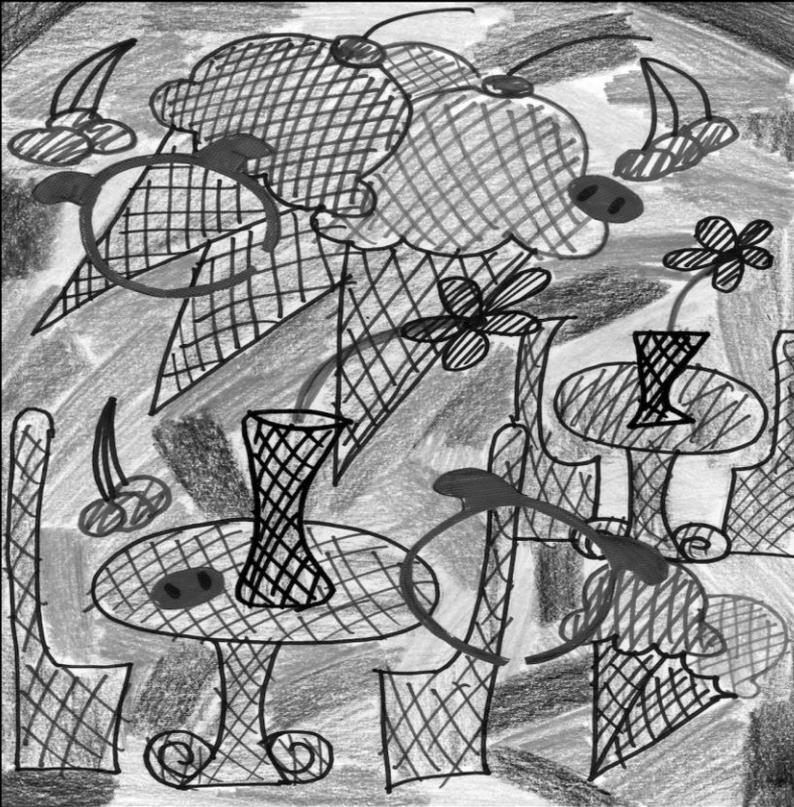


One Dollar

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Tales

FOOD OF THE GODS



Horror

Food Of The Gods

A One Dollar Tale

Jillian Roath

Food Of The Gods

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Food Of The Gods

When the new ice cream store opened, the whole town of Markstown was curious. The fact that a new store was opening, coupled with the fact that it was an independent shop, was not something that happened very often in such a small town. So, when the ice cream store's opening day rolled around, it was packed with curious customers.

The first thing that people noticed was that the interior was very pleasantly decorated. The walls were painted a soft white and the floor was done in gleaming white tile. Wooden tables and cushioned chairs were positioned along the walls and each table was decorated with a vase of fresh spring flowers. All in all, the atmosphere was very cheery and pleasant.

Unfortunately for most of the new customers, the mood was instantly killed when the first man stepped to the counter to place his order. Rusty Bennington, while a capable construction foreman, was considered one of the biggest men in the county. His body was made up of mostly flab that sat heavily around his waist and gut, often necessitating him to turn sideways in order to get through a door. Despite his girth, Rusty loved his food and neither doctor nor nutritionist was going to stop him from indulging in this pleasure.

Because he was first in line, Rusty was the first person in Markstown to get a good look at the new owner. She was a young woman with light blond hair, green eyes, and bronze skin. She was garbed in a clean white apron over black pants and white shirt and on her face was a welcoming smile.

“Welcome to the Abundance Ice Cream Parlor! What can I get for you today?” Rusty eyed the various cup sizes, his piggy

brown eyes settling on the biggest, which was deep enough to hold five large scoops of ice cream.

“That the biggest size ya got?” he asked.

“Indeed it is. But I should warn you, it’s fairly pricey; five dollars without toppings.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Rusty scowled at the cup, but had already made up his mind.

“I’ll take two of ‘em. Both vanilla. The first one, I want hot fudge, caramel, some chocolate sprinkles, whipped cream and a cherry. On the other one, gimme some strawberries, caramel, marshmallow sauce, whipped cream, and a cherry.”

“Right away, sir,” the woman said with a smile and set about making Rusty’s order. The people in line behind Rusty watched, fascinated, as the woman’s slim fingers and deft hands rapidly scooped the ice cream, dressed them in toppings and had them presented the obese man in less than five minutes.

“How much?” Rusty had worked his wallet out of his pants pocket.

“Each topping is 50 cents extra with the whipped cream and cherry being no extra cost, so your order comes to \$13.00 exactly.”

“Thirteen bucks for this! Geez, lady, you better lower your prices,” Rusty grouched as he handed over the money with bad grace. “In this economy, no one can just throw away cash like that.” The huge man grabbed his sundaes and stalked off to one of the tables, where a cushioned chair groaned audibly under her weight. The owner- whose name tag identified her as Aya- paid him no mind and continued helping the other customers.

By mid-afternoon, most of the townspeople had sampled the new store's ice cream and all were impressed. The general opinion was that the ice cream was particularly creamy and sweet, leaving a pleasant aftertaste in the mouth. Some customers (Rusty among them) even went back for seconds. Aya continued to smile kindly at each and every one of her customers, allowing them to sample different flavors at will and encouraging them to come back. Of course, the impressed customers had already made up their minds that the new business would not just survive in their little town, but that it would flourish.

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The Abundance Ice Cream Parlor closed at 10:00 sharp. People walking by, hoping to score one last sundae were greeted with a locked door and a brief glimpse of Aya mopping the floor or wiping down counters. If they were to knock, Aya would look up, smile, and point at the sign on the door, which listed the store's hours of 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and closed on Sundays. By 11:00, the lights in the store were shut off and the parking lot next to it was empty.

This raised some questions among the townsfolk. Where did the new owner live? No one could remember seeing a sold sign on a house recently (yet another indication of the bad economy), so was she even living in town? No one was sure. Still, all of Markstown was happy to have Aya here now; everyone who spoke about her mentioned at some point or another that her ice cream was the best of the best and they couldn't wait to have more.

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Within two short weeks, the Abundance Ice Cream Parlor was the most frequented store in Markstown. People visited the shop two, sometimes three times a day and raved to their friends about it. Very rarely did customers get a small cone or cup, opting instead for a medium or large size. As they constantly told Aya, no one could get enough of her ice cream. A few of her customers even suggested that she sell her products to supermarkets; she

could make twice as much money if she did. Whenever this subject was brought up, Aya would smile, shake her head, and say,

“I have more than enough. I’m happy with what I’m doing and with what I have.” This led to the belief that Aya was independently wealthy; despite the success of her shop, she would have to pay taxes for her property, as well as pay for supplies, food, clothing, and all the other aspects of a comfortable home. But Aya never seemed to be struggling; indeed, she had never reported having run out of a particular flavor or topping. Every day, her store was stocked to its fullest, despite the fact that no one had ever seen a delivery truck before, during, or after hours.

The teenage population of Markstown had another complaint: the store wasn’t hiring. With such success, surely Aya would need other employees just to keep up with the workload. But weeks passed and no “Help Wanted” sign appeared. Young men and women inquired Aya personally about jobs, only to be politely informed that extra help was not needed at the time.

“How does she manage?” people wondered. The answer was, apparently, very well. The store was always clean, customers were given their orders (however large) within minutes, and the store’s lights were always shut off by 11:00 p.m. sharp. Aya was obviously a capable worker, but surely some extra help wouldn’t go amiss, especially in the summer, when tourists would browse the quaint shops and want a cool sweet treat in the heat of the day. Or rather, several cool sweet treats.

“What’s that?” a little boy asked Aya, his blue eyes barely able to see over the front counter. Aya paused and looked over at the jar he was pointing to.

“Oh, it’s a donation jar. Would you like donate a dollar to help send food to a third world country in need?” The boy’s father peered at the metal container.

“Do we get anything if we do?” Aya looked puzzled.

“No, sir. It’s just an option people have; they can choose to donate to charity.”

“Yeah, but with other stores, you can prizes or coupons if you donate money.”

“Sorry, sir, not here. But it’s for a good cause.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t afford to donate anything today,” the father replied as he handed over a \$20 to pay for his and son’s ice creams. “But if you offered people something in return, they may be more inclined to participate in the donation. It’s the American way after all.”

“Yes,” Aya replied, “I’ve noticed.” And she said noting more on the subject.

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The week the town’s schools let out for the summer, Rusty Bennington vanished. He left work one evening and simply never returned the following day. There was no sign that he had made it home the night he disappeared, but neither was there any indication of foul play. In fact, there was no sign of him anywhere. Which was no small feat for a man of Rusty’s size. Rusty had put on several more pounds since the Abundance Ice Cream Parlor had opened, making the Markstown community wonder how he managed to squeeze through doors at all anymore. But the fact remained that no one in Markstown nor anyone in the neighboring towns had seen him.

The Markstown police could only take statements from Rusty's co-workers (the man was a bachelor), shake their heads, and sigh. And after work, they'd head over to Aya's store for ice cream, all the while tugging at the waistlines of their pants. One of the officers joked that if they didn't lay off the ice cream, the entire police force would end up as big as Rusty. Aya, who was serving him, laughed alongside the policemen. In fact, she laughed the hardest.

Unfortunately for the town of Markstown, Rusty wasn't the only one to vanish. By the time the tourists arrived in the first week of July, ten more people had gone missing. Police were baffled; five of the victims had disappeared from their own homes, despite there being no sign of forced entry or any indication of anyone else being let in. Parents were terrified to let their children out alone, doors were locked and bolted every night, and neighbors started eying each other with suspicion.

Meanwhile, the Abundance ice cream Parlor remained the most populated store in Markstown. Aya was a welcome sight for many people; her gentle smile made people feel safer despite the threat of possible kidnappers or murderers lurking in their town. And, of course, her ice cream didn't hurt either.

By mid-July, nearly half the town was gone. The summer tourists had vanished, preferring to spend their vacation at a beachside resort or on a cruise ship where it was safer. A special task force had been called in and the town of Markstown was under strict orders that everyone be in their homes by 10:00 p.m. while police cars cruised up and down the streets every night. For a week or so, all seemed well; no one vanished and everyone began to feel a little bit safer. Then, one night, one of the new patrol units' cars was found empty on a back road. Its occupants were gone, having left their radios, phones, guns, and IDs behind. The car's interior had a foul odor, as though animals had spent the night inside it, but there was no sign of the two officers and no

evidence to indicate their whereabouts. Like the many townspeople, they had simply vanished.

“God damn it!” Fred Tennison swore angrily when the news brought to him. Taking a large drag from his cigarette, the head of the investigation unit stationed in Markstown stalked out of his temporary office in the police department and headed down the street. What the hell was going on? How could all these people suddenly disappear and leave no trace behind? This sort of thing happened in fantasy and horror novels, sure, but this was real life. There had to be an explanation. There had to be!

Fred glanced up and saw that he was in front of the Abundance Ice Cream Parlor. Like everyone in Markstown, he had sampled Aya’s ice cream and found it wonderful beyond word. In fact, a little ice cream would go down just fine right now, never mind how his stomach seemed to be expanding with every large cup of vanilla covered in hot fudge, peanuts, and whipped cream he ate.

However, much to Fred’s surprise. A small sign in the store’s door read “Closed.” Fred frowned; the store was only closed on Sundays and today was Wednesday. The detective peered into the store, noting the darkened interior, pushed-in chairs, and empty tables. Had something happened to Aya? Had she become the newest victim of whatever was stalking this town? Fred decided to make sure that nothing bad had happened to the owner of the greatest ice cream store he had ever been to.

Heading around to the back of the store, Fred noted a huge steel door attached to the building. Giving the handle a tug, Fred was surprised when it swung open, revealing the back of the ice cream store. He ventured inside.

“Miss Aya? Are you here?” Fred paused in thought; did Aya have a last name? Everyone he’d spoken to had simply called her Aya, nothing else. Just who was this woman?

Fred’s feet came into contact with a small iron ring on the ground. Kneeling down, the detective inspected it and noted that it was attached to a trapdoor. Giving it a yank, Fred found himself looking down a wooden staircase that led to what was obviously a cellar. But the smell that drifted up to meet him was flat out disgusting. It smelled like mud and filth, a smell he usually associated with farm animals.

Fred carefully descended the stairs, reaching for the small flashlight he kept in his pockets as darkness enfolded him. The cellar was dark and dank, but he could see a small light coming from under a door on the far wall. A strange noise, almost like squealing, was also coming from behind the door. Fred hesitated, then ran over and wrenched the door open.

The huge room was brightly lit and quite warm. The door took up one side of the room and the other three walls were strung with chicken wire, creating a huge improvised cage. Inside the cage were large pink pigs.

Snorting, snuffling, and squealing, the pigs pushed and jostled each other, busy with the task of eating. The pigs paid little heed to Fred as he stepped into the room, focusing instead on the supply of sloppy food they had been given.

“They always get like that when they’re eating.” Fred whirled and saw Aya standing in the doorway. The young woman was garbed in a white linen dress, soft sandals, and had a golden tiara circling her golden hair, which was braided in a way that made Fred think of pictures of old gods and goddesses he’d seen in museums. Aya nodded toward the pigs.

“They’re always hungry. No matter how much I gave them, they’re never satisfied. They have to have more.”

“What’s going on here?” Fred asked, reaching for his gun.

“Put that away, detective,” Aya said mildly. “It will do you no good.”

“I asked you what was going on here!” Fred felt fear beginning to creep up on him. Aya shook her head.

“Nothing that hasn’t been going on for years before I came to this town. Look at them,” Aya pointed at the pigs again. “Can you honestly tell me you’re not surprised by this?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Aya sighed.

“Pigs. From the day I opened my store, all I’ve seen are pigs. Hungry, greedy creatures who have to keep satisfying their gluttony.”

A particularly large pig looked up at Aya and squealed. The young woman smiled.

“You have plenty, Rusty. Stop asking for more.”

“Rusty?” Fred gaped at Aya.

“Indeed so.”

“You’re saying... you mean?”

“Oh yes. That’s Rusty Bennington. He was the first, but he won’t be the last, not by a long shot.”

“What have you done?” Fred screamed. A part of his mind was screaming that what he was seeing couldn’t be real, but he ignored it as Aya met his gaze.

“I have done nothing, but bring out the true nature of these people, dear detective. All these people who came to my store day after day had one thing in common: they wanted more of what I had. They wanted and so they kept coming back, even if they couldn’t really afford to spend the money or didn’t need more dessert than they’d already had. In that sense, they were nothing, but pigs. I only gave them forms that better suited their nature.”

You... turned them into pigs?”

“Only by giving them the forms of pigs. After all, they were already pigs before I changed their appearances.”

“What are you?” Fred’s shaking hand had dropped to his gun, looking for reassurance.

“What am I? Only a minor deity in charge of abundance. But where I come from, the land is barren and unable to support life. So I came to America, hoping I could find a way to use my abilities for good. But many Americans, I found out, aren’t all that interested in helping the rest of the world.”

“That’s not true! People have food drives, create foundations, and donate plenty to people in need!”

“Oh I know. There are many good people here who help, but in this town, I have not encountered those with large hearts. Only large appetites. They buy ice cream and clothes and cell phones for themselves while people in other countries don’t have food or clean clothes or any of the comforts many people in first-world countries have. So I decided to do something about it. As

pigs, the people of Markstown will be able to give food to those who go to bed hungry at night.”

“That’s not going to happen!” Fred drew his gun, despite Aya’s protest that it wouldn’t help him. “Put your hands where I can see them, you-”

Aya merely smiled and waved her hand, her eyes sparkling as the detective’s words were cut off by a squeal. Aya watched as her newest pig blinked, looked up at her, and squealed.

“Don’t worry, Fred, you’ll get your food. Just as the starving people in this world of ours will. Aya laughed good-naturedly; even pigs could donate to the hungry. And her pigs would do just that.