

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

PEPPER
PROBLEMS



HARTLEY STEVENS

Pepper Problems

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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Published in the United States of America

By Big Toe, Writes, LLC.

Cover & Website www.HartleyStevens.com

design by Sharon Julien

www.sjulien.com

Editing, provided by Graeme Hague

Polgarus Studio

www.polgarusstudio.com

Original songs by Douglas Haines

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A Living-In-The-Country Short Tale

By

Hartley Stevens

For nearly nine years, beginning at age twenty-two, I worked for a world-renowned fitness center. The club is not only cutting edge for its advanced use of machines and systems, but for its business acumen as well. I learned virtually everything I know about business from people I met or worked with at Gainesville Health & Fitness Center. It was also the perfect place for a young man to grow friendships for life. I never belonged to a Frat on campus, never really made deep lasting friendships with the people I played college football with or even in the Army. But the friends I made at GHFC remain a tight knot of hearty souls to this day. They are my true fraternity.

Mac is a friend I made early on. He was probably ten years older than me and had a deep love for the wayward flower, the devil's lettuce. He also grew all manner of other plants and herbs and was constantly bringing in samples to the staff. I was never a big fan of the mary jane, but I loved the free produce.

Mac taught water aerobics, see scenes from Cocoon, the movie. He was hip, long on patience and never had a harsh word or evil intent.

One day, Mac brought me a bag of Habanera Peppers he'd grown in his garden of evil. He knew I loved the hot stuff and was willing to sample any fruit or vegetable he brought in.

“Listen man, these bitches are hot as Satan’s nut sack. Use caution man, the burn comes on a delayed detonator. Also, you get twice the price when you visit Johnny the next day.”

He always talked like that, a true poet even in everyday conversation. I tried to keep up.

“Don’t you worry about me and the heat, you degenerate hippy, I’ll eat the whole damn bag standing right here. Besides, I like the backend fire, makes me feel rocket-propelled.”

He snickered while tightening his life vest. He gave me a fist bump. “Warning label and all, little grasshopper. We’ve played in the same pond, but just so you know, these peppers were grown in Hades topsoil. If you munch too much, you might just need somebody to spray you down with a fire extinguisher in the anus region.”

I condescended, “Stick to what you know, long-hair. Grow what you know and leave the eating of fire to the experts. My organs are made of asbestos-covered lava, bring what’cha got.”

I shared an apartment with my eternal best friend and roommate at the time, Andy. This particular evening he was visiting a female acquaintance of some intriguing variety.

After the long day's work, I walked across the street to our apartment, showered off the sweat and grime of working in a fitness center, and decided on my evening meal.

There were oh so many options for the hearty bachelor. Pizza delivery, yeah, but of course not every night. Last weekend's Thai or Chinese leftovers, they didn't smell quite right. The old Subway standby? No, better to wait for late night weekends. I opened the doors of the barren cupboards.

Smiling back at me was Charley Tuna. Not the little useless can, but the king-sized half-pint of healthy fish with glasses. I smiled, 'Thank you, Charlie'. 'Tuna with good taste, no, I wanted tuna that taste good'.

We had a TV, but we didn't have cable or any other service. We had exactly three VCR tapes which we played over and over and over and over. I can still recite virtually every word of those particular movies. We had Top Gun, Tombstone, and a gift from Andy's mom, The Graduate. Shirt bare on top, droopy cotton athletic shorts on bottom, I felt this was more of a Tombstone kind of night. I plugged it in and turned up the volume.

I floated through the freedom of my apartment living room, no roommate tonight, no date, no one waiting for me at the watering hole. Just me, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday and some tuna with habanera peppers. Fun times.

With no cutting board and a single dull knife, I went to work slicing and dicing the homegrown habaneras. Thank goodness there wasn't book face or flipper or any other social media at the time or I'm sure I'd have broadcast the entire affair for the eternity of watchers to feast upon.

As it was, I danced around the kitchen and living room area with total abandon. As I cut the bright orange skins, I thought to call the grower. Back in that day, we had a phone on the wall.

Ring, ring.

“Macalister, by-god, The Dali Anathema of uninhibited sexual, slash, spiritual growth at your service.”

I’d had a few beers. “Listen up, you hippy freak, I’m cutting up way too many of your sissy-assed peppers. I’m gonna dump them in a bowl of tuna fish, add some pepper and salt, then I’m gonna sit down and inhale it with some Doritos. I’ll throw in some of those leafy herbs for spice.”

He said, “You remember that shaker I gave you a few weeks back? Shake that shit all over your fish and bread man.”

“What’s in the shaker?”

“Rainbows.”

“No thanks, but *gracias* and *merci*. I just wanted you to know I’m crunching your peppers.”

“If you’re not careful *me amigo*, you might just be asking for mercy.”

I wasn’t careful at all. I sliced and sang, I watched Wyatt be cautious, yet stern. I heard Doc with his withered lungs be poetic, yet acidic. Go Doc, Go.

I must admit, the habaneras were hotter than expected. And, of course, I'd used way too many. I needed generous amounts of beer to quell the mouth fire. This led to frequent trips to the toilet to drain the main vein.

By halfway through the movie, Wyatt and Doc were getting down to business—as was a building heat in my nether regions. I maneuvered and scratched as men will do. This seemed to only aggravate the heat.

It occurred to me that perhaps I should have washed my hands more thoroughly before making water. With every second, the fire became hotter down below.

I paused the movie and hustled to the bathroom where I washed my hands like a surgeon. The heat was getting loud. I shucked my gym shorts and splashed water over the lip of the sink onto the dangling uglies. Initially there was some relief. I splashed more water and rubbed the elixir around everything 'crotch'.

That lasted about two minutes. Evidently, this shit was water-activated. Hot sulfuric acid of lava raining down hell's front door caught lit. Holly shit, my *man tackle* was on *fire*!

Into the shower with only cold water blasting, I used a bar of soap like I hated the frank and beans. Redness and swelling ensued, I rubbed harder. I dumped the whole bottle of shampoo down there and kneaded and massaged. Hotter, burning, we were standing on Satan's doorstep while he pissed back diesel-infused napalm.

Out of the shower, I avoided the towel. I straddle-crab-walked back into the living room, raining down beads of water on the carpeted floor. I didn't care, couldn't care less. I grabbed an electric floor fan and hauled it into the living room and sparked it up. I lay my legs, spread wide, on the coffee table and set the fan just so. The wind was blowing at full volume straight into my crotch. This calmed the flames—for a moment. But when the water droplets evaporated, the heat began to boil again.

I repeated the shower, scrub and fan scenario, three times. Despite my efforts, I lay on the floor sweating profusely.

At that moment—at that *very* moment—groping and smooching his date, my roommate burst through the door. They'd had drinks.

I didn't move, didn't cover up, couldn't care less. When he came up for air, he surveyed the room. Doc and Wyatt were cleaning up the last of the Cowboys.

Andy peeked over the couch and burst into laughter as did his date. When he regained his breath, he said, "What's up man?" Much more laughter.

Tears streaming, sweat pouring, I said, "I burned my dick and balls with those damn peppers Mac gave me. If this shit doesn't calm down right quick, I'm gonna need some medical attention."

His date was a veterinary student at the university. Neither tried to heel their abhorrent laughter. She said, "You want me to take a look?"

"You're already taking a damn look. I need some relief!"

Hartley Stevens Remedy For Burning Balls and Wiener: Blend one medium cucumber with ice and baking powder add a pinch of salt. Slather, swollen reddened area. Sit in front of fan, grit teeth and wait the bitch heat out.

The End

Before You Go...

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