

Clash of the Diets

There's one to my right, one to my left and two sitting parallel to me. I've been penned in and escape is not an option. Tonight, I dine with a circus of carnivores that haven't quite learnt how to chew with their mouths closed. I don't know what's more horrifying: the lettuce leaf under my nose or the five plates of ground animal parts that surround me. What they see is a delicious duck Pâté, lovingly smeared on a toasted baguette with a drizzle of balsamic glaze. What I see: the mushy blitzed organs of a once living animal that probably had their throat slit mercilessly after being plucked alive. Alas, it isn't any of my business as to what my fellow diners choose to thrust into their gobs. I keep quiet, I decline to comment on their bloodthirsty appetites, and I pretend to enjoy my plate of green. If only those fools could do the same.

'How's the salad? I've gone for a minimalism theme. Can I get you some artisan sourdough as well? Only I didn't know if vegans could eat bread.' *Oh June, you could have at least waited for the main course!* She's a fairly inoffensive woman but I held a strong contempt for her dropping the V bomb so early in.

'It's lovely, thanks June.' *It's not, but she's trying her best.* 'And yeah we can usually eat bread, but I'm alright for the moment.'

'So, how long have you been vegan?' *It begins.* The pink-faced man opposite me, David, asks in budding anticipation. On initial examination, this question is one that appears innocent. Someone is taking an interest and I will gladly oblige...

I shall counter with a fairly innocent response: 'About three years now, I was a vegetarian for a few years before that but decided to make the change and I feel better for it to be honest.' It's not loaded with hatred for the meat industry; I'm not challenging him in his artery clogging choices. Oh David, I've danced this dance before. You are tackling a pro, my son.

Here it comes, I can see the spit forming on his lower lip and the gleam of self-importance in his eyes...

'And *why* exactly did you chose the vegan lifestyle?'

It's the first of many questions in his tactical interrogation. What I'd love to say is: Well, Dave, I got sick and tired of eating dead bodies: so I stopped. But I have a cultivated response to this line of questioning. It's one that usually stops the carnivores dead in their tracks and prompts them to go on eating their cooked flesh in satisfaction.

'For ethical, environmental and health reasons.'

THE BIG THREE.

I keep it brief. This tells the interrogator that I do not wish to discuss this controversial topic over dinner. I will enjoy a debate with you another time, sir. Oh and June is an extremely neurotic woman. I know for a fact that if things don't go to plan, she will go from vapid, Instagram host to table flipping lunatic quicker than you can say meat is murder.

I can tell David will not be silenced. He is revving up to hit me with the next earth-shattering statement that he hopes to blow my tiny vegan mind into a plant-based rage.

‘Well actually...’ *UGHHHHHHHH* ‘...you’re probably far less healthy just eating vegetables. I mean, where do you get your protein? It just doesn’t make sense.’ *An oldie but a goodie.*

Dave could I draw your attention to PETA’s list of ten vegan food sources HIGH in protein? You’re going to ignore that anyway? Oh, ok continue...

‘The health detriments far outweigh the benefits!’ The mumbled statement leaves his mouth with a spray of duck liver spittle as he chews the last morsel.

To counter his remarks, I respond in jest: ‘I’m lactose intolerant so cutting out dairy is the logical choice. Not to mention the striking lack of cholesterol and zero acne just to name a few benefits. But to be frank, I’d rather have to pop an iron supplement than contribute to the suffering and murder of animals as well as the destruction of our planet.’

TAKE THAT, DAVE! I’ve got him right where I want him. They can see I’m not too serious, fairly aloof. Now that I’ve playfully accused him of animal genocide and environmental ruin, he could come back at me with a witty retort or an educated counter argument perhaps. But instead the woman to my right, Margret, wants to throw her two pence in.

‘God but you must miss bacon though, right?’ She chortles, her teeth aglow with the blood red stains of her merlot. Margret is in her mid-thirties. She worked with June at the bank until she clawed her way up the social ladder. June described her as *Nouveau riche*; in an attempt to conceal this persona, she dabbles in foxhunting and owns a racehorse. She arrived tonight in a mink fur coat at which I gagged. Its musk could be smelt before she even got out the town car. It was a damp odor probably caused by a carpet mite invasion.

‘No, I don’t. Never liked it, or any pork products really.’ *Shockingly, I never had a taste for munching on Peppa Pig’s back fat. I’ve always said that the stench of pig cooking is what I imagine human flesh to smell like.* ‘Is it time for the main course June?’ *I did love chicken though.* I don’t deny that meat tastes good. It’s just when you detach the taste from the food, you see it for what it is: A bloody raw corpse of an animal.

‘Oh, of course! Let me take your plates. More wine anyone, while I’m up?’

OH GOD, YES JUNE! I’ll need to drink my weight in alcohol if I’m to survive this evening without throttling half the guests. We all nod in agreement and June scuttles off to the kitchen to bring out whatever horrors await.

Chatter commences among the diners. I let my eyes wonder around the set up that June has constructed. Margret from the bank, David (it’s a mystery where she found him), June’s neighbour Patrick and Eleanor who we went to school with. I haven’t seen Eleanor in years, but I make polite conversation about life and work and blah. That’s the thing about being a vegan around new people: the usual questions and comments hit you like an armed assault. A lot of people are genuinely interested but I can tell the people here tonight are good old-fashioned British meat eaters.

MEAT RUNS IN THEIR VIENS, IN THEIR FAMILY HISTORY, IT IS THE FUNDEMENTAL FOUNDATION ON WHICH THEIR LIFE HAS BEEN BUILT.

I know Eleanor's father ran a dairy farm. I know June can't physically eat a meal if it doesn't involve dead animals. David is a bit of a halfwit, so he probably just likes winding people up. Margret screams animal cruelty with her array of skins and furs. I'm unsure, yet cautiously pessimistic, about Patrick at this point. Reader, I remind you that it was THEM who initiated the conversation. I had no part in the declaration of war, but as God is my witness, I will finish it.

'Dinner is served!' June bursts through the dining room door carrying two plates. She delicately places them down in front of David and Margret. Steak. Predictable. But it's laden with a strange white blob. 'Here we are... oh and I've been dabbling in molecular gastronomy so enjoy the oyster foam! It's the latest fashion with influencers so I thought, why not, right?' June's take on surf and turf doesn't quite sit right with me. She whips round the table with each of the dishes as I nervously wait for mine. On her final trip from the kitchen June brings out my meal.

'There you go. Bon appétit!' *You cannot be serious.* This can't be what I think it is. Hand me that steak knife Eleanor, because I'm going to jam it into June's jugular.

'Er, June, what's this?' *It's unrecognizable slop.* The pivotal issue with this concoction, dear reader, is that it's absolutely oozing with cheese.

'Deconstructed vegetable lasagna. I thought, you know, your safe with an Italian. Everyone loves pasta. Why? Is there something wrong?' *Aside from the fact it's in pieces, yes June... IT'S COVERED IN CHEESE.*

'I can't eat cheese, June.' My patience is wearing thin.

'Yeah.' Long pause. 'Oh no, oh gosh' The penny drops.

'You can't eat cheese?' Margret chimes in again, turning to be in disbelief. She carries herself as elegantly as a gazelle, but her facade of class is soon dispelled by the vigorous clawing at her arm, must be the mites. *If this woman gives me fleas, I will take her to court.* It's as if she can't imagine a life without cheddar. What would she melt onto her toast? What would she slap between her bread? What is a cheese board without the cheese?!

'No. It's no animal products at all. Sorry June, I can't eat this.' *I'm not sorry at all.* David shoots a smug look at me as he tears into his rib eye, foam be damned, with blood trickling down his wrist.

'Hitler was vegetarian, yanoe. And we all know how that ended up.' *What the actual hell Patrick.* First thing he's said all evening and he chooses to open with a Hitler comparison. We all stare at him in confusion as he drenches his cut of cow in peppercorn sauce.

'Oh dear, I'm ever so sorry. I just thought I'd be safe with lasagna. I even used the fresh pasta I bought at the farmers market.' *No amount of expensive ingredients will tempt me, woman.* 'I'll see what else I've got, just a moment.'

‘Thanks June. I’m sorry to be a pain.’ *Again, I’m not sorry.* I find myself having to apologize for my diet so often it’s become something of a reflex.

‘I just couldn’t do it. I love my meat, I do.’ *I bet you do.* ‘If we didn’t eat animals they’d just die out. Your lot is just initiating animal extinctions.’ David amuses himself, snorting at his own comment. It appears as though he isn’t even chewing his steak, he’s just shoving it in and swallowing it.

‘I mean, my cousins god-daughter went vegan and she got sick, ate one lamb shank and felt better. If that doesn’t tell you veganism is wrong, I don’t know what does.’ *Patrick, kindly wind your neck in.*

June reenters, her timing impeccable as ever. ‘Here we are, I found some hummus and a jar of olives so I thought you could dip and I’m boiling some cauliflower as we speak.’

‘Thanks June.’ *Brilliant, my favorite meal: hummus with a side of boiled cauliflower.*

‘Oh yeah, I agree Patrick.’ *When will it end?* ‘If God didn’t want us to eat animals, why did he make them out of meat, answer me that?’

Before I knew what was happening, the words had begun flooding out of my mouth. It was like someone had triggered my own personal doomsday device. Fist’s clenched and heart racing: I began to launch my defense.

‘I’ll cook you then shall I David? Seeing as you’re made of meat too. And while I’m at it I’ll shove a leg of lamb where the sun doesn’t shine, Patrick, in the hopes it’ll cure your intolerable personality. And for God’s sake June how many times do I have to tell you I can’t eat anything that comes out of an udder!’ I could see Margret about to add one of her mind numbing interjections. Before her she got the chance, I directed my tirade towards her. It was too late to call a cease-fire.

‘Margret, if you tell me you couldn’t bear to go on without skinning a fox or kicking a puppy, I promise you I’ll set that hideous fur coat of yours on fire.’

There was a silence. All eyes were on me. June was stood at the door with the bowl of cauliflower in her clutches. A large vein in her forehead was throbbing; I could see it from across the room. Quicker than a swing of a butcher’s knife, June plunged her hand into the bowl, scooped out a fistful of cauliflower and chucked it at my face.

‘YOU’VE RUINED EVERYTHING! CAN’T WE JUST HAVE DINNER IN PEACE WITHOUT YOU SHOVING YOUR VEGANISM DOWN OUR THROATS?’

‘June, I didn’t start it, it’s them!’

‘Yeah, she’s right - you vegan Nazi.’ Patrick spluttered under his squeaky little breath. *Someone hold me back.* The accusation of being a member of the Third Reich truly was the straw that broke the vegans back. In frenzy I dove for Margret’s half eaten steak and threw it at Patrick. Following this, I frisbeed my plate of hummus at Dave’s head. It missed narrowly but not without the hummus splattering across his face. In retaliation June let out a bestial roar, lunged for the gravy and dashed it at me.

I was hit. The beef gravy was thick in my hair. There wasn't a single item of my clothing that hadn't been touched by the congealed goo. I was in shock. I felt sick. *I'm going to be sick*. I grabbed the first thing I could, Margret's leather handbag, and vomited inside. I was equally mortified and proud of myself for defiling her leather goods.

'I think perhaps it's time I head off.' Poor Eleanor. She didn't know what she had let herself in for. None of us had.

'Yeah I er... well I think this may have got a bit out of hand.' June attempted to compose herself still viscosly gripping onto the porcelain handle of the gravy boat.

'I-' words of regret tried to escape my lips but couldn't quite find their way out. 'I suppose pudding is out of the question then?'

If looks could kill, I'd be skinned, fileted and dressed for barbequing. Without saying another word, I removed myself from the table and gathered my coat and bag. I offered a look of remorse to June and Eleanor, ignored the others and trotted away