

Three Seasons of Meat Pie Selling

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PROLOGUE

Thomas is a poet. Lucy is a law student. Lucy has moved from the home the two shared in Madison, Wisconsin, to a small apartment in Brooklyn to attend NYU Law, leaving Thomas and their friends and family behind. They don't break up. Thomas speaks to Lucy every night on the phone. They both think about marriage. After six months of solo living in Madison, Thomas declares that he is ready to move for Lucy to New York. After all, he is a poet. He can live anywhere he wants.

Lucy does not seem excited enough.

Thomas arrives and moves into Lucy's apartment. She has a roommate, Doug, who has bad teeth, but other than that is a very nice guy. They live on Prospect Park West, but their windows look out onto a rare Park Slope parking lot behind the building. All three roommates declare the apartment to be more than large enough. With the odd hours that Doug and Lucy keep, they may never even see each other. Thomas decides to get some odd hours of his own, and applies for a job at the shop around the corner. The owner hires him because of his affability and proximity.

"If anything goes wrong, if there's a health inspection or a fire, you'll be here," the owner says. "That makes me feel very safe."

SPRING

Thomas sells meat pies. Lucy, a vegetarian, hates them. Thomas likes them. The owner says that they are real New Zealand meat pies, and stresses the real with his accent and with hand gestures. The real comes from the butter which is real New Zealand butter. Foolish fake American butter couldn't make that flaky a crust. With this assertion, the owner puts his hand in the pie-warmer and pulls out a steak mince and cheese. The meat pies are individually sized, meant for quick and quiet consumption. The owner takes a large bite, almost half of the meat pie, chews a bit, then stores the meatpie in his cheek and speaks.

"It's the crust that makes our meat pies the best. We got a write-up from a prominent Brooklyn blog."

The owner's halfway out the shop, when he rushes back in.

"It's also the organic beef!"

The owner of the shop is a big New Zealander named Declan who is involved in a custody dispute. The child in question is large for his age, and both father and son have unruly hair. In the basement of the shop, Declan keeps a drum set for his son to play on, and when he does, customers complain. Thomas hasn't mentioned this to Declan.

Thomas is soon promoted to assistant manager—a strange title because there are only four employees. But he makes one dollar an hour more than two other employees, and Hazel, the manager, makes one dollar an hour more than he does. Thomas is surprised that the one dollar an hour more gives him a slight stirring of validation.

The shop is a small corner storefront with large windows from the floor to the ceiling that look out onto the intersection of 16th Street and Prospect Park West. The film *Smoke* was shot in there. About once a week a customer tells Thomas this, and he learns to say, "Really? Wow. That's so interesting!" It is a joke between him and the other employees.

It's just a room divided in half. There is the side for making the meat pies and the side for buying them. The room is narrow with a small bathroom in the back that doesn't work as well as it should. The fridges are large and secondhand. The oven is also large and secondhand. Each appliance needs to be learned for its quirk, for

its inconsistency. The sink in the back is brand new because it is really the only fixture customers can see clearly.

In the front of the shop, there are two tables and little invitation for the customers to use them.

“We’re not Starbucks,” Declan says. “Customers shouldn’t live here. They should get their meat pies and they should go.”

If the customer does want to stay and listen to the music and chat with Thomas and eat a meatpie, Thomas gives him or her a flimsy paper plate. The plate will be soaked from the grease of the meatpie. The customer will not be able to use the plastic knife and fork. Thomas sometimes wants to chat, wants to learn the customers’ names. But he’s afraid of being too friendly, he’s afraid it will make him stand out. Some friendliness is appropriate and some is not. Some kinds of openness earn you smiles and a tip. But he’s offended others by acting like an equal, taking too long with a coffee, or admitting too much of himself.

The grease of the meat pies stays on his fingertips, and at the roots of his hair. He doesn’t smell the smell of the shop, just as he doesn’t hear the constant dub music on the speakers. Lucy, however, smells the meat on him, and refuses to let him in her bed after he’s worked. He starts to enjoy the post-meatpie shower. It feels good to wash away the grime of a hard day’s work. He’s never done that before. He’s worked in book stores, he’s been an SAT prep tutor, a reader for the university press in Madison. He thinks it’s strange that he had to come to New York for a job to make him sweat, to make him stink. The Brooklyn presses won’t pay him anything, the editors laughed out loud when he asked for a salary. This isn’t Wisconsin, they said. We pay rent here.

He comes out of the shower thinking about a small ache in his lower back, about the arch supporting shoes he should buy, and Lucy sniffs the air and then him and says, “You used my body wash.” He smiles and feels a large angry pimple on his chin. He hasn’t had one of those since college. Lucy pops it while he sits on the toilet and then he lets her give him a mint julep facial mask. It takes a while to get the green out of his beard.

The meat pies begin to consume Thomas’s poetry. They enter everywhere, as do Declan and his son. He spends 50 to 60 hours a week in this small room, so it makes sense he is influenced. But Thomas is concerned when Lucy reads his poems and laughs. She

thinks they are jokes, a parody, something to do when not writing serious good poetry.

Rachel, one of the other employees, one of his subordinates, teaches Thomas to prime the tip jar. He adds a few dollars of his own money every morning to suggest that previous customers have been pleased with his service. The next customers, the real customers, will then be more likely to tip, not wanting to seem less generous than their fictional counterparts. It works, and Rachel's wisdom is proven. Rachel has been working in cafes since she moved to New York, about three years ago. Thomas wonders when she learned all the rules, how long did it take. He wants to ask her about subway maps and tipping in cabs and where and what exactly is Williamsburg, but he isn't able to admit how little he knows about his new home.

Even though Thomas is naive about things, Declan likes Thomas better than Rachel. Declan says she has an attitude, which is true. She is the first to bound outside to yell at the homeless men who like to rest on the shop benches. She tells them that they have their own goddamn benches a block away, and then a whole fucking park. She rolls her eyes with each diminutive paycheck and tip. At night, when she cleans the dishes, Rachel gets water everywhere as she scrubs the soup ladles and cutting boards and the coffee urn. She sometimes doesn't wait until the meat pies are fully cooked before selling them to the customers. Thomas makes more money than she does.

More than anything, Rachel hates the cop bar across the street. The cops make her nervous, more nervous than the homeless people actually. She feels she can yell at the homeless people and they can yell back and it is a fair fight. Rachel is all about fair fights. The cops, on the other hand, drink too much and carry guns. Rachel even hates the short beat cop who sometimes stops in on windy days. Thomas always offers him a coffee, but the beat cop puts up his hand and shakes his head. Thomas can't figure why, whether he's had too much coffee, doesn't like coffee, or if he thinks the coffee will interfere with his policing. Thomas has never seen him enter the cop bar, but the cop does stare at it often. Thomas thinks the beat cop is lonely. Rachel thinks the beat cop is creepy.

"Never takes his hand off that nightstick," she says as she scrubs the screens from the espresso machine.

Lucy doesn't like Rachel. She doesn't like the pie shop in general, but she really doesn't like Rachel. It's because Rachel gave her a curry vege to try, and it turned out to be a steak mince. Lucy coughed the meat into her hand and gave Thomas this destroyed look.

"It's difficult sometimes to tell which pie is which," Thomas explained. Lucy still had her tongue sticking out with bits of gray meat on it.

"I'll get you a glass of water," Rachel said, and she never apologized.

There are three homeless people that Thomas watches every day. Billy is the most consistent. He wears a New York Jets parka all the time. He has a shopping cart filled with junk that he collects and sells so he can buy single cigarettes and glue. He likes to sit two doors down from the shop on an empty milk crate. When night comes, or when it is cold or raining, he covers his head with an old blanket. Sometimes when it is very cold he moves into the 15th Street subway station, but most of the time he sits in the doorway of an apartment building. Word on the street says that Billy's daughter owns a brownstone nearby and keeps trying to convince Billy to move inside. He won't though. He prefers to live off the grid, one customer tells Thomas.

Thomas meets Billy when there is an altercation between Billy and another man with a shopping cart. The carts are in the middle of the intersection blocking traffic and the cops from the cop bar come out to settle things. Thomas goes outside when he sees Billy spreading his big arms, the parka gaping open. He shouts, "Search me, search my pockets." It seems that one of the policemen has suggested that Billy is high and carrying. Billy insists that he is not. Thomas almost comes to Billy's defense, feels a certainty that this is wrong and sad, that Billy is being taken advantage of for some purpose, possibly entertainment, but the cops give up. It ends as quickly as it began and only Thomas is startled, emotional. He watches Billy go into the intersection and get his shopping cart back.

"What about the other one, Billy?" Thomas asks. It is the first thing he's ever said to Billy and he doesn't know if he has the right.

“Not mine,” Billy says.

Thomas learns that homeless people are very proprietary about the things that belong to them.

The second homeless man is Joey. Joey is a ravaged individual. He walks in a dazed shuffle. His clothes hang off him, and then fall off him. He exposes himself routinely to the neighborhood. The children of the neighborhood, borough children, ignore him like their parents and their babysitters. Joey does not mean to expose himself, it seems. Rachel has suggested that he likes the feeling of fresh air. Thomas doesn't disagree.

Joey is a heroin addict. He's lost the ability to speak, or speak coherently anyway. He doesn't seem to know where he is, walks out into the intersection, fingers gripping the waistband of his filthy jeans as cars swerve to avoid hitting him. He is picked up often by an ambulance and strapped onto a stretcher. He follows the orders (or perhaps the arm movements and intonations) of harassed looking EMTs and cops, and never seems troubled that they are there to take him away. The ambulance is always for Joey. It arrives without sirens. There is no hurry. It arrives when a concerned citizen makes a call on Joey's behalf. They are worried for his health, or Joey has done something particularly foul, has become particularly foul. Thomas learns about these mild anonymous calls and knows that someday they might be his responsibility. It isn't much to do, to make a phone call.

The cops of the bar like to make fun of Joey, buying him a bottle of cheap vodka every now and then to watch him gulp it down. When Joey drinks, the liquid in the bottle just disappears, as if his throat has opened up like a drain. When Thomas sees this happen, he thinks he understands the nature of Joey's addiction. A strange thing. Joey no longer seems human.

The third homeless man does not look and sound like a homeless man. In this neighborhood he could be confused for an artist. He wears Carhartts, and Rachel remarks once that he is handsome. He has broad shoulders and a defined, weathered face. He comes into the shop asking for food, and he looks tormented by it.

“I went to Iraq, and when I came home, I was all screwed up. I wish I could hold a job but I don't seem to be able to. I don't like asking for food, but I'm hungry. We're all hungry out there.”

Thomas is ready to tell him to come back when they close, that

Thomas will give him all the extra meat pies in the oven, the meat pies they throw away each night anyway or give to the cops at the cop bar, but Declan is there.

“Sorry, buddy,” Declan says. “That’s a sad story, and I wish I could help you out, mate, but we can’t just give away free food like that. I’ve got a business to run.”

Declan’s accent gets bigger when he says things like that.

The homeless man nods, understands that this is a business, and goes back out onto the street.

“That guy,” Declan says. “He needs to get a fucking job.”

Thomas thinks about piping up, saying a job like mine? But he doesn’t.

Thomas doesn’t know the third homeless man’s name.

SUMMER

Lucy has two weeks free before her summer internship begins, and spends them running and watching television. She likes home improvement shows and thinks about building and staining a bookcase. Thomas would like to be involved in the project but she gets irritated with him when he goes out and buys the two by fours. The planks live under the coffee table, jutting out so the three roommates are always stubbing toes. Thomas tries to get the project started by putting newspaper down in their small hallway, laying the planks out, buying cans of primer and wood stain. Thomas comes home after work one night and finds everything back under the coffee table. Eventually, he takes the supplies down to the curb, hoping the homeless men will be able to make use of it all. The stuff disappears within an hour, and Lucy never asks where her project went. She just whispers small thanks that night in his ear when they are lying in bed. “I can’t begin anything right now. I wish I could.” She throws off the thin sheet that’s covering them. “It’s just too hot.”

At the shop, the oven is set at 375 degrees, and must be on all day for a steady supply of hot meat pies. The open windows take in the sunlight of June, July and August. Declan has bought an air conditioner that hums loudly and leaks fluid onto the street but doesn’t seem to do anything with the air. The employees sweat and know this can’t look appetizing to the customers.

Sales go down as the temperature rises. Declan has an idea that meatpie picnics will come into fashion, and Thomas does not dissuade him. The optimism is nice. Thomas likes to be part of the exchange about business. But it's misplaced optimism, meatpie picnics are not popular, and the employees are left with more free time to clean, perfect their coffee making, and tell each other everything about themselves.

Thomas, so far, has worked most of his shifts with Rachel. He knows a lot about her from their mornings. Then Rachel wants to change her hours. She wants change in general. Hazel, the manager, begins to open with Thomas in the morning. Hazel makes one dollar an hour more than Thomas. She is a strong woman with tight gray curled hair who roller blades to work every day.

Hazel always introduces herself to customers, and the customers divide themselves into two groups: those who give Hazel their names in return and those who do not. The ones who openly say, "Hi, I'm [insert name here]," will never forget Hazel's name, and will greet her on the street with big waves and big laughs. The customers who do not give their names can be divided into two sub-groups. There are ones who are taken aback by this display of open friendliness, and so do not know how to respond. They smile awkwardly, and are eventually won over by Hazel's loud monologues about her life. The other sub-group hates Hazel and avoids the meat pie shop when she is working. Hazel treats each group and each sub-group the same, never noticing any difference at all.

She recommends meat pies that she likes with gusto. She makes coffee fast and expresses the love with which she is making it. She has lines she repeats, standard jokes, and is free and easy with her history. She explains quickly to customers that she has just moved to New York for the new woman in her life. She explains that the studio apartment is fine for her and her girlfriend, but that the girlfriend's golden retriever seems a bit much. She is a cat person.

Thomas likes Hazel a lot at the beginning. She reminds him of people from Madison. They have the same notions about conversation, primarily that it should keep going. She seems to be a giving person, and doesn't think too hard about the words coming out of her mouth. She also likes stamping paper cups and restocking the napkins. When Thomas makes a joke she laughs hard, doubles over girlishly, and ends the laugh with a satisfying sigh.

Thomas falls in love with Hazel a little. It's good to be around her.

She announces that when she first moved in with her girlfriend, she had to bless the space.

"I'm a pagan!" she says, arms akimbo, knuckles to her hips. Thomas pumps his fist in the air when she says it and replies: "Heck! I want to be a pagan too!"

She gives him a necklace and a long explanation of the rite. Thomas writes a poem about Hazel's religious beliefs.

A week into their friendship, during their shift, Hazel announces: "I was raped when I was twelve."

Thomas falls out of love with her because he doesn't know what to do. He is brokenhearted that she has told him, that she is the type of person who tells that sort of thing to a relative stranger. She says it, and Thomas does not entirely believe her, and then feels worse.

He later hears her tell a customer, and he forgives her. She becomes a woman with no filter, someone who cannot help but declare her personal tragedies. That it is sexual makes it more wrong. If she had declared that her mother died when she was twelve, she wouldn't alienate so many people. But it is rape, and the rape of a child, and it is terrible and not nice to talk about. Thomas realizes it isn't fair to bring niceness into the exchange, but it's the way he was raised.

Thomas does not tell Rachel about this at first, but she brings it up.

"Hazel told me she was raped when she was twelve," she says.

"She told me too."

"Christ. I wish she hadn't."

Thomas tells Lucy about it. Lucy, naturally, has the appropriate reaction.

"That poor woman. At least it seems she's come to terms with it."

One afternoon walking by the cop bar, a small drunk swings out, hanging onto the big wooden door, and calls Thomas a fucking queer. Thomas is walking with Doug at the time, Doug of the bad teeth. Thomas's reaction is to laugh high and loud, and the man shakes his finger at Thomas and sails back into the bar.

“Did he come out just to tell me that?” Thomas asks Doug.

“It would seem so,” Doug says. They walk on. Thomas’s feelings are hurt, but Doug doesn’t seem aware. The two men are on their way to the butcher, to buy two steaks (a portobello mushroom, already purchased, will be grilled for Lucy). At the butcher, Doug takes his time with the order and Thomas feels the eyes of the butcher linger over them both, together. Assumptions are being made, Thomas feels. He looks at the sawdust covered floor, thinks about how much he used to like this butcher shop.

Thomas tells Rachel this story during a shift together, he makes it into a joke. Rachel is cleaning the window above the door, and stands on a chair holding Windex and a wad of paper towel. She looks at him with raised eyebrows and when Thomas laughs, she laughs. Then she shakes her head, stops laughing and goes back to the window.

“I’m sorry about that,” she says, and it seems she’s apologizing on behalf of her neighborhood.

Thomas feels himself confide too much in Rachel. There they are in a small room on a corner in Brooklyn, for eight or nine hours at a time, and he feels himself giving away too much information. Part of it is the heat. Where is his filter? As he stocks frozen meat pies, sorting out the vege from the mince meat, putting the newer ones in the back and the older in the front, he tells her that he read *Eat, Pray, Love* because his sister asked him to. Rachel sits on one of the counters and eats carrot sticks with salad dressing and raises her eyebrows again.

He tells her that when Declan gave him his own desk in the basement next to the drum set, he wrote a poem about how the desk made him feel.

“How did it make you feel?” Rachel asks, and she means it, and so he reads her the poem. She doesn’t laugh, and says she gets it. She likes it.

He tells her he is embarrassed to be going bald. Rachel dismisses that, tells him it doesn’t matter for men. Then she talks about a girl she’d gone to high school with who had started to lose her hair when she was seventeen.

“She had a gorgeous face, but you could see her scalp. It didn’t help that she was such a bitch.”

Thomas wants to get back to himself, to his own insecurities

about hair loss, but Rachel has moved on. Rachel's eyes are untrustworthy because they are always moving. She has classically shifty eyes, like the eyes of petty thieves in westerns or minor villains in Shakespeare productions. She can't look people straight on, although Thomas catches her staring at him sometimes.

"How old is the soup?" she asks, swirling a ladle around with her nose all wrinkled up. "I think it's over."

That night, Thomas goes home to Lucy and confides to her his panic about his hair loss. She doesn't look up from her tort law text book but tells him she doesn't mind.

"I mind!" Thomas says.

Here is how the homeless men act in summer:

They take over the Bartel-Prichard Square, which marks the intersection of Prospect Park West and Prospect Park Southwest and is actually a circle. There are benches that curve around the Bartel-Prichard Square War Memorial, and the homeless people sleep on them and languish. Traffic circles around, children are forbidden from playing at the center, and the homeless people declare it their own. They have arguments, and they make each other laugh, and they urinate on the war memorial. Everyone else moves around them and ignores them.

Joey cannot remember which benches are his and which benches are not his. One afternoon, he lays himself out on the shop bench with his pants around his ankles. Rachel rushes out there to tell him to move on and Billy helps, translates. The two manage to get Joey to pull his pants up and to shuffle towards the park. When she comes back in, Thomas asks what happened. Should he call for an ambulance? Rachel shakes her head and looks back out the window.

"I just told him this was a family place," she says. "I'll tell you what's weird. He doesn't have a single pubic hair."

Thomas finds a website with pictures of all the homeless men of the neighborhood with needles in their arms. That's all it is. He finds it when he is bored, when he is interested in writing a poem on the history of his neighborhood. The website has a black background and it's just pictures of men and women shooting up. There is one of Joey next to a bush. Joey looks healthier. Less gray.

Rachel says it is the methadone that has done this. There is a clinic nearby. She finds Joey irritating, and likes Billy. She says:

“Billy has made a choice, not one I would make, but still. He’s living his life on his own terms, he isn’t bothering anyone, and he seems happy. Not happy happy. But happy.”

Thomas has been doing his research and knows that the health risks during the summer in the city for homeless men and women are substantial. They dehydrate. They can burn their feet on the cement. The subways which save them during the winter just trap the heat, generate more, and act like ovens. There is a good chance that Joey will die soon.

The third homeless man is worse, but only emotionally. Thomas sees him screaming at Joey outside the drugstore on 18th. Joey leans against the doorway with a puddle of vomit by his shoes. The vomit is gray, and Thomas learns that a healthy person has healthy vomit and a person who is near death has deathly vomit.

“You’re fucking disgusting,” the third homeless man says. “You’re disgusting. Look at you. I gave you money for food. Look at yourself.”

The screaming goes on for a time, and Joey can’t escape. The third homeless man stays with him, about eight feet away, and berates Joey all afternoon. The third homeless man’s face is twisted with anger, and he does not look handsome anymore.

When Thomas locks up the meatpie shop at the end of the night, Joey stands in the middle of the intersection again, alone, chewing his lips. The third homeless man has gone.

Thomas tells Rachel about Lucy when he has run out of stories about himself. Somehow they seem like his stories too. Lucy is working as an advocate for women who have had their children taken away by social services because of allegations of abuse. It is not a good job, even though it is nine to five. He tells Rachel about the latest phenomenon. Lucy never walks anymore. He sees her on the street, running to the grocery store, running to the pharmacy. Walking is too slow for her now. At home, she rarely wears anything else but her running clothes. Thomas complains once. She gets embarrassed, then angry. Thinks Thomas thinks she isn’t being feminine enough. That isn’t it. It’s just that when Lucy eventually peels off her t-shirt, running tights and bra, there are fierce red

marks around her rib cage, stomach and her ankles like she's been tied up. But Thomas doesn't tell Lucy that. He does tell Rachel.

Lucy was a fleshy girl when they first met, round-assed, round-armed, round-everything, and he'd been very attracted to her. She was just beginning to become interested in law and interested in arguing, arguing with no emotion was what she liked and he liked it too. They argued in bed, interspersed with frantic, happy sex. There were things about her body that, yes, Thomas would have changed, but she made up for it with her smile which was big and toothy. Thomas was tall and thin, and had usually gone for naturally tall and thin girls. He was charmed by Lucy's body which was so different. Thomas also thought she liked her body as much as he did. He was wrong.

He stayed with her, and he loved her, but he did have to watch as Lucy cried about her dimpled thighs. He hadn't considered the thighs until she told him to and brushed his hand over them. There were crevices and lines in her skin caused by cellulite, she explained. After a year of dating, Lucy decided to change everything about herself. She was accepted to NYU, and for her first semester, she lost about thirty pounds.

She got smaller, more muscular around her middle, and in bed, she would guide his hand to her stomach, as if to say, "See where I am not?" She now confesses that, at first, she felt too exposed to the world after losing the weight, but got used to it. And all she has to do to keep the weight off is run for an hour and a half six days a week. Simple.

In spite of the weight loss, Lucy's thighs are exactly the same.

He confesses this to Rachel. Thomas expects the raised eyebrows and no comment, but instead she throws mashed potatoes at his forehead and calls him an asshole.

"I don't even like Lucy and I feel sorry for her," Rachel says. She doesn't talk to him for the rest of the shift.

After this, she doesn't seem so interested in him anymore. She reads magazines or does *The New York Times* crossword puzzle instead of talking. Thomas tries to help with the clues, but he doesn't understand the logic and Rachel won't teach him.

"Just figure it out, it's what I did," she says.

Thomas turns to Hazel with the stories about his love life. They begin to talk about the difficulty of loving women. At first, it's

strange to relate this way, to a woman about women, but he gets used to it. He's even a little thrilled by it, by the strangeness and the commonality all at once.

Thomas tells Hazel that the first girl he fell in love with had perfect thighs, but he hadn't known at the time. He liked her thighs, was entranced by them when she wore her provocatively short skirts. But he did not have enough of an arsenal of images to know the loveliest thighs when he came upon them. Muscular, smooth, thin. The first time they'd kissed lying down, she squeezed him with her thighs so hard she left bruises. She had long brown hair and brown eyes. An unremarkable looking girl except for her body which was so taut and long. Her name was Chelsea.

Thomas tells Hazel that Chelsea works at a female-friendly sex shop in Madison. Hazel writes down the name of the shop on a slip of receipt paper because she has friends in that area.

Thomas falls in love from time to time with customers. He is fairly monogamous in his attractions, and tells Hazel about each one as they occur. Hazel tells him which women she likes, and the attractions are different but not remarkably so. Thomas's latest is a thirty-something freelance graphic designer. She likes the steak and mushroom meatpie, the heaviest meat pie they sell. The graphic designer has light gray hair, and Thomas puzzles over whether she has gone prematurely gray or if she dyed it. It does matter to Thomas because he hopes that the gray hair is an affliction to be borne rather than a fashion statement. The graphic designer is kind and always tips. Hazel likes the smaller, pixie looking women, the ones who bring Hazel their coffee cups from home for their lattes, flat whites and cappuccinos.

Thomas asks Rachel what her type is and she says she likes the young fathers of the neighborhood who wear their children on their stomachs and backs. She does not like the children as much as the fathers. She does not like Declan even though he has a son.

“He's too large. And he thinks meat pies are too interesting.”

Thomas begins to write love poems that involve the meat pies. He writes poems of the gray-haired graphic designer, and then of the perfect thighed Chelsea. He imagines both women taking deep bites into the meat pies which they hold with unnapkined hands. Chelsea would like the curry veggie but she would have liked the shepherd's

pie more. Chelsea likes classic things. The graphic designer, of course, would be eating a steak and mushroom. Thomas writes a poem imagining the women eating the meat pies, and quickly throws it away, recognizing that the irony isn't there, it is simple fantasy. Also, it's a bad poem.

Thomas goes home to Madison for his cousin's wedding and he meets Chelsea again. She takes him out to a bar. He sits at a table with the other women who work at the female-friendly sex shop. He finds them to be confident and down-to-earth and when they do talk shop, they do not change the tones of their voice. Chelsea takes him from the bar to her home, and the sex is short, it doesn't live up to his expectations. It seems to be because of the sex shop.

He returns to New York and confesses everything to Lucy. He expects her to break up with him, so he makes arrangements to sleep on his friend's couch in Harlem. Lucy, however, does not break up with him, does not make him move out. He has to sleep on the couch in the living room for a few nights, but Lucy soon lets him back under their quilt. Lucy does not hate him. She hates Chelsea.

Rachel says this is a common reaction among women. She's been hated a few times herself and it never seemed that fair.

"I never cheated on anyone," Rachel says.

Thomas tries to write a poem about Rachel but is unable. It ends up being a poem about himself.

FALL

Hazel tells Thomas the story about Declan and his son and his ex-wife. Thomas isn't supposed to know about the story, and neither is Hazel, and neither is Rachel, but soon they all do.

The ex-wife is Ukrainian and a born-again Christian. The relationship between Declan and the Ukrainian was short-lived and volatile. Rachel asks what is it about crazy women? Why do men fall in love with them so quickly?

Apparently, the Ukrainian became born-again (was born again?) after she and Declan split. She began to raise their large son as a born-again Christian. She enrolled him in a school in Brighton Beach that, Declan claims, has some cultish undertones. The large

son began to spout religious phrases to Declan, and Declan decided he wanted full custody.

Thomas knows this, and isn't so surprised by Declan's phone call.

"Listen, Mate, I'm in Long Island," he whispers. "I'm not going to be back for a while."

"Do you mean like the weekend..."

"I'm not sure. I just can't be sure. And I can't give you my number and I can't tell you where I'm staying."

Thomas hears the son in the background. There's a crash, something has been knocked over, and the son cries.

"Jesus, stop it. No, later. Listen, Thomas, I'll be back when I'm back. In the meantime, I'm putting you in charge."

"What about Hazel?"

"She won't understand, and I don't know. I've not been happy with her work lately. In fact, I'm planning on moving you up soon. Don't tell her yet, though. I need to have a talk with her about her performance."

Another crash.

"I really think I need to tell Hazel that you're gone."

"All right. All right. Just make some excuse. No one can know where I am."

Thomas pauses, then asks:

"Declan. Have you kidnapped your son?"

"My lawyer told me to."

Declan hangs up the phone.

Thomas tells Rachel and Hazel what happened, and that Declan put him in charge.

"He put you in charge?" Hazel says. "But I'm the manager."

"I'm sorry," Thomas says.

Hazel screws up her face, and it's clear she's upset.

"Fine," Hazel says. "I'll be back later." They are working the shift together, but Thomas doesn't make her stay. Hazel doesn't return for an hour and a half, and when she does her eyes are glassy.

"Hi," Hazel says, and she goes to the back of the shop to eat a mince and cheese.

The short beat cop is in love with Rachel and the cop bar. It seems an incongruous thing to happen but it does. The short beat cop

drives a three wheeled vehicle through the streets, and likes to park it catty-corner to the shop, outside the Korean market. From there, Thomas and Rachel deduce, he can look into the windows, and watch her as she refills the coffee stirrers and the mustard packets.

“He’s in love with me,” Rachel says.

“So is Joey.”

Joey loses his pants most often when Rachel is working.

“All of them are. Who wouldn’t fall in love with a meatpie proprietress?”

“No one that I can think of.”

There is one woman with a great dane service dog who is in love with Thomas. The first time she came into the cafe, she asked Thomas if she looked crazy and Thomas stupidly said no. A relationship formed. She comes in now regularly, and takes too long to order. She changes her mind, she keeps ordering more, and in the end charges about forty dollars worth of meat pies to her debit card. Thomas is not sure she eats the meat pies she buys. She is small, and indeed, crazy looking. She is in love with Thomas. She looks at him with intention and tries to prolong their conversations. Of course, she could just be lonely. There are many lonely people in the neighborhood.

The woman with the great dane comes by one night just as they are closing, and finds the shop impossible. She’s unable to open the door. She taps at the glass until Thomas opens the door for her.

“I can’t come in there,” she says. “You’re using chemicals, too many chemicals.”

He has just washed the floor with a bucket of water and a capful of bleach.

“It’ll kill me,” she says.

He takes her order from the door, and the order is confusing and long. She keeps sending him back into the kitchen for more meat pies, and exchanging the steak mince for the steak and mushroom. She wonders out loud if she will like sausage rolls, and takes Thomas to heart when he says she might. They are good with ketchup. Finally, she is satisfied with her order, and gives him cash, and he goes back in to make change. He returns with her change and she takes it all, not giving him a tip. The woman leaves with her dog and her meat pies, almost steps in front of traffic. She’s so

upset. Thomas feels he has done something very wrong, something with the bleach. He feels he has broken her heart with the bleach. Wounded, the woman with the great dane still shows up at the shop the next night. She refuses to enter the shop, because she can always smell the bleach now, but she wants her meat pies.

Rachel tells Thomas to stay in the back, she'll take care of the woman with the great dane.

"First of all, I've never seen a great dane service dog. That dog doesn't look like a service dog. It doesn't act like a service dog. I think you just got that tag and that jacket from somewhere and put it on your pet. Second of all, I want your whole order only once. And it has to be more than ten meat pies, or else it isn't worth my time. We have other customers, you know. You only get to make that order once and what you choose, you are stuck with. No more switching things around, got it? Lastly, and this is the most important, I get at least a twenty percent tip. I'm taking it out of your change. Do you understand?"

The woman with the great dane nods and she may have understood or not, but she follows Rachel's rules.

Thomas listens in, thinks Rachel is abrupt and almost cruel. So he gets to give Rachel a look, gets to raise his eyebrows at her for a change. Rachel does not give in.

"Just because they're crazy, it doesn't mean they get to do whatever they want," she says, and then she goes into the basement to get more cups. Before she goes, she puts ten dollars in the tip jar.

Declan returns from his adventures on Long Island and doesn't tell Thomas what happened. Thomas suspects that one day Declan will, but as of now, Declan must attend to business. The fourth employee, a quiet boring man, quits. Thomas has never worked with this fourth employee, mostly because Declan likes there to be one man working with one woman for safety. The quiet fourth employee quits to tour with his band, and Declan must hire a new fourth employee, and fast. He ends up hiring another woman. Thomas suspects that not many people showed up for their interviews.

The new fourth employee, Annabel, is the strangest of them all. She is a tall thick girl with thick brown hair she keeps bobbed. She likes to wear long dresses with floral patterns and to give weird

compliments.

“I love your baby’s eyes,” she says in a monotone to a young mother holding her infant.

Thomas expects Annabel to say next: “May I eat them?”

She is not a good employee. She has the habit of starting projects and then forgetting them. Or doing them wrong. She stamps all the paper cups with the logo upside down.

It is her first job ever, and she wants to do it well, and this seems to make her worse.

Annabel orders shoes online and has them delivered to the shop, then models them for whoever is working with her. She wears them with white socks scrunched around the ankle.

Rachel likes to yell at the new fourth employee and make her cry.

Thomas never writes a poem about the fourth employee.

Lucy is back at school and seems happy to be there. She’s been running longer and faster. She’s talking about the marathon more than law school. She’s talking about the marathon more than anything. She’s stopped asking to see Thomas’s poetry, and Thomas doesn’t have the will to force it on her. Lucy’s thighs are finally changing, and she stands in front of the full length mirror analyzing them. She used to hide this behavior from Thomas, and would move away from her reflection when he walked into the bedroom, pretending to have just stopped there to examine the hem of her skirt. Now, she stays planted, looks at Thomas once, and then returns her gaze to the mirror.

The new fourth employee can’t be trusted with the cash register. She can’t make change and she can’t remember the prices (for instance, a steak and mushroom meatpie costs fifty cents more than the standard meatpie). The daily total is now off by forty or fifty dollars a night.

“I don’t understand,” Annabel says. “I was trying really hard.”

“I know you were,” says Thomas.

“I know you were,” says Hazel.

“Try fucking harder,” says Rachel.

It’s getting colder. Thomas watches the homeless men, wants

to see how they adapt to the new conditions. Billy is up and about more, spends some days opening the door of the bank vestibule for spare change. Joey shits himself. The third homeless man rarely shows up at the corner anymore, but sometimes stops by the neighborhood to kick garbage cans. Thomas wants to give him the free meat pies now, but is too scared of him.

Hazel is stoned at work most of the time. Her customers can tell, ask her what is wrong, ask the other employees what is wrong. Can they help?

Rachel has a new boyfriend she refers to affectionately as assface.

“He’s really terrible,” she says.

Lucy has begun to leave notes around the apartment for Thomas. PLEASE get more milk. Can you do the LAUNDRY? Can you please SHAVE? At first she leaves them on the refrigerator under an I Love Lucy magnet, but now they appear in the bathroom, on his pillow, on the remote control. Will you just ASK Declan for a raise? He finds this note at the shop, because Lucy has left it with Annabel.

Hazel has not been demoted yet. Declan has big plans for Thomas, but Thomas can not yet assume his post. Declan must talk to Hazel, get her to see that the shop isn’t working out for her. But Declan is away most of the time, dealing with his ex-wife. Hazel has begun to hate Thomas, and Thomas understands. She’s stopped doing her work, stopped doing inventory, making orders, and stopped chatting with customers. She spends too much time in the basement, checking her email on the computer, and then she plays the drums. She’s teaching herself, and she’s not terrible.

The cops get into a fight at the bar which other cops must break up. It’s a strange scene that Thomas watches from the shop. Lots of low baritones telling everyone to “just calm down.” No one is arrested. The fight disintegrates, all the drunk cops getting into their cars and driving away. The beat cop isn’t there or Thomas doesn’t see him. Thomas is standing by the window, staring out, when one of the drunk cops comes in the shop. He enters and carries the smell of the bar. The whole room smells like beer now, and not like grease.

“Did you see that?” the drunk cop says.

“Yeah, is everyone all right?” Thomas asks.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You know how it is. So what have we got

here?"

"Meat pies."

"Are they good? They look fucking good."

"I think they're good."

"Okay. Okay. I'm going to buy a couple. For me and Mother. How much are these things?"

"Two? That'll be nine bucks."

"Nine fucking bucks? For two fucking pies? Sheesh. This neighborhood."

"We use organic beef."

The drunk cop laughs.

"Of course you do."

Thomas remembers when he was called a fucking queer as the cop fumbles for his wallet.

"What kind of meat pies do you want?"

"You decide. Do what you think is best. Hey, who's that in the back?"

It's Rachel, sitting and flipping through a magazine.

"That's Rachel. She's on her break."

"Hey, sweetheart, what meat pies should I get?"

"I don't give a shit," Rachel says.

"What?" the drunk cop says.

"I don't give a shit."

The drunk cop is about to say something, seems about to lunge.

"I think you're very pretty," the drunk cop says.

Rachel looks up from her magazine and gives him a hard look. She is not very pretty, she is simply young.

"What do you say? Aren't you going to say thank you? When someone gives you a compliment, you should say thank you."

Thomas gives him two shepherd's pies.

"Don't you think she should say thank you for the nice thing I said about her ugly face?"

"I hope you and your mother like the meat pies."

The drunk cop pauses and laughs. Then walks out the door, waving goodbye.

"It wasn't his mother he was talking about," Rachel says. "He meant his wife."

It's cold out now. The sun sets at five. Joey goes to the hospital and returns in a pair of freshly laundered overalls. It's a nice idea, but once more Joey unworks them and they are drooping down around his knees. The pants had a chance of staying up, but the overalls are too complicated for Joey to refasten.

Billy has a warmer blanket, and wanders through the 15th Street subway station with it draped over his shoulders like a cape. Thomas says hello to him now on the way to work, and is happy when Billy smiles back at him. He doesn't show any teeth, he may not have many left, but it's an unmistakable grin. Thomas feels part of a neighborhood again.

One night, after work, he decides to head into the city for a poetry reading. He texts Lucy to see if she can join him, he's sure she won't, but wants to extend the offer. He even invites Doug, but Doug isn't interested. That's why Thomas invited him. He wants to be alone, and it feels good to put on his coat and head out by himself. He writes down the train directions on the back of an envelope to the small downtown cafe. On second thought, he copies out a small map as well, and folds the envelope into a neat square and puts it in his pocket. He won't take out the map, he just likes knowing it's there.

It feels good to run down the stairs of his apartment building, to go out the door, to be going out as the sky is getting darker, grayer. He casually jogs down the stairs into the subway, and it's warm again. He hears a train coming into the station and it might be his, but he hears shouts coming from the other exit, the exit closer to the shop. He walks over through the tunnels, doesn't go through the turnstile, ignores his train. He turns a corner, and sees a body tangled on the bottom stairs of the other exit. It's Joey. The shouts are coming from outside the subway, no one else below has noticed yet. When the next train from Manhattan comes, it will be a different story. Joey will be mobbed, stepped over by the young professionals returning home. Or, one of them will run to the tollbooth, one will find a policeman, one will make the attempt to help Joey, or simply to get him off the stairs. Thomas is about twenty feet away, and Joey is still. His lips aren't moving as they usually do in that continuous sad way. Then Joey's shoulder jerks as if with a jolt of electricity. The body has restarted, and he crumples down the stairs a little more.

How does Joey keep living? Thomas wonders. He knows the body is frail, he's read enough poetry about that. But how does the body, Joey's body, keep heaving on? It's been through so much, and it's useless now, why does Joey's heart keep beating? The body is miraculous and terrible.

When the EMTs come for Joey, Thomas has missed two trains, his poetry reading, and his chance to call for help for Joey. He could have been the one to get the policeman but instead, he just watched. It's his expected behavior, this watching, it's what he's trained himself to do, he's proud of it. And this is a natural occurrence in the life of a writer, the watching has consequences. Thomas does not feel guilty about it yet because he's been expecting it. And besides, Joey threw himself down those stairs. It's what Thomas would do if he were in Joey's situation. He would also stand in the middle of the intersection of the dark street.

Lucy doesn't come home one night, and the next morning stops by the shop during Thomas's shift. She tells him she was studying with a friend.

The oven cuts out and doesn't want to work sometimes. The refrigerator leaks. The speakers have a tinny sound. The shop needs repairs, new appliances, but Declan buys instead a tiny security camera to point at the cash register, and doesn't tell his employees. This is how he discovers that Rachel is stealing.

Declan tells Thomas before firing Rachel. He seems excited when he calls Thomas into the basement.

"I've got the proof, and she can either return the money or I can call the cops. It's that simple. What do you think?"

"Are you sure it's Rachel? I mean, she's been working here for a while."

"I've got the tapes," Declan says. "I saw her take twenties out and put them in her pocket. I mean, I knew there was a reason business was so off. So, can you go up there and tell her I need to speak with her? Right away."

Thomas says he will, and climbs up the stairs. Rachel is serving a customer, and he tells her that he will finish up, Declan needs to speak to her.

Rachel nods, and takes off her hat. She goes downstairs.

She rushes out thirty minutes later, taking her jacket and her

bag, and doesn't say goodbye to Thomas.

All the women are fired. It's a bold move, one that Thomas doesn't see coming. Rachel is of course fired for thievery. Annabel is fired for incompetence. Hazel is fired for being a misery guts. Thomas is given three new employees, and he is the manager and they are all from New Zealand. They are all more attractive than he is. They all know all about meat pies, and can say with Declan's fervor and authority that these are real New Zealand meat pies.

EPILOGUE

Thomas completes a book of poetry and gets it published by a small Brooklyn press. They like the gimmick of the meat pie poetry more than the poetry itself. He sends the book to his friends.

He sends it to Lucy, even though they have broken up. He sends it to the law firm where she is a first year associate. Lucy looks at it, flips through the pages, then throws it in her waste paper basket.

Annabel thinks it's cool when her name is mentioned and shows it to her mother.

Hazel sobs deeply after reading the poem about her rape, and her girlfriend consoles her. It brings them closer together.

Declan likes the poems because they are a good advertisement for his meat pies. He wants copies to sell at the shop, only without the bits about him, his divorce and his son.

Rachel thinks that poetry doesn't look that difficult, and starts writing her own. When people ask her what she does, she says, "I'm a poet!" and laughs hard.

Thomas has some success.

Joey dies.