

## Mosquitoes Won't Bother Him None

By Man Martin

Johnny tried not to stare at Tony Lemon Jell-O's earring during supper. Instead, he kept his eyes on his granddaughter, not a hard thing to do. She'd grown up to be a lovely young woman, the first in his family to go to college.

Sarah had laid out one of her typical Sunday dinners on the table even though it was only Saturday. There was cracklin cornbread, greens, summer squash, rice, mashed rutabagas, fried chicken and country fried steak, gravy, sliced onions, garden tomatoes, chutney, sweet pickles, and iced tea. All these riches presented with the habitual modest disclaimer of all Southern cooks, "I just hope it's fit to eat."

"Tony, are you feeling alright?" Sarah asked the boy. "You ain't touched nothing but your rice." Johnny could hear the softened edge of hurt in his wife's voice.

"I don't eat meat, Ms. Cobb," Tony explained.

"Well, there's greens," Sarah said, the hurt in her voice a little sharper. "You can eat them, can't you?"

"The side meat, Grandma," Deborah explained, speaking as if Tony weren't there. "There's enough fat floating in these vegetables to put together an entire pig."

"He can eat chicken, can't he?" Johnny mumbled. Johnny had long since learned to make certain comments softly enough for no one to hear. Johnny knew for a fact his granddaughter's boyfriend ate chicken because he'd told him so himself just that afternoon.

They'd been in the pen out behind the house; Tony, who it seemed had never seen a yard bird back in California, admired the chickens and ducks Johnny kept.

"We buy a few every Easter," Johnny explained, "Trumble's Feed and Hardware on Tybee puts them on sale. They're all different colors then. Pink and green and yellow. Dyed up for Easter, you know. Like eggs. They grow out of it."

"I have to congratulate you," Tony said in a way that sounded as if he were really congratulating himself. "A lot of people buy pets when they're cute and little, but then don't take care of them when they grow up. I'm glad to know you're a different sort of person than that. Do they have names?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. He hadn't expected the boy to take such a personal interest in the livestock. "That's Reba, Connie, Patty, and over there's Tammy."

"That's wonderful!" Tony actually clapped his hands. "I bet you just love them. They've obviously bonded to you."

Even though Johnny understood each word the boy said, he could not for the life of him figure out what he meant. Pets? These dirty white and brown birds that pecked the ground bare and littered it with molt and dander? Birds who crapped such potent fertilizer that if you didn't mix it at least three to one with leaf mulch it, would burn the tomato plants? Nevertheless, Johnny could tell the boy meant well, although even Tony's warmest compliments came dipped in such a layer of self-satisfaction, they were hard to swallow.

"If you like birds, there's some marsh hens out in the marsh. You want to come along and I'll show you."

"I'd love that!" the boy said, too warmly for Johnny's taste.

“The walk’ll do us good, I reckon. Sarah’s laying out one of her big suppers, and we’ll need to work up an appetite. Her fried steak and gravy ain’t something you want to miss.”

That’s when the boy let the bombshell drop, “I don’t eat meat.”

Johnny had heard of vegetarians before, but this was the first time he’d ever come across one living and breathing. “Don’t eat meat? What do you eat?” The idea hit him as peculiar as if Tony claimed he preferred not breathing air.

“I eat a lot of pasta,” Tony said. “Fresh fruit and vegetables.”

“Pasta? You mean like noodles?” A picture rose in Johnny’s mind of Tony sitting down to a big plate of spaghetti noodles unhallowed by sauce, lifting great forkfuls of white string to his mouth and sucking them up with serene grace, like Johnny’s mental picture of a Chinese man. Johnny took in Tony’s almond eyes, shiny black hair pulled into a pony tail, and single outlandish earring and wondered for an earth-rocking moment if Tony might not be part Chinese. “You don’t eat meat at all?”

“Not red meat, at least,” Tony said, as if this were a point of pride. “I eat some seafood and chicken.”

Johnny felt some relief at this. A picky eater might be rude, but that was a far cry from living on mineral water and boiled sand. As a boy, Johnny himself could not abide crawfish. “So you eat chicken, that’s good. I don’t reckon Sarah’ll mind frying you up one.” With that, Johnny reached down hospitably with one red hard hand and took Reba by the throat. A quick twist, and she was done, a limp feathery bag in Johnny’s hand. “I’ll take this in so Sarah can get the feathers off her. You wait here. I’ll be back and show you them marsh hens.”

Tony said nothing. At dinner that night, Johnny realized the funny look on the boy’s face foretold he was not even going to eat chicken, even though Johnny had specially killed one just for him. Johnny reckoned Tony Lemon Jell-O did not eat meat of any kind; the story about eating chicken was just an idle brag. For the second time that day, Johnny had the horrifying thought that Tony might be part Chinese.

The night, after the dishes were put away, Sarah got out sheets and blankets for the foldout couch.

“You don’t need that, Grandma,” Deborah said. “Tony is sleeping in my room.”

“Where will you sleep, honey?” Sarah asked.

“In my room.”

Sarah stared at her granddaughter briefly, plumbing the implications of this sleeping arrangement. Then Sarah’s face fell in on itself, like bread dough that’s been punched down. “But honey...” Johnny knew Sarah’s Baptist sensibilities could not have been more outraged if Deborah had taken to drinking warm goat’s blood and lighting black candles to Satan.

“I’m old enough to do what I want,” Deborah said.

Johnny sat in his chair and said nothing, but his heart wilted. What had happened to the little girl his daughter had brought home from County Memorial? He studied his granddaughter’s face; her gray eyes had the same silvery glint of determination Johnny remembered from his own grandfather, a man who once gut-shot a neighbor for paying undue attention to Johnny’s grandmother.

“Not in my house,” Johnny said. “You’re in my house, you follow my rules.”

“You can’t stop us,” Tony explained with that smugness that so riled Johnny. “Even if you put us in separate rooms, we’ll just get together during the night. You might as well save yourself the trouble is all.”

With this said, the two young people suffered Sarah to make up the foldout couch, tears standing in her eyes and her chin quivering. Johnny watched with his chin stuck out, not retiring until he’d seen with his own two eyes Tony Lemon Jell-O climb into the right bed.

Before going to bed, Johnny took off his overalls and laid them on the back of the chair in his room. They weren’t dirty, and there wasn’t any point getting out a fresh pair tomorrow. He kept on his shirt and boxers to sleep in, but put his socks in the dirty clothes; it wasn’t cold enough to wear socks to bed. Sarah knelt by her side of the bed, praying. She prayed extra long and hard that night.

Sarah had always been a full-bore Christian, a loyal member of the Sanctified Tongue True Gospel Baptist Church on State Road 10. Johnny himself was more measured in his faith. He’d been saved briefly back in Junior High during a revival, but he hadn’t been to church much since. He calculated he’d get saved again and washed of sin in a few years when he hadn’t much time to live. That way he’d avoid hellfire and still get to do exactly as he pleased in the meantime. Johnny knew preachers discouraged leaving off redemption until the last minute, but the Georgia low country is full of men who do just that, and at their funerals the preacher says they’re glory-bound just the same as if they never touched a bottle or a smoke in their lives.

Johnny got under the sheet; Sarah was still kneeling by her side of the bed. In the silence of the room, Johnny thought he heard a distant bedspring squeak. His body at once went rigid. *Why don’t I go in there and make sure they ain’t getting up to any tricks*, Johnny thought, *just go walk down the hall and keep an eye out for any funny goings-on?* Even as he thought this, Johnny knew that wasn’t his style. His grandfather would have done it, but not him. He protested frequently against life, but always in an undertone.

When Sarah finally got into bed, Johnny asked, “What kind of name do you think that is, Chinese?”

When Deborah wrote home the name of her boyfriend, Sarah and Johnny had been mystified by the unpronounceable “Limongello.” They discovered on meeting Tony that his last name was really the bizarre but manageable “Lemon Jell-O.”

“Deborah says it’s Italian.”

The skin on Johnny’s neck and arms prickled. “A foreigner,” he said too softly for Sarah to hear, “I knew he was a foreigner.” More loudly he said, “Do you reckon she’s aiming to marry him?”

“I don’t know, oh Lordy.” Johnny knew his wife was torn between dread of this unspeakable match and the ruination of their granddaughter presumably going on at that very moment just down the hall. Which calamity would be preferable, for Tony Lemon Jell-O to make good on his obligation and become part of the permanent landscape or despoil their granddaughter and leave their lives forever? “I’m just glad her momma’s not alive to see this, is all,” Sarah said at last.

Johnny lay awake a long time that night, not wanting to hear the squeaking springs, but listening for them anyway. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed his grandfather came into the room brandishing a pistol.

“Where’s that Chinese boy?” Johnny’s grandfather asked. “I’m fixing to gut-shoot him.”

In his dream, Johnny pointed towards Deborah’s room and did not correct his grandfather that Tony Lemon Jell-O was Italian.

“You ought to take care of these things yourself, boy,” the old man said scornfully as he turned to go. “Don’t leave everything to me.” Johnny slept on, not unhappily, in the thought that Tony Lemon Jell-O would be dead by morning.

The next morning, however, Tony was unharmed. Johnny, who got up first, met the boy sneaking out of Deborah’s room, dressed, but with a glow on his face as if he’d just accomplished some great thing. The sheets on the foldout couch had barely been wrinkled. Johnny shuddered inwardly and made coffee, and for the rest of the morning did not lift his gaze to the boy’s eyes.

Sarah made breakfast, and a short time later Deborah came out. Deborah poured herself a cup of coffee and helped Sarah with the dishes while Johnny sat down and took a plate.

“Everything looks great,” Tony said. “Excuse me, Mr. Cobb, would you pass the grits?”

“Grits?” Johnny looked around the table for the grits and saw there were none. He looked at the boy and saw where he was pointing. “You want these?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Johnny wondered what had happened to so impair the boy’s eyesight. “These are biscuits, son.”

“Oh, I thought grits were what you southerners called biscuits.”

The slight emphasis laid on “you southerners” made the superior tone of the comment unmistakable. Johnny’s blood did not boil, but it’s fair to say it simmered. “No,” he said, explaining a system of identification as simple as it was practical, “we southerners call biscuits, biscuits and grits, grits.”

“Oh,” said Tony Lemon Jell-O. “Well, what’s a grit?”

Before Johnny could describe a lone grit, a thing he had only thought about in groups up to then, Sarah announced, “Me and Deborah are going to Tybee to look at some stores. Y’all want to come?”

“I don’t reckon I will, but Tony can go if he wants,” Johnny said, adding a silent prayer the boy would take up the offer.

“Do you want to come?” Deborah asked Tony.

“No, I’ll stay here, too. I might explore.”

Johnny looked at the boy in amazement. “Explore? What’s to explore? You think you’re Davy Crockett?” Tony, of course, did not hear this.

After the women left, Tony said, “Hey, Mr. Cobb, you said you’d show me some of the wildlife.”

“Wildlife?” Johnny said under his breath. “Oh, he means the marsh hens.” And then, so Tony could hear, “Yeah, that’d be just fine.” Maybe getting out of the house would make the boy’s company more tolerable. The yawning doorway into Deborah’s bedroom reminded Johnny of things he’d rather not be reminded of.

“Can we walk to the beach from here?” Tony asked after they’d sprayed themselves with Deet and set off together into the reeds behind the house. Tony wore flimsy running shorts that struck Johnny as sissy-ish, although Johnny got some

amusement thinking what the cockleburs would do to the boy's legs as they made their expedition. Johnny wore yesterday's overalls and his boots.

"There ain't really no beach around here," Johnny said. "Just marsh."

"Not just a marsh. The salt marsh," Tony elaborated in an informing voice, as if Johnny didn't know it was salt water. "A very special habitat. A wetland."

"I'll do my best not to endanger it," Johnny said a little too loudly. Luckily the boy was too dim to notice the irony.

"Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints," Tony advised.

"You're leaving plenty of them, anyway," Johnny said, quietly again. Johnny, who stayed to the dry parts of the trail, would not even need to scrape his boots when he returned. But Tony invariably walked straight through the muddiest parts; his tennis shoes already carried layers of brown mud. Before long each shoe would weigh more than both of Johnny's clean, dry boots together.

"Now look at that," Tony said. "Someone dumped their trash right in the middle of the marsh."

"It's mine," Johnny said. "Ain't trash."

"What is it? A net?"

Johnny considered for an instant telling the boy that no, it was grits, but thought better of it. "That's what it is."

"But there's no water here."

"It's ebb tide," Johnny explained to the expert on salt marshes, wetlands, and leaving only footprints. "Tide's out. When it changes, all these low spots is full up. You can catch you some shrimps, crawfish, even crabs."

"Oh, I love seafood," Tony said.

"Yeah," Johnny mumble, "and you eat chicken, too."

They walked farther into the marsh. "Where are these marsh hens?" Tony asked, concerned. "Hunters get 'em?"

Johnny said, "They don't care much for noise." Unlike Johnny, the boy made all his comments loudly enough for everyone to hear, and between that and the slurping racket as Tony walked through the sucking muck, Johnny didn't expect there was a marsh hen for a five-mile radius.

At last they came to the pine tree swing. "Well, this here's the end of the trail," Johnny said. Years ago Johnny had thrown a rope over one of the high branches of a pine tree for Deborah to swing on. When the tide came in, a tidal creek formed deep enough to jump in and swim. The pine must have taken root before the marsh had advanced so far inland, but as years passed, the inhospitable conditions had taken their toll. The needles fell out and bark peeled away. All that remained was a tall slender bone of a tree with a rope dangling like a noose.

"We don't have to go back now, do we?" Tony asked. "Do you ever swing on this?"

"No," Johnny admitted. "Deborah's done it." Johnny didn't add she'd been a little girl at the time, nor that the rope was designed to swing into the water, not into the gooey mud of ebb tide.

"Do you mind if I try it?" the boy asked.

"No," Johnny said honestly, "I don't mind. But I wouldn't recommend it." He said the last part very quietly.

Tony took the rope with one hand and pounded his chest with the other, making a Tarzan yell, putting on an act of childlike innocence and spontaneity. Then he swung.

What happened next was so terrible and unexpected, Johnny had intermittent nightmares about it for years. Johnny had happily anticipated the rope breaking and dropping the boy in the mud, but the rope did not break. Instead, the upper portion of the diseased tree's trunk came off, making a sound like wet cardboard being torn.

The fake Tarzan yell turned into an authentic yell of a different kind. Tony landed face first into the mud, the rope coiled down on top of him, and a length of pine tree landed crossways on his back.

"Ow. God, oh, God," Tony Lemon Jell-O said, the first thing Johnny had heard come from his lips he'd sympathized with.

"Are you alright?" Johnny called out.

"My back is broken, I think," the boy said, spluttering in his effort to speak. By craning his neck, Tony could just lift his mouth above the mud.

"Naw," Johnny said thoughtfully. "I don't reckon your back's broken, or you couldn't get your head up. Can you move?"

"I can't. I can't." Tony Lemon Jell-O briefly let his face down into the muck, and when he brought it back up, he was spitting out slime and gagging. "I'm stuck."

From his spot on the bank, Johnny studied the pine tree on top of Tony. "I don't reckon I can get that tree off of you by myself." Johnny did not venture down into the gully to test this conclusion. Johnny looked at the ground. Tony's footsteps, as always in the muddiest part of the path, told an unmistakable story of someone taking a running start to swing on a rope. Johnny's own boots, on the dryer part, had scarcely left a mark. Johnny hunkered down. A periwinkle snail climbed up some cord grass, a sign the tide was changing. Leaving the stalk the snail was climbing, Johnny plucked a broom-like bundle of grass and delicately began brushing off his trail.

"I'm going to fetch some help," Johnny told the boy. "You wait here."

If Tony Lemon Jell-O had had Johnny's gift for irony, he might have pointed out there seemed a limited number of options besides waiting there, but instead the boy just gasped, "Hurry. Please."

Johnny walked backward all the way to the house, brushing off the path as he went. When he got to his own yard, he dropped the plant into one of the garbage cans outside.

When Sarah and Deborah returned from Tybee several hours later, they found Johnny in the kitchen methodically peeling an apple with his pocket knife, allowing the long red spiral to fall into the kitchen trash can. Deborah laid an armload of purchases on the couch, and Sarah went at once to the stove to fix dinner.

"I found the white shoes like I've been looking for at a consignment shop," Deborah informed Johnny. "Where's Tony?"

"He went walking," Johnny said. "He wanted to see the marsh hens."

"He went out this time of day?" came Sarah's concerned voice. "Tide's in, all the marsh'll be full up. The poor boy'll be eat up with mosquitoes."

Johnny's response was too quiet for them to hear.

*Man Martin's other fiction has appeared in The Kenyon Review, Pleiades, The Alaska Quarterly Review, and elsewhere. His short commentaries have aired on Georgia Public Radio. His debut novel, Days of the Endless Corvette, won him Georgia Author of the Year for First Novel.*