The Secret of the Soup

“Even the ancient Romans used fish sauce,” I said, squirting a generous portion of Squid brand into the pan.

“I know,” Jenny Wada said in a bored voice.

“I mean,” I continued, stirring the shiitakes and onions, “that where I came from, no one used it. No one used anything fermented, in fact. I think fermentation was maybe a sin.”

“Oh yes?” She thumbed through my book collection, finding one and crinkling her small nose. “Where is that exactly?”

“I was brought up in real Mennonite country, down in Pennsylvania. Black clothes, the whole shebang.”

She didn’t say anything, lounging on the round dish chair in the corner of the large studio space, so I continued. “My people, such as they are, don’t go in for much in the way of flavor and spice. A little black pepper was the wild side, and even saltines were frowned on.” I turned the stove down, sprinkled some fresh chopped basil and file powder on the ‘shrooms and let them thicken. The soup looked ready, and I took a sip. “The only thing my relatives were good at is baking. It was like chemistry, I guess. I don’t know... it never appealed to me.”

Jenny nodded absently, peering at the three dishes I was preparing. “I hate Japanese food,” she said. “In case that is what you’re preparing.”

“No,” I said, confused. Wasn’t she Japanese? “I guess we all hate what we grew up with.”

“I grew up on Red Lobster,” she snorted. “My parents hate Japanese food, too.”

“Right. Well, I’ll see you around. Welcome to the Haven Test Prep Company.”

“I don’t know if that will work with my schedule yet.”

“But your scores,” I said halfheartedly.

“We’ll see.” She picked up her purse.

“I hope you liked dinner.”

“She didn’t,” I said. “She didn’t like the soup.”

The next morning I slouched out of my building, turning right past the Crown restaurant, then left past the award-winning Malaysian, stopping at the small, local coffee shop with its maple and hickory brews, and continuing up to Chapel Street, where I turned left toward the Green. I had mixed feelings about going this way, because it led past our competitor’s purple awning, but I walked to the other side of the street and ate the sugary coffee roll on a bench near the Center Church. Half-listening to the muffled sermon from
inside the church, I tried to think about dinner that night, and not the unpleasantness in between.

That entire spring I had been working on soup. I had been dazzled by the local ramen broths at two noodle houses and the local Asian supermarket, International Grocer. The broth was spectacular, with fat beading on the top, a rich, meaty flavor, all the elements balanced perfectly, so whatever it was mixed with brought out different aspects with a hint of what seemed like graham cracker. Working with the various ingredients I could identify and get my hands on, I was slowly getting somewhere. I already made my own stock, of course, but I had begun to feel like beef marrow bones were the key to the whole thing. While paying for a duck the week before, I had broached the subject with Hui Zhong, the nice lady who ran the Grocer, but she shook her head and pretended not to understand, even though she had spoken to me in perfect English many times before. Confused, I had smiled politely and changed the subject to the fine quality of their ducks. She nodded and bowed, but bustled uncharacteristically into the back, muttering to herself, leaving me wondering.

Despite my stint at the Cheesesteak Palace, I hadn’t been much interested in trying new food until I moved to Connecticut for graduate school. From my first apartment in West Haven I used to take the shuttle to Frank Pepe’s for their nationally known, mouth-watering pizzas. From there I moved to the more expensive restaurants, which seemed endless, with fish and sushi, pork and tapas, cocktails and cheese. I felt lucky that in such a small city I had the privilege of so much choice. Instead of spending my modest salary on CDs or tickets, I began to spend it almost exclusively on food. When I moved downtown after school, I blew through my money at a furious rate at first, until I began to cook for myself.

I stood up, sipped my brown nut coffee again, and continued, swinging back to Chapel Street by the famous vegetarian restaurant, glancing up at the impregnable walls of Yale University. Past the museums, I turned onto York Street, and found the small entrance to the basement offices where I worked. The woman at the front desk, Carolyn, looked up and smiled as I entered. I tipped my nonexistent hat, and walked past her around the corner into my glass-fronted office. Putting the coffee down on the desk, I turned on my computer. The classes and tutoring assignments were all set for the day, so I could catch up on some paperwork.

Students and teachers filtered in for the first round of classes, quickly stacking the five small rooms to the bursting point. Haven Test Prep’s genius lay in its elimination strategies. Most of the wrong answers on standardized graduate exams came from trick questions, though the makers of those tests never admitted that. With ways of eliminating those trick answers, smart people could get to the right one. HTP was not for typical students, and certainly not for those from the nearby community college. They would never help someone who earned a 400 reach a 600. No, HTP’s methods, cynical as they were, helped the people getting 650 or 700 reach the apex of 800. That was just what the Yale students needed, or thought they did, and just why our little company gave our purple-awning competitor headaches. I estimated we stole fifty percent of their graduate-level sales, not to mention the most qualified teachers.

“What can you do for me today?” a ringing voice asked, and a red rain slicker flopped onto my desk. P.J. Mather, my employer, was of an indeterminate age, but you could tell that once she had been a striking figure. Now she hid her body in expensive clothes, and her face in makeup. She had something to do with Yale, having gone there for one of her degrees at least. She also seemed fabulously wealthy, knew everybody in New Haven, and had dipped her ringed fingers in a number of pots. One was this test prep company, which she had founded a decade or so earlier.

I looked up and gave her my most winning smile despite the bile rising in my throat. “I can give you time and money.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” she said, seemingly pleased with me. “We need to show a big profit on the books this quarter, hear me?”

“Okay,” I said, confused.

“I hired you to manage this place to a profit, Daniel.” She paused. “And because of those broad shoulder of yours, of course. I mean . . . ” She squeezed my deltoid. “You look like you could pick me right up over your head.”

“Umm . . .”

“Come on, you know you want to,” she said coyly.

“I thought you hired me because I scored nearly perfect in the GREs,” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Pshaw. There are people with those scores wandering homeless in East Haven. And they went to Yale to boot.”

That one stung, but I dissembled. “P.J., you know I’d like to military press you right through the drop ceiling, but the students across the hall.” I pointed through the double glass walls. “I guess you picked the wrong office suite.”

“Damn,” she pouted. “I knew that whiny architecture professor would come back to haunt me someday. I mean, you sleep with someone once, and it’s all, give me a job designing your new offices, P.J. Let me see you again, P.J. Marry me, P.J.”

She trailed off. “Guess he was lousy in more ways than one.”

“I hired you to manage this place to a profit, Daniel.” She stood up to leave.

“I’m not. We reviewed the week’s work, and then she stood up to leave.”
“Bring me one of those duck sandwiches, won’t you? I’ll be in on Tuesday. Unless you want to tell me where you get them?”

I nodded, silent, resentful of her assumption that I was a hired lackey.

“Big secret, eh?” P.J.’s eyes twinkled. “Well, I have one, too, and you’re not going to like it.”

“What?” I asked reflexively.

“Nope. Maybe the duck will loosen my tongue.” She cackled and walked off, grabbing her long, red raincoat.

It wasn’t raining, I thought dully. Sticking my head out the office door, I found Carolyn looking at me from around the corner with her big blue eyes. “Next time, maybe warn me?” I said, trying to laugh.

“Yes, Mr. Detweiler,” Carolyn said in a bemused voice.

“And don’t call me that, damn it.” Nothing worse than a pretty woman I liked who called me mister. I ducked back into my office, staring at the class going on in a similarly glass-fronted room across the hall. The veteran, gray-haired teacher was holding forth, writing on the whiteboard with a big red marker. He saw me looking, and turned away without a nod.

What I didn’t tell P.J. was that I had made those duck sandwiches myself. But what was she not telling me? Why did we need to show a profit? Was she going bankrupt? Was the IRS after her? I spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the books, printing out sheets and marking them up for P.J. We had made more than a profit, we had made our biggest one ever. I tried to pat myself on the back for that, failed, and slumped into a depression. My salary was not tied to sales or commissions, and I was only helping P.J. to either get richer or at least avoid getting audited.

I walked home on George Street, for variety, and took the elevator to my apartment. Once there, I realized that I still hadn’t planned dinner, an uncharacteristic lapse. I opened the refrigerator. Green wheels of pickled cucumbers packed with a little masala and dried chilies. Spicy mushrooms huddled in the plastic, Chinese soup container, waiting, the lovely magic of vinegar and sugar and salt changing the ordinary into something delightful. Nothing ready yet. I turned to the cabinets, and found quinoa. Yes, I would cook that and mix it with red miso, butter, onions, and cheese, a simple dinner. I stared at the LaPalombara painting of the turnips. Was this food enough?

The next day was Monday, my day off, and I spent most of the day roasting a duck to perfect crispiness, cutting it up for workday sandwiches and wraps, then making stock from the bones. I also poured the fatty goop from the bottom of the roasting pan into another plastic container, to use for potatoes and parsnips later in the week. While I waited, I stared out my window over the parking lots to cars zipping along Route 34. When I first came to New Haven, the wall of that road, the deep concrete moat of the railroad, and the high stone fortress of Yale made me imagine a medieval city. Further experience had augmented that belief: a town half-enclosed and clan-

lish, with markets and merchants, ceremonies and festivals, and a vast disconnect between rich and poor. Then one day, walking across the town green laid out just a few years after the death of Shakespeare, I realized with a smack of awareness that New Haven actually is a medieval city, despite any subsequent revolutionary pretensions.

In the late afternoon I decided to head to the International Grocer to replenish the rest of my supplies. It was only a block away, around the corner on Orange Street, and I could stop there two or three times a week to get fresh fruit and vegetables. Along with the grocery and fish market, they had a small takeout restaurant, which is where I tried their fantastic soups. I was trying to cut down on that this year, though, as I became more and more dedicated to making my own food. Nevertheless, their broth was amazing, and since I couldn’t replicate it, I decided to pick up another bowl.

The sound of a small electronic bird greeted me when the door opened. No one stood at the register or the glass deli counter, so I shopped first, finding fresh baby bok choy, enoki mushrooms, star fruit, and kale. Red paper lanterns hung from the open-pipe ceiling and multicolored wall hangings with pictographs brightened the drab white walls. Small touches like a model of the multi-armed Vishnu over the small Indian section gave the place a fine, rounded character, and I greeted my old friend warmly.

What did I need? Mango pickles, which they sometimes had, but not today. My supply of rice was low, but I barely ate it anymore, preferring other grains like quinoa and millet, so I passed on that. I did pick up kombu kelp and dried tuna katsuobushi flakes to make dashi, thinking that might be a component to the broth I had missed. By the time I finished the rounds no one had appeared, but I could hear voices in the back. I moved into the fish market area, noticing that one of the open-topped tanks was filled with wriggling eels. I shuffled nearer to the door, hearing a hushed argument in what I assumed was Chinese.

“Hello?” I asked.

The argument stopped, and Hui Zhong, the owner, popped out of the swinging door, followed by a man I knew to be her son.
“I was wondering if the takeout was open today. I’d like a hot and sour soup.”

“No more soup,” Hui Zhong said sullenly. “What happened to it?” I asked, confused. “Maybe you ate it all,” the son said sharply. Hui Zhong began berating him in Chinese. I shrugged helplessly, holding out a credit card for the other items. She walked quickly to the front register with me, rang up the items, and without a word, walked back toward the eel tanks. Had I just witnessed a family argument? Or was something else going on? Maybe it was just the disappointment of leaving without their fantastic broth, but something seemed wrong. Hui Zhong had been what passed for a friend to a lonely man like me, and now she looked at me suspiciously, her mood dour and abrupt.

I remembered an incident from a few weeks before, when a large truck had blocked the entrance to the store, and another when the store had been closed on a Saturday afternoon, with a long black limousine parked out front. I had knocked on the glass, and a sinister-looking man with black gloves emerged to shake his head at me, and rattle the door to make sure it was locked. At the time I thought rashly that the mob was collecting protection money, and had later laughed at my conspiracy theory. Now I wasn’t so sure.

That left me to figure out the key to their soup base. I had decided to ignore the French model. I wasn’t going to cook these down into a sauce. Perhaps I just needed to bite the beef bone and use more meat in the stock instead of primarily bones. But a little place like International Grocer wouldn’t do something to increase their expenses, would they? It couldn’t be profitable. Maybe I needed fish stock instead of dashi as one component. That was more work: fish stock needed slow simmering, but could only go for an hour before turning chalky. Plus, I needed at least a half dozen fish for my medium stockpot. Maybe that wasn’t it, though. Maybe I needed to fry the vegetables before adding them to the stockpot, or boil down the stock a bit to concentrate those flavors. And the combination of those vegetables seemed endless, and they could be using herbs of any kind, as well. At the prospect of these infinite complexities, I found myself torn between a smile and a frown.

Back at the apartment, I mixed kimchee with flakes of the crispy duck skin in two cups of stock, threw in some fried shallots and halved quail eggs, and sat down to my own poor soup.

On Tuesday and Wednesday I had brought the duck sandwiches for P.J. but she hadn’t shown up at HTTP. I tried to give them to Carolyn, but she declined. On Thursday, I didn’t bring one, but received an email from my employer telling me to meet her at Louis’ Lunch on Saturday at noon. Furi-
os, I wrote an angry email, but luckily deleted it before I sent it.

Friday was my other day off, though I usually checked in during the morning hours before heading to the gym. Carolyn greeted me brightly, and I went through the order of the day with her. She offered me a McDonald’s hash brown, but I was the one to decline this time. I left and walked up York Street towards the gym for my weekly sets.

Through P.J. and my work with various Yale college deans I had acquired a special pass to use their weight room. However, almost every time I attempted to use the facilities a new student worker at the door refused to accept my strange permission slip and alien ID. It was a constant struggle. But I made excuses for not joining another gym: money, lack of a car, hatred of the bus, et cetera. My apartment was far too small for a squat rack and bench, though one frustrated Friday I had stormed home and tried to take measurements and rearrange the furniture. I might have had other options, but honestly the anger helped my workouts.

At the small counter in the hallway heading to the lockers, a skinny headphone-wearing kid stopped me and examined my glorified hall pass. “I’ve never seen one of these before,” he said loudly, not bothering to remove the headphones. “Are you a student?”

“No, I work for the university.” “Then you should have the staff ID,” he said, looking around as if the walls would confirm his analysis.

“I’m an independent contractor. But I have permission.” I jabbed a finger at the paper. “What is the problem?”

“Yes. I just never saw one of these before,” he whined. “Don’t get in my face.”

I decided to act. “Now you have.” I brushed past him down the hall and pushed into the locker room.

“Loser.” I heard him say too loudly, his earphones no doubt drowning out his good sense.

Instead of going back and giving him a beating, I loaded up a bar and worked angrily through two twenty rep sets of sumo dead lifts, then military presses, then dumbbell rows. By the time I reached weighted crunches I had calmed down enough to tear my awareness away from thoughts of murder and to the root of the problem.

I had gone to a state school in Philadelphia, not much better than a community college. “It was good enough for me,” said my father. Then for graduate school I had come to Connecticut to the nearby University of New Haven, which wasn’t in New Haven at all, but a questionable suburb. It was
not exactly the place to go if one wanted to become the manager of a Fortune 500 company. Of course, as P.J. had once asked me, “With your scores why didn’t you apply to Yale?” I told her I didn’t know, but it was anti-snobbery, no doubt, fed by my father’s insistence on the perils of intellectual life: “A practical college for a practical job.” How stupid all that seemed now, seeing the way P.J. navigated through life. Ninety-nine percent of the learning in the classroom did not apply to my job, or any job, anyway. I had believed all the wrong things, and stumbled into this job only by luck. I could hear my father now: “Don’t screw it up! You’re making a decent living. That’s more than most can say.” So what was I so angry about?

Not knowing enough. That was my problem. Where to find things out? The library, of course. After a shower I put on fresh clothes, and with wet hair and the smelly gym bag I walked around the block. I looked up at the enormous tower of Sterling Library, like something out of a medieval legend, and steeled myself to walk inside, wondering if I looked like a student. The old, strange resentment welled up in me, the resentment of the peasant, kept forever from the inner sanctums of power. So, I was going to do a little investigation of the one piece of Yale I had real contact with.

Once inside I walked through the metal detectors and into the grand entrance hall. Finding the information desk, I asked in a hushed voice where the old student yearbooks were kept.

“Manuscripts and Archives. Down the hall that way.”

I walked slowly down the hall past relics in museum cases, through another metal detector, and through an unassuming door leading to a fairly ordinary room. A pretty mouse-haired Yale student with a cardigan sweater took my information and gave me a badge to wear in the Archives room. I passed through the next set of doors and into a remarkable, two-tiered room of dark wood with walls of glass-fronted cases, a church built by a bibliophile. A few professorial types sat at the broad, flat tables, bent over unknown manuscripts.

A thin man with glasses at the front counter saw my hesitation and approached. “May I help you, sir?”

“Yes, I’m looking for a student from about twenty, or maybe even thirty years ago.”

“Are you a professor here, sir?” the archivist asked pointedly.

“No.” Not this again.

“A student then. Didn’t I see you at one of the history lecture series?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, clenching my fingers on the strap of my gym bag.

“Well,” he said, blinking. “At any rate, you’ll have to leave that here.” He pointed unsteadily at the bag.

“Sure.” I deposited it behind the counter.

“Our yearbooks are over here.” The thin man led me to the glass cases on the right. “Will you need to take notes?”

“Possibly.” I shrugged. “If I find anything.”

“Then you must use this paper, and only these pencils.” He handed them to me. “If you tell me the name of the student I might be of some assistance. Someone famous?”

“Mather,” I muttered. “P.J.”

“Ah yes, we know Ms. Mather well here. She comes in every Friday morning. May I ask how you know her?”

“I work with her.” I smiled in what I hoped was an ingratiating manner. “We want to do something for her birthday, but need some information and maybe an old photo.”

“Very well, sir. I think you’ll find her in here.” He pulled a Yale Banner off the shelf. “You might also want to look at these.” He pointed to another row, and stepped briskly back to the counter to help another researcher.

I thumbed through the volume of the Banner, then four more before I found Prudence Janet Mather, looking quite beautiful. She was in a number of clubs and served as her college’s representative. I wrote down some of the facts on the hole-punched paper halfheartedly, though I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. Now that I knew her class, I looked through the Records of the classes, the directories, and occasional reunion books. Her name was mentioned, but her reports seemed unremarkable, a list of who she kept in touch with, mostly, without mention of her increasing wealth, HTP, or her other companies and interests. I’m not sure what I expected to find, but perhaps confirmation of some insidious purpose, some all-powerful evil. Or perhaps the opposite.

I shrugged, put the books on the wheeled return cart, and gave the thin man back his pencil. Retracing my steps through the library, footsteps echoing, I finally absorbed what the archivist had told me. P.J. came to the archives every Friday. What could she possibly be doing there?

It was raining on Saturday when I walked across the parking lot to the brick building of Louis’ Lunch, with its red shutters and black border. I pushed through the door, too worried to appreciate the ancient toasters or carved wooden wall seats. Ordering the classic meat patty on toast with onions, invented at this small luncheonette over a century ago, I slid into the unoccupied corner booth. P.J.’s red raincoat swept in the door a few minutes later. She was chatting with two younger people, one of whom I recognized as the manager of the
purple awning test prep company. Immediately, a thousand questions leapt to mind, but I shoved them down as P.J. greeted me.

They stood at the counter while I finished my burger, staring at them across the small room. The tall young man and woman glanced uncertainly in my direction while P.J. continued a monologue, which I could hear was about the improving state of the economy. Burgers and Foxon Park sodas in hand, they sat down around the table.

“Daniel, this is Ben and Shara.”

“We’ve met.” I smiled briefly and shook hands with Ben. “We haven’t,” I said to Shara.

“I’m from corporate in New York. We don’t get out here to the provinces that often.”

“I was going to meet with you privately today, Daniel,” P.J. said, touching my forearm. “But Ben and Shara were hungry, and they came along after our meeting.”

“A meeting, eh?” I tried to be casual.

“Yes, yes.” P.J. sat up straight, becoming as businesslike as she could manage. “I have sold Haven to the enemy.”

Shara and Ben glanced at each other, barely suppressing giggles of glee.


“She got a really good deal,” Shara said almost pleadingly.

“Whether I did or not,” P.J. said quickly, “it’s done. Shara and I signed the papers this morning.”

I did some calculations in my head. P.J. probably sold the company for a couple million. Even one hundred students from us meant close to a million dollars. Pay for a teacher was negligible compared to intake. With overhead already taken care of, Ben would gain back whatever corporate lost in a year or two easily, and of course they would rule the future in New Haven.

“When is this happening?”

“At the end of this session.”

“Two weeks? That soon?”

“Yes, the next round of classes will be held at their facility on Chapel.”

“And our teachers?”

“They will be transferred over and given further training. That was part of the deal.” P.J. waved the end of her scarf as if all this was academic.

“We pay them more,” I said, a trifle bitterly, staring at the two hamburger munching agents of evil.

“They’ll be paid at the same rate,” P.J. said, winking at me.

And me? I wanted to ask, but did not, certainly not in front of these two representatives of the purple awning. It made perfect business sense, especially since P.J. only had to put two people out of a job, one of whom, Carolyn, was a student at Yale and didn’t need this. That left only the dead weight. The loser.

P.J. smiled in what she no doubt thought was a comforting way, and leaned forward. “Daniel, I have written you the most fantastic recommendation of all time. You can get a job anywhere with this.” She handed me a sealed yellow envelope.

“Hey, you can apply for a job with us, of course!” Shara said brightly.

“Yes...” drawled Ben. “Yes...”

All the hate I built up for the elite, for the privileged, for the unthinking, careless owners of the world threatened to explode. I had to leave.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said, and stood up. “I’ll start cleaning up the office this afternoon.”

“I’ve already given them our student lists and leads,” P.J. said as I shouldered past a group of laughing lacrosse players. “Ben will be by this week to help with the transition.”

“Fine,” I called back, pushing out onto the wet pavements. The rain had stopped, and small rainbows fluttered in the puddles all the way down Crown Street.

Two days later, on Monday, I stood in front of my building, angry again. I had only been waiting ten minutes, but it was the sort of inconvenience that a simple cell phone could solve. But of course that was out of the question. Another fifteen minutes and a black midsize pulled up with a beep. My father.

I got in and he pulled away immediately. “Daniel, good to see you. These roads are insane, just insane.”

“I don’t have a car,” I said smugly.

“Well, I don’t understand that.” My father snorted. “How you can live in these rotten beehives, I don’t know.”

He pulled onto Route 91, heading out into the suburbs. When he came through New England on business about once a year, he stopped by to see me. Every time he refused to stay downtown, taking me on some sort of drive, as if doing me a favor by expanding my world. We only stayed on the highway a short time, getting off and winding through the strip malls and residential developments. He pointed at the large neo-colonials we passed. “That is it, Dan. The dream.”

“Not mine,” I muttered.
He ignored this. “How’s the job? Going well?”

“Sure.” I had already decided not to tell him that I had lost the job. He would be intolerable, and would probably lead me to strangle him on the spot.

“You don’t like it?”

“Not really.”

“Well, I knew management wasn’t for you.”

“That’s not it,” I said. “I don’t like the people I work with, or for.”

He pulled into a McDonald’s parking lot. “That’s just too bad. Do you think I like my job? Driving across the country selling office equipment?”

“I thought so,” I said. “You always tried to get me into business.”

“That’s right! Because you need to make money to live in this goddamn country. Our ancestors didn’t need money. They just plowed the earth and ate their own food.”

“Well, I’m sure the economics of the Mennonite communities were more complicated than that,” I said, trying to diffuse him.

“Don’t be an idiot. Now let’s get some chow.”

“Are you serious? I’m not going to eat here,” I said, taking a stand.

“What? I don’t know about you sometimes, Dan. This food is cheap and high calorie. It tastes great. The only problem with it is that people eat too much.”

“We’re not eating here.”

“Fine. I guess you like your job more than you think, since you’re going to treat your old man to a fancy dinner.”

He pulled back onto the stoplight strip.

The only place he would consider was one of those ubiquitous chain restaurants full of knick-knacks. I slouched inside, and listened to him act like a fool to the hostess, cluck his tongue at the prices, and berate the waiter. Then he launched into a ten-minute monologue on what a pain in the ass selling office equipment had become in the age of “the computers.” The food finally came and we began to eat.

Sitting back, he pointed his finger at the piles of salty food as if they proved something. “You work hard so you can have that food, Dan. To have that house we saw. So you can have the life you want. Work isn’t something to enjoy, Dan,” he repeated my name as if I wasn’t there, and took a bite of his hamburger. “If I sell enough staplers and swivel chairs this year, I can afford two weeks on the Jersey shore next summer.”

I remained silent, at a boiling point. I wouldn’t tell him.

“You know, I’m not surprised you don’t like those people. They aren’t real working people like us.”

“I guess not.”

“I mean, they think they’re better than you, right?”

“Yes.” I bit into the awful chicken sandwich, so full of salt I could barely choke it down. “You’re right.”

“Those bastards make it so difficult for people like us.”

“I hate them,” I whispered, clenching my fist on the seat cushion, ripping it from the wooden bench. “I really hate them.”

My father looked triumphant. “Your mother always had great hopes that you would have one of those houses, Dan. Show those bastards that you can do it.”

We drove back into New Haven. It would be another year before I saw him again. On the way into the apartment I broke the door handle and spent the rest of the day finding the super and fixing it. By that time I was so angry that I did eight sets of twenty pushups, and pulled a muscle in my shoulder.

The next two weeks I facilitated the transition with robot-like precision. Though I was looking at unemployment, I couldn’t bring myself to cook more than breakfast and the occasional lunch, eating out every night, devouring slippery live scallops and buttery, acorn-fed pork. Alone at a table without even a book, I waited for escargot, for goat biryani, for gored gored. I flirted with the waitresses, hostesses, and bartenders, all of whom politely ignored me. What did it matter?

The yellow envelope from P.J. lay on the kitchen table, unopened. I refused to read what she wrote, to feel grateful to her. That would be even more maddening. Finally, taking money out of the ATM by the old mall, I realized I was spending too much. Instead of heading out for cheese fondue, I walked to Orange Street and pushed through the door of the Grocer, hearing the comforting sound of the cheeping plastic bird.

Running my fingers along the shelves like they were lovers, I picked up frozen rice cakes, bean curd, and fresh squid. I decided to try the cured duck eggs to chop into stir fry and grains. But this would be a fish week. I grabbed limes, lemons, and rang the bell for service in the fish market. Hui Zhong appeared from the back, forcing a smile, and wrapped up bluefish and cod for me.

I grabbed a bag of xia mi, dried shrimp, and to start conversation asked, “Hui Zhong, could you tell me how long to soak these before cooking them?”

“Ten minutes, no more,” she said. “You soak them too long, I bet.”

I smiled at this return of our old banter. “Yes, the flavor suffers.”

“You should try them with beans.”
“Ah, yes,” I said, then joked, “like in American chili, of course.”

“No, stupid man. With green beans. Garlic, dried shrimp, and mirin.”

“That sounds good.”

Hui Zhong walked to the cash register with me, glancing at the long deli counter where they made their small takeout menu. It was empty and dark.

“Hui Zhong, pardon me but I am very sorry.” I bowed as she bagged my food.

“Why, Daniel?”

“I am sorry that there will be no more soup.”

“Yes, no soup, and no store.” She shook her head. “Nothing, nothing.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, we are selling.” She remained stone-faced, but her voice trembled. “It is a sad day.”

I knew it. The sinister limousine I had seen outside of the Grocer those weeks ago. People like Hui Zhong and me were at the mercy of huge forces we could never hope to challenge. The world seemed to be deflating like a broken soufflé. I told Hui Zhong how sorry I was to hear of her troubles, and fled, choking back rage.

The last day at Haven Test Prep was only a half day. The evening before, the first round of summer session classes ended, and in the morning Carolyn and I cleaned out the last few things from our desks, and packaged the rest of the company’s “physical assets,” to be carted away to the purple awning, I assumed. Most of the work had been done steadily over the last two weeks, and I found very little to do. By noon we finished, and I stepped out and locked the door behind me for the last time.

“Well,” I said, ascending the half-staircase to street level. “That’s that.”

“Yes,” said Carolyn, lifting her bookbag onto her shoulders.

“Are you looking for another job?”

“Oh no,” she said. “It’s easy to find this kind of work. Besides, I’m only doing it temporarily. I’ll graduate next year.”

“Sure,” I said, remembering our conversations about her work in the School of Forestry. “You’ll be farming trees in no time.”

She laughed, her eyes crinkling up. I had studiously avoided noticing how fetching that was while she worked for me. “What are you doing for lunch?”

“Meeting some friends at the Educated Burgher.”

“Oh, well, I’m heading to the bookstore. I’ll walk with you.” We started up York Street, and I took a deep breath. “I hope we can keep in touch, Carolyn,” I said.

“Sure! You have my number.”

“Maybe,” I said, thinking back ruefully to the taped-up boxes and locked computer files.

“Here,” she said, grabbing my hand and taking out a pen, digging the numbers into my palm. “Now you won’t forget.”

I chuckled at this junior-high throwback. In front of the Burgher, I turned to her again. “Say hi to your boyfriend for me.”

“Oh, there’s no boyfriend,” she said impishly, opening the door. “Not yet.”

I walked on, turning under the covered entrance to the bookstore and walking inside. Confronted with the stairs, I paused. I had no actual business in here at all. I didn’t even need lunch, since I had brought a duck and goat cheese wrap in my bookbag.

I turned around and walked through the back campus lawns past kiosks to emerge again on York Street. On a whim, I walked north, past a few jean-jacketed loiterers outside Toad’s Place. At Grove I turned east, finding myself by the cemetery. I walked left and up one of the wide aisles to the remains of Eli Whitney and Noah Webster. After a circuit, my legs took me back out again up the stately promenade of Hillhouse Avenue, avoided the crowds of students on Science Hill, and headed out to Whitney Avenue against traffic, passing the Peabody’s giant rearing Triceratops, finding a steady pace along the sidewalks of the nineteenth-century mansions.

I walked with a steady, rage-burning gait I had gained from the last five years here. Lost in thought, I found myself crossing the border of Hamden. Once, this had been part of the great turnpike to Hartford, and I contemplated briefly walking the entire way. Instead, I slowed down, and stopped in front of the red magnificence of Eli Whitney’s huge barn. Across the street the Whitney Museum hunched below the mighty dam. I was tempted to poke my head inside, but heard the shouts of school groups and fled.

I crossed the reproduction of the famous covered bridge, and passed the old forge. On the mountain the spring greenery pressed onto the thin dirt trails, and I avoided a few grasping tendrils of poison ivy. I had the park to myself on this June weekday and could hear the red-winged blackbirds trilling and squirrels chattering. I crossed the park road, and then again, emerging on the open fields by the cliffs.

A towering monument stood to my left, with a lone figure, a straight-backed old man, saluting it. At the edge of the cliffs a few elderly people lingered watching a red-tailed hawk soar overhead. I looked out over the small city, my city, denser
with restaurants and galleries than almost any of its size, with the large trees of old New England to soften the hard edges of steel and glass. Those trees had once been towering elms, all killed off now and replaced by a new spread of oaks and sycamores. Beyond the fortress of Yale and the tall towers of the downtown, I could see small white waves break the slate blue Sound.

I was famished. Finding a seat on the orange traprock where I could look out, I opened my bookbag and took out the cold duck and goat cheese wrap and bottled water. Eating slowly, finding my only true pleasure in life, I remembered another pleasure. Carolyn’s smile as we parted was the first thing that made me think of the future. But I had been down that road before, and been rejected time and time again. Instead, I thought of the past, of Eli Whitney, and how he had been robbed of the cotton gin, and of how, someway, he moved here to the Mill River to manufacture rifles. How in the process he had birthed the modern factory, combining machine tools, interchangeable parts, and specialized division of labor. He had found the strength to start again. How? How did he not give way to righteous anger? It wasn’t love; he found that much later. It wasn’t honor, or greed, or power; he ignored those for the rest of his life. No, maybe it was the work he chose, the challenge of it, the creation and the success, the chance to contribute something and be rewarded for it. The work . . .

My father was wrong. Work is not just something to do, or to make money to support a lifestyle. It shapes personality and character with its daily machinations, forcing us into molds and patterns. Work is the tilth of life, a process that makes you who you are more than any other single thing.

I knew what I had to do.

□ □ □ □ □

I woke up Friday morning early, boiled a package of ramen noodles, and while they steamed in a bowl, threw in white miso, butter, and a raw egg, which scrambled on the noodles while I chopped a green onion and sprinkled it on top. Breakfast finished, I dressed and walked diagonally across the campus, the large trees of old New England to soften the hard edges of steel and glass. Those trees had once been towering elms, all killed off now and replaced by a new spread of oaks and sycamores. Beyond the fortress of Yale and the tall towers of the downtown, I could see small white waves break the slate blue Sound.

I shrugged, thinking that the archivist had no such compunction. “She’s a friend of mine. I’ll see her soon enough.” As I turned away, I noticed for the first time that she had a prosthetic arm.

Walking slowly through the second set of doors, I tried not to be distracted by the dark mystery of the place. I didn’t see P.J. anywhere at the long sets of broad tables. Nodding to the archivist I moved slowly toward the back, seeking into the small rooms to the left. Nothing. I went to the back and scanned the shelves, finding a biography of Ezra Stiles, and sitting down in the back I read and waited.

Forty minutes later, the door opened and I saw a flash of red, P.J.’s rain slicker. Ducking down and opening one of the glass cabinets, I peeked through the table legs, catching P.J. as she walked over to the Yale yearbook and class histories section that I had been searching weeks earlier. She put her slicker down, brushed at her stylish green pantsuit, and after pulling several books off the shelves she sat down, lucky with her back to me.

I waited until she had settled in to a rhythm of note-taking and slowly made my way through a series of what I hoped were nonchalant moves along the cabinets. Sitting down at the table behind her slightly to one side allowed me to see some of what she was doing. After a minute or two I gathered she was taking notes from the yearbooks about various Yale alums. Why? She made her way through a recent yearbook and then one from twenty years earlier. It didn’t make sense. I needed to see what she was writing, but her lettering was too small.

P.J. stood up and moved to put the books on the return cart, and saw me. “Daniel,” she exclaimed, the first time I had ever seen her flustered. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. The real question is, what are you doing here?” I asked, trying the direct approach.

“I . . . well,” she stammered.

“I assume you’re not looking at those class histories to find out what happened to your college boyfriends?” I said in a knowing tone, hoping she would think I knew her game. I heard a cough from one of the other patrons.

P.J. sat down in the chair and motioned for me to move around the table and join her. “I suppose not. You’ve found the secret of my success at last.”

I smiled, as if I did indeed know what she was talking about, and sitting down, flipped casually through her notes. As I did it, I realized that I did know what she was doing. “I guess it helps to know a little bit about the people you are dealing with.”

“Oh, Daniel, this place is a gold mine. I have met so many alums and made so many connections . . .” she said.
breathlessly. “I think that’s why they keep such good records in the first place.”

“How many people have you connected with... this way?”

“Dozens, Daniel. Only a few yield real results. But those dozens led to more, and more. And those I look up, too, and once I know things about their pasts, they forget they don’t know me well, and...you know the game.”

I didn’t, but I was beginning to understand how P.J. moved effortlessly from group to group, party to party. It wasn’t effortless at all, it was hours of research for tidbits of personality, probably hours more memorizing those tidbits. And as I realized it, a layer of cloudy mystery seemed to clear from not only P.J., but the dark fortress I was sitting in.

“So what are you doing here again?” she asked, batting her thickly mascaraed eyelashes.

“No, the store over on Orange Street. It’s for sale and I would love to manage it for you.”

“Hmm...” She sat back, toying with a flimsy scarf. “I don’t think so.”

My heart sank and the anger began to come back. “It does a steady business now and I could make it into something very profitable.”

P.J. fiddled with the scarf. “No, Daniel. It’s not my line.”

“Same thing as you, I guess.” I smirked. “Seriously, I have a business proposition.”

“Oh yes? You miss me, do you? Can’t live without me?” “That’s right,” I said, swallowing my pride. “How would you like to own an international grocery?”

“Like an international chain of grocery stores? My boy, I don’t know how rich you think I am, but...”

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I tried to smile ruefully, disappointed to the core. She reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “I do know somebody though, who might be interested.”

“That would be great, P.J.” I said, forcing a casual tone. “In fact, let’s do dinner. And don’t forget to invite someone. Perhaps that nice Carolyn girl from the office?” She smirked.

“At a restaurant? I can recommend...”

“No, he prefers a home-cooked meal.”

“Can we do it at your place?”

“No, no...” P.J. waved a hand vaguely. “That won’t do.”

I almost asked, then, if she lived at the hotel like every-one said, but I chickened out. After all, she was setting this up for me. Sure, it was out of guilt for putting me out of a job, but still. On the way out I smiled at the sweet cardigan girl at the counter, and impetuously asked her, “Do you like sushi?”

“No at all,” she said, staring at me suspiciously.

“Ah, well, this could have been a beautiful day.” I walked out, turning right out into the summer sunlight. Suddenly, fear gripped me. Other than the disaster with Jenny Wada, I hadn’t cooked for someone else since the Cheesesteak Palace seven years ago.

The next day, after burning through a hundred pushups, I walked under the purple awning and into the enemy camp for the interview with the Regional Manager. A wide counter, much more professional than HTP’s crowded entrance hall, was patrolled by two long-haired young ladies, who greeted me effusively and called for “Betsy.” I had expected to meet Shara from the encounter at Louis’ Lunch, but in an organization as huge as this, who knew who was in charge of what. After a moment, Betsy stepped out of one of the two offices and shook my hand, her huge blue eyes attempting to hypnotize me. I held the gaze diffidently, and followed her into the white-walled office. We made small talk, and soon got to larger questions of employment and style.

“What do you think you can do for us, Mr. Detweiler?” I told her that my experience was in management and quoted the numbers I had brought in as P.J.’s front man.

“Parents weekend, right.” “Yes, that’s right.”

“Parents,” I said scornfully, “are not interested in paying money for their genius children more than what they are already paying for Yale.” I laughed. “Which is a considerable amount. Besides, I’ve seen the little card table with trinkets and flyers you’ve set up before. And, no offense, it looks pathetic.”

The RM tried not to look offended, but failed. “And what would you do?”

“I have learned,” I said, deciding to omit how recently I had learned it, “that connections mean a lot in this world.
The creation of those connections and then the, forgive the term, exploitation of those connections is the way to improve business.”

The RM thought a moment. “That’s a little vague for my taste.”

“Well, since I no longer work for the competition, I’ll give you free advice. Forget the parents, because they despise you. Forget the students, because despite their status and GPAs they are as clueless as we were in college. Focus your attention on the advisors, the teachers, the deans. Convince them that your product is worthwhile, that it will help their students reach graduate school. They will sell it to the students, who will beg their reluctant parents, who respect the Yale professors as they will never respect an operation like this. Not only will you pick up all our students here, with your national resources you can double your gains at all the prestigious colleges and universities.”

The RM took a few seconds to process this torrent of information. “If you will excuse me, I’d like to make a call.” She left the office for the adjoining one. After a few minutes she came back. “I wonder if you’d mind repeating what you said to my boss.”

“Not at all,” I said.

So, I repeated the general idea of what I said, a little more politely, to the speakerphone on the desk, answered a few questions about how I had done this at HTP, and then I shook hands with the RM and left, thinking of possible dinner plans. A message on my machine from P.J. told me I had six days to decide.

During the week I called Carolyn and we had a nice chat about the local music scene, even though I had long since stopped caring about that sort of thing. I invited her to dinner, and she seemed a little intimidated when I told her P.J. would be there with a friend. “That’s a weird first date, Daniel,” she said, laughing a little. “But okay.”

Now that Carolyn was coming, I was going to pull out all the stops on dinner. I went over the bridge to the beautiful Wooster Square section of town, near Pepe’s Pizza, to the summer farmer’s market. The prices were more expensive than International Grocer, but they had things I couldn’t get there, and at this time of year the quality was amazing. I picked up a pork shoulder, Teff cereal, microgreens, and a bag of apples fresh off the tree. I also picked up one of my favorite treats, fiddleheads, even though it seemed a few weeks late for them. “Our last batch of the season, from the north side of the mountain,” the farmer told me. I inspected them carefully, but they seemed perfect. “I’m a lucky man,” I told him, buying the lot. And I almost believed it.

On the fateful day I prepared the pork shoulder with onions in the slow cooker, and before my guests arrived started the soup, hoping it would reach a nice blended state. The doorbell rang, and Carolyn came in. I gave her the grand tour, which essentially included the view from the living-dining room and, awkwardly, the bedroom. She noted my CD collection. “That is really pathetic, Dan.”

I scrunched my face at that.

“What? It is, I’m sorry to say.”

“No, the shortening of my name. Not a fan.”

“Not a fan of Dan, eh,” she chuckled. “I’ll remember that.”

The doorbell rang again, and I opened it to find my former employer and a small man of about her age with graying hair and a black sport coat.

“This is Jebediah Brick. Jeb, this is Daniel.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.” Where had I heard that name before?

“Jebediah owns . . . ” she rattled off a list of five local restaurants, three of which I had patronized at one time or another. I began to sweat, glancing back at the kitchen, embarrassed by the pervasive smell of slow-cooked pork and onions.

As if reading my mind, Brick said, “What is that enchanting smell? It’s better than any perfume.”

I chuckled nervously. “It’s a surprise.”

I motioned to the two bottles of Connecticut wine I had opened, a mineral-rich Chardonnay and a spicy St. Croix.

Then, in a panic, I searched the kitchen. What could I add to the dinner I prepared? On the spot, I whipped up a cod liver salad: a can of cod liver, mayo, homemade relish, and cayenne pepper. Putting small daubs of it with a sprig of arugula on water crackers, I plated these for hors d’œuvres. I noticed that P.J. had the situation in the main room well in hand, and rushed back to the stove.

While P.J. held forth to Carolyn and Jebediah, I took cans of cuttlefish in oil, and fried them with shallots and splashes of white vinegar. As it sizzled and caramelized, I added capers, mirin, and Tabasco. I tried a piece of the suckered tentacle, making sure it had gone past rubbery to soft, but not back to rubbery again. These needed to be eaten immediately, and after plating them in small soy-sauce bowls I brought them out to the guests with a smile. Then I took the lid of another pot on the stove, and scooped out splashes of white vinegar. As it sizzled and caramelized, I added onions.

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various stocks I could assemble. I sat down with the other three to eat this course.

“What is this?” Brick eyed the soup.
“Cream of fiddlehead.”
“Fiddleheads!” he exclaimed.
“They’re in season,” I said, shrugging.
They began discussing my paintings. “This woman should be in the Yale Gallery, don’t you think, P.J.?”
“We could have a section devoted to food.”
“The Cezanne of course.”
“Manet’s two apples.”
“Those twelve amazing plums, I forget the artist.”
“The dried fruit and nuts.”

We ate in silent for a minute, slurping the soup and polishing off the last bits of the appetizers.

Jebediah raised a finger, as if pointing to the earlier conversation. “And don’t forget the Hieronymus Bosch on gluttony.”
“I’m sure we need his sermonizing tonight. This food is amazing.” P.J. looked at me curiously.
“Really?” I heard Carolyn’s voice as I walked back into the kitchen, then it dropped to a whisper.

I whipped up a barbecue sauce made of ketchup, oyster sauce, red wine, Chinese five-spice, red pepper, cumin, butter, and barley miso. The tender pork shoulder slipped off the bone, and I mixed some with the sauce, wrapping it in fresh Ethiopian injera sponge bread that I had made that afternoon. A selection of my choicest pickles and a small salad of microgreens joined the wraps on clean white plates.

At P.J.’s urging, we talked about the International Grocer and my ideas for improving it. Then, while P.J. talked to Carolyn about her plans after graduate school, Brick and I got into a discussion about local, sustainable food versus global products, and fusion versus traditional fare. We agreed on the first that a combination of both was most desirable in a restaurant, and in life. But on the second I obviously came down on the side of fusion, while Brick championed traditional fare.

“But two of your restaurants do fine fusion cuisine,” I said, confused.

“Yes, I’m hedging my bets,” he said. “But give me a simple peasant dish that has stood the test of time.”

I nodded. “I understand that.” We sipped the wine. “But without new combinations, classics are never born.”

He nodded, clearly unconvinced. “Maybe.”

So, for dessert I decided to give something to bring Brick back to earth, and sliced apples thin, throwing them in a pan with butter, cinnamon, and sugar. After letting them reach a fine blistered brown, I served them with a touch of heavy cream from a local farm.

P.J. smacked her lips. “No offense, Jeb, but I do believe this is the finest meal I’ve had in quite a while.” She looked at the portions left on Carolyn’s plates. “What, like you need to watch your weight, girl!”
“I guess my secret is out,” she said.
“What’s that?” I asked.
“I’m a McDonald’s kind of girl.” Carolyn laughed. “I guess I always will be.”

Looking across the table at her, I tried to smile while a huge gulf opened between us.

“I like the wine,” she said, pouring the last of the Chardonnay into her glass.

I had planned on asking Carolyn to stay behind, but now I wasn’t sure. So, after dinner ended naturally with the last sips of wine, I shook her hand awkwardly, and then Brick’s. P.J. hugged me as she left. “I suspected you made those glorious duck sandwiches, Daniel.” Confused feelings welled up in me. Maybe she wasn’t the devil after all.

The next afternoon at my lonely apartment, the phone rang and I answered it greedily.

“Mr. Detweiler?”
“Yes?”
“This is Matt Braun, we talked on the phone last week.”
“I thought and couldn’t place it, but lied. “Of course. What can I do for you?”
“Well, that’s right. We’d like you to come down to corporate here in New York and talk to us about a job.”

I placed him then, the Regional Manager’s boss. “Is that right? Not the manager of the New Haven office?”
“No, no. We have another offer for you, Mr. Detweiler. I wonder if you could make time to come down.”

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“No, no. We have another offer for you, Mr. Detweiler. I wonder if you could make time to come down.”

We hashed out a date and time, and ended the call. Very mysterious. A few days later I put on my only suit and a red power tie and headed over the bridge on Church Street, turning left when I reached Union Avenue and the train station. Buying a round trip ticket to New York and hurrying down the escalator into the great sewer-like tunnels, I emerged on the platform just in time to catch the 8:30 Metro North. I wasn’t used to this kind of commute.

On the train into Manhattan I shoved down my worries angrily. I even found myself a little excited, and tried to stop thinking of the purple awning crowd as the “enemy” and rather as my ticket to a new life. New York City! I had visited, of course, but to work there was another thing entirely. As the train rumbled through the Bronx and over the bridge into Harlem I peered out the window, searching for markets, for
restaurants, for love. At Grand Central Station I grabbed some samosas with mint chutney and wolfed them down. I didn’t know how long until lunch, or if it would even be provided.

Shaking my head at the cabs along 42nd Street, I headed west across midtown. Crowds of people from every corner of the world swept by. I passed the Public Library and took a right turn in the theater district, finding myself slightly lost, turned around near Rockefeller Center, and finally arrived at the glass and steel building. I told the front desk I had an interview and they waved me through. Coming out of the elevator I was stunned at the size of the operation, spreading out over an entire floor, with classrooms and cubicle space intertwined. Though it was Wednesday before noon, several classrooms hummed with activity, and the sound of people clicking on their computer keyboards seemed deafening.

“Mr. Detweiler?” the woman at the counter said. “This way.”

We walked to another part of the floor, with larger offices and quieter hallways. The woman knocked on an open door and I saw two men in casual attire sitting across a desk, both with their feet up, tossing a purple stress ball back and forth.

“Daniel? Nice to meet you. I’m Matt and this is Trevor.”

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Instead of interviewing me directly they began telling me about their national operation, showing me maps and graphs. I commented on things I felt qualified to, and they included me in their game of catch. Then, Trevor stood up.

“Great, well, ready for lunch?’’

“Oh, man,” Trevor said. “I told you that we should wear suits to the office.”

“Yeah, we really don’t project an image of power.”

I laughed a little. “Well, I am used to an unusual boss, so I’m not sure why I expected something different here.”

“Ms. Mather? She told us that you were the reason her company did so well and that we’d be idiots if we didn’t hire you.”

My banh mi suddenly tasted like humble pie.

“And your ideas for marketing to high-end universities, well, they are complete game changers. We want you to do that for us at all the big schools.”

“It would mean a lot of travel,” Matt warned. “Mostly by train or car, of course. I mean, we aren’t a Fortune 500 company or anything.”

“No,” I said shrewdly. We all laughed. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

“We’d start you off at Yale and once you moved here you’d be based out of our office in Midtown. We’d run a test pilot for Columbia, Hofstra, and Fordham. Maybe NYU, too.”

“You guys have thought this out,” I said, trying not to feel overwhelmed.

We talked more, and they presented their formal offer. I told them I would let them know on Monday, and that I enjoyed meeting them. I meant it. They were fun and human, and the evil purple awning seemed a ridiculous prejudice of a far-off childhood. And they offered the chance to live here, in the greatest food city in the world. Not only that, but to travel across the country, trying out the infinite cuisines. Of course, it would mean cooking less. And the enjoyment of eating and the enjoyment of cooking was not exactly the same thing. What did I really want?

Maybe they had made it too easy for me, as if tempting me into a life of crime. I began to suspect ulterior motives. Perhaps P.J. was trying to get me out of her hair. Maybe she was afraid of an unlawful termination lawsuit. Maybe I had rights that I wasn’t aware of. I should have taken that business law class more seriously. And Trevor and Matt seemed too nice. What was that about a trial period? Twenty minutes later, on the train home, squeezing the purple stress ball, I wept for the first time in many years, at the stupidity of the
resentful conspiracy theory I had just concocted, at my lack of self-esteem and sinful pride, and at how even on a day like this I was unable to enjoy myself completely. But maybe in the future I could. Maybe even in old New York.

When I returned from Manhattan I found a message on my machine from Jebediah Brick. Dreams of saving Hui Zhong’s amazing grocery, and working side by side with her to make New Haven’s greatest soups, collided with my New York plans in an instant. Suddenly, the idea didn’t seem as appealing. Nevertheless, the next morning I met Brick at his newest restaurant, a zinc-coated modern joint with a tapas-style menu. A tight T-shirted man stood behind the bar, wiping glasses and fiddling with the register. I sat down on one of the high-backed metal stools.

“This place was really popular last winter, but has died down a little now,” Brick said, as if apologizing for the lack of customers on a Thursday morning.

I had never eaten here, but I decided not to say so. “Is that right?”

“Anyway, thanks for coming, Mr. Detweiler. P.J. has convinced me that you can be of service to me.” Brick sipped a coffee.

“Oh?” I tried to remain reserved and professional. Service, eh? And I noticed that he didn’t offer me coffee.

“First of all, International Grocer is not bankrupt. Quite the opposite from what I hear.”

“Really?” I tried not to appear too shocked.

“They are not selling their business, they are closing down, and I am not interested in convincing them otherwise,” Brick said, with the finality of a man used to making concrete decisions.

“I see.” Now I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Instead, I have another opportunity for you.”

“Shoot,” I said, unbelieving and suspicious.

“I have floor managers, of course, for each restaurant. But I am tired of dealing with them all myself and I need a senior manager to coordinate all of them.”

“Okay,” I said, unsure if I was hearing this correctly.

“But my problem is bigger. Along with taking care of the financial side of things, I also act as a sort of executive chef. I would want you to do the same, suggesting recipes, checking the quality of the chefs’ work, and generally making sure the restaurants are succeeding.”

“I don’t think I’m qualified for that,” I said frankly.

“I disagree. But I do have a little test for you. Come with me please.”

We walked back through a narrow hallway and through the swinging door to the kitchen. It had been a while since I had been inside a commercial kitchen, and I had only seen ones like this on television. I tried to orient myself.

“Oh, Detweiler. Poach an egg for me.” Brick smiled and folded his arms.

While the water worked to a simmer, I searched the fridges, and found the eggs and a tub of bacon fat. “I prefer duck,” I said.

Brick stepped to another fridge. “Here is some duck fat if you like,” he said noncommittally. “But as you do that, I want Brussels sprouts.”

Frustrated, I began a steamer. I would have started that before the egg, but luckily I hadn’t dropped it in yet. I heated up some of the bacon fat in a wide iron pan, and quartered a pound of Brussels sprouts. Throwing them into the steamer, I waited. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” he said. “I want those together somehow.”

By now I was sweating. I knew the pressure of a busy kitchen from the Cheesesteak Palace, but I had never been tested like this before. And this was a real test, unlike those ridiculous GREs. There were no trick answers, no multiple choice. Though there were a clear set of skills and formulas to memorize and apply, that was the least of it. I was sure Brick would expect the best. After a minute of thinking, I grabbed real bacon and threw it into the wide pan, where it crackled and spit.

Brick frowned thoughtfully. “The bacon is kind of cheating, but I like how you’re thinking. Have you ever made this before?”

“No,” I said. “All restaurant cooking is cheating. We just have to decide how and why to cheat.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it.”

As the bacon crackled on the pan, I dove into the refrigerator again, finding a jar of homemade mayonnaise and smelling it. “I would make this fresh if I had the time,” I said apologetically, crushing a garlic clove, chopping it, and mixing it into a huge dollop of the mayo. I added salt, pepper, ginger, coriander, and chili powder and tasted it, and added a few more spices. By now there was plenty of bacon fat in the pan and I threw the steamed sprout quarters in.

Now the egg. The water was simmering, and I cracked an egg gently, easing it into the water. I flipped the bacon, and got a plate with paper towels ready. By now the white was setting, and panicking, I searched for a slotted spoon. Brick handed it to me, and I nodded, setting the egg softly on a small plate. Taking the now-ready bacon out, I patted off some of the grease, then with a chef’s knife, chopped it into half-inch squares. I took another small pan and heated the duck fat...
until it was steaming. Meanwhile, the sprouts were caramelizing, and I flipped them a little. I found a hoagie roll, and threw it on the sizzling duck fat to toast it a little. The egg quivered on the plate a little as I delicately spooned a teaspoon of the hot duck fat over it, coating and giving it just a tiny bit of crust. Then, I took out the toasty hoagie roll, slathered it with spicy mayonnaise, put in the hot bacon and sprouts, and topped them with the glowing egg. Brick brought it to his mouth and crunched into it, sending the yolk of the egg dripping onto the floor.

“I’m sure I could do better with a little more time,” I said, tossing the pile of pots and pans into a sink. “That’s a lot of waste for one meal, I guess.”

Brick shook his head, looking at the sandwich. “Never apologize.” He took another bite, slowly chewing and closing his eyes. “You know your way around a kitchen, Daniel,” he said, finally, in a kind way that my father never would have. “Test over.”

We walked back to the zinc bar and I finally had time to think about the job, which would mean staying in New Haven rather than going to New York. But the salary would probably be higher, and tied to my level of work. It would also mean turning a private hobby into a business, which could be good or bad. Did I want that?

“Mr. Brick, this is a unique opportunity, but I must tell you that I am not interested in becoming a full-time chef. I had a taste of that during college, and I’m too old for it now.”

“Why the test then?”

“I wanted to be sure that dinner you made me was not a fluke.”

I shook off the compliment. “The chefs will hate me.”

“Bah! Chefs always hate the owners, until they are the owners.”

“But I’m not.” I clenched my fist angrily. Why was I whining about this?

“True.” Brick chuckled. “Anyway, you’ll be fine. This celebrity chef culture is all very well and good if it puts more people in the seats. But diners don’t come to Sally’s Apizza because of the chef. Why do they come?”

I thought a moment. “They come because the product is consistently delicious.”

“I went to the International Grocer the next day. The store was slowly emptying; it was clear they were not stocking the shelves. I panicked briefly, wanting to rent a truck and fill my small apartment, but stopped myself. Looking at the sad, empty shelves and the flickering light bulbs, I realized I hadn’t really wanted to manage this store at all, I had only wanted to save it for myself. The once-strange food I had discovered here had meant everything once. Now, it would be part of a larger pattern.

Hui Zhong came out of the back in an apron just as I filled my carton with a few items I needed for the coming week. “Hello, Daniel,” she said brightly.

I nodded, still wondering at her changes of mood. “Hui Zhong, I have heard some gossip about you.”

“What?” She seemed unconcerned.

“What? She seemed unconcerned. “I have heard that you are about to become very rich,” I said, extrapolating from Brick’s words.

She laughed happily, ringing up my purchases. “If I may ask, would you tell me how?”

“It was the soup, of course!” She cackled.

“What? How?”

“We sold the recipe for it to a big American company. You know, the one with the paintings.”

“The paintings?” I shook my head.
She showed me a postcard of an Andy Warhol. I laughed, all the anger I had built up against the mysterious elites who controlled this medieval world fleeing, hopefully for good. “That is wonderful, Hui Zhong.”

“We bought a big house in Branford, and we can afford to visit relatives in China any time we want to.” She brushed invisible dirt off her white apron.

“Then, pardon my saying so, why were you so sad?”

Hui Zhong looked confused, then a light went on. “I was angry at my son. I did not know that once we sold the recipe I could not make the soup myself.”

“Aha.”

“But now everything is fine. I make millions of dollars, this is the American Dream?” She smiled genuinely.

I nodded, shrugging. “But that was a perfect soup.”

“It’s just soup. There are more important things in life,” she said, obviously at peace with her decision at last.

I smiled wanly and shook my head, unable to completely agree. There might be more important things in life than the perfect soup, but the search for it is everything.

Bowing deeply to Hui Zhong, I left, listening to the sound of the plastic bird for the last time. Dropping the food at my apartment, I stared out the window at the cars rushing by on Route 34. I had a decision to make. But I couldn’t make it here. The apartment was too full of the past. Glancing at the LaPalombara painting, I decided on a new venue. I wound up the familiar streets, past a throng waiting outside the Schubert Theater for a matinee, and into the Yale Center for British Art, where I had never been before. Why not? A prejudice that now seemed as silly as P.J.’s bright red raincoat.

I walked up the spiral staircase into the galleries, admiring the natural wood borders and fabric walls, like a Japanese teahouse. I strolled past Whistler, Turner, and Constable. I lingered by Philip Mercier’s The Sense of Taste with its dish of figs and peaches. One of the Yale singing groups was rehearsing in the large library court, chanting Renaissance songs, harmonizing beautifully, chasing each other around the notes. The director walked back and forth on the primary-colored oriental carpet, giving notes. Their voices echoed through the museum. A few other students sat with lap easels, carefully painting. They knew what they wanted to do…more, they were doing it.

Finding a comfortable seat in front of the otherworldly light in Richard Parkes Bonington’s Fish Market, I studied the morning fog lifting, the pink and white flesh of rays on the sand. I saw the work of the day unfolding, the activity that made us human. A beautiful woman, girl really, sat next to me on the low brown bench. Her long, chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail, nose upturned, she watched the painting with me. I turned toward her slightly and she smiled, writing in a small notebook. I could say something, maybe give her my phone number. She smelled very good. Instead, I stood up and walked away.

Perhaps next time I would speak. Perhaps she would. That would happen when needed. I must become something I admired before I expected others to. For now, the work mattered. Life is work, whether for P.J. Mather or Daniel Detweiler. Besides, I didn’t want millions of dollars, or powerful friends, or even to change the world. I just wanted to be happy.

With that realization I walked outside, down the street, and among the tall oaks of the Green. A stage was set, and a jazz band was warming up. The city’s troupe of food trucks had pulled up along Temple Street for the concert, and the smells of sizzling meat and onions reached my nose. Suddenly I felt a keen nostalgia for this place, for the lonely, angry hours I spent here finding myself. Was this because I was saying goodbye or starting anew? I couldn’t possibly make that decision on an empty stomach.