A DIFFERENT MENU
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