

I'm Starving! Aren't you?

CW! Cannibalism

"I spotted a new bird today," Billy said after a lapse of silence. He sat at the rounded table covered in fine cloth. His father, in his double breasted, shiny black jacket, had craned his face away from Billy in search of a waiter. He remembered his father's anticipation: the fervent buzz of his nose-hair trimmers in the bathroom. Every detail was finely trimmed.

Billy wanted a lifetime of birds, so he started again, "It was a rough-faced shag. Isn't that a funny name?"

"Enough of that, we're at a nice restaurant," said his father, face still turned away. His waving hands being the only thing that faced Billy.

"Mother, what do you think?" asked Billy. Disappointingly, he only saw the intricate braid in her chestnut hair, ornate with tiny gems. The curls in her braid and the gems caught glints of the candle light. It twinkled.

Even from here, Billy admired it all: his father's jacket, his mother's hair. Oh how they glimmered! What a treat, to dine with his parents!

When the waiter finally appeared, Billy watched as they took down his parents orders. He squinted over their shoulders to see the menu, but the words were nothing more than fuzz. The waiter, kneeling between his seated parents, barely held the notepad as the pen sped through it. His parents kept ordering. Billy watched the pages of the waiters' pad flip up, and then again, and again.

When the waiter disappeared, Billy asked his parents, "How much did you order?" Setting the menus on their lap, finally turned to face him.

Billy waited in anticipation when his parents turned towards him— But something must've happened. As he traced the edge of his father's turning face, he waited for the contour of his nose— but instead, where his nose *should've* been, he was met with a sort of concave. And as Billy's eyes moved, he saw the absence of them in his father. Instead of his father's nose, mouth, and eyes, he saw fleshy valleys. It was as if someone had hollowed his father's facial features out, and replaced them with a layer of thin, taut skin. Billy began to wail as his view, with mouths absent and a silence so wide it made the table feel like an ocean.

Even then, the voids were sadistic. Because when Billy was next to them, he could hear their respiration, the soft wet noise when they smiled with their teeth, the click of their jaw. He could even have almost told you what they were thinking, but for the most part their faces were sucked away. Perhaps by a vacuum of neglect.

"Enough food," his Father's void said, glancing at Billy's mother. She nodded— Did they know? Could they see what Billy saw?

"I've finally got an inkling about my career," Billy tested. His parents' matte skin absorbed the light as they shifted their faces to listen. "I've decided to apply for the painter's academy."

His parents glanced at each other.

"Why not just get a job?" His Father asked, tone strange and tight. The depression on his nose began to ripple, almost as if a new one was beginning to poke through.

"Jobs are hard to come by," Billy said.

His mother, whose eye sockets began to move, as if there were something rolling beneath the surface, chimed in, "You're saying that the half-a-million college degree isn't going to get you a job?"

Billy could see the tip of his father's nose again, "Do you think you're going into the right industry?"

"Well?" His Father asked, through the starry night of his mouth-shaped hole.

"I'm not sure that's what's important," Billy muttered.

"Alright, fine," his father said, "but if you're going to be a painter, be the best one you can be. Get really good so you can sell your painting for millions." His father said. From context, Billy gathered they were still displeased.

"I could paint birds," Billy said, "Did you know that the rough-faced shag is endemic to New Zealand?"

Whatever new movement, new growth, that Billy was hoping to provoke stopped immediately. Their faces receded, their expressions swallowed in the depressions that sat on them.

"The appetiser," the waiter whispered, as he set down a tureen of soup.

His mother, instinctively, took Billy's bowl and began to scoop the liquid into it. Her shoulders perched, her tone piqued, "Billy, look! Our special treat."

As she set the bowl down, he watched the opaque soup swirl. Something triangular bubbled from deep inside and popped to the surface.

A nose bobbed in his soup.

He yelped out a half-strung chord like a spoon clinking on glass, and put his napkin to his face. He breathed in the smell of the fabric and thought of the rough-faced shag.

"This is a nice restaurant," His father said, holding his fork by the prongs. Billy peered over the napkin to watch as his father pressed his thumb into the fork. In a clipped tone, he said "We're paying for this meal out of our own honest pocket." He nudged Billy's bowl towards him. "Why won't you eat?"

"We're here to feed you." His mother said.

How could he tell them? He played the conversation in his head:

I miss you! I miss you, dearly! I miss your strong arms. How you would look at me with knowing intent with eyes focused and mouths closed.

Confused, they might turn their heads to each other for a moment, and then respond, *We're right here, in this state.* They might be still and stare down at the bowl, anxiously waiting for him to do what he won't. His dad would say, *Look, we're at this nice restaurant. This soup with my nose in it, it's for you. It's the thing I use the least on my face anyways. Later, I'll give you my eyes because I will always remember your precious face. And finally, my mouth, when I no longer have anymore to say because it'll be distilled in you. Take it. Eat it. It's all for you.*

How could he tell them? The soup was rancid. A clear liquid with fluffy bits of a green-tinted white that curdled like spoiled milk. The nose settled into the liquid, allowing the soup to fill its nasal cavities. Bits of short hair were peppered into the soup. Billy watched as the soup swirled in and through the nose like how his parents' skin had.

Is this not enough? they might've asked, gesturing to the grand meal before them.

"Well?" his Father asked, as he tapped his fork on the table.

Billy nodded to himself and raised the napkin to his face again, pinching his nose while he ate. The flavour didn't give. He felt it all: the sweat, the crunch of small flakes of gooey-salt, the texture of nose-hair.

"Finally! You're worth the wait," his mother said as she watched Billy bite into his Father's nose. She raised her spoon to serve herself. Her hair was still coiffed, it twinkled along with her void.

Billy's father's shoulders relaxed, he finally took his napkin from his plate and set it down on his lap and adjusted his knife and fork.

As they began to eat, they let out a peal of laughter that shook the table. As he scooped the soup into his bowl with so much of his body that his jacket tore at the seams, his father exclaimed, "I'm starving! Aren't you?"