

Ragout

by Michael Olsen

AARON — 20-something

Lights come up on a living room. There is a chair. Aaron rushes in. He holds a bowl of hot ragout which he puts down on a low stool in front of the chair.

Shit! Shit shit shit!

He wanders away a moment, despairing, then walks up to the ragout, sniffs.

Shit.

He half falls into the chair, wiping his forehead. He starts breathing deeply and slowly.

I'm sure if you stay very, very still, you might be OK. They say when you get bitten by a red back or a snake you should remain still, just apply pressure to the wound so the poison doesn't move around. Would it make any difference now? Maybe if you were quick you could phone for an ambulance. Maybe you could make it. Maybe.

Pause

But no ambulance is coming. There's no—panic. People aren't rushing around doing things, going crazy. It's all so quiet. Just the sound of the night. My breathing. That's all.

Pause

Here, puss puss puss puss. No? You're just going to lie down over there? OK. Typical cat. Only does what it wants to do.

Pause

I have to laugh. Really I do. The irony of it all.

Pause

I should have known. She'd never cooked ragout. Ever. And here I was sitting down to it like it's the best thing she's ever made. If I'd married her for her cooking I would have been dead long ago. So funny. Everything had gone so well at work. I finally got Mel Peterson to sign up for \$500,000 worth of life insurance. What a laugh! I should have taken out the same policy! When I got off the train you could see this sunset lighting up

the whole sky as if it was on fire: pinks and purples and reds—absolutely beautiful—and I thought: “My god! It’s good to be alive!” and I carried that feeling with me all the way home like a precious gift I just wanted to give her. I still had it when I went in the front door—and there she was, in the kitchen, of all places, and I could smell this wonderful meaty smell filling the house. She smiled quickly.

“Ragout,” she said.

Not “Hello, how are you?” or “How’s things?” just “Ragout.”

Pause

Come here you silly cat. Damn it!

Frowning.

Ragout. The dining table was all laid out. I asked what the occasion was. “No occasion,” she smiled.

Aaron bends over the ragout, sniffs, breathes in the aroma again.

Delicious. Like a marriage, really: a combination of the right ingredients, stewed and cooked to perfection, a diaspora of tastes and flavours that make it wholesome and delicious.

Pause

Only, she didn't use shitake mushrooms. She used *Amanita Phalloides*. The Death Cap mushroom. The one that kills 90% of mushroom poisonings around the world. No symptoms for the first 12 hours or so, then you get violent stomach pain, followed by vomiting and diarrhoea. Miraculously, the effects pass, but only for a couple of days. By that time the toxin has smashed its way through your liver and kidneys. If you survive, your only hope’s a liver transplant. Charming. Of course, like most poisons, it all depends on how much you ate.

Pause

How much do you like ragout?