

A Moot Point

by Peter Cherches

"All tragedies are finished by a death, All comedies are ended by a marriage" —

Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Third Canto

I was lying in bed with Cindy. She had just brought up the subject of marriage, again, when Victor began to vomit blood all over the bedroom carpet.

"Victor!" Cindy screamed. "What's the matter?" Victor heaved a few more times, then expired. "Victor's dead!" she screamed, and started crying. I took her in my arms, tried to comfort her."

"He was an old dog, baby, you must have known death would come sooner or later."

"I didn't think Victor would ever die. He was always there when I needed him. When Daddy died, Victor was there to comfort me. When Mom died, Victor was there to comfort me. Who will comfort me now?" She caught herself. "Sorry, sweetheart. Of course you'll be there." After a few minutes she composed herself. "What will we do with the body?" she asked.

"I guess we should have him buried, no?"

"Wait a minute," she said, "I've got an idea. Why don't we have him stuffed and bring him to Grandpa Morris in the nursing home?"

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The next day we went to the taxidermist we had found on Yelp. We put Victor down on the counter. "How much?" I asked.

"Well, a Doberman's a pretty big dog," he said. "Do you have insurance?"

"Is there insurance that covers taxidermy for dead pets?"

"A few carriers offer it," he said.

"Well, I'm afraid we don't have that kind of insurance," I replied.

"Well, don't you worry. You two seem like a nice young couple," the taxidermist said. "I'm sure we'll be able to work something out, with easy payment terms. How soon do you need it."

"As soon as possible," I said. "It's a gift for her grandfather, and we don't know long he can hold out."

"Well, then, why don't you kids go to the greasy spoon down the block, and by the time you're done with lunch it ought to be ready."

"He," Cindy corrected.

"Darling," the taxidermist replied, "when they're dead sex is a moot point. And a word of advice: don't order the duck a l'orange. Stick with something simple, like hash."

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The menu at the greasy spoon didn't offer much of a choice: hamburger, corned beef hash and eggs, chicken salad, grilled cheese, and duck a l'orange. The waitress came over to our booth to take our order. "What'll it be, folks?"

"Hash and eggs for me," I said.

"And the lady?"

"I'll try the duck a l'orange," Cindy said.

"Do you want that with wild rice or mashed?"

"Can I get both?"

"You can, but there's a two-dollar supplement."

"That's fine," Cindy said, "I'll take both."

After the waitress left, I said to Cindy, "Didn't you hear the taxidermist when he told us not to order the duck a l'orange?"

"Yeah," she replied, "but what does a guy who stuffs dead dogs for a living know about haute cuisine?"

The waitress returned about ten minutes later with our orders. "Hash and eggs," she said, putting a plate in front of me. "And duck a l'orange for the lady. Anything else I can get for you kids?" When I told her no, she walked away.

Cindy took a taste of her duck a l'orange. "How is it?" I asked.

"Interesting."

"Interesting?"

"Yes. I can't figure out what it reminds me of, but it doesn't taste like duck."

"Let me taste it," I said. I took a forkful. "Hey, that's not duck," I said, "it's gefilte fish! Gefilte fish a l'orange!" I called the waitress over. "There's been a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"The duck," I said. "It's not duck, it's gefilte fish!"

"Gefilte fish?" she said. "Isn't that something Jews eat? Are you two Jews? I should have known, ordering duck a l'orange in a shithole excuse for a diner."

"Hey," I said, "we don't have to stand for these anti-semitic remarks."

"Jesus, you're a regular little anti-defamation league, aren't you?"

"Look," I said, "just tell me one thing: are you going to take the duck back?"

"Duck?" she said. "I thought you said it was gefilte fish."

"Please," I said, miffed. "I'm in no mood to play semantics."

"Why not?" the waitress asked, angrily. "You don't think I'm good enough, is that it? Sure, I'm just a dumb little waitress. Well, let me tell you something, buster, I've read Ogden & Richards, I know Hayakawa like the back of my hand, and I used to follow William Safire's columns religiously."

"That's very impressive. But you still haven't answered my question. Are you going to take the duck back?"

"If it is indeed duck, no, I will not take it back, as that is what your lady friend ordered."

"But it isn't duck!" I yelled, exasperated. "It's gefilte fish!"

"Well," she said, "there's only one way to settle this. I'll have to bring the chef out here."

"That's an excellent idea," I said.

"Yo, Ambrose," she yelled toward the kitchen. "Get your ass out here."

The chef strolled over to our booth. He was an enormous man, about six-foot-five and at least 350 pounds. He was wearing a Notre Dame sweatshirt and a black stocking cap. He was badly in need of a shave.

"What's this, Ambrose?" the waitress asked the chef, pointing to the disputed dish.

"Duck," he said in a hoarse, gravelly voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said to him. "I cannot accept that answer. I have tasted the dish in question and have come to the conclusion that it's not duck at all. It's gefilte fish."

"Duck!" he said again, this time sounding a bit angry.

"Sorry," I said, "I don't buy it. Sure it looks like duck, and I've got to admit, that shows a certain talent on your part, but it most assuredly has the taste and texture of gefilte fish. And I can assure you, I know that taste and texture like I know my own face in the mirror. My mother used to serve us gefilte fish twice a week. I grew up on the stuff, and there's no way you're going to convince me this so-called duck is anything but some cleverly disguised gefilte fish."

"Duck! Duck! Duck!" he screamed, stomping his feet violently.

"Now you've gone and upset him," the waitress said.

"I assure you, miss, I had no such intention. But tell me something: can't he say anything but 'duck'?"

"Of course he can. Go ahead, Ambrose, speak!"

The chef cleared his throat and said, in a gravelly monotone, "Hamburger, corned beef hash and eggs, chicken salad, grilled cheese, duck a l'orange."

"He just read me the menu. What's that all about?"

The waitress explained. "That's the extent of his vocabulary. Our menu represents the limits of the world as he knows it, therefore that's all he needs to be able to say. Gefilte fish is not in his vocabulary, so clearly this cannot be gefilte fish and, ipso facto, it must be duck. If you don't trust me on this, I would suggest you read the work of a certain Mr. Benjamin Lee Whorf."

I had to admit I was beaten. "Finish your duck," I said to Cindy.

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We finished up, paid the bill and returned to the taxidermist. "How was your meal?" he asked.

"Well, my girlfriend failed to heed your advice and ordered the duck a l'orange. It tasted like gefilte fish."

"Gefilte fish? That Ambrose is certainly an odd duck."

"So, is the dog ready?" I asked.

"Ready as she'll ever be," he said.

"He," Cindy corrected.

"Listen, darlin', when they're dead, sex is a moot point."

He went into the back room and brought out Victor, who was wrapped in cellophane.

"It's amazing," Cindy said. "He looks just like he did in life. How can we ever thank you?"

"You can start with a five-star rating on Yelp," he replied.

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The sign on the nursing home read: Shatzkin's Home for Elderly Jews, Non-sectarian. On the porch were two old men in wheelchairs, arguing about who was the greatest Yankee of all time.

"You're mashugana, Hymie. Nobody even comes close to Rute."

"Oh yeah? Well, DiMeggio had Marilyn Monroe, and that's good enough for me."

We went inside. I walked over to the reception desk. The woman was on the phone. "You're kidding! Her vagina? Oops, someone's here. Gotta go." She hung up the phone. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," I said. "What room is Morris Rabinowitz in?"

"Rabinowitz? He's the one with the filthy mouth, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know about that," I said.

"Yeah, he's always making indecent proposals to the nurses. You tell him if he doesn't watch it we're going to have to wash his mouth out with soap."

"I'll do that," I said. "So what room?"

"318."

We started walking toward the elevator. "Just one minute, sir," the woman yelled. "What's that you're carrying?"

"It's a stuffed animal. A present for Mr. Rabinowitz," I said.

"I don't know about that," the woman said. "I'm going to have to check with Dr. Frumkin. Why don't you leave it here, and we'll send it up if the doctor says it's OK."

"All right," said Cindy, "but be careful."

We went up to Grandpa Morris's room. He was in bed, reading a copy of *Hustler*.

"Hiya, Grandpa," Cindy said.

Grandpa Morris looked up. "Eighty-six years old and I can still get it up. That's how I can tell I'm still alive. If I've got a hard-on I must be alive."

"How are you feeling, Grandpa?" Cindy asked.

"This month's cover girl has got a fantastic set of tits. Now your grandma, may she rest in peace, she had lousy tits. A hell of a tuchus, mind you, but lousy tits. I never complained though. She was a wonderful woman. An angel." He broke into tears. "Even if she always refused to take my frankie in her mouth. But her stuffed cabbage almost made up for it. Nobody could make a stuffed cabbage like my Esther."

"Are they treating you well?" Cindy asked.

"She was a saint, a regular saint," he said, and once again broke into tears. Then he fell asleep.

"He's sleeping," I said.

"This happens every time. He starts talking about Grandma, then he gets exhausted and falls asleep."

"Well, what should we do?" I asked.

"Let him sleep, I guess."

Grandpa Morris awoke with a start. "Who's here?"

"It's just us," Cindy said.

"Who's us?"

"Stanley and me."

"Have you been here long?"

"Not long. You just fell asleep for a couple of minutes."

"You know what I like best about sleeping? Waking up. If I wake up, I figure I'm still alive. One of these days I won't wake up, so now, when I do wake up, I count my blessings."

"Don't talk that way, Grandpa," said Cindy. "You've still got some good years ahead of you."

"Good years? What do you know about good years? A couple of passable ones, maybe. What do I do now? I go to sleep, I wake up, I get a hard-on and I go soft again."

"Well," I said, trying to be helpful, "isn't that what life's all about?"

"How old are you, Murray?" he asked.

"Stanley," I corrected.

"Murray, Stanley, what's the difference? How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five years old and he's telling me what life's all about! I'm twenty-five three times over and then some. I'll tell you what life's all about." But before he could he fell asleep again.

"Maybe we should leave," I suggested.

"No, let's stay a little longer. Besides, we have to wait and see what they're going to do about Victor."

"You have a point."

Just then Grandpa Morris woke up again. "Who's here?" he asked.

"It's me and Stanley," Cindy said.

"Really? How long you been here? You should have woke me."

"Grandpa, is everything all right here?" Cindy asked.
"How's the food?"

"Food? They don't know the meaning of the word. Now your grandma's stuffed cabbage, may she rest in peace, that was food. When she died she took the recipe with her."

"Do they give you enough, at least?" I chimed in.

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to satisfy you."

"To satisfy me? I was always easy to satisfy. All it took was a good fuck, a piece of stuffed cabbage and a little seltzer."

Just then one of the nurses walked in, carrying Victor. "Dr. Frumkin says it's OK," she told us.

"Hiya sweetie," Grandpa Morris said to the nurse, "so when are you going to marry me?"

"Oh, Mr. Rabinowitz, you know I have a boyfriend."

"That's all right. I'm sure you can handle both of us. Maybe at the same time, even."

"Don't pay any attention to him," Cindy said.

"If I don't, who will?" the nurse replied as she left the room.

"Some pair of knockers on that one," Grandpa Morris said.

"Grandpa, we have a surprise for you," Cindy said.

"A surprise?"

"Yes, look," she said, as she pulled the cellophane off of Victor.

"It's Vickie! It's Vickie!" he shouted gleefully. He began to hug the stuffed Doberman. "Hiya, kiddo!"

"We knew you'd be thrilled to see him," Cindy said.

"So, how are his movements?" Grandpa Morris asked.

"There's something we have to tell you," I said.

Cindy put her hand over my mouth. "No!" she shouted.

"What's the matter?" Grandpa Morris asked. "He ain't going right? Maybe he isn't getting enough roughage. He does look a bit crabby. I know the feeling."

"Well, you know how old dogs can get," I said.

"You're telling me!" He started pulling on Victor's leg.

"Give me your paw, boychik," he said to the stuffed animal. Then he

turned to us and said, "My god, his legs are so stiff. Has he got arthritis, maybe?"

"Yeah, that must be it," Cindy said.

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Grandpa Morris said.

"This dog is dead." Then he started crying.

Cindy was crying too.

I took her in my arms. "Sweetheart," I said, "will you marry me?"

