

Diet or Die?

by

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*A cautionary tale of what might happen
when you fall for the latest fad*

*Taken from Endings, a collection of ten short stories in
which the beginnings are of no consequence and only
the endings matter*

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Jennifer sat in her usual place, waiting for Olivia to join her. She had always looked forward to her weekly Wednesday “assignments” with her best friend from school. Although both of them had long been working in different parts of the city, they always made sure they would have time for themselves together – no work, no partners, no nothing! Just them, and, of course, Gino's, the best restaurant in town. Well, if you're going to spend the highlight of your week with your favourite person, apart, of course from *him*, then you may as well make an event of it. She glanced at the door as the digits on her phone, lying on the table in front of her, counted their way to 14.00. And there Olivia was, regular as clockwork.

Squeals, hugs and kisses. Straight into chat about bosses, boyfriends and the latest costume dramas and tussles at the top of the Premier League. Then the waiter came with the menu.

“So, what are you having?” asked Jennifer. “What was it you had last time? The penne, wasn't it, all smothered in that lovely sauce?”

“No. I've decided to go on that new diet,” Olivia smiled. “The West Coast Raw Meat Diet, the one that's all the rage in Hollywood at the moment! And they serve it here now. Look, here it is on the menu. Eukre-, eukreas. Strange name.”

Jennifer's face could have soured fresh cream on the spot. “Are you serious? That's the first I've heard of it, and the last thing I'd dream of doing. Raw meat? Eeeewww!! Anyway, you don't need to diet. You're perfect.”

“That's what I thought as well, till I went on the scales last night. I've put on five pounds. I don't know how. Probably all these wild lunches with you,” she laughed.

“Oh, come on! You don't eat that much! Not enough to have to go on a diet. But raw meat? What's the idea behind that? Surely it's not safe, what with all the scares we've been having recently,” Jennifer retorted.

“No. It's fine. Nothing to worry about. They've developed this special treatment. I think it's patented, but what it does is to make the meat completely free of any kind of contaminant, just like if it was cooked.”

“But why not just cook it? I know, as a veggie, I'd never eat it, but surely you'd like to smell the cooked meat and enjoy the whole experience of cooking, serving and savouring?”

“Well, what they've found is that while cooking meat kills contaminants and makes it easier to digest, it also makes you hold on to fat more, even if you don't eat much fat on the meat. If you eat raw meat, treated with the secret ingredient, it forces the body to work harder to digest and in the process actually takes accumulated fat in the body to help the digestion. Or something. I've read all about it, anyway. It's perfectly safe.”

“Are you sure it's safe? And who are 'they'? I wouldn't trust anything if the 'theys' of this world were keeping back details of what exactly it is they've developed.”

“Oh, you worry too much,” Olivia grinned broadly to her friend. “I'll give it a try for a while and see how it goes. Here's the waiter now.”

The orders went through and the food came, penne for Jennifer and eukreas for Olivia. As

they tucked in, chatting away merrily about all and sundry, Jennifer kept an eye on Olivia's reaction to what she was eating. While she didn't want to cramp her friend's style, she retained a healthy scepticism about anything that was presented as a miracle cure for anything, and her own experiences with all kinds of fads and diets only served to reinforce it. She didn't notice anything about Olivia, except that she seemed to really enjoy what she was eating, but that was nothing special when it came to her best friend. After lunch, they ordered their usual coffees to top it off. and sat chatting, waiting for them to arrive.

"So it was good, was it," she asked, looking slightly askance at Olivia.

"Oh, come on, darling. It was fantastic. Why would you think anything different? OK, I know you don't eat animal, but don't let that colour your judgement. Pity, really. You don't know what you're missing. I mean, think of the most succulent joint you've ever eaten, dripping with juices, flavour and succulence. then multiply that ten times, and you'll have this. It's great. And I feel great." The glow in Olivia's eyes didn't lie.

Jennifer smiled back and decided to put her suspicions to one side and not let them spoil her day. Her cappuccino came along with Olivia's latte and they looked at each other in their time-honoured way as they raised the cups to their lips. One sip and Olivia put her cup down as if it had scalded her, a look of disgust on her face.

"What's the matter?" an alarmed Jennifer asked.

"I don't know. The coffee's awful. It's usually fantastic, but this is the worst I've ever had here. Must be a bad batch."

Jennifer suddenly felt a thunderclap in her mind, but suppressed it, letting out simply an expression of mild concern. "Oh, that's a pity. I'll call the waiter to get another."

"No, no. It doesn't matter. I've got to go now anyway. I've got a lot on this afternoon." She smiled reassuringly at Jennifer. "Same time next week, eh?"

"Natch! Same time, same place," Jennifer said. They kissed, and Olivia turned to go. Jennifer watched as she almost hurried out; very unusual for her. Then she looked at the latte, picked it up and took the slightest sip. Odd. It was perfect. But, well, she shouldn't worry herself. It was probably nothing. She sat sipping her own coffee, turning it all over in her mind. She would wait till she saw Olivia again next week.

Same time same place came round again, and Jennifer was in her usual seat, waiting for Olivia. In she came, in her usual ebullient, carefree way, but this time, there was a difference. She was sleeker, shinier, brighter. Something had changed.

"So, how have you been, Jen? Missing me?" She peered cheekily at her friend.

"Of course. I always do. Count the days, don't I?" Jennifer replied with more than an element of truth. Then she asked what had floated round her mind for all that time. "How's the diet going?"

Olivia sighed disingenuously. "Trust you to think of that straight away! As it happens, it's going really well. I've lost three pounds!"

"That's good! I'd never be able to lose that much." Her enthusiasm had a false ring to it.

"There you go. I told you this diet would work. I've been following it every day. You know, it's funny. the more I eat eukreas, the more I don't feel I need anything else, and the better I feel about myself. And what's more, it tastes better every time I eat it. It was all I ate yesterday."

"So, what have you stopped eating, out of interest?" Jennifer enquired.

"Oh, this and that. Mostly fattening stuff. Cream, cheese, even chocolate."

Jennifer's face said it all.

"Yes, I know, I know. Me without chocolate in the evening is like, is like a female mantis without her mate at mating time."

"Typical of you to choose that," Jennifer laughed.

The food arrived and they tucked in as usual. This time, though, Jennifer couldn't help noticing Olivia's heightened awareness of her food and her attention to its consumption. There was little of the usual banter in between and even during mouthfuls. Olivia had always had a cat-like manner; sleek, graceful, agile. Now that analogy seemed to grow, but in an altogether unexpected way. Olivia's jaws, her eyes, her head movements showed the traits, almost imperceptibly. If Jennifer hadn't known her for so long, she probably wouldn't have noticed.

With the table cleared, it was coffee time. Now was the moment Jennifer had run through her mind time and again since their last lunch together. She tried not to betray her anxiety, and seemed to be succeeding. Olivia sat contentedly, smiling serenely in her usual way. If she indeed were a cat, she would be licking her paws. Jennifer took the plunge.

"Latte? I'm all ready for a cappuccino," ventured Jennifer.

"Yeh, of course. Why-ever not?"

Jennifer heaved a hidden sigh. She hadn't changed, not least in that way.

"Actually, I won't have a latte."

The sigh was stopped in its tracks.

"I'll have a black Americano. Gotta watch those calories!"

The sigh was consummated, and normal chat was resumed. Jennifer almost forgot her worries about Olivia, at least for a while. Coffee drained, kisses were exchanged and they were on their way with the next week chalked into the schedule.

Next week came and went, but Olivia didn't show up. Jennifer had arrived on time as usual, without the cares of their previous meeting. After ten minutes, she checked her

messages. After fifteen minutes, she texted Olivia and ordered lunch for herself. After twenty, she called, but the ringing only resolved to her familiar tones on the voicemail. Jennifer was increasingly concerned, and all the doubts came flooding back. She looked round Gino's at the other diners and through the window into the busy street. Everything was normal. And yet, and yet...

Something was not quite right. She couldn't put her finger on it. It was almost as if she was in a dream and she was the only one who should be there, with everyone else interlopers in her world. She felt they were all looking at her, but they weren't. At least, not *looking* at her as such. They just seemed to be aware of her presence as being somehow different, and she felt it.

Then she realised. They were all eating the same thing – eukreas. She looked at the menu, something she hadn't done for a while, as she always ordered the same thing. And there it was. Almost everything on the menu was a variation of eukreas. She *was* in a dream. This couldn't be true. She let the menu fall from her sweating hands and tried to compose herself to deflect attention. Nobody was watching her; they were too busy with their lunch. Yet she still felt their attention on her, as someone out of place. She finished her lunch and gave her coffee a miss.

Out in the street, she still had the same impression. It was still a dream, yet not a dream. It was all so real, but it couldn't be. It was like so many of those alien and zombie movies she had watched clutching the edge of the duvet. Was it just her? People seemed perfectly normal, but just felt different, so different.

Her phone buzzed her a new message and startled her out of her desktop snooze. She blearily tapped the message icon. Since last week when she ate alone, things had seemed normal and she just put it down to anxiety at Olivia's non-appearance. But she hadn't heard from her since then. She had texted a few times, but then left it, certain that Olivia had a genuine excuse and would contact her in due course. And she had.

She sat upright and scanned the message: Sorry about last week. Phone was on the blink. At Gino's and you're not here. Come on, quick, or lunchtime will be all gone.

Jennifer grabbed her bag and glanced at her watch. Only five minutes late. She ran out and round the corner to Gino's. There was Olivia. she jumped up and gave Jennifer a big hug.

“Sorry about last week and all that. The phone was on the blink and I had so much to do. I had to get it replaced and it just all went by so quickly before I realised I hadn't contacted you. I hope you weren't alarmed.” A gleam was in her eye.

“No, not at all,” Jennifer dissembled somewhat awkwardly. “Well, I was a bit, you know. When you didn't arrive or answer me, I wondered what the matter was, but, hey, I knew deep down you were OK.”

“Yeh. You know, in a sense it's great you were worried. Shows I have a great friend. Anyway, onwards and upwards, eh? I lost another three pounds! I feel so good.” She certainly looked better than Jennifer had ever seen her look before. Uncannily so. In fact, the gap of two weeks since she had last seen her made the difference all the more stark;

her characteristic mannerisms, the slightly diffident manner, the twinkle in her eye, the flightiness – where were they? She had never seen her so self-assured, steely, almost crystalline, adamant – not robotic – just too perfect to be true.

“All this from eukreas?” asked Jennifer. “Surely it can’t replace everything you eat. When are you going to call it a day? You shouldn’t stay on it too long you know, like with all diets.”

“Oh, it’s all that I eat now. I don’t need anything else. Yeh, I know I shouldn’t stay on it for too long but it’s difficult to come off when you feel so good, I’ll come off it soon, don’t worry. Let’s eat now.”

Jennifer could no longer hide her unease. “Actually, I’ve been thinking about it a lot and I really think you should call it a day. Have something else today. Go on.”

Something snapped. It snapped just for a moment, but snap it did. Olivia’s face changed. A hint of a snarl, a raised lip, a glint of a canine – and it was gone. Her smile returned, too sweet, too shiny. “Hey, now look. I’ll stop in a couple of weeks. By then I’ll have reached my target weight, and I’m sure I’ll be ready for a nice big plate of pasta. As long as it’s only once a week.”

Lunch went on, but for Jennifer it was already over. Never in all their time together had Olivia’s face even hinted at any kind of animosity towards her. Exasperation, annoyance, disappointment, frustration even, but never a hint of the vitriolic milliseconds that had just passed by. Something had gone; and Jennifer felt that it would never be recovered.

Somehow, she managed to hold it together so that lunch passed seemingly as normal, but it was a sham. Whether Olivia truly felt this, or whether her normal cheery demeanour was genuine, Jennifer didn’t know. All she knew was that this lunch might well be the last. She hated the thought of cutting Olivia loose, but what else could she do? She had no expectation that Olivia would come off the diet. Clearly, it was doing wonders for her, but in some way, it was changing her as well. It was an addiction, and Jennifer was becoming convinced that from this addiction, there was no return. Olivia had her Americano again, and they kissed and parted, though to Jennifer it was hollow. She watched Olivia leave and hurried out herself, tears welling in her eyes. However, it was the other eyes that followed her out that she didn’t see.

Jennifer had spent possibly the worst week in her life. Her panic grew as lunch day approached. Olivia had been in touch a few times and clearly she expected Jennifer to be there as usual, but Jennifer had no idea what she would do. She was so stressed that she had to stay at home on the Tuesday. She lay awake all Monday night and on into the morning. A text came through with the usual streak of humour – see you tomorrow, same time, same place, don’t delay, just bring your lovely self! To Jennifer, it was unbearable; so normal, and yet so abnormal. What could she do? She lay in bed all day, and dropped off late in the evening.

She awoke with a start. The TV was still on, with the 24-hour news hitting midnight. Strange reports were coming in, reports of disturbances in various cities, deserted town centres, raids on deep freeze warehouses and slaughterhouses. Then she heard a commotion in the street outside; screams, shouts, cars screeching, feet running, a

cacophony of snarls, whelps, hoots and howls. She quickly flicked off the light switch and turned off the TV. The sounds grew closer; now they were almost outside her block. She dared not look out, but switched on the radio and slipped on her headphones. "The government has issued instructions not to go out. There are widespread disturbances in many cities and towns and the police are out trying to restore order. Please stay indoors and wait for further announcements."

She curled up again in bed while the cries retreated down the road and quiet returned, but always tinged and fringed with the rumour of distant trouble. Her thoughts strayed to Olivia, how she was, where she was, and whether she was safe. She glanced at her phone to see if she had sent her anything. There was nothing, but she dared not send anything to Olivia for fear the phone would sound and give away where she was. Her tortured mind slowly drifted away into precious oblivion.

Jennifer opened her eyes. Sun drifted through the gaps in the curtains. Her watch told her she was about to lose her job, so she hurriedly threw on some clothes, grabbed a sandwich and ran out of the door. She stopped in her tracks; the streets were deserted and for a moment she wondered what to do. She called work, then her boss, then her colleagues one by one, but there was no answer. Dare she go to work? Maybe the best thing was to stay at home, lock herself in and try to work out what to do. Then she thought of Olivia. Today was their usual meet-up day, but perhaps she would not be there. Jennifer worried about Olivia even more. Maybe she needed her help, but she still hadn't responded to any of her calls and texts.

Jennifer went back into the house and locked the door. She texted Olivia and then sat back on the sofa with the TV on to track the news. Same message on every channel: "The government has issued instructions not to go out. There are widespread disturbances in many cities and towns and the police are out trying to restore order. Please stay indoors and wait for further announcements." Same message; same newscaster, same mannerisms, same background, same everything...

Horror crept up on her; what the hell was going on? Her phone beeped; as it fell out of her hand, she saw Olivia on the screen. She scrambled to pick it up and see what she had to say: Hi darling! Yeh, I'll be there. Same time, same place! See yah!

Absolutely nothing wrong. Exactly what she would have expected. Yet, yet, she couldn't put her finger on it. It was wrong. But what? Should she go? Without another thought, she ran out and slammed the door. Into the car and to Gino's. The streets were still empty. She parked outside Gino's, and peered in the window. There she was, sitting at their usual table, and there were the other people she might have expected to see there at lunchtime. She hesitated; was it all right? At that moment, she caught Olivia's eye, and there came that smile of pure joy at seeing her. Olivia beckoned her to come in. There was no alternative but to do so.

Jennifer sat down opposite Olivia, her apprehension clearly visible. Olivia looked perfect, more perfect than she had ever seemed in the time Jennifer had known her. She laughed.

"Hey, you what's the problem? You look like you've seen a ghost! It's only me!"

"I'm OK. I'm just freaked out by all these things that are going on."

"You mean the riots and things? I know, it's worrying. But we're here now and everything's fine. Let's order. Penne for you as usual? I think I'll have something different today."

"What?" Jennifer said in astonishment. "You're off the diet?"

Olivia screwed up her nose and cocked her head back in mock astonishment. "I told you I'd come off it after a few weeks. Yeh. It's done what it's needed to do and now I'm ready for something different."

Jennifer relaxed. Her face lit up in joy. Olivia was back as she had always known her. Everything that had gone on over the last few weeks seemed to recede.

Suddenly Olivia's mood changed. She sat straight-faced and cold; a look Jennifer had never seen before. She froze to the spot.

"Yes, Jennifer. I'm having something different today. And so are they." The other diners sat impassively, or chatted with each other. "I'm sorry, really sorry, I thought long and hard about this, and this is the only answer. Something happened with the diet. It changed me, just like you thought it might. I couldn't eat anything else. I was scared but I couldn't tell you. And now I have no choice, just like the others here. I've been to the supermarkets, the big freeze depots, farms. I've tried everything, but nothing works. There's only one thing left to try."

Jennifer was shaking. "What do you mean? You can only eat raw meat?"

"Yes, or so I thought. I tried, believe me I tried, but it doesn't work. I haven't eaten for three days. I'm starving. I need food. That's why I called you here today. I'm so, so sorry, Jen." The tears flowed, not entirely crocodilian. But her next act might as well have been.

Half the diners leapt over their tables, as if in unison, falling upon their fellow diners. Teeth flashed and flesh ripped. Blood spurted, soaking the floor and mingling together. Olivia sank her teeth into Jennifer's neck and ripped through skin, vein, bone and flesh. Snarls and growls rose as she set about reducing the most beloved person in her life to little more than the waste on a slaughterhouse floor.

Jennifer had had little time to react before the assault, but strangely, she hadn't resisted. It all seemed clear to her now. The thoughts all came together in a flash, in a moment, as Olivia wept. What she had seen the last few days had told her one thing. The world was changed. It was no longer for her. She had had enough; but she would make sure that all was not lost. She offered herself to Olivia, her last act for her best friend. In this way, her life would not have been in vain, and they would always remain together. Olivia looked at her with desperation mixed with pity. Jennifer smiled, a pure smile, a smile of love, of acceptance, of friendship, of sacrifice. Her eyes closed and she stretched out her arms. At least she was helping her friend survive her raging hunger. And so, as Olivia feasted ravenously on her body, her head rolled away, the smile fixed, even in death.

Other heads followed suit, and soon Olivia and the others sat gasping, sated, drooling blood, veins afire with life and fervour, eyes burning. They got up and wandered off. Soon they would need more, and then more, and then more...