



Eat me.

Seek sustenance, not comeuppance.



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(~7 minutes reading time)

I recommended my genius massage therapist to two friends who then used the weirdest language in response.

“Oh, great, I really need someone to *shred* my calves,” said one, a thirty-something man.

“I want someone to *destroy* my back,” said the other, a late-fifties-ish woman.

I flinched both times. I know this is the way lots of people discuss massage, but it baffles me. Why the violence? I hire such helpers to *heal* me. I don't want shredding or destruction or anything else that sounds like war upon my person. I want warm, expert hands applying touch as medicine. Let me be a floppy newborn in a trustworthy mama's embrace. Yes, the process involves pressure, intensity, and sometimes a bit of pain, but the ultimate goal is a restoration to peace and wholeness, isn't it?



I am reminded of how writing students sometimes approach workshops. *Rip me to pieces*, they might say, handing out copies of their most recent short story or poem. You can tell that most of the time they don't really mean it. It's a form of preemptive humblebrag. They want you to think they're a genius and that their writing is untouchably brilliant, even while they pretend that *they think* that *you'll think* it's a piece of crap.

(Confession: I know the experience first-hand, or maybe I mean first-person-hand. In my youth I was into fake self-flagellation. Man, did it sting when my bluff was called, and it turned out that nobody thought I was a genius and everybody really did want to rip my work to pieces. Or, far more rarely, to offer constructive criticism that, if applied judiciously, might make my intentions clearer and my piece more effective. What the heck was I supposed to do with *that*?)

Hair shirts are ever in fashion. Everyone seems to think they need comeuppance, or flat-out punishment. For what? Everyone is waiting for the other shoe to drop, for their luck to run out, for their imposter status to be revealed. Shred me, destroy me, rip me. I'm only worthy of your attention if I'm being martyred, or at least playing the role.

I'm riffing here. This isn't sociology, and I have no idea what genuine cross-cultural or historical research might reveal about these habits of speech and thinking. Are they peculiarly American? Maybe we're riddled with the collective guilt of our genocidal empire. Maybe we perceive our deep complicity in oligarchic late-capitalist evil and the accelerating destruction of our home world. I don't know. Maybe the words mean nothing at all. They are the cigar that's just a cigar.

The older I get, though, the less I'm interested in violent self-talk, even in a joking or unthinking manner, and especially not as fraudulent self-deprecation.

In particular I'm no longer interested in the ritualistic self-loathing that's so often a part of heterosexual female conversation, or in its sister activity of generic man-bashing, which to my ear feels often like unearned victimhood.

Understand: I'm not speaking of actual victimhood at the hands of actual bad men misusing their brawn and power. I mean the frisson generated when straight women get together in groups to complain about their partners for one trivial reason or another. It feels entirely of a piece with complaining about your extra fifteen pounds. In both cases there's this sense that you simultaneously deserve and don't deserve something better. You are entitled to your Best Self and your Best Life and your Best Life Partner...Aren't you? No, really, aren't you? Or are you not? Or not?

Everybody deserves every good thing, and nobody deserves anything. (This, of course, is true of all sexes and any gender expression.) Sometimes you get what you want. Occasionally you get what you need. Oftentimes, neither. Sometimes you are subconsciously asking for the very things you claim to abhor, or pushing away the very things you say you desire, because there's more to talk about when you're unfulfilled. Neurosis is a hard habit to kick.

But really, why hate yourself? It's such a time suck. I don't need shredding. I need healing hands. The genius massage therapist talks about how our stresses and our graceless movements through the day turn our muscles into beef jerky. It's her job--her mission--to reverse the process, to return us to plump, juicy, full-blooded meat. It's an act of compassionate revival, nothing warlike about it.

I want that. I want the warm hands and the plump and the juicy. Sounds like love to me. I like love. I like it in almost all its forms, from the most romantic/visceral/profane to the most unconditional/parental/sacrificial/sacred. I'm still a little iffy on the political notion of love, as in "only love conquers hate," but for now I'll take the word of wiser, more effective people who make real change via such inspiration. Love is an action word, I'll buy that, but I'm mostly interested in its micro rather than macro applications.

In my early twenties, quite overweight, I once spent five months eating nothing and drinking only water and weight loss protein shakes. This was in the late 80s, before Oprah did the same thing famously. In my Manhattan-paralegal-wannabe-novelist obscurity, I masticated my hopes and dreams for the better part of spring and summer. I drank three faux chocolate shakes a day. I grew to enjoy them, learned how to pretend they weren't fundamentally disgusting. Dropped alcohol, too: had tonic or seltzer with lime whenever obliged to go out for "drinks." I got really lean and lithe, as slender and effortlessly elegant as I'd been in my teens (when I merely *thought* I was fat.) My mother was very delighted for me, but so were my friends, as well as the quite different types of men I started to attract. (To be blunt, the thinner I got, the whiter and richer the suitors became. That's a race/class can of worms to be opened some other day.)

I'd go into the original Balducci's grocery on lower Sixth Avenue and walk around the place slowly, just *smelling the food*, high on the feeling of intense self-mastery. I was not going to break down and buy a chicken salad croissant or a blood orange or those hard-to-find Haribo peach gummies, no ma'am. I was an empress of vast willpower and I was not going to let my senses overwhelm my firmly held belief that wearing size 8 jeans was the key to eternal happiness.

I see that entire episode now as violence. I willfully harmed my overall being to perfect one aspect of it. I bombed my village to save it. I didn't just wear the hair shirt, I put it in a blender with some fine New York City tap water and sucked it down with a straw. Eventually, I began to resemble that straw, at least in comparison with my zaftig prior self.

And people's eyes lit up when they saw me! My mother and my father bubbled over with joy! No more fat daughter! They must have done a good job, after all! As much of a sucker for validation as I was, I still found their conditional affection to be wholly unappetizing, a movie stunt pie plate filled with whipped cream but no pie.

I wish I'd known to ask for something different. Now I can. Give me the plump and juicy. Give me the warm, expert hands. Give me the croissant sandwich and the blood orange and the Haribos. What a beautiful lunch that might have been, to take to a bench in Washington Square Park on a sunny spring day. We should all be so privileged.

I vividly remember this thing that happened in, I dunno, late 70s, early 80s? When asked about his wife and fellow actor Joanne Woodward, Paul Newman confirmed the reports of his unfailing spousal fidelity: “I have steak at home. Why should I go out for a hamburger?” That statement created a great wave of feminist umbrage. Paul Newman, dinosaur, sexist pig, thinks of his wife as a piece of meat! I remember the outrage, and how I wanted to agree but wasn’t quite comfortable doing so. Even as a young woman who’d been grossly objectified--treated as mere flesh without agency--on a regular basis already, I didn’t really believe Newman had said quite what they were saying he had said.

Decades later I have firmly decided in favor of Cool Hand Luke. Newman was being not literal or even meaningfully metaphorical. He was using a readily legible, if stereotypically masculine, shorthand to extoll Woodward. Am I perverse to say I find it cute, sweet, even pleasantly dumb the way well-meaning straight men can be pleasantly dumb at times? Also, a rather sensual alternative to hearing him voice some PR-vetted pabulum about his wife’s generic Hollywood charms. One person’s steak is another person’s *eternal muse, best friend, and love of my life to the very end*. A striking sensory image can be more effective than shopworn superlatives.

Besides, we are meant to be each other’s food, aren’t we? Each other’s sustenance?

Our bodies, ourselves. We are meat. Any sex and all genders: meat. We start out juicy and plump. Well-marbled little creatures needing--*requiring*--warm embrace in order to not grow up to be sociopaths. Life shreds us into hamburger, desiccates us until we’re as shriveled as Slim Jims. Life wrecks us, rips us. If we’re not careful, we become complicit in our own destruction. Autocrats of vast willpower, martyring our real selves to our superficially better selves. Nope. No more. Give us the warm, expert hands. Make us plump and juicy again. Life: please put all the mallets back in the utensil drawers. We are super prime cuts, and tender enough already, thank you very much.



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