



LegumeMan

~~Books~~

free series

## LegumeMan Books



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### About the author

As a college student and workaholic from the United States' pressure cooker, Arizona, Edmund Colell is no stranger to heads being eaten. His other short story, found in *Verbicide*, is one of the few things he created which has not in turn tried to eat others. The same cannot be promised of his upcoming work.

# EATING

# Edmund Colell



**A**fter months, Jill still finds it impossible to remove her gray beanie. Moreover, there is still no hair beneath it. She reaches up to scratch it with her inches-long fingernails, and then scratches her arms, legs, and belly after turning on her bed. The candy-wrapper-like wrinkled sheets get tangled in her legs, wiping along the growing stubble. *It might be better if* -- the thought slips into a slow haze. She scratches her head again.

On the top of her wooden dresser is a milky layer of dead skin, extending to the sides of the small television and DVD player. Shoes and clothes tangle in a mound of lint, lumped in the middle of dirt tracks punctuated by footprints. She pulls on a band shirt and panties from the mound and her sloth-like toenails scrape over other debris on her way to the refrigerator. Careful to make sure that her talons extend well past the refrigerator handle and that it is her fingers touching the handle she pulls the door aside and looks into the unlit murk smelling strongly of the coffee grounds that line the shelves. She pulls open the bottom crisper drawer, looking at the grayish-yellow beef roast still covered in plastic and resting on a foam board. Blue veins run over the surface to five cancerous growths, four of them resembling limbs and the nearest one resembling the

bottom end of a balloon. "Feeling lonely again?" the meat asks, the balloon-bottom tumor puckering with each syllable.

"You never have anything useful to say, Stephanie," Jill sighs.

"Please, I just matured recently. What's your excuse for not having anything useful to do?"

"Just let me think of a plan for -- "

"Yeah?"

"Er, sorry. Just lost what I was thinking for a second there."

Stephanie shuffles in her plastic wrap. Her sucker-mouth retracts and coughs briefly, then presses against the plastic again, saying "Mmkay. So, any luck with getting it off?"

Jill tugs against the top of the beanie, the skin of her forehead pulling with it. Her nails curl over the fabric, which twitches as the tips graze over. As she shakes her head, she feels the mouth of the hat settle back over her eyebrows. "Now I'm just trying to think if there was anything I did to make it stay like this."

"Kept you from eating me, at least. Kept you from eating a lot of stuff in here."

Jill looks at the other food items beyond the coffee grounds, like the milk carton with cheese curdling out from under the cap, the lettuce covered in a fine veil of rust, the packs of cheese populated by cauliflower-like mold, a container of butter, and a pack of fast food French fries looking as fresh as they did when she bought them two months ago. Her blank expression is the same as when she saw them in fresher states, even as she feels her stomach vibrate. She grabs a fry with the nails of her thumb and index finger and drags it to her mouth. Cold, soggy, salty, and burning her dry tongue. The lump of starch and grease slides down her throat and sticks to the back. She drags in rasping breaths as it pushes against her windpipe from her esophagus. Particles of charcoal settling at the bottom of a filtered water pitcher

rattle into the fluid as Jill yanks it from the fridge and takes a grainy gulp that splashes against her clothes and floor. The ingested water squeezes against the munched fry and drags it down in chunks. Looking back down at the floor and seeing the now-soggy clumps of coffee grounds, she feels her beanie lower its brim over her eyes and ears. Closing over her earlobes, it screeches and tugs up at the cartilage. Her eardrums throb and crunch inward, and she shoves her nails into its sides and shoves upward to no success. Thinking of the cause, she grabs handfuls of the muddy grounds and dashes over to the bag-less trash can. By the time that she has dumped several fistfuls of the stuff into the can, the beanie's screeching has died down and the material has loosened back up to her eyebrows, leaving a headache and sore inner-ears.

"Wow, that didn't take long to ride-out," Stephanie says. "Remember the time you were clawing at the top of your head for days?"

"Don't patronize me," Jill says, scraping the sludge off of her hands and wrists. Beyond the ringing in her ears she hears the tinkling of an ice cream truck. When she pulls aside the blinds and looks outside she sees a pink fly dwarfing the parked cars, its many eyes shifting to form a message in white: "Your warmth in a world gone cold. Talk to your doctor about Nulsubrism." They then switch over to display magenta pills over a turquoise backdrop. The advertising fly slowly drifts away, hovering above the houses and sprinkling its ice cream jingle over everything.

None of Jill's phones have dial tones. Her brittle-nailed fingers probe the crevasses of her furniture and discarded clothing, scooting loose change along their edges before dropping to the floor. When she finishes scavenging at an old pair of shorts, she ends up with five dimes, seven quarters, and two pennies. She then pulls on a long pair of pants, sagging them

to cover her feet as her toenails stretch out from underneath. She pushes her arms through a sweat jacket and stuffs her hands in the pockets with the nails poking through old holes and scratching her belly. Out of the house and onto the pavement, she strides to the street and down towards a supermarket. Past a procession of silent cars, a crosswalk, and the vending machines, she finds the pay phone. She drops two quarters into the payphone and dials the number to Dr. Phuhduh, pulling the receiver to her ear. After two rings, she hears, "Thank you for calling the telephone-delivery office of Dr. Phuhduh, this is Richard. How may I help you?"

"Is Dr. Phuhduh busy right now?"

"Not at the moment, would you like to speak to him?"

"Yes, please."

"Just a moment please."

Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" flits in her ear before she hears "Sorry for the wait, Dr. Phuhduh speaking."

"Hello, Doctor, it's Jill Mullens. Been a while, but I was wondering if I might need medication for something."

"How are you feeling?"

A silence passes between them for a second. "Erm... crap, I forgot what I was going to say." She snaps her fingers several times, her mind straining against the beanie's presence. Her eyes then light-up. "Oh, right. Got something eating my head. Can hardly leave my house or maintain it. I regret tiny mistakes and I've been getting desperate lately to get rid of this problem."

"So I take it you'd like to start something on a low dosage? Maybe five milligrams of Nulsubrism?"

"How did you know that was the one I was thinking about?"

"Wrote six scripts last week. Trendy drug lately, thank God it hasn't been shown to be dangerous. Give it a free trial for right now, one pill in the morning

and one at night, and tell me in a week how it has affected you.”

At that moment the other line hangs up. There is a rattle in the coin return tray as pink pills swish around each other. A crinkled and illegible script gets pulled out of the coin slot like a tissue. With the script in her pocket she finds a water fountain, pops one pill in her mouth, and washes it down.

By the end of the fifth day, Stephanie asks, “Have the pills helped any?”

Jill scratches at the fuzzy film of cotton candy that has sprouted from beneath her body hair. She feels the saliva of the beanie on her head as it consumes the sugary crop that has sprouted there, lazily slipping along her cranium. Slowly she slides her fingers underneath the beanie’s lips and detaches it with a wet sound. Among the pink crystals of wet cotton candy, the top of her head is covered in scabrous patches of skin and one section of the skull worn down to a hole above the brain. patterned around a hole leading to her brain. In her hands the beanie curls into itself and whines before she throws it in her trash can. It gently gurgles with the sound of spit bubbles popping in its mouth.

Jill walks away to her bedroom, stopping at the coffee table to fill a black Zippo and light a cigarette between her lips. Taking a puff and returning the pack and fluid to the table, she finishes the journey to the bedroom to pull a few surviving clothing articles from the mound of lint: a yellow shirt, a denim skirt, a coffee-stained pink bra, and white pants. As she pulls them on and feeds the lighter to her back pocket, an accordion whistles somewhere outside with accompanying squeaky lyrics. From the window she sees a woman with that instrument, playing it with thin arms and fingers. “Hey!” she shouts with a smile.

The accordion player shifts her attention. "Oh, need me to play softer?"

"No, it's okay," Jill says, climbing out of the window and walking towards her. "I used to take accordion lessons, haven't played it in years. Let me try." She slinks the straps over her shoulders, cotton candy catching in the black nylon. She stretches her clawed fingers over the keys and pulls both ends apart from the bellows, then snickers. "Yeah, I'm really rusty." As the wind blows over her naked scalp she imagines the beanie crawling back on to drown out the accordion with another scream.

"It's okay," the woman says, "I've been doing it since I could walk. Lots and lots of practice."

"Uh-huh."

The woman grabs hold of one of the straps. "Here, give it back a second and let me show you."

Jill cocks an eyebrow and slinks it off of her shoulders. As the woman begins to play 'O Come All Ye Faithful,' Jill stands and watches the fingers traipse along the keys and the motions of both arms kneading the bellows. The woman is looking away from her, smiling at no one in particular. As Jill feels the space around her empty itself of her presence, she walks away and crawls back through the window.

"Got any more coffee grounds?" Stephanie asks. "I think something else has just matured. It's the butter."

Jill reaches for the round box and pops the lid open. Floating in the orange soup are three yellow chunks with expanding mouths. They take turns giggling and sputtering, one with orange spittle over its greasy lips sending a bitterly salty scent into the air, smothering Stephanie's sour odor.

Stephanie retracts her mouth from the plastic, whispering to herself. "At least they still can't talk yet."

"Fuck you, lady," shouts a little boy with spoiled orange splashing out of the lid.

“Just for that, you get a stupid name. Chauncey. And your brother and sister will be Eugene and Gladys.”

The three chunks blow raspberries together. After Jill wipes the spat substance from her eyes, she notices the veins running underneath the yellow bodies. “Great, Stephanie. I think you taught them bad manners.”

“No, no,” says Chauncey. “We didn’t learn anything from that slice of cow ass.”

“Cow ass with more substance than any of you!” Stephanie shouts, flailing her growing arm-tumors. “Jill, take them out in the sun for a little bit and watch them disappear one by one!”

“Not today,” Jill says, closing the refrigerator door just as she starts to feel something rubbing up against her leg. She screams and flails her leg back-and-forth with the beanie sticking to her in a blur of magenta syrup and gray cotton. The flailing quickens to stomping and the beanie crawls up Jill’s sugary leg between each stomp. At last she draws the lighter from her pocket and cranks a small flame into its face. With a whimper it pops off and slinks away, Jill crashing her foot down on the brim as its screams choke under Jill’s stomping. “Why? Why won’t you just die?” she shouts as her foot swells. Crackling, the beanie limps into the shadows. Jill takes her keys off of the hook and walks out the front door, ignoring the accordion player’s take on ‘Dance of the Sugar-plums.’ “I’m done,” she says. “I’m just done.”

The pink fly hovers through her neighborhood again, jingling and flashing its advertisements through its eyes. Auto insurance agencies, tutoring programs, new items for a fast food restaurant, etc. “Tell me something better I can use,” Jill says as she approaches. “The pills helped earlier, but they’re not working now.”

The fly turns around with the phrase “Feeling trapped? No one wanting to help?” It holds for two

seconds before flashing over to the number for a suicide hotline.

“No, that’s not it.” She tears at the cotton candy stretching out of her head, showing the scabbed skin and brain-wound beneath. “This is it. It’s all going to happen again unless I get some real help.”

The fly’s next message reads “Get real solutions from real people.” Its suggestion is a debt-relief agency.

“No.”

The next one: “Fire is not the solution. Help overcome your pyromania in five easy steps.”

Jill sighs and turns away, thinking of choice words for the next conversation with Dr. Phuhduh. She feels the thought to call him drift slowly to the top in her head, and then it drops out of what was the beanie’s old feeding hole. Then she stares at her toenails as her feet pad after each other down to the doorstep and back through the kitchen into the living room, studying the cracks and the yellow discoloration in the walls as she ignores Stephanie’s muffled shouts for intervention with the butter brats. Her senses feel so removed that she doesn’t feel the beanie slink back onto her scalp, but she does feel it fold over the entirety of her face and blare its baby scream into her ears. Her hands don’t move to pull it off, and her legs don’t move to find a tool for doing so. The only movement is a fall to the floor, punctuated by the jolt of impact and the pop of her toenails as they crack and split. She inhales the strands of the beanie’s mucous for the next few hours, feeling the itch of cotton candy shedding from her hair follicles and the numb heaviness in her head.

By the next morning, the refrigerator door has opened from a weakened gasket. Stephanie jumps out of the crisper drawer on two legs of green cartilage breaking through the Styrofoam bottom and plastic of her container. She says, “Christ, finally,” as she flees from Chauncey, Eugene, and Gladys. She

compensates the off-center gravity of her form by pulling her front with her mouth far up, unable to see anything in front of her as she squirms around to punch two arms through the Styrofoam. As she pads across the carpet she calls out, "Hey Jill! Check it out, they weren't just extra tumors after all!"

No replies, so Stephanie follows the sound of breathing dragged through a thick filter of phlegm. As she gets closer to the source she starts to hear a faint whine underneath the drags, the pitch different from any noise Jill could make. Stephanie's fresh toes liquefy tiny patches of cotton candy, the patches thickening as she continues. As she feels weight shift in front of her, she reaches out and touches Jill's scaly heel, feeling and waddling up towards the skin and clothing until she touches the lips of the beanie which seal around Jill's neck. "Jesus," she utters, feeling around until she touches the back pocket with Jill's bulging lighter. Pulling it out of the pocket, she pulls the lid off and fiddles with the flint wheel until her fingers burn from the new flame. She flinches, then pulls it back again, holding the flame aloft as her blackening fingers hold near the wheel. Blindly, she guides the lighter back to the top of Jill's head and drags the flame under the beanie's lips.

A wild howl erupts from the beanie as it rears up and slinks off Jill's neck, then her face, then her cranium, leaving bleeding cuts and a film of slime. The howl lowers to a wail as the beanie gets on its lips and ambles towards Stephanie. She watches the nipple-tip of the beanie loom into her vision, and with a scream she charges into the creature, keeping the lighter above her body as her arms feel the cotton fold around them and trap the heat before a sting of cool air follows the beanie's recoil. Then, as she hears the beanie scream again, its lips fold over the plastic wrapping and the noise amplifies to pop her tumor-ears. A long trunk with an open mouth hovers over the plastic and then jams into her, and

putrefied juices gurgle up the trunk in sporadic pumps. She reaches back with the lighter to burn the trunk, though the convection warmth only causes the trunk to pause before blowing out the flame and resuming its sucking. The lighter then drops from her hand as her arms and legs wither with the rest of her body. Her veins start to bulge, branching blue over her sight as her vision blurs and darkens. "Jill!"

Stephanie's dried arms and legs feel a skin-irritating wetness beneath them, which she splashes into as her limbs lose their strength. Then the wetness puddles into the open tears of the foam, and she pulls against the trunk to reach for the lighter and see what the liquid is. Her crisping tumors grab the top and she pulls against the wheel one more time. Instead of a flame is a flicker of sparks, though as she's lifted into the air, the bottom of her body sings and sizzles.

Jill stands above the beanie with the can of lighter fluid hanging from her hand. A plume of black smoke clouds her eyes and rattles her lungs as she steps away and drops the can. She rushes to grab the fire extinguisher from the kitchen wall, yanking it from the hooks and pulling the tab out of the head. In the black fog she hears the beanie's baby shriek to which she aims the extinguisher's hose. She squeezes down on the top of the head and sprays the carbon dioxide powder in a wide arc, listening to it spill on the floor until she hears it coincide with the crackle of fire. The heat in the smoke fades out, and she runs to the window to pull it open. The cotton-candy-and-lighter-fluid smoke filters out of the house, leaving Jill with white powder on her floor and a charred lump in the center of burnt cotton candy. As she picks up the dead beanie its remains crisp away in her hands, its cooked trunk limping out. She feels around inside until she pulls out a piece of dry meat. In her hands, four buds and a shriveled brain curl up into a ball. It pops into Jill's mouth, crunchy-shelled and chewy

as her teeth grind it around for two minutes with tears collecting in the corners of her eyes before she finally swallows. As it slides down her esophagus, a smile inches up her cheeks. With a tremble in her voice, she says, "Stephanie, you taste better than I thought you would." As a minute passes, she looks around her house, feeling the beanie's lingering influence from every skin coating and every crumpled wad of material. *You may have given me Stephanie,* she thinks, *but damn it, I'm going to give myself more than what you took away.*

Jill then grabs a large basket from the laundry, and the first thing she drops into it is the corpse of the beanie and the collection of cotton candy with bloody broken toenails, covered thereafter by her wad of clothes. The contents disintegrate and rot as she goes around the house collecting various flavors of garbage on the floor, and into the basket they all go. She tears the loose skin from her furniture and fixtures, leaving behind oily films where they settled. The skin crusts and crumbles as she makes one last trip to the refrigerator, where in sludgy swipes she pulls wet coffee grounds and putrid food into the basket with Chauncey, Eugene, and Gladys as they all howl on their journey to the center of the muck. Lastly she pulls out a nail clipper and sprinkles the rot with many fingernail chips. Her toenails get no treatment except for bandages plucked from the hall closet.

Jill then reaches under her bed, pulling out a package wrapped in the same dead skin as the other dust-settled objects. She tears it all away, revealing an old accordion with cracking bellows and stiff keys. She slings the straps around her shoulders and puts her fingers on the keys, and as she pulls the bellows apart and squeezes them back together she hears the venting hum undiminished by neglect. She practices the accordion as the hours spill into each other and the day goes on without her. As she puts

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the instrument away to return to her messy bed, her last thoughts linger on the possibilities of tomorrow: what Stephanie would do if she had legs sooner.