

Best Served on Crackers

“Hey, can the ‘Nash stay over after soccer maybe?” Morag’s son Trevor asked from the back seat.

“Yeah. That would be cool,” Parnell Nash chimed in, sniffing as he always did. Morag had never seen him not congested.

She gripped the steering wheel. She didn’t have a problem with most kids being over. Didn’t mind the inevitable mess any company brought with it. Even the loud late hour shenanigans two ten-year-old boys with boundless energy guaranteed in the event a visit became a sleepover.

Most kids.

Parnell Nash, or “the ‘Nash” as his friends called him, was different. Mind you, there were things about him Morag could get around. For instance, his glances far surpassed the unwritten allowable time limit one can look at someone. Morag’s own calculation was a hair under three seconds, so four settled well into the staring category.

His laughs never changed tone- always a forced maniacal bellow regardless of occasion and longer than necessary. Sometimes the things he laughed at weren’t funny at all. His shirt, which he never changed, ever, had a quoted paragraph written upside down that she never had a chance to read, but presumed it was something inflammatory.

What she couldn't get around was when she had seen what he did to bugs when he caught them and thought no one was looking. And once she thought she heard him confess to wanting to do it to a cat, but he denied saying it and she couldn't be sure.

She had never seen grade five photos of serial killers and life-long criminals; but she imagined they looked somewhat like Parnell Nash.

"Umm, yeah. Maybe. We'll see."

As usual, they turned from Main on to Lynch Street, the easiest and quickest route to get to the field. Part way down that they had encountered a construction detour sign and had to divert down a smaller obscure street of abandoned houses.

Trevor looked out the window at the change in direction.

"Where are we going?"

"Detour. Construction."

"Are we gonna be late?"

"I don't think so, Trev." Her husband hated her using abbreviated versions of the kid's names, but he wasn't here.

They drove a few blocks, past a mobile solar powered cart with flashing amber lights advising of additional construction ahead. Soon, another cart, this one with a traffic light stopped them at a vacant intersection.

They waited, the kids not so patiently, for five minutes with still no changes. It was the 'Nash of course that saw it first. That was just the type of thing he did.

He padded his shorts. "There's a store here. I think I have change. Can I run in there for a minute?"

Morag looked and wondered how she had missed seeing the building. Come to think of it, she hadn't remembered ever seeing a store sitting there, although she was certain she had been down this street at some point.

The building had weathered brick, and the faded blue paint was its peeling off its wood framed windows. It got right to the point on its sign, which was fastened above its door and posted a promise of "Pizza and Beer, Clean Washrooms."

"You guys just had supper," Morag answered. She then softened. "Maybe after the game."

Clean Washrooms. There was nothing to make a person realize they needed to relieve themselves like hearing the mention it.

That slight urge that she didn't even realize she had had would now dog itself out of her subconscious and override all other thoughts while her and other parents at soccer discussed other parents that weren't present.

Clean Washrooms.

There was no indication of construction on the street even taking place. Nor any indication of the light changing anytime soon, and they still had lots of time to get to the field.

Morag pulled over to the curb and fished around in her purse for ten dollars to give Trevor for the two boys. "Save your money Parnell. Nothing big, do you both understand?"

And make sure you go out the curb side.” She was talking to them both in the mirror. Parnell wasn’t quite cross eyed but wasn’t quite not cross eyed either; she never knew when he was looking at her, or just in her general direction.

“Of course! Yeah!” they agreed and were out the passenger rear door before the car was even shut off.

There wasn’t a single person in sight. Morag turned the car off and walked into the store.

The scent of lavender was the first thing she noticed; a perfect balance of subtlety and confidence that could only be described as intoxicating. It brought her to a time from her youth she didn’t even remember forgetting about, and a thin smile curved from her lips. A low key instrumental of jazz music played over an unseen speaker, and two different hues of fluorescent lighting shone over the rows of unorganized wares on steel shelves. Touristy ceramic plates and cheap BBQ tongs, neither which would ever be bought, sat side by side covered in a thin layer of dust. There were sweaters promoting a town named Hammersmith, and movie rentals from thirty years ago.

The store was cluttered despite carrying almost nothing of value, but everything was kept right by the smell of lavender. Morag’s need for the washroom subsided some and she continued to stroll around.

She got to the end of an aisle, took a left, and let her feet carry her where they seemed to want to travel. By now she was no longer thinking of the soccer game or the

washroom at all, just following the scent of lavender in circles around the store in an endless loop.

She crossed paths with Trevor, and both mother and son were so entranced by the melodic smell of lavender that neither person acknowledged any formal familiarity with the other. She next crossed paths with the 'Nash and they ignored each other completely. Morag because she had by now lost her senses, the 'Nash because he hadn't had many walking into the store to begin with. The second time Morag and Trevor crossed paths, it was eight minutes later. This time it was as if the other person wasn't even there.

How long they walked around in the store is difficult to say. The 'Nash could have told you. The kid kept most of his diminished senses the whole time. All except for the sense of smell, of course, which allowed him to not fall victim to the hallucinogenic scent as the others had.

Aware that something was terribly askew but too excited to do anything about it, the 'Nash was well into his third beer as was advertised and trying to break into the cash register when the creatures from far away came to collect their harvest.

Time was not for the creatures as it is for us, and the duration it took to appear and disappear was under a second. During this they raised the roof of the building on its hinge, bound the arms and legs of the those captured before whisking them away, and relowered the roof. They tidied up the outdoor signs, adding "Hardware for Sale" and "Whine" signs above the existing sign above the door. 'Whine' 's intention had been 'Wine', but with so many languages to master on this planet, one could hardly fault the harvesters for that.

They had started toward their next live trap, this time in a small French village near Nice, when they stopped, returned, and grabbed Morag's car to discard once back in space.

On the spaceship, there is always a short time when those captured regain their senses. The lavender wears off and the new asphyxiant hasn't yet kicked in. Tears are shed, along with other bodily fluids, which is the reason for the outfits worn by the harvesters. These outfits are not unlike the oil cloth of our own fishermen and butchers.

By the time Morag regained her faculties, she was hung upside down by both ankles in a large, dimly lit smoky room. She was among dozens of other inverted people in various stages of consciousness. The hum of the spaceship was low but always present and with it a minute vibration comparable to what one feels on any large vessel.

With significant effort she spit and snorted out the goop that had been hastily shoved in her mouth and nostrils- the aliens' version of an apple. She gagged and retched, then screamed, yelling Trevor's name as she strained to look around her. He could have been within a few people down the line, but it was hard to tell for sure. Beside her was an unconscious teenager in a white and black striped jersey- one of the soccer game's referees that she hadn't noticed walk into the store and never made it to the game either. On the other side of her was the 'Nash.

He had been awake and smiling the whole time and hadn't even bothered trying to remove the gunk in his mouth and nose.

During Morag's lucid moments of absolute panic and fear for her and especially her son, the absurd thought came to her that the one-time Parnell Nash's stupid shirt was

upside down and able to be read properly to anyone standing upright, she still couldn't read it.

The kid's team lost their soccer game anyways.