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Product Magazine - New Writing

Hunger

by Omar Kholeif

'All this will be gone in a minute'.

Blake tilted forward and gazed at the five trays of party food that he had neatly laid out on the kitchen table.

'Are people coming over?' Mandy questioned.

'No'.

'Well then, what are you talking about?'

'I'm going to eat it'.

'Are you really hungry?'

'Not really,' he shrugged.

'Oh, OK', she responded, still unsure if he was joking or not.

Mandy stood next to Blake, rubbing her lips together. She searched the kitchen with her eyes and tried to think how Dr. Phil would respond to Blake's comment.

'If you don't mind me asking, why are you going to eat all this food?'

'I need to,' he said resolutely.

Mandy crossed her arms and contemplated this for a second.

'Now, Blake, is there something that you aren't telling me? It isn't healthy for a twelve-year-old boy to over eat. I would understand, maybe, if you were training to be a professional athlete, but as far as I'm aware, you have to be well into your upper teens before you can be taken seriously, and even then, I doubt that you will be required to work your way through this many onion rings and potato croquettes'.

'A-ha', he responded, trying to fill the silence.

'I can't let you do this to yourself.'

'I need to.'

'Why?' She was almost yelling now.

'I need to fill the hole'.

Mandy paused and smiled to herself. A full beam smile. Blake's response had just assured that her psychoanalytical powers were as astute as ever.

'I need to fill it. Now leave me the fuck alone,' he hissed.

'As you wish!' She snapped back.

Relieved by Mandy's exit, Blake started sizing up the food before him, readying himself with a game plan. He had to think this out clearly. Now, if he were to begin from the right of the table, he would manage to work his way through the cocktail sausages, which would be a nice aperitif, and then he would reach the pizza, which sat at the centre of the spread. However, on the left side, there was garlic bread and chips, two of his favourite things. This realization jilted his thought pattern momentarily. This wasn't going to be a losing battle. As an alternative, he decided to work his way from both the left and

right, this way, he could get the best of both worlds before reaching the centre. But it didn't take long to spot that there were a number of holes in his arrangement. If he were going to survey items of food from both ends of the spread, then he would be too satiated to enjoy the pizza once he'd reached it.

Undoubtedly, the pizza was the prize piece of the spread, the main course—the item that would elevate his experience from a maniacal binge to something that resembled fine dining. No, he would have to work his way from the middle and then somehow figure out how he would fit everything else in after. Without much a due, he took a deep breath and began. He tore apart piece after piece of the pizza and quickly started to stuff it into his mouth. He didn't seem to take much notice of how he was destroying the presentation that he had so artfully prepared. He didn't even mind if the pizza cut outs had shared any resemblance to the shape of a traditional slice; all he knew was that he wanted to fire it inside of him as quickly as possible. Once he'd finished three quarters of it, he decided that it would be time to start fitting in the side dishes, which he had hankered for earlier. Despite the challenge, he battled on with the willpower of a trooper. Blake was a clever little fella, able to use half his mouth to munch up his chips, whilst, using the other to wipe down the bone of a greased up chicken wing. You had to give it to him; Blake was a kid who was never short of stamina. And so, he continued, at warp speed, slowing down was not an option.

Before long, his stomach started to hurt. The pain was severe; like knives piercing through his bowels. But, as much as he ached, he kept on binging. He was restless now. If he stopped, he would be a failure. Just a little fat kid who had eaten too much. He had to be a winner, a champion. This was Blake's equivalent to extreme sport.

The mounting pain quickly began to stifle him. An indigestive fire pulsated from his chest and began to shoot down the length of his body. Blake carried on. He was now hunched over the table, burying his face into the serviettes, voraciously chewing everything up. He resembled what a stray dog would have looked like, had it found itself in the kitchen of a Michelin star restaurant. Yet, the more his body pulsed--the more determined he got. He was nearly finished his task, when all of a sudden, he couldn't breathe. Somewhere along the line, he had lost control of his finely honed technique. On this occasion, he had swallowed a thick unheeded potato wedge without allowing the time for it to dissolve in his mouth. Instead of attempting the logical and trying to dislodge the item, he did what he knew best, he carried on. He shoved four onion rings into his mouth quickly without chewing them. Then, Blake fell to the ground with a resounding thud. To this, Mandy and Blake's mother came rushing in. His mother glared at her child momentarily, before launching into a series of unpunctuated screams. Mandy, on the other hand decided there was no better time for her to act as saviour. She pulled Blake up and performed a well-executed Heimlich manoeuvre. This eventually freed up his air passage.

Blake pulled himself together and coughed heartily before exiting the kitchen, leaving the little food that was left on the table. His mother, unsure what to do, started to scream once again, albeit with less intensity. Mandy shot her a fiercely judgemental look. This made her stop. Mandy continued to examine his mother, studying the middle-aged woman in the same manner that she had done earlier with her child.

The next morning Blake woke up to find that in place of breakfast there was only a glass of orange juice. After he finished this, he was summoned by his mother to meet her outside in her red Ford Fiesta. Once, he was strapped in, his mother started a little pep talk. 'I am taking you to see a psychiatric professional'. 'What?' he screeched.

'You can argue till your blue in the balls kid, but this is for your own good.' She paused and let out one of her trademark sighs. She was genuinely pleased with herself. She felt like a hockey mother, or better still, a bit of a Lorelai Gilmore type character; Tall, beautiful, effervescent. She checked herself out in the rear view mirror to make sure of this. Yes, she was indeed as beautiful as she had imagined herself to be. 'Great', she thought. One day, I'll get to write the How To Guide on Parenting. Maybe, she'd even be propositioned for a television show, or better yet, she could have her own Cable channel, there was certainly a gap in the market for a glamorous single mother!

She turned to look at her son who was twitching his fingers together so vigorously that they had gone from pink to blue to a slightly purple tinge. He peered up at her, looking more sycophantic than ever

before. He had worked himself into a most despondent state, channelling the technique of Stella Adler and Lee Strasburg, which he had come to read in his mother's acting books.

'Save your monologue for someone else Blake, I have no time for this,' she interjected.

'Is it dad?' he begged.

'For someone so smart, you do say the dumbest things,' she muttered.

Blake looked at her pleadingly. 'He's an orthodontist!'

Usually Blake would be armed with a quick-witted response, but he was ready to give up. He knew that his mother had worked herself into the role of the paternal carer and that she would not back down until she had accomplished something. He had come to know her mood patterns well, after all, his swings of bipolar whimsy where to some extent modelled on her own unpredictable shifts in nature. In particular, they were both renowned for their unscrupulous dramatic performances. These were usually hopelessly undisciplined; rarely paying attention to the socially permissible sanctions that surrounded them. Indeed, they were both entangled in the same quagmire---the need to be different from everyone else.

And so, Blake was forced to visit the faux medical professionals, who artfully queried and prodded him without end. In return for his time, he was offered a simple diagnosis. An acute self-image disorder, which could be remedied by a few residential visits to a private treatment centre. Playing the concerned mother, Jane agreed to the conditions, and gave the doctors permission to keep him under their watchful observation.

The whole process did not faze Blake. Undoubtedly, he could have done with a more enchanting getaway; the wilds of the country or the great open road perhaps, nevertheless, the sterilised inner city feel of the compound was perfectly acceptable. Although, it wasn't going to inspire him to write a groundbreaking novel about depression, nor was it going to make him anymore hostile – it suited him fine.

During the residency, Blake was encouraged to take part in physical activities, which he had little interest for. These were interspersed with team building exercises and in-depth psychiatric sessions. Eventually, he grew increasingly fed up with the experience; unfortunately, he was denied the usual outlet that he had always used to manifest his tired boredom.

When he was discharged, his mother decided that she no longer had to treat her son like an alien, and so, for the first time, their life drifted into the mundane. Even Mandy started to lose what little interest she had in him. 'Did they ever perform shock therapy on you?' She queried excitedly. Blake looked confused. 'You know like an electric charge through your brain? Zap!' He shook his head. Mandy looked bruised by this news. Having Blake as her little lab rat was the closest thing that she had to a relationship with anyone. Exploiting him had become almost her way of expressing her affection, but now, the only straw that bound them had disappeared. 'Well, I guess, I'll see you around maybe'. Blake nodded without making any eye contact.

For the next year, Blake's mother thought it would be best if her son were home schooled. She would also make it her duty to teach him herself. This would give her a sense of purpose. After all, her two annual performances at the local college drama club hardly qualified her as an actress. Naturally though, she wasn't much of a teacher either. Rather, Blake spent the majority of the year that saw him become a teenager, inadvertently lonely and quiet. He spent a lot of time in his room, rarely frequenting the kitchen or any other room for that matter. In due course, he began to shed the pounds, which he had so painstakingly accrued. By the age of thirteen, his lack lustre appetite, coupled with a growth spurt meant that Blake was now as tall and lanky as a loose tree branch.

On the eve of his fourteenth birthday, his mother decided that she would take him out on a shopping spree to commemorate his handsome turn to adulthood. They swiftly shuttled between the various shops at the local fashion mall---his mother often picking out colours for her son, which she thought matched items of her own clothing palette. He cordially accepted anything that she was willing to buy him, rather than querying her strangely inconsistent fashion choices. Last but not least, was a trip to the local tailors. As soon as they walked in, his mother was taken aback by the sight of a navy coloured satin three-piece. She pulled the slim fit suit off the rack and pushed her son into the nearest fitting room.

Blake began to undress slowly but forcefully, as if under great duress. The shimmering light of the fitting

room stung his eyes like a laser beam. He hunched down to avoid this. Then, he began to take off his trousers carefully. While in motion, he briefly caught a sight of his unclothed body in the mirror. He had never seen himself naked like this before. He couldn't understand how he had become so perfectly formed. His legs were no longer apelike; his skin wasn't loose, but tight. Surely, he wasn't worthy of such a gift. What had he done to deserve this? He placed his right hand on his chest, closed his eyes and began to slide it along the contours of his body; feeling every stretch mark, every bump and disfiguration until he reached the bottom of his frame.

Instead of achieving peace, he felt a lump of loose skin. He grabbed this in his hand and then proceeded to tug on it forcefully. He started grinding his teeth together, trying to muffle his screams, whilst he pulled and pulled at the loose layer of fat. His skin was now a fiery red and his eyes began to water. But he couldn't stop now. He kept on clawing at himself, yearning---begging to find some form of tranquil release. Finally, his body decided to give into his violent plea. In the following moments, Blake wet himself. The stream of urine came gushing out of him and flooded the changing room. When Blake opened his eyes again, he knew that he was free, more so than he had ever been.

With little recourse left to him, he opened the door and walked out of the room wearing nothing but his soiled boxer shorts and the trousers that were still wrapped around his ankles. When he caught his mother's gaze, he began to weep. Unlike before, his tears were less cathartic. A welcome return to his theatrical roots, one assumes. Jane marched up to her son and used her pocketbook to smack him across the head. She then grabbed him by the arm and forced him out of the shop, whilst in his volatile state. When they reached the car, the pair of them sat silently staring out of the window. Blake contemplated. All in all, the experience would be a minor blip on the radar of his life. Luckily for him, he didn't go to school anymore; there would be no one to bully him about the whole scenario.

Unfortunately, his mother took the incident as a personal jab at her parenting skills. Unable to admit failure, she sent Blake to live with her sister, who stayed in a comfortable home in suburban Oregon. Everyone who lived in Oregon was a hippy in one life or another, she assumed. In turn, it made sense for him to live there, where there wouldn't be so much of a stigma attached to public incontinence.

Without a doubt, this was best for Blake. No one in Oregon knew of his past. They only knew the new Blake, and accordingly, they were more willing to accept him. In fact, he became so enamoured with his new self that he eventually broke any ties to his past, including the likes of his mother, Jane. Over time, he grew popular. He became loved by people that never knew that he was a fat little binge eater; People who didn't feel the haunting absence that he felt from having lost so much weight. His wife grew to be one of those people. He knew that she wouldn't have married an overweight man. You could tell just by looking at her. She was too meticulous to accept such deformity. And in time, this thought began to take its toll on Blake.

'Did you see the size of that thing? She wasn't even human!'

'You don't know her. Why should you be allowed to judge her?'

'I'm not judging her, but jeez, someone needs to take that fork out of her mouth'.

'Maybe she's got problems.'

'We all have problems.'

'What would you know about problems?'

'Fine. I'm sorry, will you let me finish my food?' His wife buried her face into her tofu soup and didn't look up again until she had finished. On the drive home after, a tense air permeated the space; the two didn't speak again properly for weeks. Their exchanges were limited to conversations about colour schemes and materials that they were going to buy for their new home. As the months wore on, they began to fill the empty silences by over stuffing their three-bedroom house with uncomfortable furnishings, most of which they could not afford. They had gotten to the point where even the hint of emptiness in the ether might lead to a break down in their marriage, and so they decided to carry on crowding themselves out of each other's lives.

Eight months into the newfound silence, Blake received news that his mother had died from a stroke. His aunt, who informed him of the news, insisted that he should go down with his wife and collect the belongings that his mother had left him. On the journey to Anaheim, the two did not exchange a single

word. His wife had become a stranger after all, and could hardly find the clarity to speak. When they arrived, Blake saw little point in wandering about his childhood surroundings nostalgically. He grabbed the things he could readily see and shoved them into the countless bin bags and boxes that he had brought with him. As he paced about relentlessly, his wife took the time to examine her surroundings, making her way up to her husband's childhood bedroom. She searched the room vigorously for clues, something that could help her understand why her marriage to this man was failing. She plunged into his bed and stuffed her face into his pillow, trying to breathe in his untainted scent. She jumped to her feet again, searching the room methodically, giving as much attention as a protagonist would give to a crime scene in an Agatha Christie novel. While probing, she spotted a little framed photo on the windowsill. A pink round child stood alongside a perfectly groomed woman. She squinted and tried to make out the people in the photograph. Blake kicked the door of the room open and marched in. His wife let out a shriek, dropping the photo frame in the process. 'What the hell are you doing in here?' She struggled to find any words. Instead, she knelt down and picked up the shards of glass that covered the broken frame. Blake marched over. 'Is, is this you?' She asked hesitatingly. Blake squatted down in front of her. He looked at the photo frame and then into her eyes. There was a real anxiousness inside of him---the nervous trepidation emanated from his eyes. His wife looked at him comfortingly. It was going to be good between them now. She knew it. She just needed him to trust her again, to let her love him for who he really was. She remained, kneeling, waiting for him to realize that things could get better again. Despite his fear, Blake placed his hand into hers'. The sprinkles of frosted glass prickled his hands. The feeling reminded him of the freedom that he had felt that day in the changing rooms when he was thirteen. And with that realization, he could breathe again.

END.

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