



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE PONZO

## VEGETARIAN AT A PIG ROAST

BY JESSE MECHANIC

Well, it happened: I've seen a man eat an eyeball. Not a human eyeball, a pig's eyeball, but nonetheless, an eyeball equipped with all the same qualities we expect. I have gazed upon an audience sporting updated versions of a Birkenstockian aesthetic, and have seen them stumble, trance-like, brimming with anticipation towards a table of meat like the mathematical equation for life itself was hidden somewhere within the leathery skin, or skull or snout. I have seen a dead animal in a wooden box command Beyonce-level attention, as cell phones sprung from pockets to capture a lasting image of the animal before it faded, a shooting-star splintering the night sky with a transcendent but rapidly fading light. Also, there was KanJam.

The immediate snapshot that danced into my head when I read my invitation to this annual event was of a decidedly generic variety: a dead pig with a spit shoved through its body and out its mouth, slowly rotating over a bed of hot coals. It's tribal scene with an archaic aesthetic for sure—one can almost hear the native drums slowly building in the background. As I put the invitation down another image slashed into my head. This one was of me showing up to the event with a pig on a leash. I'd parade around Blake -the name I gave to the imaginary pig- to all of the patrons of the pig roast. They would inevitably fall in love with Blake and realize that they shouldn't consume a creature of such inimitable majesty and wit, but befriend him instead. One by one the roast attendees would switch sides, like a swine-centric version of *Twelve Angry Men*. And eventually, the entire

pig roast would morph into a vibrant celebration of the beauty of the animal itself - oh what a joyous romp it would be. I patted myself on the back for my illusory activism and then decided, I am definitely **not** going to this pig roast.

A vegetarian at a pig roast, I had thought, sounded like a decent title to a memoir -or an essay- but it did not sound like a particularly good time. It felt akin to a socialist attending a Tea Party rally, or a Hispanic family holding a Quinceanera in the ballroom of the Trump Hotel. But as I began to delve deeper into my immediate reaction -after I was informed by my also vegetarian wife that we were, in fact attending this pig roast- I realized -through some of my own unpacking and a significant amount of spousal influence- that declining the invitation was patently ridiculous, or at the very least my reasons were thin and wildly inconsistent.

I've attended numerous BBQ's over the past few years and every one of them served meat, mostly meat actually, and while I did not partake in its consumption, I've never made a fuss over it being served. It turns out my appreciation for outdoor camaraderie often supersedes my views on animal rights. And I'm fine with this. I never want to be one of *those* vegetarians. I am cellularly averse to proselytizing in nearly all forms outside of the discussion of the universal merits of the television show *Cheers*.

I will never be some pedestrian Morrissey that gallivants around making aggressive statements that no one really cares about. That is not to say that Morrissey, a staunch vegetarian who refuses to play at any venues that serve meat isn't making a real statement of worth, he actually is. But, by not attending my father-in-laws BBQ, or my friend's Memorial Day Jamboree, I am hardly going to change anyone's mind. Except for, potentially, a few people there who had thought I was not a judgmental ass, and would subsequently think different. But my reticence towards the pig roast, while perhaps being a bit misguided, was more centered around the idea of the event and the fuel of its interest and intrigue. I just didn't want to be hanging out in a yard pretending there wasn't a dead animal pirouetting over a bed of hot coals, a hot flesh popsicle of worship. It's like when you're on the subway and a gentleman steps on sporting a pink mohawk, blue eyeliner and gauge piercings in his nose and cheeks, and you try to look anywhere but at him, at his face and the massive holes in it, but inevitably your eyes just keep being drawn to his nose and his cheeks, and then he notices you staring and looks away sheepishly and you think, "oh no, now he thinks I'm staring at him because he looks different, which is, I guess the reason, but I don't want him to feel bad about it, good for him for actually being different, for actually being a true aesthetic non-conformist" and so you look away, but then, once again, after another few minutes you sneak one more glance and then another, and then another, and soon you can't concentrate on the podcast that is chattering away in your ears and your entire life is centered around the massive piercings in this man's nose and cheeks and you look up just in time to realize you missed your stop. I didn't want this scenario to happen with a dead pig.

I had visions of gazing over at the animal on the spit, and each time its mouth came around into view, he/she would whisper -at a level only I could hear- "you did this to me, you did." Now this was a dramatic vision if there ever was one, but it encapsulated my feeling of being some sort of traitor by attending the pig roast, like I was disobeying some -non-existent- code of conduct, included on page 3 of the pamphlet I received the day I stopped eating meat. But, traitor or not, for better or worse, I was going to this pig roast.

We -that is my wife and in-laws- arrived in Rochester, NY the day before the event was to take place. The pig roast was being hosted by my wife's cousin and her husband -two people's company who, despite our diametrically opposed dietary choices, I tend to enjoy. And this is why my wife insisted we attend this event. The pig roast is a massive, annual event hosted by two people who we do not see very often and who we actually like (a feeling that seems to be growing increasingly more rare as time passes). We dropped our bags at the hotel and headed over to the venue for a pre-pig roast get-together. We walked into their backyard (the venue) as they were stringing lights across the expanse. The whole space looked charming with a rustic magnetism that felt authentic, not the faux-rustic urban aesthetic I was used to. The yard was a large rectangle bordered by houses on each side. Various tables were lined up along the fence, vacant and stoic -patiently awaiting their time to shine - to show their table-ness. About five minutes into the evening I hear my wife's uncle say to my Father-in-law, "you wanna see it?"

My Father-in-law's eyes lit up, he didn't even need to open his mouth, his response was written in the childlike enthusiasm circumnavigating his face, "yeah, definitely."

Then Uncle Glen turned to me, "Jess you wanna see the pig?"

I was about to respond but my Father-in-law interjected for me, "he's a vegetarian, I don't think he wants to see that."

"Oh right, you don't eat meat, I forgot. Still though, you wanna see it?"

"Uh, I think I'm good for right now, thanks though."

"Alright, it's pretty cool though." I nodded in a way to overly concede that I'm sure it actually is really cool, just not really my thing, no judgement, just not my particular cup of pig. So uncle-in law (?) and father-in law headed off with the man responsible for the actual roasting of the pig, Dave. Dave is my wife's cousin's husband. He grew up in the area, is an avid bow-hunter, a fantasy sports enthusiast and a rabid Game of Thrones Fan. There's a part of his personality that is along the lines of a down-home country boy, but it's -surprisingly due to his decidedly more rural upbringing- only a very minor portion. He has quite a malleable personality- he's a handsome, charismatic and intelligent guy- he just happens to enjoy hunting animals and roasting pigs. And I don't mean this to come off as if I'm saying these facts are at all negative aspects of his personality, or character flaws of some ilk, I don't think that at all. They are simply facts, that, for this essay, should be mentioned.

The three **men** returned from their viewing a few minutes later, "wow, pretty crazy Jess, you should check it out" my father-in-law remarked as he sat back down at the picnic table. I was surprised by his statement as just five minutes prior he interjected on my behalf saying that I "wouldn't want to see that." So what could have transpired at the gazing of the pig? What sorcery did this dead animal yield? Whatever it was, it seemed to have a strong power over most men. Perhaps the aroma paired with the site of the pig forms this sort of idyllic, culinary pheromone that all phallic-featured humans are helpless to resist. "Where is it?" I asked gazing around the yard in search of the carnage.

"You see that huge wooden box in there?" Dave asked.

I gazed towards the house and noticed a massive wooden box a few feet off the ground, held up by wooden legs, a handmade, no-frills coffin. Something along the lines of what you'd see a man hammering nails into, next to a saloon in an old Western.

"Yeah. That's it? No spit or anything?" I said.

"It cooks better in there," Dave responded.

I nodded, in some way slightly underwhelmed by the fairly classy approach to the whole thing. Part of me was locked-and-loaded to be disgusted, primed and ready to think of myself as the more civilized and enlightened person - the one who was not enamored by a pig on a spit- and instead there was only a closed wooden box. There was a distinct, culinary aspect to the whole enterprise that I had not anticipated. The thought slid into my head that perhaps this particular pig roast was decidedly less archaic ritual and more alternative food preparation, but I still wasn't sold.

The night went on as any other night would: conversations, drinks, food, laughter et al. The pig was brought up a few times in passing, my Father-in-law -a very solid chef in his own right- would occasionally vocalize a preparation query as it popped into his head, but that was about it. The pig was laying over in the corner in his box -a looming presence yet to be revealed. I realize now, looking back, I personally viewed the pig as a dominating, overarching Northstar of the evening, an undulating presence preparing to take the stage—but no one else really shared in my obsession. Others were excited to try it, a select few were flat-out enamored by the idea, but the general fervor was tame. But this night wasn't the pig's night; this was the penultimate event - the build up before the finale.

We spent much of the next morning exploring downtown Rochester. It's a small but warm city, adorned with far more elements in the arena of quaint than I had anticipated. As we were getting ready in the hotel to head over to the big event, I put on Morrissey's "Meat is Murder" on the small hotel alarm clock with auxiliary plug. I love Morrissey, but I had forgotten how brazenly downtrodden and severe that song is:

“Heifer whines could be human cries  
closer comes the screaming knife  
this beautiful creature must die  
this beautiful creature must die  
a death for no reason  
and death for no reason is MURDER”

I let the whole thing play, thinking yeah, let it all seep in, meat is murder and I am the true hero and champion for animal rights - I am the lord commander for those who have no lord commander. I am a lord commander who is about to -in some regards brazenly forsake his vows—spare me my brothers-in-arms, spare me.

We arrived and headed around to the back yard. Every inch was now filled with tables and chairs, more stringing lights, various kegs of beers, bottles of wine, chips, dips, vegetables, cheeses, crackers and nearly every other typically American pre-food, food.

I felt a little nervous and uneasy as I made my way past the wooden coffin. Here I was, someone who did not eat meat on principle, at an event centered around meat consumption on a series of different planes. This event was stationed beyond the realm of simple sustenance, this was a spectacle of meat, an attraction, with a

star -albeit dead- performer. A burnt monolith upon which men, women and children alike would worship with their engaged incisors. A group of men would soon remove the pig from its no-frills chamber, and hack and slice it into sizeable, edible portions by hand, with blood, flesh and bone forming the primary mosaic. This small group would butcher an animal in a backyard and prepare it as sustenance for a party of 50 people, and I'm standing on line quietly asking my wife, "can we eat that salad? Is that chicken or chickpeas?"

Fast forward to 2:00pm, there are about 40 people scattered throughout the backyard, mingling, snacking, sipping and laughing. The space was filled, but there was still plenty of room. Most attendees were milling about chatting and greeting each other with that painfully generic level of excitement that-at least it seems- every human being is guilty of at every get-together that has ever occurred. But I suppose these formal, yet cookie-cutter acknowledgments of one's presence are a byproduct of the innate monotony of greeting someone in a formal fashion when that particular person does not need or warrant a formal greeting.

Pleasantries are fine -they're nice (see also eponymously: pleasant)- but when they become a chore and the genuine feeling behind a greeting is transferred into a force of obligation, there's a shift that occurs. There is a certain malaise that circles above hands as they connect and shake and seeps out between trepedacious hugs. All I tend to see in these scenarios are thought bubbles pronouncing, "WE ARE DOING THIS BECAUSE IT IS WHAT WE WERE TOLD TO DO - IT IS HOW WE LEARNED TO BE POLITE." To the left there were a few twenty-somethings playing Kan-Jam and in-between it all was an assortment of attendees of all ages -mostly female- circled around an infant and glowing with happiness. An infant was -it seems- the only attraction that had the magnetism to -temporarily- defeat that of the pig.

So I settled in, began meeting people, conversing, drinking. Small talk has never been my forte, and in this scenario, nearly everyone thought it logical—and it was— to bring up the pig. "Have you ever been to a pig roast?" "Did you see the pig? It looks amazing." "I'm trying to concentrate on other things, but I really just can't stop thinking about the pig." In response to most of these I just smiled, nodded and said something vague like, "yeah, definitely." A few of the conversations began to reach to depths of meat talk I was not comfortable with, so before those could delve into a conversation on various cuts of meat, I would say, "I don't eat meat actually." The response was typically something along the lines of, "really? And you're at a pig roast?" I would toss back a polite little laugh acknowledging the situation and utter something like, "it's fine though, I'm not going to set it free or anything, it's already dead." This lame little joke received some courtesy chuckles and a few odd looks, which were the exact responses I was hoping for.

As the night progressed the pig talk increased exponentially. The moment, the unveiling was drawing near and people were excited. Around 4pm Dave -along with a few friends- removed the pig from its cooking coffin and began to cut the meat. I didn't see this whole process, but I did not purposefully avoid it - I just somehow missed it. I was probably playing KanJam.

What I did see however was my Father-in-law grab something circular with a small meaty tail from the main butcher (Dave) and pop it into his mouth. It looked like a meat meteor. A meateor.  
Sorry.

Next thing I knew, massive plates of meat filled up the vacant tables lining the fence, and the party, as a collective began to notice. There was a shift in attention that took place as soon as those hefty plates hit those

plastic tables with a series of audible thuds. Everyone's heads popped up like meerkats, gazing upon the horizon in search of something transcendent, and for many, they found just what they were looking for. I heard my wife's Aunt explain how my Father-in-law and party host Dave each ate one of the pig's eyeballs. I then realized the hand-propelled meateor I saw just twenty minutes prior was the pig's eyeball. Apparently this is a part of the whole ritual. Drive to a pig roast in a 2014 Jeep Cherokee with A/C and a Bose stereo system, navigate traffic by using an up-to-the-second global positioning system, step into a backyard with music playing from a streaming service off an iPhone 5S connected wirelessly by Bluetooth -and eat a pig's eyeball. But hey, at least they utilize the entire animal, really can't be mad at that. When I heard about the eyeball consumption I had to ask what it tasted like. I could only think of Elle Driver's eyeball squishing up through the toes of Beatrix Kiddo in Kill Bill 2 - it was not a particularly appetizing vision. According to my Father-in-law it, "was delicious...it tasted like chicken, just a little softer." A little softer perhaps...because it was an eyeball.

As the rest of the pig was laid on the table, cut into pieces of varying sizes a line began to form behind the pig alter. I was not in line, but standing next to it and listening to the conversations of linemates—100% of which were about the pig. More people meerkated, propelled by toes, to get a glimpse of the final product, and others just sat back and embraced the smoky aroma ascending and wafting from the table-de-pig.

**Overheard quotes:**

"oh man, looks good!"

"smells delicious"

"I can't wait to try this"

"Thank the lord for pig"

"Have you ever had meat like this? It's so good, you'll want to eat it everyday."

"Holy shit that looks amazing"

"I'm going to eat the whole table."

"Damn!"

"It's supposed to smell smokey"

"OK, OK, I'll try it"

"Who ate the eyeball?"

One by one as each attendee filled his/her plate and found a seat and a place of table real estate, the entire party quieted down for a few minutes. A hush fell over the imbibing crowd and rhythmic chewing reverberated through the yard as each attendee -sans my wife and I- took his/her first few bites and prepared to declare an opinion. The consensus was essentially: four stars, a thrill ride the whole family can enjoy, two, enthusiastic thumbs up. Compliments began to be flung across the yard in Dave's direction and he'd raise his hand in acknowledgment and thanks at each of them. Despite the acclaim, however, Dave stated that, while it wasn't bad, it wasn't nearly as tender as last year. He lamented certain aspects of the preparation this year, blaming himself for the meat not being as flavorful or juicy as it could've been.

Regardless of Dave's regrets, the crowd adored the pig. In the subsequent two hours post pig, many a hands were graciously placed upon Dave's shoulders with sentiments regaling his efforts in the preparation and its results. As most of the crowd winded down their meat consumption and my wife and I finished our plates of

sides and vegetables, the conversations turned to how great the pig was. It was akin to Star Wars devotees waiting outside a theater for hours and finally being able to see the film, and then spilling out onto the street to deep dive about Boba Fett's helmet or Bib Fortuna's accent. [\*De wanna wanga.\*](#)

At this point my wife's uncle Glen sat down next to us and we started conversing on banal topics like work, the city and life in general. When the conversation hit its inevitable lull, Glen diverted the silence towards the star of the evening. "Did you guys see what it looked like before Dave cut it up?" My wife and I looked at each other silently signaling, "did he forget again about us not eating meat?"

"No, we don't really want to see it" I responded with a smile.

"I know you don't eat meat Jess, but it's pretty amazing, check it out." As the attention turned to me, my wife gave me a look of "you're on your own," rose from the table and walked away.

Uncle Glen then pulled out his cell phone and began to cue up pictures.

"Glen, I really don't want to see it. Thanks, but I just have no desire to see the pig, at all."

"C-mon, just look at one picture, it's crazy." He would not relent.

Now Glen, in all of our previous encounters going back 5+ years has always been a very generous, accepting and intelligent man, but at this moment, it seems he was stubbornly drunk on pig and was not going to let me off the hook.

"Fine, if you care that much, I'll look at one picture OK." He found the best shot and passed the phone over. As I looked at the phone I saw a vivid image of a large pig split open from neck to navel, its head drooping lifelessly to its side. It was more brutal than I figured somehow. "Wow" I said, but for drastically different reasons than Glen likely had. There was a directness to it that I had not anticipated. As I looked at the photo I saw death first - I saw a captured moment of tragedy. I saw an animal that used to live and run and love, and was expertly cut down to be served as a culinary attraction to satiate a madding crowd.

But I realized most people here saw this photo as food first; they saw sustenance, protein and flavor, and I wondered what it was that separated us. Is it just varying levels of analysis towards everyday life that leads one to making decisions such as this? What it doesn't seem to be is some sort of elevated connection between person and animal, because I have come across numerous animal activists and general animal lovers who have no issue consuming meat.

As I looked at the photo of this dead animal, and then gazed around the yard and saw people milling about -some eating, some not- but all locked in to conversations with varying levels of engagement, I came to the surprising conclusion that, in many ways, a pig roast was a far more respectable enterprise than an everyday BBQ. At a pig roast, the convenient disconnection that is often made between the food we eat and where that food derived from is severed completely. Everyone in attendance knew they were eating a dead animal, they could see its eyes (and taste them). There was a level of honesty to the whole operation, and an overarching sense of moral liability that often seems to be lacking in every day meat consumption. Most people eat meat, but at least the people here were not deluding themselves - they were proud and confident in the fact that they were preparing and consuming a dead animal.

There is a level of respect exhibited by not severing the connection between food, life and death that is, frankly, important and rather admirable in many ways. Blissful ignorance or all out repression of thoughts and ideas are tactics born out of convenience -and a pig roast is not convenient.

I thought I'd leave this event either internally disgusted with the whole thing, or staunchly unchanged, but I found myself walking away from the glimmering expanse of the yard with a feeling I had not anticipated, a feeling of, not quite understanding but acceptance. An acceptance centered around the differences in human beings and how we approach things, of how our minds choose to compartmentalize the issues we care about, and how those issues dictate our actions.

I suppose it simply boils down to diverting forms of influence and experience, along with the innate columnization of empathy. Neither approach is better or worse than the other—we just categorize differently.

We are simply flesh-covered supercomputers operating under different algorithms.

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