



Last Scraps

By Norbert Kovacs

Wally Peterson lay hungry in bed in his studio apartment. His diet had been little else than Ritz crackers and water for several days and he could have stood a full meal. However, he turned on his side and dug his dark head into the pillow, unwilling to rise from bed. Wally had been in a funk since he lost his job as a clerk at the insurance company more than three months ago. It had been a good, reliable position, where he proudly wore a collared shirt and long tie to the office every day. They had to let him go not for any personal fault, his boss explained, but because business had slumped. Wally had applied for clerk posts around town without any success ever since. "Don't worry over it!" his friends had said when, discouraged, he spoke of it. "You haven't been that long out of work. Something is bound to come your way." Wally met no sign it would, however.

Over the past month, Wally had applied less for work and instead idled in his apartment. He read old magazines, cover to back, and pieced puzzles together to stay occupied. These diversions lost their magic and he wound up moping on the living room couch. He reflected often on his new circumstances. His unemployment barely covered the rent and his savings were going to pay for food. *I won't fare well much longer*, he admitted. After he failed his last interview, Wally caught some flu that turned into a terrible fever. He stayed in bed several days, rising only to eat from his ready supply of snacks and to use the bathroom.

He found his sense of time dimming as his illness persisted. He did not know if he kept to bed for hours or days. On the stand by his bed, his smartphone rang and his brother Joe's name flashed on the screen. Since Wally had told him about losing his job, Joe had called regularly to learn how he managed. Wally did not bother to answer the phone anymore: he was in no mood to explain the umpteenth time that he had not found work.

As he lay curled in bed that afternoon, Wally heard his downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Sparks, call to her husband, "Dear, come eat lunch before you leave for second shift." The mention of food roused Wally. *It would be nice to eat something today*, he thought, and felt his hunger sharpen. He sat up, his dark eyes still sleepy, and swiveled his heavy legs over the bedside. He stood in an unwashed T-shirt and sweatpants and lumbered toward the kitchen.

On the table were strewn empty cracker and cookie boxes from which he had eaten and never bothered to recycle. More of the like greeted him in the pantry where he had snacked

straight from a gallery of chip bags. He poked around the shelf and found nothing edible. *Nuts*, he thought. He gave the pantry door a lazy push that failed to close it and returned to the kitchen. He checked the refrigerator which he had not been opened in any time he could remember. Little appeared on its shelves: a small aluminum pan that held two cubes of beef in red sauce, the remains of a stew made over a week ago; next to this, some cooked rice in a cup; one baby carrot; and three bread crusts saved for a stuffing he never made. Wally collected the different items from the refrigerator shelf. *Sort of meager*, he thought. Scraps really. *But it's better than nothing*.

Wally brought the food to the kitchen counter. Setting the sauce pan on the stove, he dumped in the rice, the baby carrot, and the crusts. He took the salt from the cupboard and added a dash. He turned on the heat to get all of it cooking. As the pan warmed, he stirred the rice and meat in slow circles with a wood spoon. The food, covered with sauce, darkened from red to a reddish brown. Steam threaded upwards from the rice. The savory smell of his cooking made the saliva start in Wally's mouth.

Finally, the food was done. Wally turned off the stove. He moved the pan to an unused burner and stirred its contents to cool them. As the steam slowed, he took a silver spoon from the drawer, dug into the pan, and ate. He did this slowly in hopes of meting out the small meal. He chewed and re-chewed the beef to get its full savor. He relished the sweet carrot, the thick bread. He ate it all, including the sauce, down to the pan bottom. Though it had been little, he felt it enough to make him full. *A very good meal*, he thought. *Even satisfying*.

As he set his spoon down in the pan, Wally recalled suddenly his old job as the insurance clerk. He had held a senior post in Appeals. With some pride, he had made sure casework got to the managers on time for review. The junior clerks had gone to him as a rule to ask into department matters. He had been their number one resource, in fact. On his salary, he had lived well in this apartment in a decent neighborhood of the city. Many nights, he had invited over his friends and served them good dinners—even beef stew with rice as he had eaten from the pan. His friends had smiled and grown warm as they ate around the table.

Wally bowed his face sadly before the stove. The pan had cooled and he cleaned it in the sink. The next thing, he went to his closet and fetched a good shirt and slacks. He had decided he would visit his brother, Joe, who owned a small grocery store three blocks away, and ask him for a job. It would not be the same job or the kind he knew. This did not matter though. *I need to work*, he felt with an urgency he had not known before his meal of the small scraps. *I've sat and wallowed at home too long. I can't be sorry about myself forever. At Joe's, I can stock shelves. Break boxes. I would earn my keep. I think I won't feel right about eating again until I do*.

With a determined step, he set out from his apartment to be sure he would.



About the author

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared or soon will appear in *Thrice Fiction*, *Westview*, *Gravel*, *STORGY*, and *Ginosko Literary Journal*. Norbert's website is norbertkovacs.net.