

Fast Food



by Michael Shea

Oily black smoke rises from burn-piles dotting the bulldozed land, rises past the gray-green wall of the chewed-back rain forest, sprouts up in tall black columns that shred and wisp away to nothing amid the great anvil-heads of the tropical sky, white cumulus clouds sheared flat on top by the winds of the tropopause.

Two mighty bulldozers, their tires a story and a half high, are parked blade to blade not far from the rain forest wall. Vic and Henry sit on a log near their rigs, having a cold beer lunch in the dense, sweating air of noon. The screaming orange paintjobs of the 'dozers give a mirage-like quality to the little group, the feverish glow of something magical that might melt away at any moment.

"There's Jivaro," says Vic. He waves his beer can at a small, dark man, leanly muscled and nearly naked, who has just stepped out of the forest. Vic's smile slackens when he sees that the man carries in his arms something sizable — something black and burned-looking.

As the Indian approaches, the purple welts of tattooing grow visible on his dusky chest and arms, and on the grave mask of his face; now the two Americans can see that he is carrying the charred carcass of some animal caught in the firing of the bulldozed vegetation.

Henry gets quickly to his feet, draining his beer, tossing the can. "You wonder what's the point of drinking," he laughs. "A beer don't even make it to your bladder down here, just goes straight out your skin." Henry climbs onto his rig and backs it out. Let Vic deal with the unpleasantness of the burnt animal — this speechless Indian is Vic's pet, not Henry's. Vic has nicknamed him "Jivaro," cultivated him, offered him beers, amused himself with monologues using the unspeaking savage as his straight man, joshing him: "Mighty Burger is progress, Jivvy! You could come up to the States and work for 'em! Flip patties, wear the cap, hey?"

Vic watches Jivaro approach, sees the barklike toughness of the aborigine's skin, and thinks the Indian is like a piece of the rain forest, made of the same stuff as the puzzle of leaf and frond and branch behind him. The Indian's skin has the coppery burnish of leaves, the tough gloss of beetle or slow-pouring python. Now Vic can see the scorched thing he carries is a big cat, a jaguar, its contorted face like black sculpture, abstracted and demonic.

Now Jivaro stands before him, and lays this carcass on the ground between them. Though Vic sits and the Indian stands, their eyes are still almost at a level. For the first time since Vic has known him, Jivaro faintly smiles. Then he speaks, voice deep and mellow, in perfect English. "I have something to sell you. Something of pure gold."

"You *talk!* You speak *English!*" It seems to Vic that he is all at once in a dream. He sits there waiting, mouth half-ajar, feeling a dreamer's tranquil conviction that these strangenesses — the burnt cat, the smooth, perfect voice — will reveal their meaning.

Jivaro is smiling, holding up a massive ring of gold, carved with intricate runes of a barbaric beauty. "You should try the fit. It has the power to give you new insights. Try the fit." He drops the ring in Vic's palm.

"Jeez," Vic says absently. "You talk such perfect English, how come you never...?" The ring is distracting; Vic's palm thrills faintly to the heft of it. The gold is so pure he imagines he can see a saffron dusting of its atoms on his fingers from handling it. His finger faintly itches to feel the ring's snug mass around it. He slips it on.

Something jolts him and he finds himself on the opposite side of the jaguar. And the cat is no burnt corpse now, but stands there, a living beast, looking up at him with its slotted topaz eyes.

And when Vic looks at his hand, there is no ring on it, and the hand is not his own. It is small, gnarled, and dark. And there, facing him from the other side of the jaguar, is himself, wearing the ring he has just put on. In utter terror, Vic watches himself speak, but with Jivaro's slow, rich-timbred voice: "I'm afraid I've misled you, young man, and that you are going to have to occupy my body for an indefinite period. I must borrow your body, and leave at once on a vital enterprise. I am going to mount your earthmover, and have an extremely expensive accident, disastrous for your friend's machine as well as yours. This will lead to my dismissal, and speedy repatriation to the United States.

“Listen to me. In the deep forest where you are going, you can stay alive if you learn to attend devoutly to the other living things you will share the forest with. I hope you are successful, for I have grown very fond of that body, while yours is polluted and in poor condition. This jaguar will lead you into the forest. She died quite horribly during your burnings. She will take you in, but she will not protect you, so keep your wits about you. Good luck.”

The jaguar touches its flank to the aborigine’s hand, and the dark fingers adhere to the fur. The beast walks toward the rain forest wall and the wiry body follows — stumblingly, stiffly, with an awkwardness most unaboriginal. Vic wants to balk but can’t — he cannot even turn to look back. He steps through the fringe of the rain forest. Its dampness touches his skin, and its chorus of smells and sounds floods him with uneasy premonitions and vague, atavistic memories. The hundred-foot trunks surround him, pillars of the dripping, bird-loud canopy. As the big cat leads him deeper he hears, already far behind him, his bulldozer being fired up. A mighty crash shortly follows, the distant thunder of steel giants colliding.

At one end of the counter of a Mighty Burger franchise, near the perennial NOW HIRING sign, “Vic” is handing Fred Bosely a completed job application. Fred is a lanky teenager, earnest, affable, inarticulate. “Driving a bulldozer in Brazil. Wow, that really sounds, you know, interesting!”

”Vic’s grave calm seems odd for a man in his early twenties. “I inadvertently destroyed two of the company’s largest earth-movers.”

“You mean, like, wrecked them? Rad!”

“They dismissed me, and gave me to understand that I had raised their insurance premiums over a hundred thousand dollars a year. Remorse torments me. I want to continue to serve Mighty Burger, in however humble a capacity.”

“Uh-huh. Cool. You know you talk really, ah, good English. For me English was always a big, you know, scrambling block in school. But put me in front of an Atari.” Vic looks at him blankly, and Fred goes on. “Well, I’m sure the manager will hire you for this shift. We’re really short.”

“This shift?”

“Yeah, from three to midnight.”

“Excellent! Those are very suitable hours!”

The following day, three P.M. finds Vic uniformed and ready. Fred shows him the drill behind the counter. Vic has it pat after one run-through, and astonishes Fred by repeating every detail verbatim.

“So,” he says, “why don’t you show me the food locker, young man?”

”Fred blinks. Vic appears to have perhaps five years on him at most. “Well, sure. Okay.”

The locker is a sizable refrigerated room, its shelves loaded with plastic- wrapped buns, patties, fries, cheese slices. “So like, at the start of each shift,” Fred begins, “we restock all the stations up front with —

”Vic is holding a bag of meat patties, his eyes far away. When he speaks, his voice trembles with passion. “I’ve stood, I’ve *walked* where they raise this meat! Raw pasture land where mighty forest towered not two years past! In the green maze of that forest were intertwined a million-million kinds of life. Life sang, soared, swam and slithered, crawled, climbed, crept a-hunting, clung to, crouched beneath or coiled around every living stick and stem of that forest! And what is there *now*?” He tosses down the bag of patties with contempt. “What lives there now on those pastures, those vast, unreal lawns? Cattle! Thousands of identical cattle! Great, torpid, swollen blimps of oleaginous tissue that do nothing except masticate and defecate! To see them there, where that rich forest stood, is...stupefying. It is like the sorcery of some great, evil demon...”

”A silence follows. Fred clears his throat. “Wow. I guess I never, you know, saw it that way.”

”A few days later Fred’s Mom and his kid sister Squirt, a brassy nine-year-old in a dinosaur sweatshirt, stop in for dinner, and Fred keeps them company on his break. The family mini-van is visible outside the window. Fred picks up a burger and waggles it to tease Ralph, the Bosely family’s big mixed Lab out in the van. Ralph wags and pants and barks, muted by two layers of glass.

“Don’t tease him,” Mom says.

“That’s right, bone-brain,” Squirt says. “You know he won’t get to eat it till we’re home — it’s too messy to feed him in the van.”

“Why don’t you eat? I got you one,” Mom says.

“Oh Mom! I’m tired of burgers.”

“Well, I’ll take it — shopping makes me so hungry. Are your father’s turnovers here?...So which one is the new guy you were talking about —the strange one?”

“Over there at the second register. Don’t point, dummy!” (This to Squirt.) “He just says such, you know, *weird things*, like about the meat patties. He was talking about the forest, where they raise the cattle...?”

”Mom blinks. “Do they raise cattle in the forest? ”

A little later, as Mom and Squirt go out past the counter, Vic answers their uncertain smiles solemnly. “I hope your meal enriches and enlightens you,” he tells them.

That evening, in the Bosely living room, Dad watches a video from his La-Z-Boy, munching one of his turnovers. Ralph, who has just finished eating a Mighty Burger from a dish with his name on it, lies at Dad’s feet, also watching the video. Squirt stomps through the room with a poster of glossy green snakes. “How’s the world’s youngest reptileologist? ” Dad asks.

“Herpetologist, Daddy!” Squirt says scornfully. “And you’re watching the tube again — ugh! What crap!” Dad chuckles affectionately. Squirt heads for her room to hang the poster, scratching herself between the shoulder blades.

Mom joins Dad, sinking with a sigh into her own La-Z-Boy, a match for his. “I ate hours ago but I still feel so full! I keep telling myself I’m going to stop eating that fast food. It’s just that it’s so...so *fast!*”

“The stuffs filling all right,” Dad says, scratching his neck.

“Are you getting a rash too? Celia’s got some little bumps on her back.” Celia is Squirt’s real name.

“I dunno. I itch a little, I guess,” Dad allows.

The late shift is in its last hour at the Mighty Burger. Vic is handing a woman her tray, looking earnestly into her eyes. “I hope you find enrichment and new life in this food, young woman,” he tells her.

The woman, bodily at least, is a decade older than Vic. She stares at him for a beat. “So do I, young man. But I think it’s more likely that I’ll just find a lot of MSG and animal fats and steroids instead.”

“Those too, of course,” Vic concedes, unperturbed, “But more — far more as well!”

Fred, noting the woman’s quizzical expression, hurries over. “Say Vic, could you, like, put some fries in three and four?”

A moment later Fred glances over to see Vic — who has just dumped in the fries — make a cryptic gesture over the seething fat.

It’s an hour past closing, and the street doors are locked. Fred is wiping down the dining area. A big refrigerator truck, bearing the Mighty Burger logo, is out in the parking lot, and Vic is supposed to be in the back loading the delivery into the food locker.

But when Fred is half done he looks up and realizes the truck is still parked out there. He calls to the back, “Vic? How’s it going back there?” There is no answer.

Fred goes back through the kitchen, to the delivery area by the food locker. Supplies are stacked by the locker door, still waiting to be taken in and shelved. He steps out the back door. There is the trucker in the cab, just sitting behind the wheel. The light is dim, but it looks like the guy is napping.

The rear door of the truck’s trailer bangs shut, and Vic steps out from behind the vehicle. He goes to the cab, mounts the step-well, and says something. The driver sits up. Vic speaks some more, and the driver nods. As Vic rejoins Fred, the truck fires up and pulls out of the lot.

Vic is beaming. “Did you know that our supplier, the Mighty Burger processing plant for the entire region, is less than an hour from here? I must visit that plant!”

“How come?”

“To become more completely a part of this great company, of course! To contribute what I have to offer!”

After Vic leaves, Fred is still at work with the sponge and the spray bottle. He worries about Vic as he works. The guy is so...so *emotional* about Mighty Burger. It's not normal. What if the guy needs, like, some kind of treatment? Shouldn't Fred, as his supervisor —

What was that? The strangest sound, like the growl of a big cat, wasn't it? And *that*? Jeez, like a *whirr*, like the wings of some big bug! From back there. Near the fridge...

Slowly, gingerly, he moves toward the back room. And as he approaches the food locker, and touches the door handle, the noises grow louder, grow frighteningly clear. Animal noises. The chatter of monkeys. The shrilling of frogs. The splash of some heavy aquatic creature. Awed, entranced, he grips the handle, and yanks open the heavy door.

And finds inside just the familiar shelves of buns and patties and fries, all cold and dead silent.

When Fred comes home Dad is watching a video, absently scratching the back of his neck, which looks swollen. Dad's weight goes up and down, and right now he's definitely in a porky phase. Ralph is watching the video too, lying on his back with his paws in the air and his head cocked sideways. Ralph also looks unusually fat.

"Hi, son."

"Your neck itch, Dad?"

"I must have whatever Celia's got. Hers is on her back."

Fred finds Mom in the kitchen eating a monster sandwich, which is what Fred himself has come in to make. He looks in the refrigerator. "Jeez, Mom! The salami and the liverwurst are both gone!"

"Well excu-u-u-use me! I live here too, don't I? And do all the shopping? Considering where you work, you could occasionally eat before you come home, couldn't you?"

"I guess, but I'm tired of burgers." He pours milk on a bowl of cereal.

"I am getting fat as a pig," Mom says, after taking another bite. She touches her stomach, which is indeed substantial. "And yet I can't stop eating. And both Celia and your father have these *bumps*. And Ralph does too! Tomorrow I'm going to the doctor, and taking Ralph to the vet.

"Pete Katz, manager of the Mighty Burger processing plant, looks up outraged from his computer screen when Vic steps into his office. "My receptionist is out there for a reason, fella," Pete snaps. "*She's* Step A. If it looks like we have anything to talk about, I'm Step —"

"I have come," says Vic, smiling serenely, "only to make you a gift of this." He slips off his ring and drops it into Katz's hand, which the man finds himself opening to receive it. Katz's palm tingles to the dense warmth of the graven gold.

"An unusual opener, I'll grant you that," Katz says, briefly bemused. "Okay. State your pitch in exactly one sentence." He raises a rigid digit. "Start a *second* sentence," (suiting digits to words) "and you're out."

"I want you to try the fit of the ring. Slip it on. It's pure gold.

"Katz's hardboiled smile only partly masks his arousal. "If you're really giving me this, fella, you've gotta have one of two reasons. A, you want something more valuable from me in return, or B, you want something more valuable from me in return. If you've got a *third* reason, lemme hear it.

"Vic leans solemnly nearer. "Mr Katz, I am fired with awe and devotion for Mighty Burger, this benevolent giant that feeds so many for so little! We serve the same master, you and I. Try the fit of the ring. Accept this little token of my loyalty.

"Katz is now turning the ring between his fingertips, gazing closer in spite of himself at the linked runes circling it. "There's two things we have to get very clear before we take another step. Three things, actually. There are three things we're going to have to..."Katz slips on the ring. Instantly Vic's face sags, his jaw drops, and Katz's voice comes out of his mouth. "Where did I...? What did you...? How could you...?" His voice is rising to a shriek, when "Katz" rises from behind the desk and stills him with a gentle touch. He replies with Jivaro's voice. "We're merely trading jobs for a while, Mr Katz. Your new body — 'Vic' is your name for the present — your new body knows its job at the franchise. Just let it do

the talking and perform its routines. The body will override you if you refuse to cooperate. Well. I have much to do. I appreciate your assistance.” Here “Katz” smiles. “Have a nice day.”

“Have a nice day!” replies “Vic” brightly. His eyes flash for a moment with amazement at himself — with the terror and perplexity of the imprisoned plant manager. But he gives the cheery wave that goes with his reply, and leaves.

The foremen and floor supervisors of the Mighty Burger processing plant at Linda Vista have been called to the staff cafeteria for an unexpected assembly at the lunch break. Everyone’s talking, voices guarded, because Katz has been acting odd all morning. One foreman is telling another, “If there was ever a guy I woulda said *wasn’t* religious, it was him.”

“I’d say you were crazy, but hearing him...I mean, when a guy suddenly comes out with a completely different voice...”

“Like those multiple personalities, right? ’S just what I thought of, because I tell ya he was *blessing* it, had his eyes closed, makin’ these signs with his hands, an’ like whispering some kinda mumbo jumbo.”

“Watchin’ the burger flop outta those grinders at two tons a minute has made me think of a lotta different things over the years, but saying a *blessing* wasn’t one of ’em.”

Katz enters the cafeteria, and everyone straightens up. He smiles beatifically at them. “Our relationship in this great enterprise, my friends, has been too impersonal,” he announces. “We must commune. We must repledge ourselves to our shining goal, which is to give Much to Many for Little. So I have arranged for us to partake of our own fine product together, as a kind of sacrament.”

Women from the production line bring in trays piled with hamburgers. Servers and served trade amazed looks as the feast is distributed, eyes asking questions none can answer.

“Everyone in Production is joining us at this moment,” Katz proclaims in his new, mellow voice. “So! Down the hatch!”

At the franchise, “Vic” is wearing the headset and working the driver’s window. His co-workers keep glancing at him, perplexed by the strange voice coming out of his mouth. “That’s two Mighty-Munchies,” he says into the mouthpiece, “and two cherry Super-Slurps. Would you like — ”

A convulsion seizes him. Thrashing his head left and right he shouts hoarsely, “I’m Pete Katz! Plant Manager at Linda Vista! This isn’t me!” Then he goes perfectly calm. “Would you like fries with that?” he prompts blandly. “That’ll be twelve seventy-five at the window, please.”

Rita approaches him, holding an order for the front. “Are you okay, Vic? You think maybe you should take off sick? Go home and rest?”

“I’m not Vic!” It erupts from him; strain cords his neck, his jaw gapes to say more, but then his hand seizes a wad of fries from Rita’s order and plugs his mouth with them. Chewing, he goes calm again. Gesturing apologetically, he puts together his own order. The man who placed it, a burly, sullen fellow, pulls up to the window and watches Vic suspiciously as he works. Vic takes his money, makes his change and bags his order, exuding Mighty Burger courtesy. The man, unmollified, checks first his change, then his order over carefully, giving Vic a long and searching look.

The look somehow causes the imprisoned plant manager to fight his way to the surface again. He thrusts head and shoulders out of the drive-thru window. “This isn’t me!” he shrieks. “This isn’t my job! I’m really —” Then he snatches back the man’s sack, pulls out a burger, and crams it into his mouth to gag himself.

No one else is home yet tonight, so Fred and his father are making sandwiches in the kitchen when they hear Mom pulling into the garage. She enters the kitchen, Squirt and Ralph behind her. They all stand there, staring at Fred and Dad. Dad swallows. “So? What’d the doctor and the vet say?”

“The vet said Ralph is pregnant.”

“What? Ralph’s a *male!*”

“Hey! That’s right! That’s why we named him Ralph, isn’t it?”

“Look, take it easy, hon. Ralph is really *pregnant?*”

“He’s carrying a litter. And so am I.”

“*What!?*”

“I’m carrying three infants. The doctor doesn’t know what they are. And I don’t mean he doesn’t know if they’re boys or girls, I mean he doesn’t know what they *are*. And those bumps on Celia’s back? There’s something alive in them. So I guess you could say she’s pregnant too, and you too, probably, for that matter.” Dad uneasily touches the bumps on his neck, which are now quite pronounced. “We shouldn’t feel singled out by disaster, though,” Mom goes on in the same unnerving sarcastic deadpan. “Half our friends and *their* families are in the same boat.”

“When...when are you...”

“When am I *due*? Well, the doctor can’t be sure, and I guess we can’t blame him much can we? But he’s betting within the week — for me and everyone else.”

“There’s no reason to worry,” Fred tells Vic in the hospital waiting room five days later. Vic doesn’t act worried. He just sits there, saying nothing. Fred has brought him straight over from the franchise after seeing the huge bumps on the guy’s neck. Fred wants to be here anyway because his whole family is already here, admitted last night. “It’s happening to everyone but no one’s died of it,” he tells Vic. “I mean, look at this place!”

The hospital is swarming. Three different crews of reporters with lights and cameras have doctors or patients cornered in various parts of the large admissions area. Other free-roving reporters shout a gibberish of simultaneous questions at anyone passing in medical costume.

Suddenly a wave of new excitement sweeps through the crowd. Cries and shouts ripple toward them. Then — astonishing! — half a dozen brightly colored birds came sweeping out of a corridor, and fly across the admissions area in swooping formation, gracefully crisscrossing the room while people duck and stare and ooh and ahh. Squirt, in a hospital gown, comes weaving through the crowd, squealing with delight. “Fred! Come see! Come see!”

“How are you!? What about you — ”

“They just popped out and the skin healed like magic!” The little girl opens the back of her gown and shows them. Her young skin is unmarked. “Come see! Come see!” Fred follows, pulling Vic.

The crowds around the glass-walled observation rooms are thick, but people are flowing, circulating, avid to see everything, and Squirt is able to worm them to a vantage at the window. “There they are! Those are mine!” She points to a small incubator, in which seven baby alligators squirm amid the fragments of their eggshells. “Aren’t they adorable? Come see Mom’s and Ralph’s!”

Mom waves to them rather abstractedly from her bed. She is ministering bottles — not without a certain bemused tenderness — to three infant howler monkeys. Ralph has been provided a box on the floor near her. He lies in it, ears flattened, the image of canine shame; drinking from a rack of improvised nipples arranged by his belly are three jaguar cubs. “Dad had a clutch of anaconda eggs,” Squirt enthused, “but we better leave him be a while because he’s still pretty touchy about it.”

They thread through the uproar of the corridors. More birds, as well as moths and other insects now weave above the heads of the crowd. The noise of intertwining conversations is deafening, and yet the tone is oddly upbeat, energized. Amazement flashes from every eye and perhaps, here and there, a veiled kind of joy. The three of them pause to listen to an interview a doctor is granting to a reporter and her camera crew.

“We are told,” says the reporter, “that what we are seeing here at General is happening up and down the state at this moment, and in other states as well. Thousands of people of both sexes are painlessly giving birth, for want of another term, to animals of all kinds.”

“We’ve heard the same,” the doctor replies. “More than a thousand different species have been reported at this point. We have no explanation for any of this. There does seem to be a general consensus, however, that all these species have one thing in common. They all appear to be native to the South American rain forests. At the very least, we’re looking at an absolute bonanza for our zoos and wildlife

preserves. Unfortunately, the problems of survival for all of these creatures, up here in a very alien environment, are going to be — ”

“Look out!” shrieks Squirt in a voice that stops hearts for thirty feet in all directions. She has seen a baby snake slithering along the corridor floor through a forest of feet — and seen a gurney burdened with a pregnant fat lady being pushed by an oblivious attendant on a collision course with the tiny reptile. All eyes follow Squirt’s pointing finger — too late. The gurney rolls, with a pronounced bump, across the snake’s back. The snake slithers on, unfazed. Squirt picks it up and lets it coil around her forearm. “It’s a little boa,” she says, wonderingly. As the doctor takes it, to examine it for damage, Fred notices that Vic has risen from where they have left him. He is heading for the street door in a hurry. He is talking to himself, scratching furiously at his neck. Fred rushes after him.

“Wait, Vic!” Fred sprints to overtake him.

“This isn’t me!” Vic is screeching. “This isn’t happening to me!” He is rushing blindly — furiously scratching his neck — straight towards the street, where heavy traffic whizzes past. Fred catches him at the curb just as, with a howl of exasperation, Vic scratches his neck with renewed fury. His neck seems suddenly to flower, to sprout a foliage of gorgeous leaves.

No. They are butterflies hatching from his nape, their sudden wings like stained-glass windows refracting the sunlight. The sight stuns even Vic himself. The two young men stand rapt as the butterflies take wing and scatter through the air like an exploding rainbow.

“Oh no!” Fred cries: one butterfly has fluttered into the street, into the path of an oncoming car. The driver sees the brilliant insect, but shows no sign of slowing. A mighty impact follows.

The car, stopped cold, sits with crumpled grill. The driver raises his dazed head from the spiderweb of cracks it has made in his windshield. And the butterfly, daintily disengaging itself from the twisted radiator, again takes wing, and zigzags up toward the morning sun.