

Crab Head

By Andrew Barclay Newsham

I have had the thought of cooking the newsagent's head on my mind now for sixty five days, eight hours and seventeen minutes. At first this strange thought frightened me like a specter and set my heart racing but now its appearance in my mind is as comfortable as the prompt to phone my mother or go to the toilet. I'd thought that once it had lost its shock value it would retreat to the back of my mind with all the other junk but even though the taboo of the subject has dulled considerably, it still persists with the regularity of the dawn chorus. Psychologists would probably be able to provide a hundred different explanations for my strange fancy but I care not for their twisted reasoning. The sickest amongst them would interpret my thoughts as a latent wish and from this unstable ground turn it into a sexual lust. Only psychologists can put two and two together and get an orgy. In any case, I am not overly concerned; I know there is a vast wilderness of conscience and apathy between thought and action. At heart we are all camels chained to society's oasis and I could no more cook the newsagent's head than I could become Prime Minister.

But then again, someone must be the PM.

The newsagent has a face like a lump of dough in which a child has buried a pair of clams and every time I see him he blinks at me suspiciously as if I've just kicked over his rock in some midnight lagoon. To cook his head you would need a very large pan. I've seen the perfect one in Sainsbury's. It has a beautiful heavy wooden handle and a deep stainless steel basin. Don't worry; I haven't taken measurements.

It used to be the case that I would shrink from the idea when it loomed into my mind in the early morning gloom, but now it's happened so often I'm no longer shocked by it. Self-induced moral indignation only made things worse; the more I chastised myself the more real and exotic the dishes I went on to create. With every censure the thought grew like blood on a blotting pad and it now seems to have taken up permanent residence. It seems as unshakeable as gravity or God.

When I was a boy I could not look at the wallpaper in my Granma's dining room because skulls watched me from between the petals of the flowers. Of course I realize now it was just a trick of the light, an accidental pattern within a pattern, but once I'd seen them I could not get rid of them. I tried everything; closing my eyes, looking only at my food, actually listening to Grandma... nothing worked. In time they became commonplace, like wallpaper, and I even remember thinking they were a more fitting audience to my grandma's grim commentary on the death of her friends and her own aches and pains than me. I was, after all, only twelve and as such unaware of her serious preoccupations. Maybe she'd actually been talking to them. Towards the end she even began to resemble them. As everyone said at the time, we should have buried her earlier.

I bear no malice towards the newsagent; my thoughts about boiling his head have no basis in any personal hatred. All in all I've barely shared ten words with him in the past two years. We share the perfect relationship in this advanced capitalist society: he is a salesman and I am his customer. There is no bartering or cheery banter about the tabloid women. I buy my cigarettes from him and that is it.

I once heard two old ladies talking about him at the bus stop outside the shop. They both clung to string shopping bags, bus passes and the shared belief that he was a martyr. Listening to them, you could not help but agree that it was 'a shame'.

'The things he puts up with!' exclaimed one with indignation.

'He does everything in there and she never lifts a finger,' said the other.

'Well, you know,' the first said, dropping her voice, 'she drinks...'

'Really?'

Her voice rose in a quiver of excitement. 'She's in the store every day, always getting a bottle of something and I know he doesn't drink.'

Her friend tutted. 'It's a shame.'

'She won't even let him go to the pub and he gets the papers at three o'clock every morning.'

'Have you seen how she shouts at him?'

'Oh, I know, it's a shame.'

'And the kids!'

'I know. She expects him to see to them and run the shop. They all treat him like a slave!'

'He has the patience of a saint.'

When the bus came I sat upstairs, beyond the reach of their words.

Another time I was waiting for the bus when he was unloading boxes from the back of his car after a trip to the cash and carry. His sons were harassing him for money. Sweating and out of breath – he's very unfit – he was doing his best to unload while ignoring his children. Suddenly, his wife appeared at the shop door in her dressing gown. I'd seen her before so I was already acquainted with the disgust that is permanently etched into her face. She is a real virago. She reminds me of one of those portly Russian

dolls: inside she goes on for ever, a million carbon copies of her tentacle misery right down to the very last atom.

‘Can’t you do anything?’ she screamed. ‘You know I’m trying to sleep!’

He didn’t respond. He just calmly put his box down and took out his wallet and bought the boys silence with a ten pound note. She swept back inside, utterly disgusted. The boys snatched the money and ran off without so much as a thank you. He shrugged and raised his eyebrows to me in a friendly way as if to involve me in some sort of world weary kinship. I nodded back my recognition.

Later I regretted having observed the scene and the hapless shrug he had made for my benefit pissed me off. I do not share his implied bondage to life. I am no accomplice to his feckless existence with his fat spoilt children and his fat spoilt wife. In the morning I buy my cigarettes from him and we wish each other well in a polite, unconscious way. Does that involve me in his tragedy? Why did I have to nod back my recognition?

I don’t know when it happened but at some point things changed in my relations with the world. Not so very long ago – well, maybe a few years – people used to smile at me, women used to ask me to light their cigarettes, whenever I got talking to strangers they told me jokes. Lately, however, I have noticed a disturbing trend: complete strangers have begun to say things like, ‘Don’t worry; it might never happen.’ Last week in the supermarket an old man with white whiskers and overpowering aftershave told me that I shouldn’t, ‘let the bastards grind you down.’ I was only buying cheese. All in all, I’ve always considered myself a happy person. Well, as much as anyone is ‘happy’ without having that crazy religious lobotomy. I have the same blues as everyone and all the normal things: a nice house, elderly parents, a job that I loathe. The usual. If anything, it must be the job.

When I get home from work I sometimes feel so sore it’s impossible to do anything. I’m very sensitive; sometimes I can’t even sleep. I work for the social security department, only it’s not so much a job as a sick kind of game. Every day it’s the same shapes, the same patterns. They crawl up to my desk with borrowed flesh, blinking like sea creatures, scratching with tooth decay. They bumble about in a fog, worrying where the next fag will come from, their eyes crusted with sleepy routine. I think, ‘Is this really life, is that your life?’

On no account am I allowed to give any advice that might be helpful. I can get in trouble if I engage them in fractious conversation. They have rights. Their ignorance is a cornerstone of society, to be quantified by armies of bureaucratic clerks in the grip of some kind of brain fever. I once hung a sign on the notice board: ‘They must be maintained in the misery to which they have become accustomed!’ No one saw it; it was soon covered by second-hand car adverts. In this enlightened age I get them to fill out forms, then I fill out more forms, dealing with the futile movements of small change. As I go through the motions the world keeps turning, the same shapes, the same patterns, skulls smiling through the roses.

I am not a violent man and although it seems like a very evil thing to contemplate, I have thought about how it would happen. It's a kind of dream. On a perfectly ordinary morning I will wake as usual at seven and wash and shave and make toast while drinking tea and climbing into my suit. My mornings are always such a clutter of action. Walking my usual route to work, I light my first cigarette and the taste of Marlboro bites sweetly into my tongue. Everything is still and as I round the corner on to Dogpool Lane by the scrap yard, I notice the street sign has been vandalized again. Once more some wit has run off with the 'L'. Somehow it seems to fit. As I walk up the lane the newsagent's comes into view, its windows radiating a yellow chip-pan glow. Pershore Road is the usual logjam. Although the cars aren't going anywhere fast and you could easily walk between the bumpers, I don't dare risk it and walk up the road to the school crossing.

When I enter the shop to buy my cigarettes the newsagent greets me with his customary 'hello' and reaches for my daily pack. Relations pass as usual: simple, polite, conversation as I fumble through my wallet for change. Then, as I hand him my money, he calmly suggests that I cook his head. He asks me in a very matter of fact sort of way, as if telling me the weather report for the day, and I flinch in recognition of the social impropriety of the request, but only I just do so. My flinch is little more than a token.

'I'm sure you wont use too much salt,' he jokes, taking the awkwardness out of the situation. I laugh and he leads me through the beaded curtains into the back room.

We use a small guillotine for the decapitation. The blade is remarkably sharp and the cut swift and clean. As his body slumps to the floor I realize that he has clearly been planning it for some time. On a large table in the centre of the room he has gathered almost every ingredient and utensil I could possibly need. There is even a fondue kit with a picture on the box showing a Swedish family sitting a lobotomized skull. They are blond and they are having a whale of a time with the fondue forks. It is the moment of truth. Head in hand, I have to decide what to do. All is going smoothly except there is no cheese grater. NO FUCKING CHEESE GRATER. Can you believe it? One of the most standard and useful kitchen utensils ever invented and the useless fuckwit was more interested in making sure the fucking Business section was in the motherfucking Telegraph. Holding his bloody head in hands, I rush and kick his bulky lifeless trunk again and again until I lose my breath.

Slowly I regain my cool. There really is no reason for me to need a cheese grater since I do not have any cheese, but still. It is an infuriating oversight. Parmesan Forehead is now not an option.

When I am calm I choose how to cook him. I almost opt for the traditional roast; the finishing touch, of course, being an apple in the mouth. But this is mere fancy. His head will have to be boiled like a lobster. The oven sits in the corner. It is an unremarkable sixties model that could do with a clean but is otherwise adequate. On the opposite side of the room a table is neatly set for a meal. I fill the pan full of water and place it on the biggest ring of the hob. Threading a needle, I sew his eyelids closed to

prevent the eyeballs popping in the boiling water. The water boils in eight minutes forty two seconds and I add salt and then the head. After ten minutes the head starts to scream like Jimmy Somerville singing the opening the opening yelp of the Sylvester hit, 'I Feel Love'. It only lasts for a few minutes but it's enough to get the song stuck in my crop. 'Ooooo, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I FEEL LOVE.'

While I'm waiting for the head to finish, I try to fold a napkin into a rose in the fancy way they do in expensive restaurants. After several attempts I give up and settle for an airplane. I then drain the water, unpick his eyes and serve the head on a plate. To finish, I rub lemon juice into his scalp and then sprinkle saffron and nutmeg all over his hot red scalp. I push two lemon wedges up his nose and as there is a thick puddle of blood on the floor from the decapitation I reach down and get a dip of blood on my forefinger and place a spot of it on his forehead like a Hindu Bhindi.

After this I light the candle, bang the dinner gong and clear off out of the place. Yes, the blood stain on the floor is quite sticky and the oven is unacceptably dirty but I am the chef not the cleaning staff.

I have speculated about who will eat the dish and instinct tells me it will be enjoyed by the newsagent's wife and, of course, the thousand miniature wives within her. Even though I have explored the entirety of this fantasy – police conviction, extra unexpected guests, an appearance on *Ready Steady Cook* – I can no more stop thinking about it than he can stop being a sphere of dough with oysters for eyes. We are both to blame and, at the same time, we are both hapless victims of fate.

For some strange reason I just know his head will taste oddly of crab.