

ANNETTE SCHIMIZZI

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Hunger

HUNGER

RESEARCH

Mansion-sized, crusted and rusted cylinders line the roads, clinging to the chemicals they hold or once held. Chemicals. Cement is subdued and raised as nature pushes up, reclaiming its original right. On the toll road, drivers speed up to pass it all by, raising windows instead of voices. Above, haze greedily hangs where air once was, and this chemical war continues. Past the prison-barred liquor store, not far from the old tracks, a shade tree stands in Gary, Indiana.

My girlfriend Drea has relatives in Gary, so I have relatives in Gary. We arrive, and I sit and talk a little with those already beneath the tree. The grills are lit, and they battle the haze for smells. Two old men arrive in a brand new Cadillac – maroon with gold trim. One of them has a gold tooth and a very nice suit and hat. Two more arrive in what Drea calls, “lookin’ like now ‘n later” suits. They have a box of equally brightly-colored prophylactics in their trunk, and they give handfuls to a twelve-year-old boy, better safe than sorry.

A woman stumbles into the cook-out, and libations that were being shared moments before are now hidden. She stumbles away, and the sharing resumes. I overhear a conversation that people were shooting at each other right around the corner, just the other night. I look around with paranoia, knowing how bad things would have been for me had I grown up here with my old friends, Rage and Death Wish. The peace pipe is passed, though, and I get to be here while Rage sleeps. I look around to see where we would run if necessary, better safe than sorry.

A handsome young man walks into the scene with a huge tub of raw shish kabobs, and I wonder why God didn’t build every man like that. The food hits the grill, and the haze is pushed back. I meet Drea’s Aunt Ella, aka, Cookie. We talk politics and “old schoooool,” and I’m smarter than I was an hour ago. When I turn my head, I’m handed a shish kabob. The beef is tender and the

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perfect sized, dashed with spice, and the peppers and onions are perfectly placed throughout. Talking is put on hold – mostly. A broken-down guy keeps trying to talk and flirt with Drea. She’s too polite. I eat and watch the show with a smirk while she glares at me intermittently. He calls her “miss lady,” which I thought only happened in movies. He finally leaves. “At least he has good taste,” I say. She’s not amused, and I laugh again.

I need to find the facilities, and someone is happy to take me. We go around the corner of a broken privacy fence and into what’s left of a house. An extension cord for the refrigerator goes outside and down the alley. I think about how people make homes, and again about the forts we used to make in the woods. I get back outside and a new family arrives – each of them spitting images of each other, and each of them with Olympic-sized calf muscles. Drea makes one of her Kunta Kinte comments, they all laugh, and it’s my turn to be the minority. She introduces me, and they hug me like family, which always feels nice, as well as foreign.

Later that year we travel to Erbil, Iraq for Drea’s accounting business. The apartment complex we are in smells like a chemical spill. “Iraq feels like Gary,” I tell her. The smell makes me think there will be an explosion any minute, and I’m sure we’re going to die – no escape rout this time. Forty days and forty nights. “I can’t believe we came here.” “I’m starving.” Apparently someone did as poor of a job with the pipes as they did with the elevator; we take the stairs from now on. Her client tells us the Turks do most of the construction here, and I figure that must be why people tell you not to end up in a Turkish prison. I didn’t ask, though.

The sand causes a haze in the air. From the tenth floor I look through the window while devouring a can of “Vrinkles” (Pringles), which may as well be prime rib at this point (I’m starving) I see men building homes out of cement blocks. I imagine seeing the blocks on the news after a bombing – limbs and clothes sticking out, dashed with red: nonfiction. Between adding receipts in pounds, lyra, euros, dollars, dinars, dirhams, and every other currency in the world from faded receipts or credit card statement hunts, I learn about the Kurds.

It's the night of the super moon, and several of us head into the mountains to see it. Here, I find out that Kurdistan isn't exactly part of Iraq, at least not in their opinion. We show our passports at checkpoints guarded with machine guns. Her client drives us up mountain roads that couldn't pass any inspection, and he seems to have death-wish for sharp turns with steep drops. I review my life and prepare for my death. "At least I tried," I assure myself. He says, "this is where the Kurds hid when Saddam gassed 'em." Chemicals, again. I thought about that image of Saddam during his trial, and how we're always at war, or whatever you want to call it. I wonder what his last meal was.

Two Kurdish ladies, an older man who I think is their chaperone, and an American journalist who works in Baghdad arrive right after us. We gather wood, which is sparse, and we get a fire going. The fire is easy to start, like, flame-thrower easy, and Drea and I wonder if there is oil in the ground. If. We drink wine and break bread. One of the ladies offers us delicious pita and lamb snacks. After a week of eighteen-hour days coupled with a completely destroyed stomach . . . let there be light. The journalist finishes his pita and is quick to light up a smoke. "Everyone and their mom smokes in Baghdad," he says. I think how I would smoke too if death was looming right around the corner. I grab another pita and refill my plastic wine cup. It's the first time I've been comfortable since we were sitting in the South Bend airport last week. The moon is beautiful, and the big dipper hangs over Iraq.

On the way back to the hotel he drives one hundred miles an hour through a crowded town, which he assures me is normal, and again I'm sure we're going to die, and again I'm wondering what we're doing here. Hunger. I think of the risks we all take – at our jobs, in relationships, with speed limits, with other countries to get ahead(or even), to convert or conquer, to corner the market, to just pay a bill, or to get through the day, the hour, the minute. Hunger for adrenaline on a dirt road, a savings account, a shish kabob. Hunger to be a professional, to prove, to gain, to finally earn a room of one's own. For love. Hungry for a moment of peace, or whatever you want to call it.

