

"Five to Seven Minutes on High"

When we found the freezer broken we had just gotten back from spending all of our money on TV dinners. Max and I had found the massive appliance a few months beforehand, sifting through the guts of a burned-down Arby's. It took four men to lift, barely fit into the back of Ricky's van, and the weight of it pushed the tires to their limits. We were surprised it even lasted as long as it did. Still, the timing couldn't have been worse. We'd bought enough dinners to fill the thing.

Lacking both Styrofoam coolers and the means to obtain ice we resigned ourselves to eating as many of them as we could before they thawed. We sat like chess masters on either side of the table, communicating through stony glances our mutual respect for the task at hand. Neither of us knew how long they would take to thaw, or how long they'd keep once they had. Ideally we'd be done quickly enough that we'd never find out. I put the first round in the microwave and hit the button.

"You know if we do this right," Max said, "we probably won't even need to eat for a while. We can live on stored body fat, like a camel or a bear or something."

"If we do this right," I said, "it'll be a while before we even want to eat."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." His gaze fell and his eyes grew dull.

The timer on the microwave dwindled, and like a starter pistol it finally beeped.

"Let's do this."

We started with the fried chicken. It felt like rubber fried in lard, and tasted like the same but with a dash of snuff. The corn was

corn only insofar as it was small and yellow. The potatoes were chalky at best. The brownie tasted like chicken. We ate slowly, pacing ourselves despite the urge to take it all down like medicine. We ate dinner after dinner this way. Salisbury steaks with gravy like tobacco water, chicken nuggets unburdened by the necessity of flavor, peas like little green bunny turds and stuffing in which I could swear I saw Chinese bylines. Meatloaves.

After we'd each eaten eight we hobbled out to the stoop for a cigarette break, bloated and delirious. After a couple of minutes Ricky walked by.

"Hey guys," he said.

"Hey Ricky."

"Christ, you guys look like shit. Did you get more of that scotch with the rocking chair on the label?"

"No," Max said, "we spent all our money on TV dinners and when we got back the freezer was broken."

"The big one?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Wait," Ricky stepped back and held up a single open palm. "You guys aren't trying to - "

"Yeah," I said.

"Shit!" He said.

"Yeah," Max said.

"Do you two want some help?"

Max and I looked at each other and shrugged.

"Yeah."

So we let him in, and he ate with us. More dinners, more ham with the texture of gym mats, more chopped sirloin and lima beans which left the same dull tang on either side of the tongue, more fish fillet that tasted the way a widow feels and more pork with neither chops nor loins. It wasn't long before Ricky's cheeks puffed out with a restrained belch and he pushed his tray forward.

"Guys," he said, "we're gonna need some help."

We called everyone we knew. Given the scope and urgency of our request it wasn't difficult to solicit help. Friends, acquaintances, and strangers all filed into our apartment in a near endless procession. It became an event of sorts, a party with a purpose. Max and Ricky and I assumed the role of overseers, handling meal requests and busing the trays back and forth. The noises in the place were a gentle cacophony; the dull thuds of fork against plastic sounded like a field of muted crickets, and the sound of chewing was like a million boxers pounding a colossal wet sponge. A reporter from a local paper arrived, eager to latch onto a story about the rallying together of young people. The pile of uneaten dinners slowly dwindled until finally there were none. Empty plastic trays lined the floor like fliers after a political rally. After saying its goodbyes the crowd poured itself out the front door, a collective mass of stomach cramps and regret, and left us with the mess. Max and I agreed it best just to leave it till morning and go to bed. Before leaving the kitchen I went over to the freezer and kicked it, stupid thing. Something inside of it sputtered, and the quiet whir of its motor resumed.