

# Hermano Sandwich

*by* Daniel Passamaneck

The day was hot, and getting hotter. Dust rose in a cloud that never dissipated, slowly growing thicker as the sun climbed in the cloudless sky. Our shadows grew shorter and we doffed the heavy coats we'd had to wear earlier in the day, wiping the sweat from our foreheads as we stood behind the stacks of trinkets, fruits and vegetables we'd laid out on our blankets over the bare earth. Folk just kept coming, singly and in small groups and large families, until the knots of shoppers and merrymakers had coalesced into a veritable crowd: young women in their brightest skirts throwing laughing glances over their shoulders; young fathers inculcating their young sons with newly-minted market sense and bargaining skills; motley vendors and vagabond cooks selling hot lunches and cold drinks to the hoarse and hungry masses. Minstrels and *corridistas* filled with music that part of the air not already full of dust and the scent of grilled meat.

It seemed that meat was suddenly being cooked everywhere I looked. Beef was seared in glistening slabs and as small skewered morsels; chicken pirouetted over open flames, interspersed with slathered masses of meaty ribs and joints; pork abounded in every form - ears and maws and feet, whole sucklings sold as-is or in parts, carnitas and chilis and hams; goats and rabbit and small game were being simmered, boiled, charred and sold - a dizzying conclave of *carne*'. I'd set out that morning before dawn with nothing in my stomach but half a plate of cold beans and a green onion; I'd been selling my produce all day in the open sun. I couldn't help it, see? It all smelled so good, and I was so hungry. I began to hunt for my lunch, letting my nose lead me to the most succulent-smelling opportunity.

I found it at the edge of the fairground: a man squatting alone by a bed of amber coals, grilling strips of pale meat that smelled better than anything I'd ever eaten, better than anything I'd ever imagined. I'd found him by following the sweet redolence of his cooking smoke,

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a scent that had captivated me from the first whiff: moist, peppery, rich, flavorful even when merely imbibed through the nostrils. I hurried over to him, glad no one else had discovered him and that I did not have to contend with others to purchase the food he was offering for sale. I would have my pick of what he offered.

The vendor wore a wool serape and a highlander's traditional black bowler hat as he tended his firepit in the noontime heat, and he did not lift his eyes from his flames and his savory sizzling meat when I approached and asked to buy some of his food. I salivated as he picked a few particularly luscious pieces from the dark grill with his naked fingers, pressed them into a tortilla with a piece of lettuce, sprinkled it with salt and handed it to me.

The first bite was even better than I'd anticipated: hot juices shot into my mouth and the flesh collapsed between my teeth with tender resignation. The flavor was sublime, piquant and sweet at once. Never had I enjoyed a piece of meat so much; I was unable to slow myself down before I'd wolfed down half my meal. I wanted it to last a little longer so I forced myself to pause, sinking to my haunches across the circle of coals from him to tell him, "It's the best food I've ever eaten." Slowly he raised his eyes to mine. That's when the day turned cold for me.

His eyes glowed brighter than the coals beneath his grill; in their unblinking intensity they seemed to pull the heat from the very air. His mouth smiled but his icy eyes did not. "You like it?," he asked with a thin deflated voice. "Old family recipe. Enjoy."

His appearance chilled the perspiration on my arms and face, but the meal was delicious so I tried to put my disquietude out of my mind. With forced cheerfulness I smacked my lips and congratulated his family for devising such a delicacy. "It's not pork, is it?," I asked between mouthfuls.

"Pork, no. Guess again," he challenged me with a harsh whisper. "Goat?" He shook his head. "Tortoise? Armadillo? Squirrel?" Each time he shook his head with increasing rue, and a mirthless laugh slowly bubbled in his throat. I'd noticed that, since he'd raised his eyes to look at me, his gaze had not wavered from my face. His

fingers continued to turn and rearrange the meat neatly on the grill, but as if of their own accord, as he never looked at anything but me; the breeze kicked up a cloud of acrid smoke from the coals into his face but he didn't even blink - just kept letting those bright eyes drill right through me. "Okay then, I give up," I conceded. "What am I eating?"

"It is chupacabra."

"It is not." You're toying with me. Now answer me honestly," I demanded - but even as the words left my mouth I felt them ring hollowly. This wizened old man knew no mirth. I didn't believe him, but I knew he was not joking either.

"It is chupacabra," he insisted. "Goatman. The flesh of a monster. It is better than pork, no?"

If I'd had any of it left I'd have thrown it at him, but instead I just tried to overturn his grill in outrage and disgust. Instead, I found the seasoned iron much heavier than I'd anticipated, and surprisingly hot; it burned my hand badly and I only succeeded in shifting it a few inches. I fell to my knees, cradling my singed hand protectively. Calmly, still staring at me through the thick dusty smoke, he pushed the grill easily back into place with his greasy fingers. "How can you say," I finally choked out, "that this is chupacabra? Everybody knows they don't even exist!"

Now he looked on me with something like sadness. "There are many things about the beast that are not well known. Most do not know, for example, that their flesh is more delectable than the finest meats men raise or hunt."

"So how do you know so much?"

"I know because I am myself a chupacabra, *hermano*," he dolefully explained.

"You sure don't look like one."

"Well, neither do you," he said with that empty little laugh and stone dead eyes. "You see, a chupacabra is a monster to others in the nighttime, but we are monsters only to ourselves by day. At sunset we transform into unholy fiends, racked with agonies of body and soul, consumed by a hunger that cannot be satisfied. By night

we run on four hooved feet and kill for our sustenance. We can eat anything, but the only food that comes close to fulfilling us is the flesh of men. If we cannot have that, a cow or a pig will do, but our hunger is only diminished, not sated. The lower the prey, the less good it does us, and when the sun comes up again on us, we are weak and our bodies are tortured with unsatisfied appetites."

"So, the less like a man your meal is, the worse you feel the next day."

"Exactly. You see, we do not sleep, by night or by day. We live only to feed. Our day begins at dawn and we must feed daily to prepare for the next sunrise. At night we turn physically into the twisted form by which we are so rightly feared, but at daybreak our monstrous bodies return in semblance to those of other men; we walk upright and speak with words, and we pay the price for our nocturnal depredations. We chupacabra never forget; we remember exactly what we have done, every day and night of our existence, and the memories consume us even as we feed."

"Then where did you get this cursed meat I ate? Do you kill each other in the night and sell the scraps you leave behind to natural men like me who know no better?" My burned fingers stung terribly; my whole arm throbbed and I realized I had grown quite agitated. Though the tongue in my mouth still craved the flavor of the meat, my body had begun to feel nauseated - by the meal, by the vendor, by the whole terrible story and my growing suspicion that it was true.

"Chupacabra do not kill each other," he explained calmly. "We gain no nourishment from our own diseased flesh. Only wholesome creatures ease our hunger. But when I told you we must feed each day, I did not make myself clear. We must kill and eat every night - unless...."

He had paused in thought. The quiet between us made me uncomfortable. "Unless?"

"Yes, we must feed ourselves in the night, unless we have fed others during the day. On any day that our flesh is consumed by a natural man, we do not hunger till the next day's dawn, and thus we

need not hunt. It is the closest thing to pleasure we can feel, not to suffer the compulsion to rip the arteries from a screaming throat with my fangs, not to have to choke down raw muscle and sinew and still-warm offal from a freshly-killed corpse in a roadside ditch. But to gain freedom from that fate, we must provide of our own selves to others. Another man must eat my flesh if I am to escape the urge to slaughter and consume a living being."

"Must eat your flesh... you're telling me that the meat you served me for my lunch was from your body? This is impossible, you'd be dead by now. I don't believe you."

"Believe what you wish. You have seen I feel no pain," he patiently reminded me as he lay his hand flat on the grill. "You could not touch this without being burned; I do not even feel the heat. It burns me, yes - " and he raised his hand up again to show me the dark lines seared into the blistering flesh of his palm - "but I feel nothing, and each morning when I resume this guise I am healed of my injuries. This is how I can bear to cut myself, to butcher myself for you."

With this he stood for the first time with no small difficulty and moved his serape aside, pulled up his worn linen shirt to show me his belly. It did not bleed, but it was deeply and freshly carved; thick strips had been sliced from either side of his gut, starting just below his ribs and going all the way down to his hips. "Here is where the meat is sweetest," he explained, pointing with a long filthy fingernail at the gouged flesh, "so this is where I cut it away. I don't feel a thing, but until it grows back tomorrow morning, I'm weak. At least this way, though, I can rest at night. Otherwise, I'd have to hunt."

"So I ate your belly for my lunch?"

"You did, and I am eternally grateful. And sorry."

The breeze cut through me and the songs and laughter of the crowd behind me sounded as distant as the moon. "Why are you sorry?," I asked quietly.

"You have not yet asked me the two most important questions: How are we created, and how we can be destroyed. But I will tell you anyway, to the best of my poor ability. If a natural man consumes

the flesh of chupacabra by daylight, he becomes one of us come nightfall. I am sorry, *hermano*, but now you are as I am. Tonight at sunset you will feel your body change: your mouth will fill with anger and hunger; your skin will thicken into leather and your eyes will cease to blink, and you will hunt for something to eat but it will not fulfill you. And tomorrow morning you will find yourself yourself again, externally, but your burned hand will be healed and your spoiled soul will rankle within you for all eternity."

I rocked backwards, watching him as if he were at the end of a tunnel that grew progressively longer as I peered down it. I could feel a change within me and sensed my humanity ebbing as I digested his flesh. My voice was a hoarse whimper, sounding almost like his, as I forced out the question he'd raised but had not answered: "How do I end it, then? What will make me die?"

He gazed at me like a father sending off his son to a hopeless war. "If you learn that," he sighed, "please tell me before you do it. That knowledge has never reached me." His eyes glared at me, but I knew that if he could have cried, he would have.

I rolled away from him, pushed myself up and began to run away. I ran from the market fair, ran quickly and as far as I could get, and then when I regained my breath I ran some more. I put a lot of distance between myself and the monster, but I felt the curse growing ever closer to me even as the miles between us lengthened. I could see the shadows stretching from the trees as I passed among them, saw the sunlight casting golden as the cruel day waned. And now I cower in a hollow in the woods, watching the dusk gallop toward me from the eastern hills. I am awaiting my transformation, with no idea how to escape my fate. All I know for sure is, that meat I had at lunch was really delicious - but now I am getting hungry again....

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