin' ya like?” She smoothed her bloody smock.

“Chicken,” Mike said, “but nothing fed with hormones.”

“One?”

“Two, please.”

The butcher lady hustled two naked birds from the case, slapped them on a table and split them. She wrapped and taped them, then scribbled a price. “You health nuts,” she laughed with a grunt, “you’re drivin’ *me* nuts.” She reached over the counter to hand Mike the packages but a pregnant woman in front of him blocked her reach. Mike stepped around the pregnant lady; he thanked her, put the packages in his basket and laughed under his breath.

The young lady on the nest looked at him with a curious expression.

Mike’s amusement mutated into a loud laugh.

The pregnant woman glanced at the butcher lady then to back to Mike.

Mike pointed to the label. “Says here range fed,” he snorted, “can you picture cowboys in Montana herding chickens?”

Light sparked in the pregnant lady’s dark eyes. “Where the deer and the cantalopes play?” She beamed with a playful smile. Their eyes met for a second then she turned and left.

Half way down his list Mike saw the nest-lady in the produce section; red grapes were in her basket, honeydew and apples. This mother-to-be knew plenty about prenatal nutrition. Her shiny black hair was gathered in back by a polished blue abalone barrette. Hair, Mike thought, that must feel as fine as a bird’s feather. It was all he could do not to stare at her clear, soft skin and the fine, downy hairs at the nape of her sensuous neck. For a minute Mike forgot to breathe. Geeze-Louise! He was becoming an ogler! Mike turned his back to select broccoli and lettuce. It took little imagination to see her ripe figure under the thin cotton maternity dress. Mike could only hope the lady’s husband was as gentle with her as he had been with Mary — when Mary was on the nest. Mike blinked; Mary’s pregnancy increased their intimacy. Hormones, he supposed. Suddenly the lady was inches from Mike. Mike took in the sweet blend of her flesh mixed with earth from potatoes. In a heart-beat Mike moved on. She might think he was stalking her.

Mike found Q-tips on aisle B; two aisles beyond he tossed in linguini. He searched for

Alfredo sauce, but could not shake Mary's face and voice from his mind. Mike could almost feel Mary's arms around him in bed —her breath on his neck. And in the mornings? Mary's lyrical songs filled the kitchen.

The pregnant lady reappeared; she stopped for couscous and smiled politely at Mike.

Mike threaded his way through the check-out line.

"Hey! Mike!" the blond checker called, "what about your groceries?"

"Be right back," Mike cried, "Left my check book in the car."

The cars in the lot had the same colorless shiny roofs, their hoods beaded with rain. When Mike found his Honda he rushed inside and slumped over the steering wheel. Rain peppered the windshield. "Mary," he gasped, "Oh, Jesus-God Mary!" Mike tuned the radio to a classical station. Soon music unclenched his fists.

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"OHMYGOD! Mike! Hurry!"

"Choppy breaths, sweet cakes, remember?"

The traffic light would never turn green. Mary's maternity dress was soaked in pink fluid. "Hang on! Sweet cakes."

Mary struggled for breath, her tortured face twisted with a scream. "This can't be normal. Michael!"

Mike hardly knew her voice. He slapped the dash board. "This friggin light!" He punched the Honda through the intersection, the same time he dropped back Mary's seat. "Can you believe it? We're going to be ancestors. Lean back. Mary! C'mon now choppy breaths!"

An old lady in a Volkswagen crawled in front of them. Mike passed her on the right; subconsciously he breathed for Mary. "Deep breaths," he cried, "yeah that's it—that's better." Another light. Mike turned left against the red signal and complaining horns. "C'mon, Mary breathe!"

Mary didn't answer. Blood pooled on the Honda's carpet, dark and thick. "Look down on us, Jesus! Don't do this to her! "Right on Garden Street—punch it—high beams—horn—Mary! Talk to me!"

The Honda bottomed in a dip; something metallic scraped and Mary's arm fell limp on the gear shift.

Mike rolled into Saint Francis' emergency entrance. "We're here!" Mike bawled, "Mary!"

He skidded into an empty ambulance entrance.

A masked team from the ER rushed over to the Honda; they transferred Mary onto a gurney then rushed into surgery.

THE SIGN ON the O.R. door read, 'Positively no admittance,' in double sized letters. An hour and a half dragged. Twice Mike approached the doors; he pressed an ear to the door in strained silence. No Mary. No baby. Mike returned to his seat in the hall. He felt something light touch his elbow.

“Mr. Haywood?”

“Yeah? Mike Haywood. Where's Mary, the baby?”

A white line ringed the doctor's tight mouth; a perplexed glaze washed through his eyes. “I'm sorry.”

FOR SIXTEEN months Mike slept with Mary's pillow in his arms; he was never aware of the empty pain in his stomach. Mike's boss loaded him with ample overtime. On his days off Mike avoided parks, beaches or schools, anywhere children might play or laugh. Mike did *not* drink. He read endlessly. Sometimes he would take in a movie. On nights when he went to bed too exhausted to eat, Mary would come to him in a dream. She always laughed as if nothing had happened. “Death is no big deal,” Mary would tell him, “Michael R. Haywood, get on with your life wilya?” Mary never stopped teasing him. Most of all she was happy.

Mike leased a small house across town; he bought a puppy.

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HE WAS STARTELED by loud, rapid knocking on the driver's side window. Mike lifted his face from the steering wheel. The rain had stopped. Outside, a woman's voice cried in urgent tones. “Are you alright?”

It was her —the one in the store, the one on the nest. Her groceries were balanced on his hood; she was gawking at him. Mike turned off the radio then rolled down his window. “I'm okay, really.”

She blinked rapidly. “Oh, jeeze, I thought you were passed out or something.”

Mike opened the door and stood in front of her. "It's thoughtful of you," he said with a forged smile. He joked to cover his embarrassment, "I was thinking of my tax audit tomorrow." Mike returned to the market for his groceries.

She was still laughing.

Fifteen minutes later Mike placed bags on his back seat. Fresh wind had swept away the clouds; the sky was now washed in clear autumn light. Mike had bought a six pack of English ale. For some unexplainable reason he felt buoyant. He checked his watch. Kickoff was only ten minutes away.

The pregnant lady was still there. "I know you," she said.

"Afraid I don't—"

"You live on Clinton Terrace. You have a black lab, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Your dog poops on my lawn every morning."

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

She paused; for the moment her dark hesitant eyes settled on the Honda then in his face.

"Well? Neighbor? You going to offer me a lift?"

"Sure." Mike placed her bags next to his in the back. "Hop in."

She offered her hand, a little out of breath, "I'm Elizabeth Winslow."

"Mike Haywood."

"Yeah, right," Elizabeth giggled, "cowboys and chickens."

Mike drove south on De Lavina. When he stopped at a signal, he looked down at her melon-stomach. "When's D-day?"

"Doctor says two more weeks." Elizabeth's expression froze.

"Something wrong?"

"Gas," she said with a relieved smile. She removed the barrette from her hair. "Turned out to be a nice morning."

"Football weather," Mike gushed. "You and your husband picked out names?"

"Not married."

She said it so casually, as if Mike were taking a census.

"Rachel," she added, "for a girl I mean, Patrick for a boy."

Mike stopped to let three kids cross on skateboards. Elizabeth placed his right hand on her stomach. "That feel like two more weeks?" Her eyes grew wide when she saw Mike's

watch.

Mike withdrew his hand. "You need to be somewhere soon?"

"The Forty Niners are playing the Eagles." Elizabeth fussed with her groceries, saying, "I'm a fruitless football fanatic."

"you know," Mike injected, "Jerry Rice might break the record today."

"He must," Elizabeth said, "I prayed two novenas for him."

Mike pulled over to steady the bags on the back seat; two diaper boxes had fallen on the floor. "I've forgotten all the stuff you need for a baby."

Two blocks further Mike pulled into her driveway. "Someone waiting for you?" he asked.

"Not any more," she said.

"Say, Elizabeth?"

"Hmm?"

"I have a new crib, a new playpen ...bassinet too, they're still in the box. I have no use for them." Mike opened her door. "They're yours if you like." He hefted her groceries. "What do you think?"

That same curious light returned to her eyes. Elizabeth hesitated with a thoughtful look.

"I know what," Mike said, "While you think it over we can watch the game on my big-screen TV."

Her brows lifted with a cautious smile.

"Oh, C'mon. I bought popcorn."

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