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Cheese

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CHEESE*

by Irwin Tang

Mr. Shiu

I come home. No one there. Good. Then she comes. My wife. She doesn't usually come so easily. I usually have to call after her for hours. She comes out of the bed room. She is happy to see me. Good.

No one knows. I have cheese. In my jacket. Got it just now. It's surprise cheese. No one knows I have it. I don't know. Cheese is okay. Cheese is respected in the United States. Every American must eat cheese. Cheese is where Americans unite. It's like that Beatles song: "Come together / Right now / Over Cheese." Am I mistaken? There's nothing wrong with cheese.

I try to ignore my wife. Not attract her attention. I say hi. I say I love you, honey. She looks at me as if she can see I have cheese. I say, honey-pot. As in I love you, honey pot, but I don't say I love you again. Once is enough. I walk to the door. My son's room. I knock. Open the door. He's reading Son of Satan comic books. I say hi. He says hi. Silence. I want to tell him about the cheese. I want it to be our secret from his mother. But what does that mean: Son of Satan? I don't know what to say, what to think about Son of Satan comic books. So I save the secret for another day. I ask him how he's doing in school.

Irvine Shiu

My name is Irvine Shiu. I am fourteen years old and a freshman in high school. My sister is named Berkeley and thirteen and a half. My father has a thing for University of California schools. He is also Satan.

I am the son of Satan. Let me explain. When he said, "I love you" to Mom, I knew there was something wrong. He doesn't mean anything like that. He walked into his room right afterward and started with his cursing of Wallace and calling for tea. He talked about Wallace for a while with Mom, and then Mom left the room to cook dinner, and he added a few things about Wallace as she walked out the door. And then as I got the newspaper from out of the living room, he screamed for my mother to get him some tea as he lay on the bed casting an evil spell on Wallace, and in Chinese, of course. Whenever he speaks about Wallace, he says it in Chinese so I don't know what he's talking about. To tell you the truth, I feel sorry for Wallace; he probably has to listen to my father criticizing him, and with a bad accent too: "Walrus," I can hear him say, "You must nern to have some initiative." That's what he tells me: to learn initiative and ambition.

* Irwin Tang, "Cheese", *How I Became a Black Man and Other Metamorphoses* (Austin: The It Works, 2006), 13–33. © 2009 Irwin Tang. All rights reserved.

I get the newspaper when he comes home and lays in bed on top of the big pillow and his “little wife” pillow, which is an old, yellowed and browned pillow filled with probably the softest material known to man. It’s probably so soft because he keeps it between his legs all day and night, or under his greasy hair. I imagine the pillow melts to a degree. Anyway it never fails. Just as I am about to walk into his room with his newspaper, he yells out the door, “Irvine! Get the newspaper!”

He loves to tell people to do things they are already doing. Or tell them things they already know, like when he talked to me at my bedroom door, he told me to study hard. I know that already. If I don’t get an A in my Biology class, we’re going to do something “educational” to my comic book collection. That might mean like a scientific experiment involving, say, acid or combustion. He’s a professor of Molecular Biology at Texas A&M.

I give him the newspaper and he looks at me like he is going to say something. He’s always surprised at my “initiative” when I get him the newspaper. It’s his way of reminding me that I have the initiative of Pavlov’s Dog, and the ambition of Dennis the Menace. But he didn’t say anything to me. He just took the newspaper, held his side as if he had suffered a flesh wound and moaned like an ailing cow. “Goddamned Wallace and his crew try to killing me today.” He said it with his eyes closed, so he couldn’t see the look of disdain on my face. Moaning, whining, and cussing at the same time, he was. I shook my head slightly and went back to my room and wasted time. Before I left, I noticed he had something orange in his jacket.

Mr. Shiu

That turtle egg Wallace. He’s the head of my research team. He makes me want to come in one day and be the Chinese Eddie Murphy. “What are the results from Sample 295?” he’ll ask, and I’ll say, “Velly funny, muthafuckah!” He’ll say, “What?” I’ll hold up his precious sample and sing like that Eddie Murphy ice cream song, “I got your sample/I got your sample/I got your sample/ And I’m going to piss on it.” He hates me because I’m Chinese. I won’t tell my family that though. My son doesn’t need to hear it. He has no ambition already. Why should he? He sees what the goddamn bitch’s sons do to me at work. If I was him I wouldn’t want to go into science either. I want him to be a chemist and work for a corporation. That’s a joke, see, chemists aren’t scientists, see? Please, Heaven, let my son work in the money-hungry private sector and not, I repeat, NOT!, in academia.

Irvine Shiu

I go into my sister’s room. I grab a stack of *She-Hulk* comic books. She-Hulk is the cousin of Bruce Banner, The Incredible Hulk. Because she needed a blood transfusion from Bruce in order to save her life, she becomes a Hulk too. But she’s a woman, so they call her the She-Hulk. I grab my sister’s comic books and start drawing bare breasts on the She-Hulk.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Equal Rights,” I say. “The Hulk loses his shirt and has to expose his chest to the elements whenever he turns into the Hulk, so I think the She-Hulk should too.”

“You’re a pervert,” she tells me. It’s amazing how she doesn’t care much about her comic books. “You should do your homework,” she tells me, “or Dad’s going to put your comic books in the microwave.” In the name of science, my father once put in the micro-

wave a live scorpion we had found just to show us what happens. Honestly, that was the coolest science I ever seen.

My mother barges into the room and tells us to come eat. She sees me drawing a particularly long and spiraling breast on the She-Hulk, and I read on her face: I should've breast-fed Irvine. Breast-feeding me would've also prevented her from getting pregnant with Berkeley right after she had me. Berkeley is only eight months younger than me. She calls that the year to remember; she keeps on reminding us.

Mr. Shiu

Behind a table overrun with platters of food—the garlicky snow peas leaves, the juicy cabbage and mushrooms, the sweet pork ribs, the green and brown broccoli beef, and the murky dates and peanuts soup, sits my wife, alone, an empress on a cold throne. It took twenty minutes for us to get out of our rooms and come to the dinner table. For some reason we just did not want to eat delicious food together. My reason was the cheese. I stand before the table in my jacket. I could have thrown away the cheese, but it would have been wasteful, and why should I be fearful anyway? I am bringing something good to the table. Any American family would appreciate a good solid block of cheese, made proud with American cows and American ingenuity.

I sit down at the table and my children sit down at the table. I look again at the blank face of my wife. The four rice bowls are empty. We each have one sitting in front of us. If we look carefully, we can see our own hollow reflection in each of them. I order my son to get us all some rice. He gives me his look. He thinks I am lazy. I come home after work and everything has to be done for me. I am tired. I really am. And I am the man of the house. If I didn't work hard, come home, and ask my family to serve me, I wouldn't be the man of the house anymore. My wife believes in the system too. She just thinks I take it to excess sometimes. Like when I can't even boil my own tea. If I had to boil my own tea, I would go ahead and kill myself too. My son will learn someday; right now, I think he believes that everyone should get their own single bowl of rice. Perhaps we should each cook a single bowl of rice, wash our individual bowls.

Anyway, it was in this atmosphere that I could not help but bring the cheese out of my jacket. I put the cheese on the table, next to the pork, as if it were a dish just as worthy as its tabletop cohorts.

Mrs. Shiu

Yes, I am the wife of the coconut.

I see the cheese and I am ready for divorce. This is the last straw. No one cooks better than me. At least no one who would cook for him cooks better than me. And the only reason I still cook for him is Wallace. Wallace wants to destroy my husband. He wants to kill my husband through NSF-funded research. But my husband is a tough guy. He'll take on Wallace and any other microscope-fondling biologists. Sometimes I think Wallace wants to take my husband's place – to inherit me and the children. They say Wallace likes Chinese food. He goes to the Chinese restaurant and orders Sweet and Sour Pork, Sweet and Sour Chicken, Sweet and Sour Beef, and egg rolls, with sweet and sour sauce. Only a man with no sense of right or wrong can do such a thing.

CALLALOO

Berkeley Shiu

I struggle every minute I am home to maintain a philosophy of classical Greek stoicism.

Mrs. Shiu

I tried not to look at the cheese sitting next to the pork I cooked. Cheese! Made from spoiled milk and worms. At least the Swiss allow the worms to eat their way out. The solid orange cheese my husband has brought home makes me shudder. Who knows what has died in there. My husband will claim that I know nothing about Western culture, but my English is so much better than his; he can barely pronounce cheese, I bet. I bet he says, “Chi-si,” which means “anger-to-death” in Chinese. But *I* should be saying that.

I begin eating without looking at the cheese, or at my husband, or anything! I eat blind at my own table! Blind! I cook! I clean! Am I allowed the decency of eating and seeing – *at the same time*? The answer is no.

Irvine Shiu

My mother picks up a piece of pork with her chopsticks. “What am I holding?” she asks with her eyes closed.

“Pork,” I say.

“Not cheese?”

“No,” I say.

My mother puts the pork in her mouth and opens her eyes. “This is worse than the time your father knocked me out right after I gave birth to you.”

My father looks indignant. “You should be happy I did. It meant I was really in love with you. My passion was uncontrollable! Besides, I’d been waiting for so long.”

“Less than a month after giving birth to your son! Thank you velly much-ah!”

“You didn’t seem to mind. It was a long time for you too. And don’t make fun of my accent-ah!”

Mrs. Shiu

And then I say to him, “Are you saying I wanted to be knocked out by you right after I gave birth?” I want to show off my verbal skills, so I quote from history: “You say I wanted it? I tell you that night will be *a day that will live in infancy!*”

Berkeley Shiu

I learned long ago that I will never understand my parents. In America, with all their traditional ways and bad English, they are more innocent than Irvine and me. And it’s hard for adults to understand children.

After the infancy line, my mother pauses to let the power of her words sink in, and then she says, “You came on me; I didn’t come on you.” My brother and I look at each other. Even for our family, this was exploring uncharted territory.

“You didn’t resist when I came on you. You let me come on you!” snapped my father. “I wouldn’t have come on you unless I knew you wanted me to come on you right then and right there! Why does this issue always come up? Have I not been a good father and husband?”

My mother ignores him and turns to me as if, being a thirteen year old girl, I would understand, "Your father came on me just weeks after I gave birth to Irvine, and being an obedient wife, I let him knock me out. That's when we conceived you."

My brother winced and rubbed his temples as if he suffered a sudden migraine. He suffers so from the oppression of my parent's language skills. "You mean," he sighed, "Dad came *onto* you and you let him knock you *up*."

My mother looks my brother square in his face. "*That is what I said.*"
 "Whatever."

"Whatever whatever!" says my mother. "You like whatever so much, you go eat at Whateverburger! Okay?"

My mother is on a roll. I think she means Whataburger. We don't want to laugh in her face right now, so we eat silently. My father keeps eyeing his cheese, as if he wants to give us each a slice.

"The cheese was free," says Dad.

"I know," says Mom.

"If I didn't take it, they would have thrown it away." I smile as I hark back to the times I was nine and Dad taught me the joys of composting. Within a week, I sought dead vegetation and vegetable waste wherever I went. I became obsessed and had my mother, who was doubtful about whether composting for the entire neighborhood was "educational," shuttle me from home to home to pick up cantaloupe rinds and dead leaves.

"It's free government cheese," says my father. "I picked it up at the welfare office. We shouldn't let them waste our tax dollars by throwing away good cheese."

It's hard for me to tell sometimes whether or not my father is actually *trying* to sound dumb.

My mother didn't say anything. She took more vegetables into her bowl. She looked over to Irvine and said, "Irvine, your English has gotten so much better ever since you joined the Thighmasters Club."

I can hear my brother's teeth grind.

"Mom," I say, "Thighmaster is an exercise contraption promoted by Suzanne Somers."

"What?" my mother turned to Irvine. "You're exercising with Suzanne?"

"Who's Suzanne?" Irvine sneered.

"I don't know. You're a Thighmaster."

"A Toastmaster," said my brother through gritted teeth.

"A toast?" said my mother.

My father lifted his glass, my mother rolled her eyes. "I'm talking to our son," she said. "He's a Toastermaster."

My father looks back down at his cheese as if the mention of toast gives him ideas. My mother interrupts, "Don't think I am too proud to eat cheese. If we ever actually need free cheese, I'll be the first in line, short and skinny me, pushing away everyone on Earth, screaming, 'Free cheddar cheese! Free Swiss! Hell, give me American!'"

My father squints his eyes at the cheese. Yup. It's American.

"But we don't need cheese," concludes Mom.

"We don't need the cheese," says my father, "but if we don't eat the cheese, there will be surplus cheese, and then the cheese, before you know it, is in the trash."

"Let them waste the cheese. Do you understand? This is America. It's okay to waste things. This is the wasteland. If you waste enough, whatever's left becomes quality. Quality things. Quality time. We don't need to survive anymore. We need to enjoy."

My father looked at the cheese as if it were his last remaining friend in this world. "You kids don't remember this because you weren't born yet, but that's no excuse. I should tell you. I should tell you some stories, so you can understand. You don't understand me and your mother. You don't love us like the American kids love their parents because we are so strange and unusual to you."

Tears build up in my brother's eyes. He is so sensitive.

"I am not the oldest child," says my father. "There was one sister above me and one below me . . . who didn't make it out of the war. The war started in China in 1937, or at least that's when we really started fighting back. It ended in 1945. A whole generation of Chinese children, all we know is war. When the Japanese took over the capital of the province, our family fled. My mother led me and my siblings out of the city in the middle of the night as the gunshots got louder by the second. We knew what the Japanese soldiers would do. Kill and loot and rape. I was only seven. My father was not with us. He was fighting the Japanese on some other front line. We left home with hardly anything, except what we could carry in bundles on the ends of a bamboo. My mother said that we were going to Chungking to stay with some relatives, but I didn't remember us having any relatives in Chungking. We didn't have time to destroy anything, so we left our things for the Japanese to take. There were five of us at the beginning of the trip. My older brother had died a year ago of illness. During war, people just got sick and there was no medicine, and then they died. It was simple and natural. I got really sick just days after we started running away. We had just a little bit of herbal medicine that my mother had brought with us. She gave it to me. She wanted to get more of it, but we could hear the gunshots of the Japanese, so we didn't bother to enter the village we were close to. As we walked away, a couple of Japanese soldiers stopped us. My mother said, "What do you want? We have nothing. We have less than nothing! You want to rape me? Your children will be born without eyes! You touch me and even your nieces and nephews' offspring will suffer for a thousand years!" I had a little sister and a little brother. The sister was the youngest, named Li An. She was about five and she gave the soldiers a dead glare as if she saw the shadow of death through their transparent bodies. She had not been her usual happy self since leaving home, but she was a strong girl. Strong as an ox. The soldiers looked spooked. They were a bit drunk too. They said they were tired of raping and looting, and said my mother was an ugly bitch anyway and walked away. We were surprised they knew some Chinese. As soon as they were out of sight, we ran away from there as fast as we could. But the flight took its toll on my older sister. She became sick with what I had. We walked through forests and rice paddies and burnt-down villages. We saw dead people walking all around us; they just needed to be buried. Everywhere we went, we heard stories about what had happened at Nanking and all the other major cities. The Japanese soldiers liked to throw babies up in the air and catch them on their bayonets.

"One time, some of us kids got so tired of running, my mother told us we were going to die if we didn't run faster. We all started crying. So my mother paid a big man some money and some salted preserved eggs to carry us, two at a time, in baskets, one basket on each end of a pole, the pole put across his shoulders. And we took turns sitting in those

baskets, except for me because I was the oldest boy. Even so, we were very lucky for that luxury. But then, the next time we ate, there was nothing but plain rice gruel—the eggs that would have given it flavor were in that big man’s stomach. When I looked at that plain rice, I almost turned my bowl over.

“My older sister died the next day. We couldn’t get any medicine, and the last of the medicine had been used on me. My mother and I dug her grave with the help of an old man. He and his wife let us stay in their old country house. They didn’t have anything but rice and spiced preserved cabbage, but it tasted so good, I almost forgot about the death of my sister. I remembered the bitter taste of the herbal medicine that night as I lay on the floor, listening to crack! crack-crack! in the distance. I wished we had saved some medicine. I wished we had saved some of that medicine and let me stay sick a week longer. Just a little bit of that medicine. She was older and stronger than me. She didn’t need as much. We left our sister underneath the ground near the old man’s house and went on. I had no idea where we were going or when we would stop. Just like life.

“Weeks passed. As we walked along a country trail, a large dog jumped out in front of my little sister. My little sister was frozen by the scare. The dog stared at my sister and at the rest of us. He had seen much. He looked at us as if he had lost all respect for humanity. He bore his teeth at my sister and me. I tried to pull her back, but her body was limp, and by pulling her I nearly caused her to collapse to the ground. I yelled at the dog to go home. Go home, evil dog! The dog barked at me, telling me, I have no home! Some soldiers burned it down and ate my master for food because he had slaughtered all the pigs before the soldiers could get to them.

I told that dog to shut up, and I raised a stick above my head and swiped the dog across the face. The dog barked at us and then strutted away, as if saying to us that we were lost, and that anything that walked on two legs could not be helped. I wanted to kill that dog for being so arrogant.

“It happened that that evil dog had scared the spirit out of the body of my little sister. She didn’t speak or eat for the next three days. We found a doctor on the third day, and he said that her spirit had run far away from her body, just like we had run far away from home.

“Then, after months turn into years of running and stopping and stopping and running—finally, we were in a very tiny village, a very poor village, we weren’t even in the village, we were in a cave next to the village. But we heard crack crack crack. And I knew we had to run again. But my mother didn’t say anything. She walked toward the village. We walked behind her with quiet feet, waiting for the bullets to come into our skulls. We got to the village, and everyone was laughing in the streets, lighting firecrackers, crack crack crack. And it wasn’t even New Year’s. An old woman pulled my mother aside and whispered in her ear, ‘Rumor has it, the Japanese surrendered! Some sort of a big bomb killed them all!’ My mother took some firecrackers from the old woman and said, ‘After so many years, it sounds too easy, a big bomb killing them, but in case it’s true, we better celebrate.’

“The villagers killed some chickens and picked a bunch of vegetables and fruits, and that night we had a big happy feast. My very first. Everything was okay, except that two lives had been wasted. My two sisters had died. We could not save them. There was not enough medicine. The war made me want to study biology. Only the most horrific thing

that mankind's scientists have ever produced – the atomic bomb – *that* was our salvation. The killing of hundreds of thousands of men, women, children, and babies was the greatest thing that ever happened in my life. And no matter what I want to believe, I cannot change that in my mind. If dogs could smile, that dog would smile! What a waste. So now you know why it is important to save things."

My father stands up from his black fake leather seat. His fingers rest on the table as if he were playing the piano on them. He picks up the cheese and turns, walks to the kitchen and opens up a cabinet door, moves aside a pile of UPC codes and Proofs-of-Purchase (presumably to find a spot for the cheese), fumbles with the rubber bands he had saved from the newspapers, picks up for a moment the neat stack of disposable containers that he has not disposed of (his excuse being that the Styrofoam and paper containers are only *dispos-able* containers, not *dispose-mandatory*); he rummages through some unmarked stamps he had torn off of incoming mail (he would staple the stamps to the envelopes with salvaged old staples); he sifts through his collection of hotel soaps (at this point, his journey through junk has become gratuitous); he strokes his pile of half-used paper napkins (ah, if only used toilet paper weren't considered "dirty"); he gives a respectful nod to the black bananas that *will* be eaten (his word is his bond). Then he realizes that the cheese should be put in the refrigerator. He opens the fridge door, eyes the overdue milk that he plans on finishing off, and slides the cheese into a side-shelf. He comes back to the table and sits down. My brother and I had both been silently watching my father. My mother ate. My brother adjusted himself. He seemed uncomfortable. He looked down at his rice, which had gone from good and hot to lukewarm. He wanted to say something. Tears were in his eyes again. He had a hard time speaking to my father. "I," he said, and then stopped. My father stared at him without speaking nor making a gesture. "I," repeated my brother, "I didn't know all of that happened. war."

My father let my brother hang with his silence. My brother did not know what else to say, so he just continued, "I guess this is why we don't get an allowance, and all our clothes is bought from clearance racks. I'm the goofiest-looking guy in school, but I think I understand." There was a silence here. My father wanted to know what my brother was saying, what he meant. He wanted to tease out the good things my brother meant by his words. My father wanted to pat my brother on his shoulder or something, say something or do something to show that he appreciated my brother listening to him. But he saved his words and his pats and saved his outreaching and his father-son bond, just like he saved everything else. He didn't want to throw it away. He might need it for an emergency someday. So my father said nothing, cast no light and no shadow on his face, and sat down and lay his forearms in neutral parallel lines on the table.

"I guess this is why," says my brother, "you'll have to burn my comic book collection if I get a B in Biology. Wouldn't want me to waste my life enjoying living."

My father says nothing. He starts eating again. He's angry, but he won't waste his breath. He hates to repeat things, good things or bad.

Irvine Shiu

Son of Satan, the character, was born long ago, in the early 1970s. But the stories I love so much are happening right now in the 1980s. They are in *The Defenders* comic book, published by Marvel, and the relevant issues are something like #92 through #125. In the

classic issues leading up and including #100, the son of Satan along with his Defender friends must prevent his father from making Hell on Earth. I am the son of Satan. And like my fictional counterpart, I must do the same.

My parents are arguing. They are screaming in Chinese at each other. They are using the more sophisticated Chinese words that I cannot understand; I only understand my mother every once in a while saying with a sneer the word, "cheese." If I am going to act, I must act now.

Mr. Shiu

My wife is throwing food at me. I am picking some of it up from the floor, the stuff that is not terribly moist, and eating it. I wish my kids were out here to watch me. I teach by example. I want them to see that it's good to eat food from the floor. It has germs on it, and the germs help the body to build up resistance. And resistance is good.

Mrs. Shiu

I cannot tell you what we are arguing about because I don't even know. All I know is now my husband is rummaging through the drawers again, and now he has taken out a large knife. And now, the doorbell rings. My husband looks at me, and then, knife still in hand, he walks to the front door and throws it wide open. Wallace stands on our front stoop. Wallace!

"Uh, Li," Wallace says. He calls my husband by the first part of his first name, cutting off the second part.

"Wallace," says my husband, forgetting to call Wallace by his first name.

Wallace looks this way and that trying to adjust to being called by his surname. "Uh," he says, "what are you doing with the knife?"

My husband shakes his head, "What do you think I'm doing with this knife?" My husband turns his back on Wallace tells him the truth, "I'm going to cut the cheese." Wallace nearly falls off the front step. My husband, hearing Wallace stumble, turns around. "What are you doing here?"

"Somebody called me," says Wallace. "He said I had better come over."

"Well, come on in," says my husband. Wallace crosses the threshold. He is just a step behind my husband when my husband says, "I'm going to cut the cheese now. Do you want some?"

Wallace stops in his tracks. "Um, no."

"I'll give you some anyway."

Gregory Wallace

When Li says he's going to cut the cheese and give me some and I'm standing right behind him, I think it's some sort of Chinese tradition. So, I just hold my breath. Well, next thing I know, he's bringing a plate of sliced cheese out to the coffee table. Actually, that's what I thought he meant all along. We have a good laugh when we figure out that his son called me to break up a fight between Li and his wife. Ha! What a ballsy kid. I hope he doesn't get grounded for life.

They serve me some leftover pork dish. Boy, it is delicious. I ask for sweet and sour sauce, and they hand me their leftover sweet-and-sour packets they get when they order

C A L L A L O O

take-out. They say they never use them, and that they were saving them for just such an occasion. They laugh and look at each other as lovers often do.

Mrs. Shiu

After Wallace leaves, I am left with just these thoughts: I am not saying that wasting things is good or that saving everything is bad. But for heaven's sake, just do it for the kids. Waste a little. In this new world, they can't survive if they have to save their entire life.

Mr. Shiu

I have nothing more to say. I am spent.

Irvine Shiu

I thought that Wallace would vanquish Satan, but Satan welcomed him into his home. Our home. Satan was civil. In the following week, it was me who had to finish the cheese. Cheese ain't bad.

Berkeley Shiu

Sometimes saving is the same as not giving. But I don't believe in corny fortune cookies. I leave them at the restaurant. Cheese. I'm glad my brother ate it.