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THE SAGA OF BEEF GONE BAD

By Lisa Torcasso Downing

I COOKED ROAST BEEF TODAY, EVEN THOUGH I knew no one would be around to eat it. And I'm not talking my usual roast beef, which is nothing more than a slab of cheap rump roast dropped into an old Crock-pot and set to simmer. No, today I *really* cooked.

First, I sautéed mushrooms, onions, and green peppers in olive oil. As they sizzled, I picked up the bacon press I'd purchased at a garage sale a few years back but had never used. The truth is, when I slipped my two quarters into the seller's palm, I didn't even know what the thing was for. I liked the cute little pig stamped into the cast iron and thought it'd bring a folksy charm to my kitchen. So I brought it home and set it atop my breadbox where it's lived a life of leisure ever since. But today . . . Today I introduced Porky to the concept of work.

With my vegetables browned and their aroma filling the kitchen, I placed my expensive cut of beef into the sauté pan and slammed that pig's face as hard as I could against the flank of that cow. I pushed so hard, in fact, that I worried I might break my ceramic range top. But I didn't relent until each side of the roast was seared to perfection. Only then did I place it in the roasting pan. (I paid retail for it.)

With the drippings and vegetables in the skillet, I made gravy—a rather pale and unappetizing mixture I poured over the beef. Setting the lid on, I slipped the roaster into the oven, set at 325 degrees Fahrenheit, fully confident that, when finished, that roast and gravy would be the most succulent meal made today on planet earth.

I started on laundry. Two hours later, I pulled the roaster from the oven and uncovered it, a cloud of savory scents rising toward the light. Next, I took a serrated knife and

sliced deeply into the meat, letting the fat and juice flow into the pan. Then I drained the liquid and made a second gravy—a deep, dark sauce—which I poured back over the roast, widening the slits I'd cut with the tines of a fork so the gravy slid deep into the crevices. I repeated this process two hours later. So yes, today, I *really* cooked a roast beef, even though no one would be around to eat it.

I have three children and one husband. I knew that tonight my husband planned to take our youngest, age six, to the grand opening celebration of the town's new 24 Hour Fitness. There'd be games and balloons and granola bars for the kids. This is what my husband told me this morning, as I pulled out my cookbook. They'd be gone from around six until eight-thirty p.m. Maybe later.

And by the time I poured a dollop of olive oil into the pan, I knew my older children wouldn't be home either. My eighteen-year-old son would be on stage, playing young Scrooge in a community theater production. And my sixteen-year-old daughter would be attending a friend's birthday dinner before spending the night at yet another friend's home.

It wasn't that I thought, "Well, my family can eat the leftovers." It wasn't that I wanted the roast all to myself. And it certainly wasn't a stubborn streak that compelled me to create the greatest roast beef dinner of my existence even though no one would be around to eat it.

Call it a wild hair. But something inside me needed to cook that roast. I am a busy woman. I run the house; I teach freshman composition part-time; I do some editing work and keep slogging away at my own written words. I attend soccer and football and baseball games. I'm on the artistic committee for the community theater and a regular participant in an area writers' workshop. Necessity has made me a Crock-pot mom.

Heating frozen lasagna is as close as I usually come to genuine culinary adventure. I even slice my cookie dough from a tube. So I should've rejoiced at the opportunity to take a night off from meal creation. I should've stretched out



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on the couch with a chocolate Slim Fast and a bag of apple cinnamon rice cakes. I should've put my feet up on the coffee table and read the latest *SUNSTONE*. I should've called my mother in California or my brother who has cancer.

Instead, I cooked a roast no one would be home to eat. Maybe not even me.

I JUST RECEIVED a text message from my daughter. Apparently she and the sleep-over friend have decided to meet at the movie theater across the lake in thirty minutes—could I please come pick her up and drive her there?

I glanced at the oven door. The clock read 5:51 p.m. The roast should be removed just after seven.

I can practically hear my husband's voice telling me that these kids need to learn that they are not the center of the universe. But my daughter is sixteen, and her brother, eighteen. Only a few intangible months stand between this moment and their leaving us. As I inhale the aroma of beef and onion, I swell with the knowledge that time flies and children do, too. What my husband doesn't understand is that our children are—that they have always been—the center of our universe, a universe that is breaking apart despite the promise of eternity together. "Together," I am learning, does not necessarily mean "with." So I told my daughter not to worry; I'll get her there on time. It's just a roast.

I called my husband on his way home from work and

asked him to please swing by the restaurant where our daughter waited. After I hung up, I pulled the roast out once again and used a spoon to bathe it in gravy. Then I arranged four, pre-formed chicken nuggets on the roaster lid and slid it all back in. My husband could grab a slice of bread on his way to the gym and eat the roast later, but our little guy needed nourishment before they left.

I checked the local news station for traffic and weather. The drive across the lake takes at least thirty minutes in pleasant weather and free-flowing traffic. But tonight the darkening sky churned with heavy, black clouds, and the plummeting temperature left me fearful that the water in the overstuffed bellies overhead would fall as sleet. The prediction was for a wet Christmas, five days away.

Complications. The roast should come out in sixty-five minutes. My husband would be here and gone before thirty had clicked away. If my daughter and I left as soon as he arrived with her, I still wouldn't be back to take the roast out for about an hour and a half. I'd be back sooner, but the area we were going into was one that demanded a mother walk her daughter into the theater and physically connect her to her friend's family. I turned the knob, lowering the temperature of the oven.

When my husband showed up with our daughter, she hurriedly collected her overnight necessities and I hunted up the SUV keys. I paused in the garage doorway as she loaded her stuff. Still in his Public Health Uniform, my hus-

band put his head into the oven, looking like a man peering into the mouth of a lion. He inhaled, his eyes closed.

“Never mind the roast,” I told him. “It’s not done; I’ll take it out when I get home. Have a nice time at the gym.”

I glanced over the kitchen island into the family room.

“And David’s all ready to go.”

The boy slumped on the couch, staring at Sponge Bob Squarepants—a position he often assumes while the rest of us whirl around him, trying to get here, to get there, to get it all done, all in, all over so we can slump onto the couch and watch TV.

“He ate some chicken nuggets, so he shouldn’t be hungry.”

The boy’s face swung slowly toward me. His blond hair has grown past the tops of his ears and his glasses ride the tip of his nose.

“I’ll be back in forty-five minutes.” I said it like a promise, but I knew I lied.

“Sure smells good,” my husband said as he closed the oven door.

But I was gone.

When we were newlyweds, we had a little apartment in San Antonio where he attended dental school. On the back wall hung a sheet of mirror stretching from floor to ceiling—a decorative element that was supposed to make the pint-sized place appear larger than it was. But we were poor and had little furniture, so it didn’t much matter. In those days, I had a desire to cook for my husband, to please him with food. I remember the way he’d roll away from the textbooks spread across the floor and call to me in the kitchen, “Whatcha making? Sure smells good.”

I backed the Yukon out of the garage and into a cold, pouring rain. My daughter’s cotton candy perfume filled the cab.

“Did you have fun?” I asked. She grunted, which meant yes. I grunted back, which meant good.

And then I took a wrong turn out of the subdivision. I was three miles down Farm Road 549, nearly to the high school, before it occurred to me that I was driving on autopilot again.

The roast.

My misdirection couldn’t be righted for another mile, so I re-calculated the time it would take me to make the round trip and added another ten minutes.

I merged into I-30’s rush hour traffic. The rain punished my windshield while my frail wipers slapped back. Traffic crawled across the lake bridge as the wind made sheets of the precipitation. Flashes of lightening littered the world like brilliant confetti; thunder swept up afterward. As I drove, carefully following the red taillights of a UPS truck ahead, my daughter’s thumbs flew over her cell phone keys in a text-message frenzy.

“What do uw2c?” I imagined her friend asking. “IDK,” the response.

Clear of the bridge bottleneck, we next braved what we in Texas call a Mixmaster, also known as a highway inter-

change. This particular one feeds cars from two merging highways directly into the only exit for the only mall in eastern Dallas county. The roadway is always congested, so the area was undergoing heavy construction—road extensions and improvements—all in the hope of e-ven-tu-al-ly improving the traffic flow.

But tonight, in the storm of the season and with the ultimate roast in my oven, the overpass linking I-30 East with 635 South was perilously slow, thanks to the engineering genius who’d crafted a spectacular zig and a stupendous zag to the single-lane, backside slope, and hemmed it all up with two unforgiving concrete barriers.

As I moved along at school-zone speed, those barriers gleamed in my headlights like wet clay on a potter’s wheel. Bullets of rain fired against my windshield, and my daughter flipped from one country station to another, naively thinking she’d find a commercial-free program during rush hour. The heater raged, blowing cracks into the skin on my hands.

At the bottom of the overpass, a two-story wall of concrete, the base of the new section of overpass, confronted me, its wet fangs of rebar jutting from its upper lip. My daughter glanced up from the radio and squealed, thinking, I suppose, that I planned to end it all at fifteen miles per hour. Instead, I maneuvered right and took the mall exit. She laughed, her phone vibrated, and I’d lost her again.

The light at the intersection turned yellow. The car ahead stopped and so did I. I watched as the brake lights seemingly transformed the clear rivulets on my windshield into a sort of spirit blood.

Once upon a time, I used to cook chicken cordon bleu. I bought whole breasts, fresh, and skinned them with my bare hands, dug the fat out from under my fingernails with the edge of a fork. I flattened the breasts with a wooden mallet, part of a cutlery set I’d received at a bridal shower. I filled each breast with cheese and ham slices and folded them. Finally, I knitted the edges together with toothpicks. I dipped each into milk, then salted flour, then egg, and finally seasoned bread crumbs. I baked them, and, if I was lucky, the cheese didn’t bubble out onto the baking sheet.

When the light turned, my daughter twisted in her seat and looked behind us at the construction. She said she couldn’t figure out how this “new bridge thingy” was going to fit into the grand scheme of the highway redesign. “It doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere.”

I glanced into the rear-view mirror. I saw headlights glare and streetlights reflect off the dripping bodies of cars. I saw neon signs shout through the rain.

When my husband and I had hosted other student couples for dinner, he always asked me to please serve my chicken cordon bleu. I served it when the Densleys came, and the Clarks, and the Wallaces. I remember showing my mallet to Cindy, the wife of a medical student, and feeling so grown up because of the serious expression on her face.

Rachel shifted in her seat, faced me. “Mom, I asked you a question.”

Every social meal, chicken cordon bleu . . . and always with sweet corn, the only vegetable my husband eats.

“How is the new bridge going to connect up?”

Everything with sweet corn.

I shrugged. “I haven’t got a clue.”

Chicken cordon bleu with corn, enchiladas with corn, eggplant parmesan with corn. Right now, there in my freezer, sat a bag, waiting to be simmered to accompany tonight’s roast beef.

She settled back, folded her arms. Her phone vibrated again, but she ignored it. “You’re supposed to know everything,” she quipped. “You’re old.”

“You’re right.”

I followed the access road past North Mesquite High School, past the car dealership and the furniture store.

“Where’s the theater?” she asked, reading the miniature screen on her Blackberry.

“We’ll make it.”

“The movie is about to start, and Katie wants to know if she should buy me a ticket.”

“Tell her no. We’re almost there.” The sweep of my windshield wiper seemed to follow the precise arch of the theater’s neon rainbow. “We’ll be there in two minutes.”

I glanced at the clock. I’d left the house—left the roast—more than forty minutes earlier.

My daughter’s fingers worked the keys. “You should drive faster,” she told me, but I didn’t respond. Traffic had thinned, and I could actually see the slick asphalt beneath my low beams. Oddly, I’d never really noticed before—but hadn’t thought it through—but in the rain, in the dark,

when it’s just your headlights showing the way, a lined asphalt road can appear both black and white—both deep and dark; and glistening and clear—all at the same time.

I pulled into the busy theater lot and parked.

“You’re not going to leave me alone,” she said, and I found that interesting, since she was the one leaving the car.

I pulled the keys from the ignition. “No.”

The winter rain soaked quickly through my Keds as I walked with my sixteen-year-old to the ticket carousel and purchased a ticket. The police officer standing beside the ticket taker permitted me to accompany my daughter to the specific theater to make sure she met her friend’s family.

I thanked the officer, both grateful he was there and sad, so sad, that he had to be.

Next I drove through our old neighborhood so that I could drop off my daughter’s pillow and backpack at her friend’s house. Despite the waiting roast, I went the long way, down the street we’d moved from three years before, curious to see the old house and discover if our family’s imprint remained.

A single mother and her two young children had bought the house from us. As I drove slowly up to the brick house, I saw she’d painted the door a peach color I disliked and had pulled out the flower bed. Other than that, she’d changed very little about the place. One light shone through the darkness: an upstairs light. Our daughter’s old bedroom, a room where some other child now received good-night kisses.

I stopped. I could see the wallpaper, the white clouds floating against a summer-blue sky. I’d hung it myself. Though I couldn’t see, I knew the bottom of the wall would



still be bordered with a wallpaper strip of tall grass, and that in that grass an array of creatures hid—a puppy, a bunny, a duck, and even a small pig.

A shadow flitted along the lower panes. I dropped my head against the headrest.

I ARRIVED HOME and found my husband descending the stairs. He'd just finished helping our little guy brush his teeth and say his prayers. He went to change, and I headed for the oven.

The house held quiet as I slid the roaster from the oven. Steam roiled up as I lifted the lid. What I found inside was a charred lump set in a tar pit of dehydrated gravy. Shriveled mushrooms clung to the side of the roast. I pronged the thing and tried to lift it from the pan; it stuck. I shook it until the pan clattered free, falling onto the countertop. Then I lowered the forked remains onto a platter.

As I stared at my petrified good intentions, I felt my husband's hand slip around my waist.

"I cooked a roast for you," I whispered.

He kissed my ear. "I told you I wouldn't be home to eat it."

"Would you like some?" I handed him the carving knife. I thought he'd laugh or scoff, but instead he accepted it.

"Hey, I'm just grateful to have it," he said, moving around me. "We never got roast when I was a kid." He sawed back and forth. "Well, Mom made it some Sundays, but there were so many of us that I never got my fill."

"You can have your fill tonight." I smiled.

His bicep flexed as he poked the serrated tip through the charred outer layer. "Can you pour us something to drink?"

I groaned, then pulled two soda cans from the second refrigerator in the laundry room. When I returned, I found him sliding blocks of meat onto two plates.

"I didn't have time to make the corn."

"Why ruin corn?" He smiled.

I watched him carry both plates to the kitchen table. I followed him. "You don't have to eat that." I moved someone's history textbook and sat. "I thought if I turned the temperature down, it'd be all right." I popped the tab on my soda and handed him his. "I should've added more water."

"It's fine," he shrugged. "But tonight I'll offer a blessing."

I shouldn't have laughed—and I tried not to—but somehow a series of snickers escaped me and skipped across the thick silence of our house like a flat stone on smooth water.

He waited for me to regain my composure. Then, smiling, he bowed his head. I closed my eyes and listened along, my lips rolled between my teeth.

"Bless this food for our nourishment and strength."

And I lost it. It all seemed so funny, so stupid, so typical, so avoidable, so perfect.

My husband progressed immediately to the Amen and then grabbed his fork. Knowing he had an audience, he stabbed his supper like a caveman attacking some ice age rodent. Then he put the whole slice to his mouth. With his

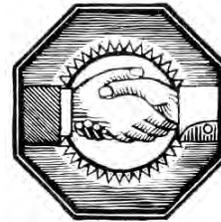
teeth, he tore free a hunk and chewed, canine-style.

He choked out, "Delicious," before knocking back his Diet Coke.

I laughed as I watched this man I'd lived with for twenty years saw off another jaw-breaking mouthful; this man who'd fathered my three children, who'd cheered them around bases and toward goals and basketball hoops, who'd held the back seat of their two-wheelers until their balance came, this man who'd grown crinkly before my eyes and had begun to sprout white hair. I watched this man eat a roast beef that jerky manufacturers would reject—and I realized this may well be the tenderest meal we'd ever shared.

The kitchen faucet dripped, a sound like a tick, tick. I took a bite and began gnawing.

Because today, I cooked a roast beef that I knew no one would be around to eat.



MAPLES

Out front the strong-armed sugar
lobs shadow to the lawn's mitt,

canopies kids at play
on the lazy lap of noon.

Trunked true, it preaches permanence
to its credulous flock. Meanwhile,

I stumble out back at midnight
among heretic silvers that shed skin,

lose limbs, surge sloppy toward destruction.
This one, already strung tight by futile cable,

will further splay its split trunk, bleed sap,
ache itself apart toward some vegetable bliss

until it breaks
and crushes the swing-set.

Tomorrow I'll patrol the yard,
rake up all it lost last night,

pledge to stanch its wounds
with a tree fort.

—MITCHELL METZ