

Eyeing My Caesar

By AT Mango

God bless the food courts of America! What I mean? Most places have lunch hours, then shut down till dinner. Not our food courts, no sir. Open all the time, same as their parent, the mall. Man wants to eat off hours, me, what's he going to do? So, you come here. They're glad to see you at this still time. Healthy's@ is a chain; trust them. They make a mistake, you complain, and the franchise gets itself a new manager. They don't put up with shit. You know what you're getting when you order, same all over the Midwest. Ordered me up a Caesar - doc says there's more pounds of me than should be. Salad for lunch, even this late lunch, but boy, the beef I'll have me at dinner. Reading a novel now, man's companion when you dine alone. A Grisham. They're all alike too. If you like them, you know you be happy - keep you peppy till supper.

Reading, turning pages, whittling down my garden repast. Barely looking in the bowl, looking at the book instead, yet I notice something odd in there. Croutons are square, this thing is round. Croutons are yellow or brown - hardened bread crusts, they are - this is blue. Nearly stabbed it with my fork but held off in time. Pausing, I take a good look at what I was about to eat. An eye. Fucking eye in my salad.

"I got an eye in this here Caesar," I yell.

I look around. Just me and some fat kid eating a burger, or what looks to be a stack of burgers, one on top of another. Must of got it from Barry's Buxom Burgers right next to Healthy's@. He's got him five pieces of roll encasing three patties and a gooey cole slaw layer, bacon and cheese top of each patty. Whole thing's a single sandwich. And the kid is not messing around, doing yeoman's work, eating steady. Has to kind of tip his head and tackle it in stages, can't fit all that height into his mouth at once. I trust this kid to put it all away eventually - what accounts for the kid's girth. Not putting him down or anything like that, no sir, appreciate the kid's ambition and endurance. My kind of kid. Took me nearly half a century to create this thing tumbling over my belt. Kid's only in his mid-teens, outdone me already. Hat's off to you, kid. He hears me yelling something about an eye. Looks at me, curious. Hears the word 'Caesars', interest curtailed, keeps munching.

I grab the salad and run to the Healthy's@ counter, screaming at the wall behind the empty counter. "Got an eye here. I want to see the manager. I want to see the cook. I got an eye here. Ain't supposed to be an eye in your salad. Don't say on the menu, 'Want an eye with that?' Don't say that at all. I don't appreciate this here extra side. What you doing, putting eyes in people's salads? Launching a new gourmet trend? 'Stead of anchovies, have yourself an eye?"

Guy comes running out of the kitchen, whirls around the cash register at the corner of the counter, stops short facing me. Guy's smaller than I am, Hispanic looking, hair in a ponytail wrapped in a goofy hairnet, wearing one of those ribbed tee shirts with straps 'stead of shoulders. Has tattoos all over hisself, on his shoulders, down his arms, around his neck. Ugly sumbitch.

"Give me salad. I get you new one."

"What the fuck's an eye doing in my salad? Whose eye is this?"

“I give you fresh salad, no charge. Don’t charge whatever you ate from this salad. You getting two salads or one salad and half of another salad for price of single salad. Is good deal. Give me salad with the eye.”

I back away, still holding onto my bowl, suspicious. Police got to look at this eye, find out where it came from. Cook’s too anxious to reclaim the eye. Backing out of the food court now, but the guy stalks after me looking real pissed. I turn and start to run through the mall.

“Call 9-11,” I yell. I forget that it’s called ‘9-1-1’, not ‘9-11’ like in the Trade Center plane thing a few years back. “9-11, 9-11,” I’m shouting. People look at me like I’m nuts.

I run to the up-escalator, holding the salad bowl with one hand, keeping my other over the top so the eye don’t fall out. Tattooed man chases me.

“Get a cop!” I yell. “Security guard! Security guard!”

I’m lucky. A guard was in the john just to the side of a jewellery shop. Comes out adjusting his belt. I run over to him.

“Look. An eye. In my Caesar. From Healthy’s@. That guy...” and I point to the cook who is just now coming up to us, malevolent bastard, giving us a really hard look. You don’t expect to see hard looks in the afternoon in a shopping mall. On a street, maybe. Some tough street in a big city at night, near a bar, in a dirty alley maybe, but not here in front of The Gap and Pine Creek Collectibles and Barbara and Company. You just don’t expect to see such looks.

Tattooed man reaches us, me and the guard. Tries to grab the bowl away from me, but I keep it out of his reach. The guard is a big guy, bigger than me and the tattooed man put together, even though I do have this extra weight I’m trying to get rid of. He grabs the cook’s wrist, holds it firm.

“Just what you doing here, boy?” he asks, in southern sheriff talk, like in the movies. I don’t know if that’s where he picked it up or that’s how security guards talk. Never talked to one before.

“Consuela,” the tattooed man moans. “I kill her. My Consuela.” He starts confessing to the guard. I listen in. I’ll translate, put it into your real American English.

Four games into the season, local college team hasn’t won even once. Local professional team? Two games, not a single touchdown. Just one fucking field goal for three points. Three points in two games. How’s a man supposed to feel like a man? All your teams losing, acting like pussies. Gets you down, shrivels your dick. Then your wife, Consuela, who claims she likes football but doesn’t. Not really. Not like you. Consuela’s not mad, not angry, acts like nothing’s wrong, like everything’s okay. You try to explain to her what a bad thing this is, how hard it is to get through the week, how you’re scared when Saturday comes and the college team loses again. Then the very next day, these big guys with their million dollar salaries can’t cross the goal line even once. That’s their whole job right there, millions of dollars they get for playing ball while you chop lettuce, add oil to cheese, make fucking salads for these fucking shoppers.

You lose your temper. You start chopping her - your wife, Consuela - before she lets you out of the car this morning to go work at Healthy’s@. You chop her with a butcher knife you borrowed the night before, cook you some carne at home. Then you realize what you have done and you cry. You tell the parts what used to be your wife, the parts scattered over your car, how sorry you are, but none of the parts can hear you. You

don't know what to do. You're scared. You put a blanket over the mess in the front seat. You go to the trunk, get out a tarp, spread that over the mess in the back seat and floor. You take off your scarf and rub some of the blood off the window, then leave everything in the parking lot till after work when you can figure out what to do. You go to Healthy's@ kitchen, chop lettuce for salads. One of her eyes must have been in your shirtsleeve, falls into a salad. This gringo gets that salad, causes a fuss. You just want the eye back. It belongs to you. It's part of your wife, Consuela. Ah, you love her, loved her. So confused right now.

Tattooed man cries. Guard has called other mall cops for backup, 9-1-1, not 9-11. You hand him the bowl with the eye and start to leave the mall, but you're still hungry. You got to eat something. You go back to the food court, see the fat kid licking his fingers. He stares at you. You stare back. You go over to the Barry's Buxom Burger counter this time and order two 38DDs. You intend to give the kid one, eat one yourself. But by the time they bring them out, he's left. You know you can eat one, but not two. You'll have to leave part of the second one.

You're about to begin your feast, figuring out how to attack a six-inch thick samwich. Then, discretion grabs you. You peel apart each layer to inspect it, folding over each piece of roll. Is Healthy's@ kitchen separate from Barry's or do all the kitchens converge in a cluster back there into one big open kitchen? Maybe more than just a single eye got stuck to the tattooed man's clothes. Maybe other pieces of Consuela were flying around the open kitchen when he chopped lettuce. You peel and you peer, very carefully; make sure you ain't eating no Consuelaburger here, no sir.

AT Mango is the pseudonym of a scientist who lives in the West. He often emerges last out of the gate, but with all insensate speed and determination, sometimes finishes in sight of the pack, still last.