

FICTION

MAX AT SEA

BY DAVE EGGERS





REDUNDANT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

give a three-headed cat. "Yeah, you go do that," she said.

Max left the room and found Gary lying on the couch in his work clothes, his frog eyes closed, his chin entirely receded into his neck. Max gritted his teeth and let out a low, simmering growl.

Gary opened his eyes and rubbed them.

"Uh, hey, Max. I'm baggin' a few after-work Z's. How goes it?"

Max looked at the floor. This was one of Gary's typical questions: Another day, huh? How goes it? No play for the playa, right? None of his questions had answers. Gary never seemed to say anything that meant anything at all.

"Cool suit," Gary said. "Maybe I'll get me one of those. What are you, like a rabbit or something?"

Max was about to leap upon Gary, to show him just what kind of animal he was—a wolf capable of tearing flesh from bone with a shake of his jaws—when Max's mom came into the room. She was carrying two glasses of blood-colored wine, and she handed one to Gary. Gary sat up, smiled his powerless smile, and clinked his glass against hers. "Cheers, little rabbit-dude," he said, raising his glass to Max.

Max's mom smiled at Max and then at Gary.

"Cheers, Maxie," she said, and growled playfully at him.

She picked up a dirty plate and hur-

ried back toward the kitchen. "Claire!" she yelled. "I asked you to get your stuff off the table. It's almost dinner."

Max entered the kitchen with his arms crossed, marching purposefully, like a general inspecting his troops. He sniffed loudly, assessing the kitchen's smells and waiting to be noticed.

His mother said nothing, so he brought a chair near the stove and stood on it. Now they were eye to eye.

"What is that? Is that food?" he asked, pointing down to something beige sitting numbly on a plate.

He got no answer.

"Mom, what is that?" he asked, now grabbing her arm.

"Pâté," she said.

Max snickered and moved on. Pâté was a regrettable name for an unfortunate food. It seemed to Max a good idea to get up from the chair and to leap onto the counter. Which he presently did.

Standing on the counter, he towered over everything and everyone. He was eleven feet tall.

"Oh, God," Max's mom said.

Max squatted down to inspect a package of frozen corn. "Frozen corn? What's wrong with real corn?" he demanded. He dropped the package loudly on the counter, where it made a wonderful clatter.

"Frozen corn is real," Max's mom said, barely taking notice. "Now get off the counter. And go tell your sister to get her stuff off the table."

Max didn't move. "CLAIRE GET YOUR STUFF OFF THE TABLE!" he yelled, more or less into his mom's face.

"Don't yell in my face!" she hissed. "And get off the counter."

Instead of getting off the counter, Max howled. The acoustics where he was, so close to the ceiling, were not great.

His mom stared at him like he was crazy. Which he was, because wolves are part crazy. "You know what?" she said. "You're too old to be on the counter, and you're too old to be wearing that costume."

Max crossed his arms and glared at her. "You're too old to be so short! And your makeup's smeared!"

"Get DOWN from there!" she demanded.

"Woman, feed me!" he yelled. He didn't know where he'd come up with that phrase, but he liked it immediately.

"Get off the counter, Max!"

"I'll eat you up!" he growled, raising his arms.

"MAX! GET DOWN!" she yelled. She could be very loud when she wanted to be. For a second, he thought he should get off the counter, take off his suit, and eat his dinner quietly, because the truth was he was very hungry. But then he thought better of it, and howled again.

"Arroooooooooo!"

At that, Max's mom lunged for him, but he was able to elude her grasp. He leaped over the sink and then back down onto the chair. She lunged again and missed. Max cackled. He really was fast! He jumped down, landed on the floor, and executed a perfect shoulder roll. Then he got up and fled from the kitchen, laughing hysterically.

When he turned around, though, he found that his mom was still chasing him. That was new. She rarely chased him this far. When they raced through the living room, Gary took notice of the escalating volume and urgency. He put down his glass of wine and got ready to intervene.

Then, in the front hall, a surprising and awful thing happened: Max's mom caught him.

"Max!" she gasped.

She had his arm firmly in her hand. She had long fingers, shockingly strong, and they dug into Max's biceps. In her hand, all his muscle and sinew turned to soup, and he didn't like it.

"What's wrong with you?" she screamed. "You see what you're doing to me?" Her voice was shrill, corkscrewed.

"No, *you're* doing things!" he countered, sounding meeker than he'd intended. To offset this sign of weakness, he thrashed around in her grip.

"There's no way you're eating dinner with us. Animal."

Now, because he was angry at having Gary in the house, and angry at having to eat pâté and frozen corn, and angry about having a witch for a sister, he growled and—the idea flooding him so quickly he couldn't resist—bit his mom's arm as hard as he could.

She screamed. She stepped back, holding her arm. Max had never bitten her before. He was scared. His mom was scared. They saw each other anew. Max turned to see Gary entering the foyer. He was clearly unsure what he was supposed to do.

"He bit me!" she spat.

Gary's eyes bulged. He turned to Max's mom. "You can't let him treat you this way!"

"He's not allowed to talk here!" Max yelled, pointing to the frog-eyed man.

Then Claire stormed into the hall. Seeing Claire and Gary and his mom, everyone looking at him like *he* was the problem, sent Max tumbling over the edge. He screamed as loud as he could, producing a sound between a howl and a battle cry.

"Why are you doing this to me?" his mom wailed. "This house is chaos with you in it!"

That was it. Max did not have to stand for this, any of this, all of this. He threw open the door and leaped down the porch and into the night.

The air! The moon!

He felt pulled as if by an outgoing tide. The air and the moon together sang a furious and wonderful song: *Come with us, wolf-boy! Let us drink the blood of the earth and gargle it with great aplomb!* Max tore down the street, feeling free, knowing he was part of the wind. *Come, Max! Come to the water and see!* No one could tell that he was crying—he was running too fast.

"Max!"

Stupid Gary was following him, trying to run, huffing mightily. Max ran faster, almost flying, his hands grabbing at the air. When he looked over his

shoulder again, he saw that Gary was losing ground. A moment later, the freckled little man pulled up lame—he was doubled over, holding his leg. Max kept running, and though his face was wet with tears, he grinned maniacally. He had won. He ran to the cul-de-sac, where the road ended and the trees began.

Max was free of home and mother and Gary and Claire; he had outwitted and outrun them all, but he was not ready to rest. He ran to the lean-to he'd built in the woods by the bay, and sat inside for a few seconds, but he was too alive to sit still. He got up and howled. Something about the wind and the configuration of the trees and outcroppings gave his voice more volume; his howl twisted and multiplied in the sky in the most satisfying way. He grabbed the biggest stick he could find and commenced hitting everything he could with it. He swung it around, he stabbed trees and rocks, he whacked branches and relieved them of their snowy burden.

This, he thought, was the only way he wanted to live. All he needed to do, sometime soon, was sneak back into the house and get some of his things—his knives, blankets and glue and rope, maybe some of his mom's matches. Then he would build a forest home, high in the trees, and become one with the woods and the animals, learn their languages and with them plot an overthrow of his home,

beginning with the decapitation and devouring of Gary.

As he planned his new life, he heard a sound. It wasn't the wind and it wasn't the trees. It was a scraping, yearning sound. He paused, his nose twitching and his ears pricking up. It was like bone against bone, though there was a rhythm to it. He followed it toward the water, a hundred yards away. He jogged down the ravine and met the stream that led to the shore. He jumped from rock to rock until he saw the bay's black glass, cut through the middle by the reflection of the moon.

At the water's edge, amid the reeds and the softly lapping waves, he saw the source of the noise: a wooden sailboat of average size and painted white. It was tied to a tree and was rubbing against a half-submerged rock.

Max looked around to see if anyone was close. It seemed strange that a boat like this, a sturdy, viable boat, would be unoccupied. He had been coming to the bay for years and had never seen a boat like this, alone and without an owner. There was no sign of anyone nearby. The boat was his if he wanted it.

He stepped in. There was just a bit of water on the bottom, and when he checked the rudder and sail and boom everything seemed to be in working order.

If he wanted to, he could untie the



MANIKOFF

"Oh, them—they're just the ghosts of all the people we've terminated."

boat and sail out into the bay. It would be even better than living out his days in the forest. He could sail away, as far as he liked. He might make it somewhere new, somewhere better, and if he didn't—if he drowned in the bay or the ocean beyond—then so be it. His horrible family would have to live forever with the guilt. Either option seemed good.

Max untied the boat from the tree, and pushed off. He righted the boat and aimed it toward the center of the bay. He unfurled the sail and steadied the boom. The wind was strong; in no time he was chopping through the bay's small waves.

He had sailed at night only once before, with his father, and even that had been unplanned. They'd gotten stuck out in the bay without wind, and hadn't brought a paddle. They'd passed the time naming every candy they could remember and playing hangman with a grease marker on the boat's floor. It occurred to Max that he didn't have any of the safety items his father insisted on—a life preserver, a paddle, a flare gun, a

bailing vessel. The boat was empty but for Max.

And he was getting cold. By the time he reached the middle of the bay and the wind began to bite, he realized that it was December, and no more than forty degrees, and the farther out into the bay he ventured the colder it would get. When he'd been running and howling, he hadn't felt the rip of the winter wind, but now it cut through his fur—and his T-shirt and underwear—unimpeded.

He decided to sail not into the ocean but toward the city, where his father lived. This immediately seemed a better idea. He would sail downtown, dock with all the yachts, walk through the city until he found his father's apartment, and ring the bell.

Wow, he'd be surprised! He would be astounded and impressed, and they would live together from then on. All Max needed to do was sail north for a few hours and keep his eye on the dim glow of the city in the distance.

But the city seemed to be getting far-

ther away, not closer. Max held the rudder steady, and the sail had a constant bellyful of wind, but as the hours passed the city grew smaller. According to the compass screwed onto the bow, Max was sailing directly for it, due north-northwest, and yet the city lights were growing fainter.

There was little Max could do. He knew he was sailing straight. He hoped that sometime in the night the bay would become rational again and the city would draw closer. He would have to tell his father about this strange elastic stretching of the bay! But soon the city was disappearing altogether. For a while, it was no more than a twinkle of dwindling lights, and shortly thereafter it was gone. There was no sign of land in any direction. Max didn't want to admit it to himself, but some part of him acknowledged that in all likelihood he'd left the bay and was now in the open sea.

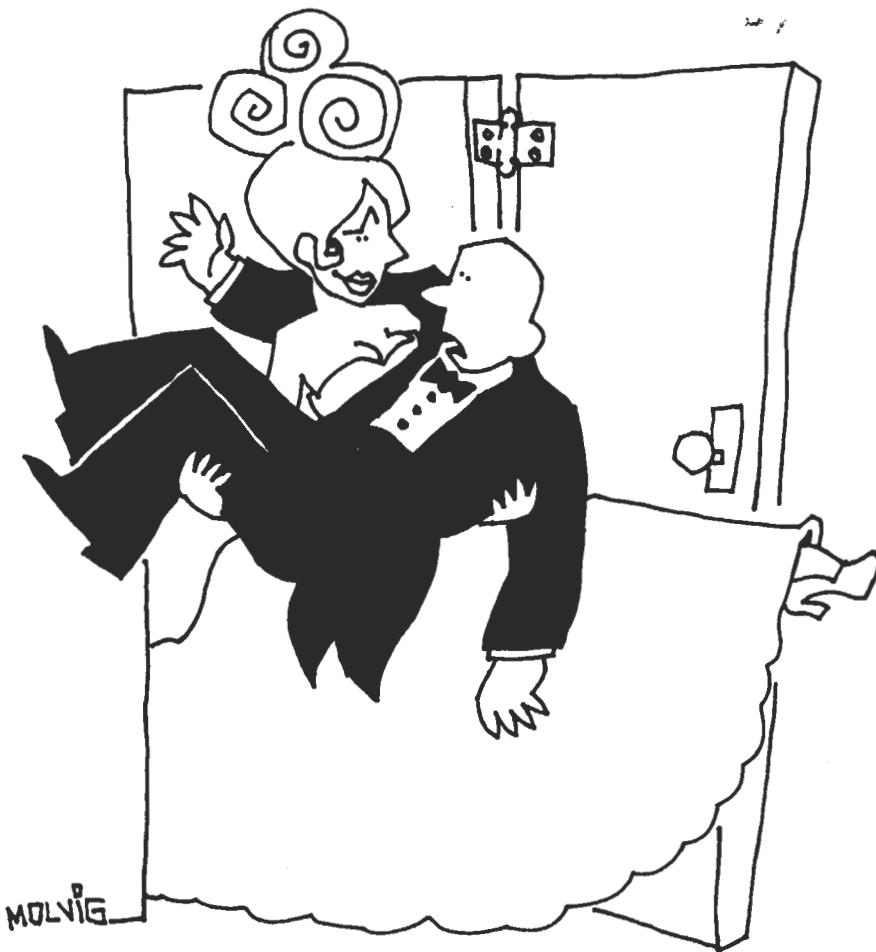
Before Max was even tired, the moon had fallen through the water and the sun had risen to replace it. He'd sailed all night without sleep and was too bewildered to think about rest now. He continued sailing north-northwest, but even though it was daylight, he saw nothing. Not a fish, not a bird. The wind had slackened, and the sea grew broader and more interminable. By his rough calculations, he had to be at least seven million miles from where he cast off.

As the sun climbed higher, he was tired enough to sleep. He pulled in the sail, tied it to the mast, rigged the rudder so it would remain true, and fell asleep.

When he woke, it was already the next morning, the beginning of the longest day Max had ever known. In his boat, the straight line of ocean unbroken on any side, every minute was a day, one hour was longer than any life ever lived.

His mind ran out of things to think about. He thought of everything he'd ever thought of by midday and then could only start over. He named all of his classmates, dividing them into the ones he knew, the ones he tolerated, the ones he barely knew, and the ones he would punch in the head if he had the chance. He named all of his uncles and aunts. Uncles Stuart, Grant, Scotty, Wash, and Jeff; Aunts Isabelle, Paulina, Lucy, Juliet. Who was that last one, the one who played rugby? Theresa.

Max sailed in and out of days and nights. He endured blustery winds, cruel



"I wanted to do that."

winds, chattering winds, and warm blanketing breezes. There were waves like dragons and waves like sparrows. There were occasional sightings of birds and fish and flies, but nothing that Max could reach or much less eat. There was rain, but mostly there was sun, the terribly unimaginative sun, doing the same things day in and day out. He loosened a nail on the boat's bench and removed it. He used it to count the hours (as close as he could approximate) as they passed, marking them on the bench as a prisoner would. On the outer rim of the boat, he carved his name as big as he could so that any fish or whales or passing ships would know who commanded this vessel: "MAX," it said.

Then one day he saw something. A green blot on the horizon, no bigger than a caterpillar. Not trusting his eyes, he thought little of it. He went to sleep again.

When he awoke, the caterpillar had become an island. It towered over him—massive cliffs, green hills above.

By the time he reached the shore, it was night and the island had gone black. It was a good deal less welcoming now, as a silhouette against a gunmetal sky, but there was something high in the hills that beckoned him: an orange glow between the trees.

Max jumped into the water. He'd thought it would be at most waist-deep, but it was far deeper than that. His feet could not reach the bottom and he was quickly swallowed in the foam, the white. And the cold! The water was colder than he thought possible; it knocked the wind out of him.

He held the rope that held the boat, and tried to dog-paddle shoreward. He thought for a moment that he would have to let go of the rope, lest he drown. But just as his head dropped below the surface, and the boat tugged against his grip, his feet found the sand, and he stood.

Max dragged the boat onto the beach, placed a group of large stones around it, and tied its lead to the biggest tree he could find. He was tired and hungry and leaden; the weight of his fur when wet surprised him. He considered taking off his wolf suit, but he knew if he did he'd be even colder. The wind was bracing, and he knew that his only chance at warmth—and survival—

would be to climb the cliffs and find his way to the fire he'd seen from the sea.

So this is what he did.

The cliffs were jagged but dependable. He climbed to the top in under an hour and rested at the summit. Looking back at the boat—he was easily two hundred feet up—he heard sounds coming from the island's interior: crunching and crashing, whooping and howling, the crackle of a gigantic fire. Only in his depleted and desperate state would Max have considered that his best option would be to run, stumble, and crawl through the densest and wildest kind of jungle toward the sounds of what seemed to be some kind of riot.

But this is what he did.

He walked for hours in the moonlight. He slashed his way through the undergrowth, ducking under grasping, luminescent ferns and slithering between barbed and crosshatched vines. He waded through narrow creeks and climbed over boulders covered with a red and delicate moss that clung to the stone like embroidery. The landscape was familiar—there were trees, there was dirt, there were rocks—but then very odd: the earth seemed to be striped in brown and yellow, like peanut butter and cinnamon at the first swirl of a mixing spoon. After some time, his fur, at least above his shins, was dry, and he was warmer, but he was so tired he was dreaming on his feet. Again and again, he would shudder awake and find that he'd been walking while asleep, always making his way toward the chaos in the center of the island.

Finally, when he reached the top of a long high hill, he saw the fire, huge and snapping at the black sky. Most of it was obscured by a giant boulder in his line of vision, but the fire's size was clear: it licked the surrounding trees orange and blotted out the stars above. It was intentional. It had a center and a purpose.

Then, movement. First, there was just a blur—some kind of creature shooting through the trees, a rushing shape silhouetted by the red fire beyond. It could have been a horse, he thought, but the animal seemed to be running upright, on two feet.

Max dropped to his knees, holding his breath.

Another shape darted between the trees. This one was the same size, but Max could have sworn he'd seen a beak.

It seemed to Max's tired eyes that a giant rooster, twelve feet tall, had just run across his field of vision.

Max had half a mind to turn and flee—for what good could come of engaging beasts of that size near a fire of that strength?—but he couldn't leave just yet. The heat from the blaze had awakened him, and he had to know what was happening down there.

So he skulked forward. He wanted the warmth the fire promised, and he wanted whatever food might have been roasted on it, and he wanted more than anything else to find out just what was going on.

A hundred yards more and he knew.

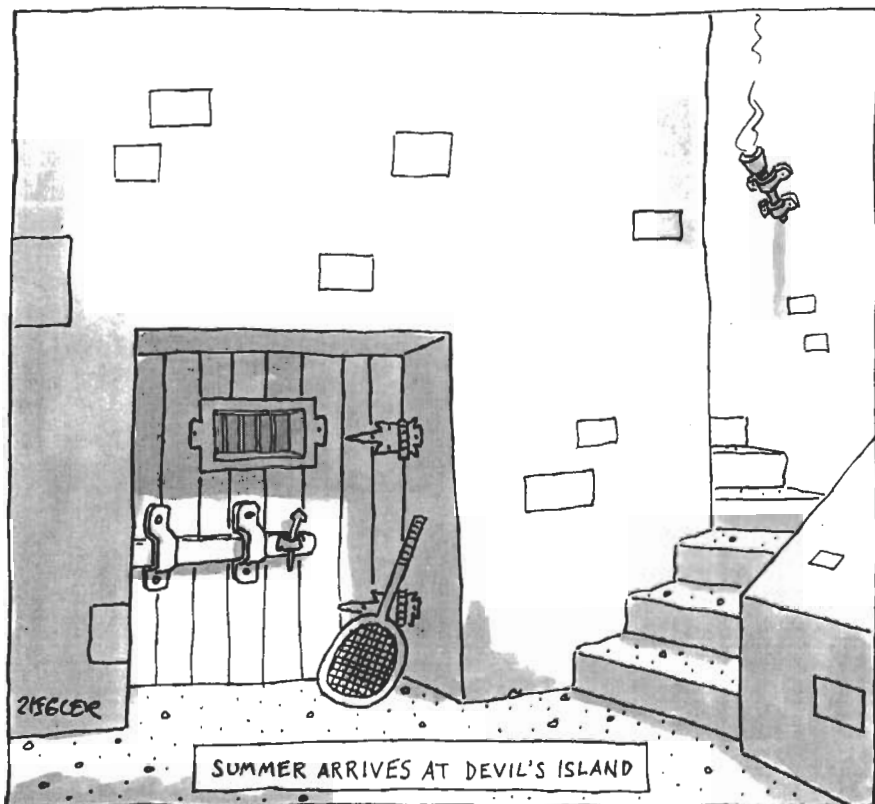
Sort of. That is, he saw what he saw but couldn't believe any of it. He saw animals. Animals? Creatures of some kind. Huge and fast. He thought they might be oversized sorts of humans covered in fur, but they were bigger than that, hairier than that. They were ten or twelve feet tall, each four hundred pounds or more. Max knew his animal kingdom, but he had no name for these beasts. From behind, they resembled bears, but they were larger than bears, their heads far bigger. Even so, their movements were nimble, deft—they had the quickness of deer or small monkeys. And they all looked different, as humans do: one had a long broken horn on its nose; another had a wide flat face, stringy hair, and pleading eyes; another seemed like a cross between a boy and a goat. And another—

It *had* been a giant rooster. This was the weirdest one by far. Max slapped himself, making sure he was awake. He was awake, and there was a giant rooster before him, no more than twenty yards away in the full glow of the raging fire. It was at once comical—it looked like a giant man in a rooster suit—and powerful and menacing.

The rooster seemed frustrated, staring at another creature, of similar height and heft but with a different shape. This one had a mop of reddish hair and a leonine face, with a large horn, like a rhino's, extending from its nose. It looked female, if that was possible for such an ugly thing. She was in the middle of beating a large nest, resting on the ground, with a log.

And this seemed to be greatly upsetting the rooster.

Soon, Max could see a pattern to what



the beasts were doing. It looked as if they'd come upon some kind of settlement, full of great round nests—each made of huge sticks and logs, and bigger than a car—and had decided to destroy them. They were systematically wrecking them all, like kids destroying sandcastles.

Max was about to turn and run the other way when he heard (could it be?) a word. There was, he was almost sure, a word: "Go!"

And just as he was repeating the sound in his mind, turning it over, analyzing it, the creature closest to him spoke a full sentence: "Is it twisted?"

Two of the creatures appeared to have fallen through the wall of a nest, and one was asking the other for help, assessing possible injuries to its spine.

"Yeah, it's kind of twisted," the other said.

Then the two gathered themselves up and ran off.

Max squatted down again, determined now to watch a bit longer, to try to figure out what was happening and why.

One creature seemed to be leading the melee. He had a big round face, sharp horns like a Viking's, and dark bags under his eyes. He was getting ready to run to-

ward one of the nests when the rooster approached him and put his hand—it wasn't a wing; he seemed to have hands and claws—on his shoulder.

"Carol, can I speak to you for a second?"

"Not now, Douglas," the big one, Carol, said, and moved the rooster aside. Then Carol got a running start and barreled into the nest, knocking it flat.

Max was astounded. Had that sentence just been uttered? These weren't grunting monsters. They spoke just like people. Gradually, Max realized that they were a kind of family.

Douglas, the rooster, seemed logical and even-tempered, and didn't appreciate the way that Carol was trying to amuse himself. Carol was the main instigator and the heartiest of the destroyers: He was the biggest, the strongest, the loudest. He had horizontal stripes on his torso like a kind of sweater, and his claws were huge and cleaver-sharp.

The creature with the horn and the red mop of hair was called Judith, and she had a sharp, poky voice and a harsh cackle for a laugh. Ira had a bulbous nose, and he seemed to be always close to Judith. Max guessed they might even be a

couple. Ira had a sad sort of aura and poor posture. There was the goat-shaped one, Alexander, with a snarl for a face and pin-thin legs. He was just a little bigger than Max. And then there was a bull, whose name seemed to be the Bull. He was gigantic, maybe thirteen feet high, and seemed built entirely of muscle and stone. He hadn't said a word yet.

The beasts jumped from trees into the nests, they tossed each other into piles, they rolled boulders into the remains of the structures. It was just about the best mayhem Max had ever seen.

But soon there was a lull in the action. One by one, the beasts sat down, scratching themselves and nursing small wounds.

"I'm bored," one said.

"Me, too," said another.

"C'mon!" Carol roared. "Let's finish this!"

There was no answer from the rest of them. Ira sat down. Carol jogged over to him—they really were agile things, these creatures, Max thought.

"Ira," Carol said, "we're not done yet. The job isn't complete."

"But I'm so tired!" Ira said. "And uninspired."

"Hey, don't think you can rhyme your way out of this. Uninspired? How's that possible?" Carol turned to address the rest of the creatures. "C'mon, isn't this fun? Who's gonna really go crazy with me?"

No one responded. Carol jumped from beast to beast, trying to create some excitement. When he approached the rooster, Douglas said, "Carol, why are we doing this in the first place?"

A quick cloud came over Carol's face. His teeth—what must have been a hundred of them, each as big as Max's hand—were bared in something between a smile and a show of force. He ignored Douglas. "All I need to know now is if there's anyone on this island who's brave and creative and wild enough to help finish this job. Is there anyone up to it?"

No one responded.

"Anyone?"

Something clicked in Max. His thoughts lined up, his plan was orderly and clear: he needed to be that someone.

Max dashed down the hill and between the legs of Douglas and Ira, his face a knot of determination. The crea-

tures towered over him, and outweighed him by thousands of pounds.

"Whoa, what's that?" Ira said, alarmed.

"Look at his little legs!" Judith squealed.

"What's he doing?" Douglas asked.

Max intended to show them. He took the largest stick he could swing and he began to hit everything he saw. He knocked over the remains of whatever nests still stood, he broke low-hanging branches from the trees, he screamed and howled.

The beasts cheered.

"See, that thing knows how to wreck stuff!" Carol said, his eyes aglow. "Let's do one together, little thing."

Together, Carol and Max picked up a long log and ran at a nest that had survived intact, laying waste to it. Max had never destroyed so much so well and so quickly. He followed Carol to one of the last nests, and he and Carol both lifted their sticks over their heads, preparing to crush it with simultaneous blows.

"Hey, new guy!" Judith snapped. "Don't touch that one."

Max hesitated.

"Don't lay a finger on it," she warned.

With a laugh, Carol kicked his immense foot into the structure, reducing it to splinters. "There," he said. "Not a finger."

Max had to laugh. That was pretty good. He watched as Carol, his comrade-in-arms, ran over to the other side of the clearing, looking for anything left standing.

Max looked, too. But as far as he could see there was nothing left to destroy. Max stood in the middle of a desolate plain. The nests were no more. He started to walk toward Carol, to celebrate the completeness of their wreckage, when Douglas appeared in front of Max, blocking his path.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"What? I'm just helping," Max said.

"Then why are you smashing our houses?"

"These are your houses?" This was news to Max. He'd assumed they were destroying some enemy encampment. "Why are you smashing them?"

"I'm not, actually. You're not very observant for someone swinging that big stick around."

Max dropped the stick.

"Wait," Alexander said, standing in the ruins, alone and teary-eyed, like a child lost at the mall. "Where will we sleep tonight?"

Suddenly, a realization seemed to spread among the beasts.

"I was trying to tell you all that," Douglas said.

"Well, don't blame *me*," Judith said.

"Why not?" Douglas said. "You were wrecking as much as anyone else. You wrecked everything but your own nest."

"Sure, but I didn't *enjoy* it," she said. "And, anyway, it wasn't my fault."

Douglas was shaking his head. "Then whose fault was it?"

Judith looked around for a moment, and her eyes settled, rather happily, on Max.

"The new guy!" she said. "He's the one who got everyone riled up. And you know what I say you do with a problem? Eat it."

"Yeah," Alexander said. "He's the problem!"

"What are you guys doing?" Ira asked.

"Oh, we were just gonna eat that," Judith said, pointing to Max, as if picking out a lobster at a restaurant.

"O.K.," Ira said, shrugging and beginning to drool.

Max was very quickly surrounded by the three of them, and soon Douglas and the Bull had joined the throng, and the air was very dark and warm with

beast sweat. Max backed up until he found himself against a mess of sticks and mud where a home used to be. There was no escape.

"He looks tasty," Ira said.

"Does he?" Judith said. "I don't know. I'm thinking gamy."

"Gamy?" Douglas mused. "Really? I say succulent."

"He's an ugly bugger, though, isn't he?" Judith said.

"Close your eyes, then. I'll feed him to you," Ira said.

"Oh, that's so romantic!" she said.

"Hold on!" a voice yelled from across the camp. It was Carol. Max felt some relief, and yet the creatures were still closing in on him. Max could feel their hot wet breath on his face, he could see their enormous teeth, each incisor as big as his foot. Ira licked his lips. The Bull snorted, his hands reaching toward Max.

Max knew Carol couldn't save him in time. He had to save himself—somehow. He arched his back, and, with a voice that emerged far louder and more commanding than he had expected, he roared, "Be still!"

The beasts stopped. They stopped moving, stopped talking, stopped raising their arms to claw Max to death, stopped salivating. Max couldn't believe it. He didn't know what to do next.



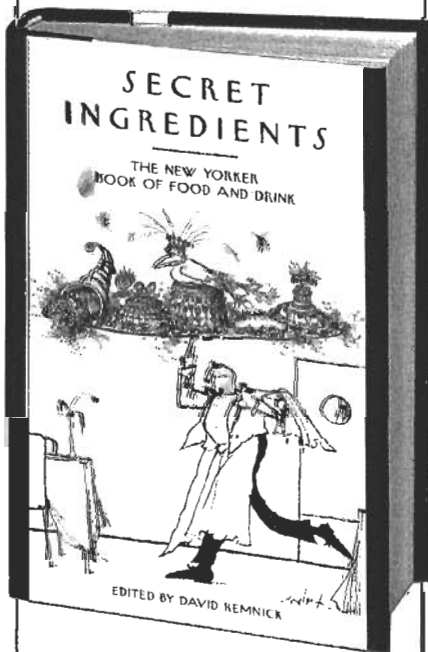
"Hurry up with your investigation—he's lying on the remote."

A FEAST OF DELICIOUS
WRITING ON FOOD AND
DRINK, SEASONED WITH
A GENEROUS DASH
OF CARTOONS.

A TASTE OF THE MENU

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"Why?" Judith said. "Why should we stop?"

This was a tricky question, Max knew. If he was about to bite into, say, a strawberry, and it told him to stop, he, too, would want a good explanation.

"Because . . . uh . . . because . . .," he mumbled.

The beasts stared, waiting, blowing roughly through their nostrils. Max knew he had to come up with something immediately, and, to his surprise, he did. "Because," he said, "I heard about this one time that they weren't still, and they . . ."

"Who?" Judith said. "Who wasn't still?"

By this time Carol had arrived, standing behind the others.

"Um . . . the hammers," Max explained, making it up as he went along. "They were huge ones and they didn't know how to be still. They were crazy. They were always shaking and running around and they never stopped to see what was right in front of them. So this one time the hammers were storming down the mountainside and they couldn't even see that someone was coming up to *help* them. And you know what happened?"

The beasts, enthralled, shook their heads.

"They ran right over him and *killed* him," Max said.

There were a few gasps, but there were also a few sounds that said, "Well, what *else* would they do?"

"And the thing is," Max added, "he *liked* them. He was there to *help*."

"Who was he?" Douglas asked.

"Who was who?" Max said.

"The guy coming up the hill," Douglas said.

"He was . . ." And again Max fumbled in the velvet darkness of his mind and found, impossibly, a gem. "He was their king."

Carol stepped forward. "Do you like us?"

This was a tough question. Max wasn't sure that he liked any of them, given that they had been, moments earlier, about to devour his flesh and brains. But in the interest of self-preservation, and because he had liked them a lot when they were all breaking things, he said, "Yeah. I like you."

Ira cleared his throat and said, with a hope-filled catch in his voice, "Are you *our* king?"

Max had rarely had to do so much bluffing in his life. "Sure. Yeah," he said. "I think so."

A ripple of excitement spread through the beasts.

"Wow, he's the king," Ira said.

Douglas stepped forward, as if he'd just thought of a stumper of a question that might decide it all: "Were you king where you came from?"

Max was getting good at the fibbing, so this one was easy. "Yeah, I was," he said. "King Max. For twenty years."

A quick happy murmur rose from the creatures.

"Are you going to make this a better place?" Ira asked.

"Sure," Max said.

"Because it's screwed up, let me tell you," Judith blurted.

"Quiet, Judith," Carol said.

"Judith, of course he's here to fix everything," Douglas said. "Why else would a king be a king, and a king be here?" He turned to Max. "Right, King?"

"Uh, sure," Max said.

Carol smiled. "Well, that settles it, then. He's our king!"

They all moved in to hug Max.

"Sorry we were gonna eat you," Douglas said.

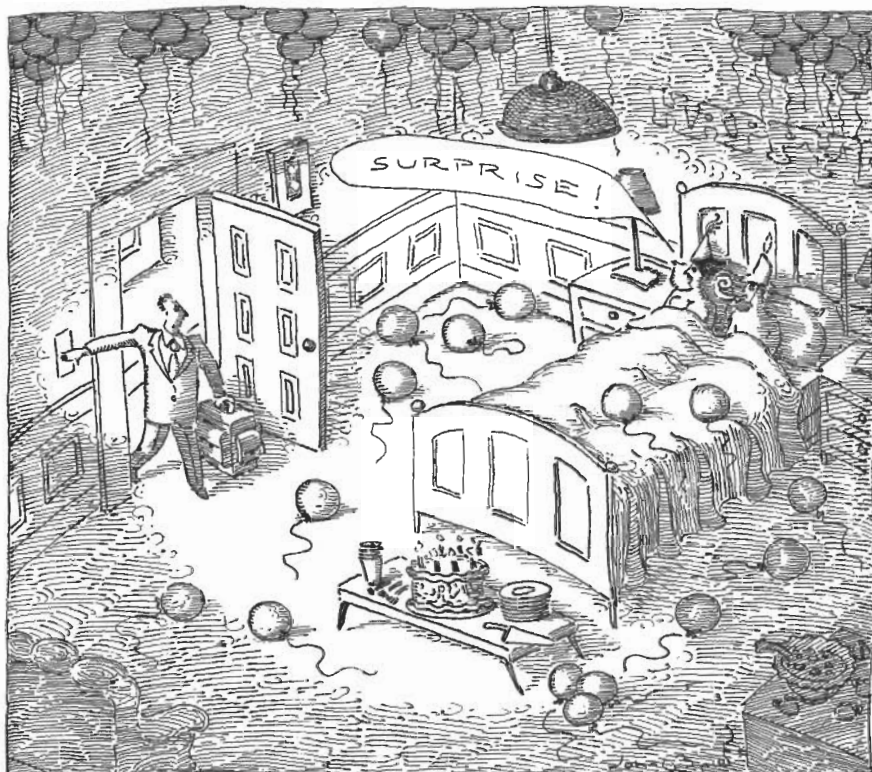
"We didn't know you were the king," Ira said.

"If we'd known you were the king, we almost definitely wouldn't have tried to eat you," Judith added, then laughed in a sudden, mirthless trill. She lowered her voice to a confessional tone. "We just got caught up in the moment."

Max was swept up and lifted high in the air and finally set down on the shoulders of the Bull. The Bull followed Carol into a cave under an enormous tree. Inside the cave, two torches illuminated a golden oval of a room.

The Bull put Max down and rooted around in a pile of rubble on the floor. He soon retrieved a sceptre, copper-colored and bejewelled, and gave it to Max. Max inspected it reverently. It was heavy, but not too heavy, with a hand-carved handle and a crystal orb at the top.

The Bull continued to dig through the rubble. Curious, Max peered around the Bull and saw that it wasn't a pile of sticks and rocks but a pile of what looked to be bones. They were yellowed and broken, the remains of maybe a dozen



different creatures—twisted and spotted skulls and ribs in sizes and shapes Max had never seen in any book or museum.

“Aha!” Carol bellowed. “There it is.”

Max looked up to see that the Bull had pulled a crown from the heap. It was golden, rough-hewn, and as the Bull turned to place the crown on Max’s head Max pulled away.

“Wait,” he said, pointing to the pile of bones. “Are those . . . other kings?”

The Bull glanced quickly at Carol with a look of mild concern.

“No, no!” Carol said, chuckling. “Those were there before we got here. We’ve never even seen them before.”

Then Carol and the Bull did a quick jig atop the bones, reducing them to dust.

“See?” Carol said, grinning, his eyes nervous and alight. “Nothing to worry about. Just dust. You’re the king. And nothing bad can happen to the king.”

Max looked into Carol’s eyes, each of them as big as a volleyball. They were the warmest brown and green.

“But what do I have to do?” Max asked.

“Do? Anything you want to do,” Carol said.

“And what *you* have to do?”

“Anything you want us to do,” Carol

said. He answered so quickly that Max was convinced.

“Then, O.K.,” Max said.

He lowered his head to receive his crown. Carol gently placed it on Max’s head. It was heavy, and the metal was cool on his forehead. But the crown fit, and Max smiled. Carol stood back and looked at him, nodding as if everything had finally fallen into place.

The Bull lifted Max and placed him back on his shoulders, and they made their way out of the cave to deafening cheers from the rest of the beasts. The Bull paraded Max around the forest as everyone whooped and danced in a very ugly—drool and mucus spraying left and right—but celebratory kind of way. After a few minutes, the Bull placed Max atop a grassy knoll, and the beasts gathered around, looking up at him expectantly. Max understood that he was supposed to say something, so he said the only thing he could think of:

“Let the wild rumpus begin!” ♦

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