

Even What is Bitter Tastes Sweet by Bethany White

To lose a son is a tragedy even God himself could not abide in permanence. Man is made in His image, thus we cannot abide it either.

The woman wakes up inside her freezing house. Outside, the earth cracks under the July sun. The woman wanders over cool brown tile to the kitchen, where what's left of her husband's 5 AM batch of coffee waits for her. She pours it into a calcium-ringed mug. She lets the dogs out, the heat greeting her like an open oven. Her husband will shake his head over the thermostat when he gets home. She goes back inside and turns it down even further.

Sipping coffee, the woman takes inventory of the fridge. Half-and-half, a rock-hard lime. And of course, the casseroles. They come in big rectangles and small squares. Most are foil-covered, but a proud few boast plastic lids. They Tetris the fridge shelves in tectonic layers of red and orange and brown and yellow. The woman takes one out, the foil upturned from where her husband dutifully transferred two generous scoops into a plastic container for his work lunch.

They started bringing the casseroles 21 days ago. After the woman and her husband had sat numbly in hospital lobby chairs while a nurse told them their son was gone. That a not-even-drunk driver had taken their future away, just like that. At home, there were already two casseroles waiting on the porch.

The casserole train was organized by Linda Corcoran. She made lists for the local women of approved cream bases, crunchiest chips to crumble on top, and best cheeses for melting. If you weren't raised in this dusty North Texas town without a zip code to call its own, you might assume a casserole is a free for all. Quite the opposite. Every ingredient serves a purpose, every casserole builds toward a larger goal. Linda knows this intimately.

The woman knows, too, so she takes a careful bite of her casserole breakfast. It's a Tex-Mex calamity: Under-cooked onions, unseasoned ground beef, and hard taco shells on top that cut the woman's mouth. On her fifth bloody bite, something hard sends a jolt of recognition through her fillings. She spits it out: A molar, not hers. Finally, she thinks. She sifts through the rest of the casserole as she reheats and eats, pulling out canines, incisors, and more molars from between greasy layers of cheese. She washes them carefully. She's missing a few incisors—her husband will bring those home later, she guesses.

Until then, she collects the incomplete smile in her hand. It rattles softly on the way to her son's room. It's even colder in here. On the twin bed, the woman carefully arranges the teeth, referencing her phone occasionally for the correct order. After 20 minutes, she stands back to check her progress.

On top of the navy blue comforter are the findings from casseroles one through nine. Demi Travianni could only spare a few toes, so others in the casserole train had to be tapped to make up the difference. The result is that the feet on the bed are a bit mismatched. Still, the woman knows it could be much worse. Like the whole fiasco with the Hillsmith boy's arms.

The right foot is joined by a calf with a cross tattoo, a strong knee, a pale thigh, and a bony hip. The other leg is nearly done, the woman suspects she'll find what she needs in the Thanksgiving-themed casserole from Jenna...what's her last name? The woman can never remember. Big-boned hands rest isolated on the bed, waiting for arms. Maybe the tuna fish casserole from Mrs. Norris will be a help there.

The woman hopes her husband comes home early with the rest of the teeth. Or that he never comes home. If he never comes home, she has given herself permission to not let the dogs back in. She will pour gasoline, light a match, and drive away while the house burns, the almost-body with it. She will go somewhere without Bibles in the bedside tables, somewhere she

is not a mother or a bombed-out frame where a mother used to be.

But this is just the grief talking. Linda told the woman it would be this way when she showed up at the door 20 days ago, chicken noodle casserole in hand. Linda told her they were all there for her, all the women in the town. It takes a village to raise a child, but only the village women to raise a child from the grave. On Linda's casserole rested a card with white lilies watercolored on the outside. Inside, in Linda's smudged cursive, a message: "Proverbs 27:7 — One who is full loathes honey from the comb, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet." The woman had read it and sagged with relief as she realized it was not anger clawing up from her chest out of her throat, but hunger.

She is still hungry as she looks at this thing on the bed that is not yet her son. It's slow going, but patience is the key to creation. We cannot assume ourselves God, capable of a seven-day turnaround. It's worth the wait because sons are the future. Not just the woman's future, or the town's, but the whole country's. We need our boys, Linda had said firmly. Confirming what the woman always suspected, that her son was never just hers to begin with.

The dogs bark outside, and the woman decides she can't wait for her husband. She goes to the bathroom and brushes coffee from her teeth. Eating the rest of the casseroles will be hard after this, but not impossible. The woman uses her fingers to take what her son needs. At least this part of him will be all hers. And really, is there anything sweeter than a boy with his mother's smile?