

Swicks Rule!

by Kathy Fish

My twin cousins, Margie and Mae, are manning the grill, telling me about their diverticulitis. They shake their heads. No nuts, no seeds. Their sweet hound dog, Steve, lies at our feet smelling oddly of devilled eggs and Crazy Glue.

“Steve. How's about a nice shower, boy?” I unroll the hose on the side of the twins' house and turn on the faucet. The water gurgles and whooshes its way through the coiled hose. It's brown at first, like the grass. Steve comes loping over and flops on his fat back. I spray his belly and dribble a little into his open mouth. His eyes are closed and he's wiggling from side to side, tongue hanging out, lapping the water.

“He doesn't like that,” Margie says.

The twins don't match. Margie is much grayer and stouter and Mae is as tall as me and she has a terrible, unfortunate stutter. She smiles a lot.

It's the Swick Family Reunion 2008. My first family function without my wife, Lorraine. My nieces and nephews painted the banner that's taped to the garage door, with everyone's handprints, even the adults'. I have promised that later I'll give them all rides on my back, but they're a year bigger and I'm a year fatter.

A little blonde is tugging at my belt loop. “Did you bring the jigglers?” She asks and I realize to my horror that I can't think of her name. There are so many of them.

“No, sweet pea. I'm sorry.” Lorraine used to bring those every year. The gelatin snacks shaped like, I guess, animals.

Steve wanders away and I go sit at the picnic table next to Gigi Gran and my brother, Lou. Gigi Gran is telling him how she doesn't believe in global warming, pulling her cardigan tighter around her bony shoulders.

“Pah!” she says. “And pah again!” She's never learned to modulate her voice.

“Meanwhile the narwhals are disappearing from our earth,” Lou says.

Lou's got his binder, the one that says “Save the Turtles” on the front. It's full of articles he's cut out and hole punched. He was captain of the debate team in high school and knows to carry his evidence around with him, just in case.

Gigi Gran leans into him and says, “Eh?” and he says, “Narwhals. Narwhals!” She waves her hand around, says, “Pah!” and starts digging invisible things out of the potato salad with her bare hands.

“Hey, I was going to eat some of that,” I say.

“Oh, hello, Bob,” Lou says, and then we just look at each other. Everybody's feeling awkward around me today. I want to tell them it's all right, that *I'm* all right but I don't want to see their eyes when I say it.

Gigi Gran has eased her lumpy feet out of her house slippers, so I reach down and grab one and chuck it to Steve while she's not looking. He paws it to his mouth and chews on it, dolefully. The burgers smell so good and I find my stomach growling again. There's not enough food in the world for me these days. I buy Lean Cuisines and eat four of them in one sitting. All my dishes have dust on them.

“Soup's on,” Margie says, bearing a huge platter of grilled burgers and hot dogs and brats.

“Thank god.” I'm embarrassed to realize I said it out loud.

The twins' neighbor has shown up, uninvited, and is playing the bongos while the nieces and nephews jerk their skinny bodies around in something resembling a dance. They don't want to come eat but their parents, my brothers and sisters and their spouses, stop playing volleyball and wave them over, saying they won't get ice cream later if they don't eat now. They look temporarily annoyed and harried, but I think, I know, they're all happy in their good lives.

Lorraine and I squabbled sometimes, due mostly to her stubbornness, but it was always an adventure. She said our someday kids were bound to be crazy, just like the two of us, but we both kind of liked the idea.

Gigi Gran has made some remark that makes everybody laugh and my cousin Mae's got her arm around me and she's saying. "Yyyyy...yyyy...yyyyou're doing great, Bob." She's smiling a little goofily, a piece of sweet corn stuck in her teeth. They're all looking at me now, the whole big bunch of them, even the uninvited neighbor with his bongos strapped around his waist, even Steve who's standing up now, wagging his tail expectantly. I'm in a panic, thinking I'm supposed to say something, but the neighbor saves me. He slaps the bongos and says, "Good God, let's eat!" And so. We do.

#####

