

GEORGE CHOUNDAS

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*THE MONKS*

We were at the Pearsons. Outside, on their back deck, no sweaters, because it was October and we were pretending it wasn't. Ethan was opening up a third bottle of Malbec, third or fourth. We'd finished the scallops—a simple preparation, white wine and garlic, but Christ they were good—and the steaks were coming along. Ethan knew my wife Jennifer only drank Malbec.

That's when things started with the Tibetan monks.

"It's not just a religious issue," Ethan's wife said. "It is ethnic and cultural and everything else. Tibet is a totally different, totally different nation."

Lisa majored in Political Science at Columbia so she knew.

"They've been setting themselves on fire, right?" Jennifer said. "The monks?"

"They don't just set themselves on fire," Ethan said. "They wrap wire, or they wrap themselves in wire."

"That's right," I said, "I read about that. That way bystanders can't rescue them by just tearing off the burning clothes."

"Talk about premeditation," Jennifer said.

"Doesn't matter that the Chinese don't speak the same language," I said. "They can understand that, people willing to die that much."

"Premeditated desperation," Lisa said.

"I will go to hell for saying this," Ethan said. He held up the grill cover and squinted at the steaks. Then he dropped the cover and turned briskly away as if headed for an appointment.

"But they're like scallops," he announced. "Scallops wrapped in bacon."

"What?" Lisa said.

“This is horrible, I know,” Ethan said, now pouring wine, careful not to spill any, “but monks and scallops? You know, they’re both bald, they’re both soft?”

His smile was pure mischief, trying to get across as much face as possible. No height to it at all. Only joy gives height to a smile.

His wife Lisa started giggling, but the feverish kind where there’s times you can’t hear anything because she’s so caught up. She was drunk.

Ethan’s tongue was out on his lip. In a little curl there, like it wasn’t finished. Like it couldn’t wait to finish.

It didn’t have to. Ethan: also drunk.

“And, come to think of it,” he continued, “wire and bacon are both longer than they are wide.”

“Also, bacon and wire, both of them stay hot longer than most things. Once they get hot,” Jennifer said.

This was my wife who said this. I looked at my wife.

“Hotter and for longer than other things,” she continued, straight-facing it. But her mouth looked like it had too much in it, and she was scrunching her shoulders way forward. In other words, this show of pretending to try to not giggle was worse than if she had just fucking giggled.

Outrageous.

“But scallops probably wouldn’t stare at my wife’s breasts every chance they got,” I said. “Am I right?”

Jennifer put her hand on my arm and didn’t move it. Spousespeak for I should stop talking.

The smile stopped trying. It didn’t go anywhere, but it didn’t go anywhere.

Lisa put a glass to her lips. Unlucky for her it was one of the empty ones. She sipped at nothing.

“About my wife’s breasts, I mean?” I said.

We were never invited back again. I had a feeling that would be the case. Score one for the monks.