

A DIFFERENT MENU

FADE IN:

INT.BEDROOM - MORNING

CURTIS, a thin ten year old boy with a crewcut, is at a computer, surfing the Internet. He studies images with wide eyes. Suddenly, FOOTSTEPS can be heard. He quickly shuts off the screen, as the door opens. HELEN, a blonde woman of medium height, in her early thirties, looks in.

HELEN

Breakfast is ready, honey. We're all waiting for you.

(beat)

You spend too much time on that computer.

CURTIS

Aw, Mom, it's school holidays. I have to keep learning stuff, don't I? Besides, it's my birthday.

He walks over to Helen, a grin on his face.

HELEN

(softening)

Yes, Curtis, it is. But there's some things on that Internet that should be kept secret.

CURTIS

(taking her arm)

Mom, where's the fun in that? Come on, then. Let's eat.

INT.KITCHEN/FAMILY ROOM - MORNING

Downstairs, the table is set for breakfast. GRANDPA JACK, a tall, lean man in his sixties, sits with two other children: EVE, a twelve year old girl, and TIMMY, an eight year old boy. They all look up as Curtis and Helen enter.

GRANDPA JACK/EVE/TIMMY

Happy birthday!

CURTIS

Hey, thanks guys.

He sits at the table next to Grandpa Jack. Helen organises the food in the kitchen.

GRANDPA JACK

I got a real big surprise for you today, Curtie.

CURTIS

Wow! What is it, Grandpa? Please tell me.

GRANDPA JACK

Now, son, I think we better wait till after we eat. Your mother might get a bit...

TIMMY

(chuckling)

Yeah, Mom's like that.

EVE

Hush, Timmy. Mind your manners. You need some help, Momma?

HELEN

(bringing plates to table)

No, honey, I'm fine. Here you go birthday boy...and here's yours, Dad.

She puts the food down. Grandpa Jack and Curtis fall silent as they eye the plates, which have a mixture of baked meat and vegetables on them. Eve and Timmy stare ravenously, waiting impatiently for their meals. Helen brings three more plates and sits down.

GRANDPA JACK

Is that leftover rat from last night?

TIMMY

No, I think it's...wow, looks like a sparrow. A big one too!

EVE

(squeals with delight)

A bird? Oh, Momma, you're the best!

HELEN

Well, it is Curtis's birthday. It's important to have a luxury meal every now and then. I saved that sparrow for today.

Grandpa Jack picks at his food reluctantly. Curtis watches him then begins to slowly eat, as the old man nods to him.

HELEN

(getting up again)

Oh, I almost forgot. Another treat.

She goes to the fridge and brings out a jug of water, and a single shrunken orange. Helen cuts it in half and squeezes a trickle of juice into the jug. Timmy and Eve sigh.

GRANDPA JACK

Where did you scavenge that pathetic orange from? No, let me guess...you walked out to one of those slum farms. Helen, they use all kinds of weird fertilizer to grow what they pass as fruit.

HELEN

It's a treat for the children.

CURTIS

I read about that on the 'Net. They...

HELEN

Be quiet please. Eat.

EVE

Grandpa Jack, why is fruit so hard to grow, but we have lots of vegies?

TIMMY

Well, der! Everyone knows why.

GRANDPA JACK

Now, Timmy, behave. Ok, Evie, basically, because of the climate change, different parts of the world, including here, are cooler. So the fruit which we used to grow is now, well, tougher to grow.

CURTIS

Whereas the vegetables, like ours out on the balcony, flourish in all types of conditions.

GRANDPA JACK

Good lad, Curtie! But in the meantime, we are still eating damn birds with our peas and beans!

TIMMY  
(grinning)  
I never complain. I love this food.

Grandpa Jack shakes his head. Curtis eats a mouthful but his heart is not in it. The other three tuck in eagerly.

When they finish, Helen washes up in the kitchen. Timmy and Eve watch TV in one corner of the room. Grandpa Jack and Curtis stay at the table.

CURTIS  
Grandpa Jack?

GRANDPA JACK  
Yes, Curtie?

CURTIS  
What's a fish?

Helen looks up from the sink, concern on her face. Timmy and Eve watch TV, oblivious. Grandpa Jack glances defiantly at his daughter.

GRANDPA JACK  
A fish? Well, that was a creature that lived in water. Some in rivers and lakes, some in the ocean. Why do you ask?

CURTIS  
I was reading about them.  
(glances warily at Helen)  
On the Internet.

HELEN  
I told you to stay off it. You'll only find trouble there. I thought those history websites were monitored.

CURTIS  
(shrugs)  
They are. But Stevie next door, he showed me how to...

HELEN  
I should have known. That boy is bad news. Him and his no good father. Always trying to upset things.

GRANDPA JACK

(chuckling)

Aah, the inquisitiveness of youth. You're just like me when I was your age, Curtie boy. Always wanting to learn. That's how the world gets changed, you know.

HELEN

It isn't funny, Dad. Why do we need to change? What's wrong with our lives? We're happy, aren't we?

Grandpa Jack's eyes tighten and he pounds the table with a fist. Timmy and Eve look up from the TV, startled. Even Curtis jumps.

GRANDPA JACK

Happy? How can you be happy? Eating rats and birds? Drinking weak orange juice?

HELEN

Keep it down. This isn't the time or place for arguments.

GRANDPA JACK

No, dammit, girl, I'm sick of tiptoeing around this subject. I seen how the world got to this stage and it was complacency that did it. And a plain pigheadedness to accept reality.

HELEN

Well this is our reality, so deal with it. Stop being a stubborn old fool, living in the past.

GRANDPA JACK

Well, it just might be better than trying to get by in this present. This ain't living.

(he stands up)

Come on, Curtie. Let's go and get your birthday surprise.

HELEN

Where are you dragging him off to? Filling his head with foolish notions.

GRANDPA JACK

I'm taking him to a cow auction.

(beat)

Gonna put in a bid.

CURTIS

Wow, that's awesome! A real cow.

Real meat.

HELEN

You're a fool, Jack Ferguson. A damn fool. You need a whole lot of money for that.

GRANDPA JACK

I got my life savings. I've decided to use it to give these kids some proper food.

HELEN

Aren't you listening to me? How can you outbid the rich people? They always get the best food. We can't compete.

GRANDPA JACK

(shaking his head)

I'm going to an auction where the rich ones ain't allowed.

HELEN

You still need a pass to get in one of them. It takes weeks to even line up for a pass.

GRANDPA JACK

A friend of mine got me one. He owed me a favour.

HELEN

This the same friend who offered you a partnership in the dog farm? The one where the dogs ate each other?

GRANDPA JACK

It's my business, my money and Curtie's birthday! I'll do what I please!

EVE

You think you can get us some meat, Grandpa? I love my sparrow and juice but...

TIMMY

You ever eat meat, Grandpa?

GRANDPA JACK

What? Why sure I did! Me and my daddy used to go hunting when I was a boy.

EVE

Hunting for cows?

GRANDPA JACK

No, no. For deer. In the woods.

TIMMY

What's a deer, Grandpa?

GRANDPA JACK

Never mind, Timmy. Some other time. Come on, Curtie, let's get moving.

He and Curtis walk to the door of the apartment.

HELEN

You take care of my boy, Dad. None of your foolishness.

CURTIS

Aw, Mom, I'll be fine. Me and Grandpa know this city like the back of our hands.

HELEN

That's what I'm afraid of.

Grandpa Jack and Curtis leave. Helen finishes the washing up, muttering to herself.

EXT.CITY STREETS - DAY

Grandpa Jack and Curtis emerge from their building, onto a busy street.

SUPER: PHOENIX, ARIZONA      MAY 2040

The buildings and streets are normal looking(as in 2009 standards), but there are no cars. The streets are filled with pedestrians, bicycles, horses and carts. The taller buildings and apartment blocks are covered in vines and growing vegetables, balconies overflowing. The weather is quite cool, the heat gone from this former desert furnace.

CURTIS

Mom means well, Grandpa.

GRANDPA JACK

I know, son, I know. But I've had enough. It's time you kids learned more about how we used to live.

CURTIS

I've found out some stuff off the 'Net. But tell me again what happened. You know, years ago, in your day.

GRANDPA JACK

Well, Curtie, it was a number of things that built up gradually. Each one on it's own wasn't too bad. But when it all combined and hit at once, well, that was the final straw. Like a stack of dominoes toppling. And we were powerless to stop it. Hey, there's the Big Game!

He points to a giant TV screen on the side of a building. a crowd of people have stopped to watch. The images show a large cage containing several men with knives, and an enraged lion.

CURTIS

Wow. Those guys are the bravest in the world.

GRANDPA JACK

(nodding)

Yes sir. Desperation and hunger creates their courage. Even though they know they have a one in five chance of dying, they still risk it.

On the screen, the men work as a team, attacking the lion from different angles. A man has his throat ripped out, but the others manage to kill the beast. The survivors high five each other and start carving up the carcass.

CURTIS

And now their families have meat for a few days.

GRANDPA JACK

Yes. And the dead man's family will receive the choicest cuts, in his honour. He didn't die in vain.

They continue walking along the crowded street.

CURTIS

You never told me about the fish, Grandpa!

GRANDPA JACK

Didn't I? Well, your mother started her moaning didn't she? The fish? They was a part of the decline too.  
(beat)

Most of the animals were wiped out by man. Too much development and misuse of the farming areas. Entire species simply disappeared.

CURTIS

(softly)

And the fish, Grandpa?

GRANDPA JACK

Gone. All gone.

CURTIS

But you saw them? When you were a boy?

GRANDPA JACK

Of course! We'd catch them. With a long pole and fishing line and bait. Catch them and cook them up.

CURTIS

I saw pictures of them on the 'Net. I would've liked to have seen a real one. No matter how small.

GRANDPA JACK

You know what, Curtie? I might be able to help you there. There's one in the museum, or so the story goes.

CURTIS

There is? A live one?

GRANDPA JACK

Well, yeah, I think so. Another friend of mine works there. And he told me once, there's a rumour about a basement underneath the museum.

(beat)

A secret basement filled with all kinds of animals.

CURTIS

(excitedly)

Do you think your friend would let us search for it?

GRANDPA JACK

You never can tell, Curtie. But, hey, look, let's go bid for that cow first, ok?

EXT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

The cow auction is held in a quiet side street, inside a large warehouse. Security guards man the door, checking the passes required. Grandpa Jack and Curtis wait in line.

GRANDPA JACK

I got a good feeling about this, Curtie. Tonight you gonna be eating in style.

CURTIS

(seriously)

Grandpa, this is the best birthday ever. No matter what happens.

GRANDPA JACK

And it's gonna get better, son.

(gives pass to guard)

There you go, good sir. Come on, Curtie. Let's go get us some beef!

INT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

The warehouse is packed with people, a large, roped off section in the middle. The animals up for auction are led in through a covered tunnel. More security guards with guns circulate in the crowd. Grandpa Jack and Curtis pick their way to a spot close to the rope. The mood of the crowd is ok but an edge of tension hovers...

CURTIS

Why do they have guns, Grandpa?  
Surely no one would be silly enough  
to try and steal the animals?

GRANDPA JACK

These are desperate times, Curtie.  
There's men here worse off than us.  
Anything could happen.

The auction starts with the animals brought out from  
smallest to biggest. A cat is first, followed by a dog.

GRANDPA JACK

I can bid on that dog if you like,  
Curtie. I got money to cover it.

CURTIE

Thanks, Grandpa. Timmy and Eve  
would eat that old dog, fur and all  
I bet! But we want that cow. Right?

GRANDPA JACK

Right on, Curtie. That's what I  
thought you'd say.

He watches the boy's excitement for a moment, their special  
bond growing stronger. More animals are brought out: a pig,  
a pony, even a small bear. The bidding is fierce but well  
controlled by the auctioneer. There is no anger in the face  
of disappointed ones. Only a kind of resignation...

GRANDPA JACK

That cow should be up next, Curtie.

But he feels a sense of anxiety. The bids so far have been  
very high for the smaller beasts.

CURTIS

I can't believe I'm actually going  
to see a live one.

Then the cow is led out and the crowd is hushed. It is huge,  
specially fed to make an astronomical amount of money. A  
phalanx of armed men surround it, as the magnificent beast  
struts around the enclosure.

GRANDPA JACK

Damn, that's one fine animal.

CURTIS

(tearfully)

Oh, yes, Grandpa he is. It  
almost...

GRANDPA JACK  
Yes, Curtie?

CURTIS  
(whispers)  
It almost seems a shame to eat him.

Grandpa Jack looks at Curtis. He hadn't been expecting this...

GRANDPA JACK  
(softly)  
You still want me to bid, son?

Curtis's gaze slowly moves from the cow to Grandpa Jack. Around them, the frenzied bidding starts...

INT.KITCHEN/FAMILY ROOM - EVENING

Grandpa Jack, Curtis, Timmy and Eve sit around the table. There is a mood of great festivity.

TIMMY  
Hurry up, Momma! Please...

GRANDPA JACK  
Manners, Timmy. Your mother's been busy cookin' all afternoon.

EVE  
Oh, grandpa, we can't wait. Real food at last.

CURTIS  
What happened to your taste for rat?

TIMMY  
Yeah, rat girl!

GRANDPA JACK  
(lowered voice)  
You can't talk, Timmy. Rat boy!

He nudges Curtis and they all laugh, even Timmy. Then Helen comes in from the kitchen, with a huge covered silver tray.

HELEN  
Ok, no touching, it's hot. Wait till I dish it up. Eve, pour that water please.

GRANDPA JACK  
At last! Tonight, we're eating  
proper food.

He can't help himself, and reaches over to lift the lid off the tray. He drops it on the table and blows on his fingers.

GRANDPA JACK  
Ow, fuck that's hot.

HELEN  
Dad! Language.

But the kids are all laughing as they look at the tray. Grandpa Jack laughs too, as eventually does Helen. A large whole fish rests on the platter, surrounded by herbs and vegetables. Steam rises from it and the family fall silent.

GRANDPA JACK  
Happy birthday, Curtie.

CURTIS  
Thanks, Grandpa.

Helen begins to cut the fish into portions, and piles it on the plates.

EVE  
So a guy at the museum sold you  
this fish, Grandpa?

GRANDPA JACK  
Aah, yeah, that's right.

He glances at Curtis and winks covertly. Helen catches the gesture but says nothing.

TIMMY  
(eating)  
Oh, man. This is so good.

Soon there is quiet as the family eats. Helen refills the plates and the fish is gradually reduced to mere bones.

GRANDPA JACK  
How was it, Curtie?

CURTIS  
(licking his fingers)  
Just awesome, Grandpa. You're the  
best!

HELEN

Yes, Dad. I know we'll never hear the real story behind this, but thank you.

Timmy and Eve echo her sentiments.

GRANDPA JACK

Well, I was only providin' for my loved ones. A man can't do more than that. But I ain't finished yet. I got us a special dessert in the market.

TIMMY

(anxiously)

Not a rat cake, Grandpa?

They all laugh.

GRANDPA JACK

No, Timmy. It's a treat I used to have when I was a boy. It's hard to find but some folk still make it.

He produces a paper bag and opens it. He holds up a thick wad of something soft.

CURTIS

What is it, Grandpa?

GRANDPA JACK

Red rope licorice.

(his eyes glaze over)

Your grandmother used to love it...

FADE OUT