

Hot Lunch

by James Quigley

I'm digging through a box that I haven't looked through since I took it out of my father's attic in 1998. It's filled with stuff from my first year of Junior High School. My yearbook, old drawings, a few comic books, and a video tape with the words "HOT LUNCH" scribbled in my adolescent handwriting.

I pull the little TV-VCR combo I got at the flea market out from under the crumpled suit in my closet, plug it in and stick in the tape. The tracking is all off, the tape is crackling, and although the audio is pretty muffled, the image on the screen is fairly clear.

It was my favorite show when I was 12-years old; it's all coming back to me once the theme song kicks in. Sounds a bit like Kenny Loggins, kind of inspirational almost.

"HOT LUNCH!
You can't make the cut if you can't make the grade!
HOT LUNCH - HOT LUNCH!
You gotta keep on tryin'. Yeah, don't be afraid!
HOT LUNCH- HOT LUNCH!
It's doesn't always matter if you can't pass the test!
Sometimes it's just a matter of trying your best!
Get up and do it - now get up and go!
This is your life, you're the star of the show!
Yeah, Yeah... it's HOT LUNCH- HOT LUNCH!
MY-MY- MY- MY-MY HOT LUNCH!"

"Episode 31: BRIAN POPE"

I always hated returning to school from any vacation. Christmas 1986 was cold and wet, and I had spent most of it watching Monty Python videos and reading through a stack of old Powerman and Iron Fist comics that I scored at the flea market last summer. My first day back was in a panic, I'd done none of my homework over the break and even worse, Brian Pope was dead and he was supposed to give me 5 bucks to laminate something for him.

All the kids knew he'd been sick but we didn't know he was going to die. Mr. Browning told us that his mother couldn't wake him up that morning. I sat behind him in home room since the beginning of 7th grade. The first day I met the kid I thought he was Chinese because his cheeks and forehead were so fat it forced his eyes to narrow into slits. His hair was jet-black and shiny, and many of my mornings were spent staring at the psoriatic snow-fall along the terrain of his shoulders.

The principal came on over the intercom and read the announcements. We all stood up for the Pledge of Allegiance and then we were told to sit in silence and reflect on the passing of our fellow student, Brian Pope. There wasn't much to miss about him I thought, but I kept thinking about the day I got stuck spending the whole day with him.

Brian seemed to carry his whole existence in one large WWF duffel bag that never left his side. It was mostly black at one time but over the course of its short junior high life-span the bag had faded into a dusty grey mess that tore wide open in home room on the day before

Christmas vacation after Duke Rockwell made the last of his daily secret jack-knife cuts in one of its swollen sides.

Everyone in the room saw it happen when the bell rang and Brian slung the massive thing over his shoulder. It sounded like a flock of birds suddenly flapping away from a predator. Brian flew forward and fell to one knee as the heavy innards of his giant bag projected from behind him in a wake of floppy disks, pens, textbooks, action figures, and a Penthouse magazine that I don't think anyone else noticed. Most of the other students giggled and made their way out of the door avoiding Mr. Browning, who stood up from his desk and commanded Brian to clean up the mess.

"I can't find my inhaler!" Brian's usual pale face was like a red melon and he looked like he was going to cry.

I was the last in line and Mr. Browning stopped me before I could get out the door.

"Quigley, help Pope find that thing."

I turned around and crouched down at the spot where Brian was sifting through the three months worth of scholastic vomit he obviously never cleaned from his bag. I looked back at Mr. Browning's annoyed glare and with an audible sigh sat down Indian-style lazily helping Brian to make loose piles of the bag's former contents.

"Where are you going to put all this stuff? In your locker?"

Brian looked at me, "I don't know, I don't even know where my locker is."

Before that moment I'd never said a word to him or heard him speak. His voice was so small, it squeaked out of his little shiny red mouth in a slight spray of soft spittle that landed on his bottom lip. I could see why Duke always called him ass-face, which was mean but also true.

"What color is your inhaler?" I wanted to leave. I hadn't done much to help clean the mess and I realized that for the past few minutes I had been doing nothing but twisting a candy wrapper between my fingers.

"It's orange and metallic," he replied.

Brian almost seemed like he'd forgotten about the inhaler. There was a raw faint whistle pouring from one nostril as he stacked his floppy disks. The redness of his face had reduced and only a few pink capillaries glowed under his plump white cheeks. He seemed at ease. Mr. Browning had left the room and at some point the old janitor tossed a couple black trash bags onto one of the desks. I noticed, but I imagined that Brian didn't. He

seemed happy recollecting the debris on the floor. He was humming to himself while he finished gathering and organizing what was left of the mess.

I stood up. "I kind of need to get to class."

Really, it didn't matter if I was late. My first period class was a study hall and I went to the Library every Monday and Wednesday during that time to work in the periodicals room, where I secretly abused my access to the laminating and photocopy machines.

Brian didn't look up from his handful of Ghostbusters cards. "Yea but you work in the library on Mondays right?"

He got me. "Oh yea, today is Monday. Yea, I forgot. I probably should go anyway though."

I didn't want to hang around Brian any longer than I had to. Fifteen minutes had somehow already gone by and I wanted to wash my hands of the tangy stench of his old paper bag lunches and pencil shavings.

Brian leaned forward and pulled some of the piles toward him.

"I work in the library too. Can you give me those trash bags?"

He must have seen the janitor come in. I tossed the bags in front of him and he shifted onto his knees.

"Can you hold open the bag while I put this stuff in it?" Brian was smiling, "its going to be heavy, we should double-bag it."

I didn't care why he had taken so much time to organize the mess only to destroy his work by stuffing everything including his tattered duffle bag into another bag. In under a minute he had deconstructed the piles and was standing there with the swollen trash bag over his shoulder.

"We can go to the library together," he said.

"What about your inhaler?"

"Oh yea, I think I actually left it at home." Brian wiped his nose, "Hey James, out of all the demons in the Monster Manual, which one is your favorite?"

"I don't know, I guess the Obyriths. Why?"

Brian smiled at me, "just wonder-----"

The VCR eats the damn tape. I pull it out. It's not hard to splice it back together but there's a pretty good chunk missing. I put the tape back in.

----- on a pile of band uniforms. The incantation seemed to be working. The band room echoed with the calls of feral cats and the soft sizzling of the dim fluorescent lights that shifted into a green swampy spectrum and cast a pale spotlight on the steaming humanoid standing before them.

"What the fuck?" Adam gurgled.

Mike's voice quivered from behind a stack of folding chairs. "Where did he come from?"

"I don't know," I replied. "There's actually supposed to be an army of demons or something."

Mike crawled out from behind the chairs and slowly crept back toward us with his back along the wall. "That's Brian fucking Pope!"

Brian stood there in a trance naked and oozing. His mouth was a gaping mess of peanut butter dribbling down from a pair of sagging blue cheeks. Below his chin a massive nest of brown hornets pulsed within his chest. His arms draped by his sides and in place of his hands two bloody feline heads generated tortured cries.

"He's going to kill us," Adam mumbled.

I made my way towards Pope. I wasn't scared, I remembered the tiny devil I invoked and trapped in a 2-liter bottle of Mountain Dew on the dresser in my bedroom. "No he won't, he can't move out from within the circle."

Everything was in its place. Adam and Mike didn't know what I knew. In order for the spell to work, they had to remain ignorant of the extent of their participation. I was the sole invoker of Brian Pope and although the obese infernal mutant was hungry for human flesh, he wouldn't be leaving the circle unless I commanded him to.

I moved closer to Brian. "Trust me, so far so good right? Look, I'm standing right in front of him, I don't even think he's awake."

They cautiously drew closer and we each took our place standing on the three points of a triangle outside the circle. I unzipped my backpack and we each took out small freshly painted neon-green pipe bombs that I had packed with rooster spurs and pig teeth.

I checked my watch. "After we do this we've got to get to the cafeteria before the bell rings."

"What are we doing with these?" Mike asked.

"You're going to place the bomb at your feet, and when I tell you to, push the button on the timer, and just run away."

Mike and Adam just stared at me.

"Come on guys, I can't do this by myself. I've gotten us this far, right?" I was fake-crying. "Just do it, we don't have any more time."

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "What happens if we don't do this?"

"Jesus, Mike! If we don't do this before the bell rings the circle isn't going to hold Brian anymore and he's going to eat us. Hurry up, you don't have a choice!"

They both put the bombs at their feet.

"On the count of three we all have to push the buttons on the timers at the same time."

This was it. We'd come to the beginning of the end. The past few weeks spent learning the rituals and gathering everything we needed was about to pay off. No more quizzes, no more floor hockey injuries, no more rejection from Linda, no more warm coffee milks, no more anything and especially no more Duke Rockwell.

"One- two- three."

Adam and Mike scurried out of the room, the timer said I had 33 seconds.

I reached into my backpack and took out my brother's .45. The final incantation needed to be performed. I ran to the edge of the door to ready myself for a quick escape.

"Brian Pope, turn and face me!" He spun in the circle and let out a groan. This was it.

“BAEL! Here kitty kitty kitty-thing.
Damned flea-bitten scab-eater, wasted spurious king.
Wart-ridden dark dweller!
Urinary amphibious pestering beast!
Spawned of royal incest to command the true East.
A feast awaits you, gather your hordes.
I offer Brian Pope’s soul to you and your lords!
I give to you the second death of this resurrected
beast!”

I centered my aim at Brian’s heart within the beating hornet’s nest. I had ten seconds until I needed to make the shot. He was staring at me. I couldn’t feel guilty. This is what he would have wanted too. Everything was going to change. It had to.

The timer had counted down to the last ten seconds. I wasn’t sure if this was going to work but I was in too deep to get out. I watched those digital numbers pulse down and on :01 I took my shot.

There’s nothing worse than a walk down memory lane where along the way the sense of innocent nostalgia that you’re supposed to experience is replaced by those same damn awful feelings that you’ve simply had all along. I’m here for nothing and I realize this, but this has always been what I call my only realization. It will be the only thought in my head while I die my first death. There is no point to get to. Just a void, an endless drop, and while I’m falling (failing), I will feel empty space sliding over my skin, and I will hear the echoes of plunks splashing below me and they’re eternal familiar sounds that I’ve always recognized.

The sound of a deep pool, dirty water enveloping the dimensions of an object that I can sense only through a speeding chill spreads out from my heart into my ribs and exhales through the clogged pores of the skin on my chest. I will discover that I’m simply and only an object when my trajectory slows and the weight of the space around my form twists my limbs into an impossible knot. There’s the place where I am, caught falling (failing), where I’ve kept failing just like Brian Pope, catching myself in that big pulsing Brown Hell Hole.

I don’t need to watch this anymore, I know how it’s going to end. . .

FOOD FIGHT!

I shoot Brian Pope in the chest just as the pipe bombs explode. I’m disintegrated in a wave of hornets, teeth and bone fragments, hair, peanut butter, claws, horns, antlers, piss, snot, warts, entrails, and blood. A Putrid pizza splatter. Hamburger and hot dog doomsday. Armies of skinned toads scream in battle. Cosmic crustaceans crush cafeteria trays in their claws. This Salisbury steak slaughterhouse is alive.

On the backs of winged fried chicken legs the blood golems soar along clutching the scalps of their scholastic sacrifices. Red ribs crack up through the floorboards and block every exit. Rouge waves of mucous wash the ceiling. A phalanx of goblin arses sprays an arc of putrescent living steam snakes that carve sigils in every draining sinus. In the center of a smoldering Phoenix nest a she-wolf wet nurse drizzles her abysmal black syrup into the dead eye of a stillborn fetal cyclops floating in a toilet. The cheerleaders are suffocated by porcine scrotum skins. A new Zodiac is born where the math club is pickled and floating in a constellation within the starry void of the infinite guts of a sleeping albino mastodon.

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Wild severed woodchuck hands release themselves from the ammo-belt of a centaurian axeman, who commands them to telekinetically crucify the lunch ladies with hot pink unicorn horns. Nuclear Winter ice-worms writhe beneath a Toxic Shaman’s polar bear carriage headdress as he dances and shakes the crystal Death Rattle of the Winter Witches. A cabal of telepathic Jizz Wizards invokes a cum elemental from within the gurgling rancid belly of Brandy Coon. A naked indigo swan-headed hydra freshly boiled in hot grease hisses a hymn to the Crooked Serpent. Negative rainbow trolls dance in the pale skins of the soccer team. Green lightning cracks and the paralyzed offspring of half-breed hungans gobbles up the sweet and sour afterbirth of the newborn shivering Son of the Morning.

The school bell rings and in the white heat glow of two rows of six billion black candles, twin lycanthropic homunculi roll a spasming cocoon along a coyote-skin catwalk crushing spoiled milk cartons in their wake. Behind the soda machine a venereal dwarf hirsute inseminates the throat of a toothless jester fettered by slimy intestinal chains to the three prolapsed rectums of Cerebus. Fudge pudding drapes the walls while the Great Vomit King surveys the carnage from atop his undead veal calf mount.

The massacre ends when the gavage-fed Lying Septic Spirit escapes his restraints in a paroxysmal panic and bellows a bile-laced eructation bigger than Jupiter’s thunder, splitting a fissure in the invisible umbral skin of our known plane that will slowly replace our whole universe inside-out from this day on.

©2008 James Quigley is www.Gunsho.com. Somewhere between nursing on goat’s milk as a baby and his teenage summers spent sifting through flea market arcana, James began to find fascination in the strange and magical vastness of the marginal fringe. A regard for the toxic forces that transform humans into monsters shaped his early drawings and set him on a path into a surreal artistic thicket of beasts, demons, and mutants. In 2006 James began work on a modern interpretation of the 72 Demons of the occult text known as The Goetia. Each demon is the subject of a screen-printed art print. James has lent his illustration skills to the likes of Tokion magazine, COMPLEX magazine, Dose Magazine, Heroin Skateboards, és Shoes, Guitar Hero II video game, and a multitude of record labels and bands including Lovepump United records, Corleone Records, Parts Unknown records, AIDS Wolf, Neptune, Landed, Genghis Tron, Horse the Band, and others.