



Source: Thom Shanker, 'Army career behind him, General critical of Bush', *New York Times online*, 13/05/07.

Tags: food, desert, intimacy, nostalgia, water

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It goes something like this.

The hours were tired already and he was all of a particular sadness that morning. This feeling was shot through with drip-coffee caffeine and plain bigged-up love for Joanne, because he had to tell her his news that day, had to break it to her, and it would break her. He felt the heavy sense of responsibility that unavoidable ruin brings straight to the belly.

These two sit eating sandwiches in a blue-collar diner on the north east side of the city of Rochester, New York. The day is grey, unremarkable, and the lake upon which the city sits is dark. Days like this make him uneasy, but Joanne likes the steely feel of the streets. This is an ordinary scene I'm giving you here. Just an ordinary day with luck and promise and hunger and shoes that rub and attempts and calls made and truth and betrayal and hair and buildings and unfinished business, a day like any other day.

On the table between them sit the two deluxe Reubens they have ordered: great sturdy layers of rye filled with corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese, limp dill pickle, watery lettuce, dry slices of tomato drained white with hot-house fury and folds of creamy mayonnaise, piled high like layered surfaces of a miniature gastronomic continent. They eat in silence, looking down, observing the food, eyeing up each half-sandwich before hand moves to mouth, each preparing the most strategic line of attack, the best possible mouthful which will contain all flavours without the whole thing falling apart. They both look around: at fallen sauerkraut on the table, at other people, at the waitress's bitten fingernails and the old man in the booth across the way reading a newspaper for as long as he possibly can. They look anywhere but at each other.

But now here's what's really going on.

He's thinking about responsibility and leaving, and what he'll feel like when he's on the aircraft carrier; about what so much sand will be like, what smells and sounds his body will encounter; what he will live without; who he won't know how to be anymore within the tight lines of discipline and operation he will become; how the words he speaks will change, and how there will be less language for anything at all.

She's not thinking about the desert; she's all about the lake. And now she's contemplating the satisfying combination of corned beef on rye, and she begins to think about the abandoned subway system built in 1927 that spreads out beneath Rochester and the countless homeless people currently inhabiting those tunnels. The city wants to fill them in with dirt even though it would cost the same to restore the entire system. She thinks about the wastefulness of human endeavour and the relentless cycle of building and destruction; about digging tunnels beneath the earth's surface and then dissoccupying them. But then about the resourcefulness

of the homeless coming to inhabit those tunnels, and the dull stupidity and injustice of wanting them filled with earth. Where's the sense in any of it? She's happy thinking about these abandoned capillaries and venules, like a nervous system beneath the busy streets. She delights in this hidden world. By 1957 the subway had been closed down, but her father often spoke of riding it to work every day. Rochester remained the smallest city in the US to have its own subterranean rapid transit system. Such ambition! Such prospect! Such hope!

And then what happens is that Joanne looks across the table for a second, sensing that today if he catches her glance he will cast his eyes away. And just at that moment he does. She pauses and thinks. There's that sensation of internal falling: something is wrong and it will be wrong for the rest of our lives. Then she continues. She enjoys remembering things about the city when she eats a Reuben.

Now she's thinking about the diner where they sit which stands in the north east part of the city where Sharkeys Rollerskating Rink was in the mid-1970s before they knocked it down, after which the Sharkeys and their thirteen kids left the city. They went back to Puerto Rico, took all the money they made and opened up a rollerskating joint in San Juan, called Sharkeys Numero Dos. Took all the records with them, the disco ball, lights and skates, hundreds of pairs of them in suitcases. Joanne thinks, 'I'll bet they made that Saturday afternoon north American feeling happen all over again.' She loved Sharkeys. Just the name reminded her of being eleven years old. The Rochester municipal claimed to have taken it down because no one wanted to do that kind of thing anymore, nobody wanted to rollerskate, and they needed to make way for a road and a big mall, with Target, RadioShack and a JCPenney. She wanted to cry when she discovered it would no longer be there, but instead she mourned the loss quietly as she had so many things in her life. Joanne thinks how easy it is for people at the top to just take a big old piece of anyone's life-pie away. They can make any one of our memories all of a sudden fragile and unsustainable, because you can't go back to the original place anymore, you can't go back there where your life has done all its happening. But the diner was still here, and so were some of the people who used to go to Sharkeys as kids at the weekend to skate around to disco music until someone blew the whistle when you'd neck off quickly with someone you fancied. And when the music started again you skated round in circles. It was that simple.

What is he thinking as he wipes his mouth with a napkin trying to look casual and distracted? He looks towards the window, contemplating water and his journey in three days time. He's wondering when and how to begin his next sentence.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sara Jane Bailes.*