# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## The Next Meal Is Lunch

### *Merrill Joan Gerber*

One of the gay boys across the alley was hucking and hocking in his bathroom which looked directly into Anna's kitchen window. She pushed away her dish of cottage cheese--how could a person be expected to eat when these poor boys were dying like flies all over the place? And where were their mothers on a special day like this? If one of her daughters had AIDS, Anna would be right there, holding the bowl for her to throw up in, especially on Thanksgiving, when no one should be alone.

She was alone. Accidentally, of course. A big dinner had been planned, as usual, at her daughter Janet's, with Carol making the stuffing and Gert and Harry bringing the canned sweet potatoes. But then Janet had come down with the flu. Anna certainly hoped it was the flu, but these days who could know? She had always thought her son-in-law was perfectly respectable, but from the talk shows Anna knew that almost anyone you met could be a closet bisexual or have a file cabinet full of heroin.

Today was a hard day to be alone. It happened Anna's birthday came this year on Thanksgiving Day, and this one was not chicken feed, this was 80, this was the Big Time. She'd already been planning how she would break up and distribute the chocolate turkey her daughters always gave her. The hollow head, she'd decided, would go to her youngest granddaughter who had won a $10,000 scholarship to college and proved to Anna--not that she needed proof--the superiority of her genes.

She heard the sick boy cough again, half-choking, half-strangling. Could the AIDS virus leap across an alley? On the news they talked all the time about safe sex! When was sex ever safe? At its best it gave you children, and some children (of course not hers!) could ruin your life as fast as any fatal disease. Thank God Anna was past that minefield--no chance of getting pregnant, and no chance of having rotten children. Now all she had to worry about were the diseases of old age. When she went, she wanted to go fast. And if she had the bad luck to linger, she only hoped someone would make short work of her.

It crossed her mind she should cook chicken soup for the gay boy and bring it in to him, but, as usual, whenever she had a generous impulse, her good sense ruled it out. Neither did she want to hang around here and listen to him *krekhts* all day.

"So I'm going for a walk," she announced to her furniture, to her two pianos, to the ghosts who hopped around her apartment. "I should only live to

see you again, I shouldn't be mugged." This was said to protect her from the evil eye, though Anna had no use for those old and meaningless superstitions. Still, if a person anticipated all the terrible conclusions, they couldn't sneak up on you. She didn't take a purse-a strategy designed to discourage muggers, and she took her ID in her sweater pocket, in case she got hit by a truck.

A truck hit Anna the minute she stepped off the curb at Melrose and Fairfax. For the first time in her life she flew like a bird, but grunting. And hit down like a rock, but bursting. Blood was in her mouth. She saw a Mexican jump out of the truck and felt him take her gently under the arms and drag her back on the sidewalk. She was sorry she had ever wished they would all go back to Mexico. He was staring into her eyes with a passion she couldn't identify, but it moved her. She wished he were her son. Daughters could be devious (she was lucky hers were not!) while sons usually adored their mothers. She was about to ask him if he was good to his mother when he stamped his foot.

"Lady! You crazy? You must be blind!" He pinched her arm. "Give me *money.* You make me late for work!"

He growled over her with a dog's mouth, menacing her, his mustache curved like a scythe. Anna felt a veil descend over her eyes.

"Shit, man," he said. "Shit, you losing me my job, man." He kicked at her thigh. She saw him climb back into his truck and roar away.

"Give me money," she mumbled as she lay her head down on the pavement. "Give me money. That's all anyone knows these days.

The Day Is *Thursday*
The City Is *Nectar Hill*
The Weather Is *Cloudy*
The Next Meal Is *Lunch*

The sign hung on the wall directly in front of Anna's bed. Anna privately added a fifth line:

The Person Forced To Read
This Is A *Moron.*

She had lain here during the risings and settings of several suns, but the day remained Thursday, the next meal always lunch. She was strapped into her bed; at intervals she was turned like a frankfurter on a barbecue grill. A pattern of motion occurred around her: white-coated forms circled in the hall. Nurses slid along on their rubber shoes, carrying Dixie cups filled with little pills; aides, with their sullen faces, threw down lunch trays, refilled water pitchers. An old woman

in a red furry robe pushed her wheel chair up and down the corridor, crying: "They poison my food. My son stole my house. What comes out in the toilet is black. No one believes me." In the background an old man crooned "Nonno, Nonno," never stopping, never changing his tone.

The moment Anna's daughters materialized at her bedside, she said, "Get me out of here." She saw them look at one another. "Listen," she said. "The weather isn't cloudy, the next meal isn't lunch, and I'm not a vegetable. Not yet." She motioned to the other two beds in her room, sporting horrors she preferred not to memorize. "You can't get lox and bagels here. What does it cost me to stay here a day?"

Her girls gave each other another look. They'd already explained to Anna that the hospital to which the ambulance had taken her refused to keep her because she wasn't badly hurt, so until her dizziness went away, she had to stay here in this nursing home. She'd told them she wasn't dizzier than usual and she wasn't ready for a nursing home. Now a panic rose in her lower belly, along with a premonition of her future here, a place from which she couldn't call her congressman or write a letter to the newspaper, or threaten anyone with a lawsuit. Unable to escape, she would be reduced to a lump of nothing.

She thought of her miserable apartment with longing; it now seemed as spacious and fragrant as Yosemite itself, her narrow stall shower a waterfall, her white stove vent a snow-capped mountain. Never mind the Armenian's barbecue fumes, never mind the germs coming across the alley from the gay boy. A haven of freedom was what her apartment was--where no one told her what day, what weather, what town she was forced to endure in. Was it possible she would never get back there?

In a drawer by her bed at home she had her Hemlock Society card; if her daughters didn't get her out of here, she would phone the society and ask for the name of some doctor in Holland who could mail her the correct pills as soon as possible. Was it a major problem that her children would be insulted when they realized they weren't important enough to keep her alive? She began to compose a note to them: *"Believe me, children, this has nothing to do with the way you treated me and it's not that life wasn't worth living,* espe*cially with your father (I wish I believed I would meet him and be his footstool in heaven, but dead in my opinion* is *dead, what can I tell you?) and it's not that my grandchildren aren't dear to me, but look, let's face it, they're not interested in me—do they ever come to visit?"* This last she decided to leave out--she didn't need to create any extra hostility. *Please be advised I'm no coward--you'll find out* some *day that old age isn't for* sissies.

She began to imagine her funeral: what she wanted was for the girls to play a tape of herself performing Mozart on the piano; maybe a little Chopin, a

page or two of the Pathetique, a little Claire de Lune--a sampling of her well-rounded repertoire. And definitely no fancy ceremonies. Certainly no rabbis, those crooks. No strangers either, just a tasteful gathering to the tune of great music, played by Anna's gifted but deceased fingers.

She sensed a breeze passing over her face, and saw some papers flutter in front of her eyes.

"Ma?" she heard. She blinked. "Janet and I have some papers we think you should sign." A thin tube--a pen-was slid into her hand; a hard surface appeared beneath her forearm. They unstrapped her straps.

"What papers?" she said.

"We think you need to let us handle your money from now on, Ma," Janet said. "If you give us your money--then after two years the government will pay for your bills here."

*"Two years?"* Anna yelled. "You think I'm going to stay in this zoo for two years? You're crazy!"

"A lawyer advised us to do this, Ma, it's perfectly legal. It's just a protection."

"You're seeing lawyers about my money?" Anna said. "Who are you protecting?"

She knew the look they were giving each other; it was the look you give over the body of a crazy person.

"What're you doing, Ma?"

Anna rolled out of bed and landed with a clunk on the floor. The stroke-victim in the next bed peered down at her and began to hum a Christmas carol.

"Listen," Anna said, on her hands and knees, "a Brownie troop is coming tomorrow to bring candy canes. The aides are putting up a Christmas tree in the hall. A chaplain is coming to pray with us and remind us of the suffering of Jesus. You want me to be here for *that?* I'm still your mother, children," she said fiercely, "so get me out of this joint right now."

At Carol's house, they argued with her all night. They wanted her to give up her apartment. The time had come. All right, she was a reasonable woman. She could see the sense of some of their arguments: it was dangerous to live alone, hard to shop, she never liked to cook much, anyway. In a retirement home she'd have better nourishment, security, care, protection, and, if she fell, help on the spot. The two of them would take care of everything, move her to a place nearby, they'd visit her all the time. (No one said anything about her living with them, but fine, she was a modern old woman, she knew children didn't take you in anymore.)

"You wouldn't have to visit me all the time, believe me."

"So you'll agree to move?"

"I'm helpless in the hands of fate," Anna said. "What can I do?"

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She moved her two pianos with her; it wasn't easy fitting them into her room, but Anna was gratified to see it made quite an impression on the staff of the Country Gardens Retirement Home, how their mouths dropped open when the elevator groaned under the weight of her instruments, one baby grand piano, one upright. In her room, she directed the movers to set her bed between the two of them so that she could reach up with either hand and find a keyboard waiting for her.

"So children: this is the last stop," she said lugubriously for her daughters' benefit as the three of them signed registration papers at the desk in the lobby, but she was noticing a bunch of old ladies watching her, ladies with legs like elephants, ladies with eyeglasses like pyrex plates. She saw a couple of old men, too; nothing to get excited about, stooped over, with walkers, with canes, but she had a feeling it wasn't going to be so bad as she thought. Who knew what energy she still had in her? When had she last had a chance to try out her popularity?

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At the end of her first week, one of the old ladies got hold of Anna and said, "Unkind things are being said about you in the dining hall, my dear. Bend lower and I'll tell you." They were examining the menu for the week, tacked on the bulletin board.

"I might slip a disc if I bend down," Anna said. She was very careful now, with the threat of the nursing home in her mind. "Just talk louder."

"You've *got* to wear your skirts longer," the woman whispered to her. "I'm telling you this for your own good. It isn't your fault you have such pretty legs."

"What should I do, cut them off?" Anna asked. The menu in front of them was unbelievable: crab quiche, Louisiana frogs' legs, chimichanga, chile relleno. At moments like this, Anna wished she had not dismissed so viciously the Jewish Home For the Aged. There at least they would occasionally have potato latkes, blintzes, kreplach.

"Also, certain people have noticed, I won't say who, that you don't wear earrings. You don't curl your hair."

"So tell them not to look," Anna said. "Tell them I believe in natural beauty."

"And one more thing we think you should know: stay away from the man in the brown plaid shirt. He has only one thing on his mind--sex."

"Believe me," Anna said, "I wouldn't go near the King of England if he had sex on his mind."

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The joke going around was that everyone at Country Gardens had AIDS; "Guess what kind of AIDS I have?" "You have AIDS?" "Yeah--hearing aids." Or: "Guess what disease I have?" "What disease?" "Oldtimer's Disease." If it made them happy to be comedians, let them be comedians, like the old lady who came down to dinner one night wearing a Groucho Marx nose. Anna hadn't liked vulgarity as a young woman, and she didn't like it now. Thank heaven she hadn't got coarse with age. Mozart and Culture were her creeds--she'd tell the old ladies to put that in their pipes and smoke it the next time someone asked her what church she attended on Sundays. Or she'd answer that her religion was Beauty, that she got spiritual insights on Rachmaninoff. What else could she say to all those clanking pearl earrings hanging between scrolls of blue-white hair and flowered polyester dresses; how did you defend against a little army of Church Ladies?

Anna wore what was left in her closet from the old days--graceful pleated skirts, sheer stockings, high heels (these she had to wear because of a spur on her instep) and a tailored blouse with a roadrunner pin (a gift from Abram) on the collar. She weighed a hundred pounds; the other old ladies weighed two hundred. She saw them looking at her calves, at her short skirts, and she swung her hips more grandly as she walked down the carpeted halls.

The shape of Anna's days had changed--at home she had had no structure: a walk to Fairfax was her outing, or she could lay there all day like a dog. But here they had everything: an exercycle room (a nurse right next door), a beauty shop, a library, a crafts room, a bingo room, a banking room where once a week you could cash checks. A maid came and gave you clean towels and sheets. How could she afford this? The fact was she had no money at all anymore; her girls had stripped her of every cent in the interest of some future good. They were paying her bills, and they told her to put money-worries out of her mind. If she couldn't trust her children, who could she trust? Her life of responsibility was over. She was free as a bird.

Coming toward the dining hall she smelled the luscious odor of frying onions (the thought of onions alone used to make her sick; now her mouth watered.) She felt as if this were the college she had never attended, the dormitory life she had never had. Heads turned when she came into the dining hall; if she could still see to thread a needle, she'd sew hems on all her skirts and make them even shorter.

Of course, when her daughters called her, she complained; the food was awful, the heater didn't work, there were roaches in the bathroom--and when they came to visit, she let her knees buckle, she told them she had headaches that her sciatica was back, her osteoporosis was going wild. The instant they were gone, she went downstairs and climbed on the exercycle, and did a mile.

The man in the brown plaid shirt took a seat across from her at dinner. "I'm Harvey and I'm eighty-six," he said. "I understand you have two pianos. Fancy that. I have two cellos."

"I don't do duets," Anna said.

"I can see you're a smart cookie," he said. "I can see you've been around. Now me," he said, "I am a famous architect. I built 280 houses in the San Gabriel Hills alone. I can prove it." He reached into his pocket and handed her a photocopy of an article, telling how famous he was.

"I'm not impressed," Anna said, handing it back. "At this point in my life, only Arthur Rubinstein could impress me."

"I have it over him," the man said. "I'm still alive."

"Maybe, but only barely," Anna observed. She ordered her dinner from the waitress. "Easy on the onions," she said. "I might have a date later on."

That night, Harvey-plaid-shirt knocked on the door of her room. When she opened the door, he pulled a gun on her.

"Stick 'em up," he said. Then he pulled the trigger. A flag that said *"Bang!"* fell from the barrel.

"They told me you were a sex maniac," Anna said. "You go around armed, too?"

"Only when I meet my match," he said. "And I think I have, kid, with you."

"You certainly are conceited," Anna told him.

"See what I mean?" he said. "I met my match. You and I are a pair, kid. We're survivors. You don't get to our age unless you're smart, tough and lucky."

Just then the phone rang. Anna's sister Gert said: "How come you weren't in your room last night?"

"I had Bingo."

"A gambler you're becoming in your old age?"

"Don't worry," Anna said. "I use plenty of self-control."

"And the night before?" Gert asked.

"I was at Potpourri. We have an entertainment night. I was playing the piano for my friends."

"What's this with the night-life?" Gert asked. "And what kind of friends? You never made a friend in your life."

"You sound a little jealous," Anna said. "Someday, after Harry dies, you can move in here, you'll see for yourself."

"Don't tell me you like it there!

"Harvey was aiming his gun at her again.

"Don't aim for the eyes," she warned him.

"You have someone there?" Gert asked. "A friend, he just stopped by for a minute."

"A man in your room already! And you sound cheerful," Gert accused her. "A week ago you told me this is the last stop!" Gert said. "In your own words you said so. 'I hope I die in my sleep,' you said."

"Now I see it could be a long last stop," Anna said. "It could be a vacation."

Harvey fired his pistol.

Anna laughed. She had the clear impression she was getting younger.

**reprinted from volume 2, number 2, Fall 1990*