

DIRTY COOKBOOK

By Jason Clampet

Chapter One: The One

My closest friends, Ted, Lou and Smitty think she's the perfect woman. If I left them alone with her for any length of time I'm certain I'd come back to find her either cast into bronze or cloned. Every Monday night the four of us meet at Lou's apartment and the subject of Jane occupies at least a half hour of our debate about food and women, our two favorite subjects. Jane's the only woman the four of us know – and, not to brag, but we know more of Chicago's finest than your average sampling of men – who takes equal pleasure in a good cut of beef as a nice roll in the sack.

If I wasn't with her, I'm certain at least two of the guys would propose to her. Actually, I should say that I'm seeing Jane. Dating implies a level of commitment and reliance that neither one of us wants or will readily cop to. For us, seeing each other means this: Once a week she comes over to my place. I make her dinner. She loves it. Then we screw like mad; her Jane, me kinda like Tarzan. She's also my accountant. She's good at that too. It's fun, but it's not dating.

I've got nothing against marriage, it's just that I know Jane is only good up to a point. That sounds much worse than it actually is. I've always been able to decide quickly whether I like something and how much: a building, a pair of shoes, a woman. I knew immediately that I liked Jane but that both she and I would tire of each other eventually. In the meantime, though, there was no reason we couldn't really enjoy each other for as long as it lasted. No, I haven't discussed this with her, but I'm sure it's implicitly understood. This isn't a concept that makes much sense to many people. Smitty and Ted think it's judgmental. Lou, the lawyer, thinks the same thing, but for him that's high praise.

It's 8am and Jane is still in my bed. This is the longest she's stuck around and I think that it has more to do with general exhaustion than a nesting instinct. The last few weeks have been physically intense but otherwise hollow. I think she's got her own sense that I'm not the one. Still, it is nice to be making coffee for two instead of one. I'm taking my first sip when she comes into the kitchen.

"Morning Paul."

"Sleep well?"

"Mmm," she says before taking a sip of coffee. "I think the wine helped with that."

"Need a ride this morning?"

"I don't have any client commitments until noon. I'm going to go home, clean my cuts and bruises and put ice on my head." She gives me a little playful hip check.

"I don't have the luxury of R&R. They're filming at the worksite again and I have to keep my crew from killing the cameramen. I should have been there ten minutes ago."

"Then I'll take a cab," Jane says. "Same time next week?"

"I'm counting the minutes already. And taking my vitamins."

"Good boy," she says before slapping my ass, grabbing her coat from the stand in the hallway and disappearing out the door. I stand there at the counter and flex to test the soreness in my bones. I feel like I spent the night sparring with Leon Spinks. As I add up my injuries, I go over last night's menu, followed by the damage to my kitchen and my dishes and my soul:

Risotto with sliced roast duck

- 1 roast duck, cooking Peking style and sliced in 1/4" pieces
- 4 oz Plugras butter
- 1 lb Arborio rice
- ¼ bottle Valle de Loire *vin blanc*
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 2 cups shiitake mushrooms
- 3 green onions
- A few dashes of saffron and something I'm not yet sure I can trust you with

The damage (in order of destruction)

- 2 bottles Il Paradiso di Frassina Do

- 1 wine glass halfway through bottle #1
- 1 ceramic serving bowl. Note: replace with wooden version
- Zipper, size 34/32 Levi jeans
- 2 more wine glasses – during the table clearing.
- 1 bone china pasta bowl. Why don't I just use paper when Jane's over?
- Punch bowl. Not sure what that was doing on the table
- White button-down Paul Smith shirt. Now with 1100% more red wine.
- 1 tablecloth. I told her it was too delicate for a girl with a healthy appetite to swing from
- Dining room chair – will wood glue work?

The other cost: Me and my weary bones and me are late to the job. We're only onto day four, but divisions within the crew have emerged between those who are here to work, and those that showed up on day two with haircuts and designer work-wear after they learned we were filming an episode of *Tops to Bottoms*. The cameramen don't help, either. They keep sneaking up on us as we're about to bring a sledgehammer against a wall or pry a fixture from the floor.

My plans for today have us tearing down a load-bearing wall dividing the dining room and living area. I stayed late yesterday with my foreman Malcolm to shore up the temporary supports and, from the sound emanating from the open door; I can tell that he and the crew have already started. I walk up the steps and into the center of a room alive with the sound of sledgehammers meeting plaster and waves of dust undulating off the collapsing piles. I should have an aversion to this. Demolition is about destroying another architect's vision and the destruction of every lingering memory in the space. But there's something in the feverish activity that's the perfect corollary to the measured and plodding nature of architecture.

At the center of the scene is a figure enveloped in a haze of dust and sunbeams who hovers above the activity like an angel; a creature more beautiful than any that's ever descended on a construction site. And it's not Malcolm. Whoever she is, she's taken charge of the scene with such an uncanny grace and grip on power that even the pretty-boys who just want to be on TV are busy hauling red wheelbarrows full of debris out of the room. With one hand she directs the construction crew, with the other she encourages the cameramen to get closer (but not too close). Their movement is in such perfect harmony that I stand back and watch, hoping I can

commit her every move to memory in case she up and flutters back to heaven or the modeling agency or wherever she came from.

Malcolm approaches me from behind, snapping me out of my daydream.

“Something else, right?” he says.

“Who is she, Malcolm?” I ask.

“She’s Victoria, AKA Blake’s brain. His creative director. She showed up before the crew today with homemade cupcakes and a vat of coffee.”

Just then, one of the pretty boys grunted past us with wall studs to recycle and a smile on his face.

“Oooh, she’s gotta be a witch,” Malcolm says.



Malcolm walked away, but I continued there at the periphery and took in the scene until she eventually turned my way. She gives me a little smile and walks over to where I’m standing. While she’s approaching me, she somehow manages to turn the removal of a pair of khaki work gloves into an act electric with seduction.

“I’m Victoria,” she says while reaching out her hand. “You must be Paul.”

“How do you do it?” I ask, pointing to the harmonious scene behind her. “Yesterday I had to keep Joel over their from braining your cameraman with a two by four. Now it looks like they’re booking tickets to Hawaii.”

She giggles and adds a little snort. The cute kind.

“I just treat them with respect,” she says.

“Right. Sure. Feel free to charge me for all the ingredients you need for the spells you cast. If you’d be willing to share them with me, I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Better be someplace nice,” she says as she turns away. “I’m wearing my best overalls.”



As Victoria tells it over our hot dog lunch – her: pickles, ketchup and onions; me: two of the same – she never planned on playing second fiddle to a man and she never had aspirations to work in entertainment. She’s an art school girl, which’ll turn Smitty on to no end.

“What’d you do? Photography, painting or drawing?”

“None of those, really. I built models.”

“I have some friends who’d love their numbers.”

“Not that kind of model. Miniatures. I built small architectural models and took pictures of them like they were real. It lets me play God and artist at the same time. But being God doesn’t pay as well as advertised, so I took a job as a set designer’s assistant on TV and movie projects around town.”

“Sounds glamorous.”

“The man I worked for was a total nightmare. The boss from hell. He is an addict of everything – drugs, alcohol, food, paid-for-sex – and I had to spend more time covering for him than creating with him.”

“Can you tell that story to the crew back at the site? Sometimes they forget how good they’ve got it,” I say.

“It turned out to be a good thing for me. One week he goes on a bender and disappears days before we’re shooting a TV pilot project with the some fresh-faced baby face named Kevin Blake. I guess I saved the day. Blake and I clicked and we ended up building the partnership we’ve got now. If you see anything with his face or name on it, books, bed sheets, TV shows, whatever, I had a hand in it. We’ve got a line of paints next spring, too.”

Her hot dog’s sitting there only half eaten. I’m done with mine and stare at it with longing.

“My hot dog,” she says.

“That was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Liar. But of course all men lie when it comes to food.”

“I love women who don’t resort to sweeping generalizations of men. It’s so charming.”

“Sorry. My ex was a chef. A *sous* chef, I should make clear. Apparently it was my fault that he didn’t have his own restaurant yet. That one weekend in five years that we escaped to the Bahamas really ruined his chances at making it.”

“Sounds like a winner.”

“His pastry chef thought so.”

“How’d you find out.”

“Let’s just say he brought her work home with him one night.”

“He brought you a pie?”

“I caught him before he could duck into the shower. His fly was coated with dried whipped cream, his thighs with solidified caramel drippings and I hope that was chocolate all over his crotch, chest and ass.”

“Maybe not. Maybe you dodged a kinky bullet.”

“That’s not something you want to discover in year five. After you’ve paid his way through cooking school. Did I mention he also played drums in an experimental jazz band?”

“Well there’s your problem right there. Don’t hate the cook, hate the drummer.” I start staring at her hot dog again.

“So what about you, Mr. Master of Renovation?” she asks before taking defensive this-is-my-property bite out of the dog.

“I’m just a simple architect. No global brand power, no impending line of paints. No chocolate below the waist.”

“That’s what you tell all the girls you buy hot dogs. But don’t be modest. The reason we chose O’Grady’s project over another was that I’ve seen your work and wanted to see more of it.”

I give her the what you talkin’ about Willis look.

“Seriously. The McAdams greystone in Logan Square? I’ve been there. That staircase was a piece of art. And the Wilford condo? Perfect scale. You’re good. And your face can turn many shades of red.”

“Oh no, I’m used to beautiful, successful women praising my work. Especially ones who can operate a table saw.”

She blushes a little too. “See what happens when two people have relish in the middle of the day? I think we should head back now. That linoleum isn’t going to tear itself up.”



The linoleum did get taken care of that afternoon, as did the illegal plumbing hook up to the dishwasher and a wiring job that would make a pyromaniac proud. Victoria distracted me all afternoon. Not her physical form so much – she was busy with the TV side of the job – as thoughts of her. I made up my mind to ask her out before the closing bell rang or before she forgot that three hot dogs ago I was brilliant. Or before some other guy on the crew asked her out and ruined it for the rest of us.

Malcolm signals with a whistle that it’s time for the mini-cleanup I make everyone do at the end of each workday. This ritual not only gets us ready for the following morning, but an inventory at the end of the day keeps the more itinerant guys on the crew from lifting tools and supplies, saving me a few thousand dollars on each project.

Victoria is on the other side of the room helping her crew wrap up cables and cords and pack the rest of the gear. I’m staring at her intently when she looks up and over in my direction, flashing a smile that makes my knees ache. The blood starts pumping through my veins and swells to a drum solo in my eardrums. I begin walking towards her and my whole world comes crashing down around me.

Or at least the cheap-ass drop ceiling that separates me from the floor above. I guess that one of the guys accidentally knocked out the anchors holding the frame on one side of the room. When that happens, all the tiles slide in one direction – over Nelson, one of the cameramen, to be

exact – and fall directly on him when the weight becomes too much. A grey/brown mist, that’s half dust, half fiberglass, rises from the floor and envelopes the room. Except for Nelson, everyone else is still standing and has taken on a uniform color – flat, grey and ET-like.

“Who’s not OK?” I ask.

There’s a rumble of tiles from Nelson’s direction.

“Little help, guys?” Victoria says. Me and four of the guys piece our way through the collapsed aluminum frame and start uncovering Nelson.

“Lawsuit,” he says when he finally pokes through the pile.

“You know these things only weigh a quarter pound each?” Malcolm says. “The same thing happened to my six-year old niece and she didn’t even fall down.”

“I’m emotionally scarred, man. Deeply.”

OK, things are looking good. Little accident, little humor, now I can ask her out. Then her cell phone rings.

“Victoria here,” she says. “Not again. OK. Yeah. Of course. I’ll wash up and be there in forty.” She claps her phone shut and turns my way. “Why is it that Blake can’t live without me?”

In my mind I quickly make a list:

- You’re beautiful
- You know how to swing a hammer.
- You’re funny
- You’re totally boss
- You’re incredibly sexy when you’re naked (This is my fantasy, I don’t need to be slowed by facts like not actually having seen her nude.)
- You like my work
- You eat hot dogs.

“If one more man asks me to do a single thing today I swear he’ll meet the business end of a staple gun,” she says looking straight at me.

Later on, I’ll probably figure out what I should say to her right now – something about taking care of her like she should be taken care of. Instead I act like a guest on *Oprah*.

“You go girl,” I say.

She gives me one of those looks that says ‘I now question everything I thought I knew about you,’ followed by the longest “Yeah” I’ve heard since I smoked three hash joints and tried to explain the meaning of life to my fellow backpackers at an Amsterdam hostel.

Dammit.

She turns to leave.

Damn.

Damn.

Damn and she’s out the door.

Chapter Two: The Ex

“I’m ending it with Jane.”

The guys look toward where I’m standing near the door from their habitual perches on the couches and chairs that Lou precisely positioned around the center of his loft space. I go over to his fridge, reach in and pull out a beer. While I’m taking a drag from it, the trio pipes up like a Greek chorus made up entirely of thirteen year-old boys:

Smitty: “She finally realized there were more numbers than sixty-nine?”

Lou: “What’d you do? Tell her you only love her for her spreadsheet skills?”

Ted: “I always knew you were gay.”

Smitty again: “Did the dish breaking streak finally claim the ‘special’ vase. You know, the one you made yourself during that way too little mocked hippie phase of yours?”

And back to Lou: “Someone say ‘gay’ yet? OK, then it must be your penis. She’s finally gotten sick of rounding it up to a whole number.”

The laughter continues for a while and I take the opportunity to sit down and put my feet up on one of the coffee tables.

“Everybody done? Ted, it’s your turn, isn’t it?” I say.

“No, I think we covered all the bases. Except your haircut. And your cooking,” he says.

“My problem,” I say over the continuing chuckles, “Is that I don’t know how to break up with somebody who, A. Isn’t technically my girlfriend, and B. Is an excellent accountant. The best I’ve ever had.”

Lou launches into his wise counsel voice, the one he uses with clients, children, and the three of us. “The real question, as I see it,” Lou says, “Is why on earth would you break up with this woman? The sex is, by your admission, phenomenal. The commitment is negligible. Either you’re lying about her accounting skills or there’s another problem altogether.”

The other two nod in agreement. Ted leans in and speaks in a hushed tone like he’s about to impart the solution to all of my problems. “Is it one of those ‘guy’ problems? There are all sorts of medication available to men just like you.”

“It’s worse than that,” I confess. “I think I met The One. With a capital ‘T’ and ‘O,’ quotes around it ... maybe even all caps, bold and italics. It’s that serious.”

A hush falls over the group. The type that’s usually broken by a belch or passing wind. Instead my words sit there with the strange odor of the latter but an altogether more unfamiliar and unwelcome effect.

Smitty clears the air. “How long have you been seeing her? How come we’ve never met her?”

“Today,” I say. “I met her today. And we’re not really seeing each other yet. I’m going to ask her out tomorrow.”