

Bird's Eye Chili

An old man is holding the hands of his two young grandchildren; they are making their way across a grassy field, looking for the best spot to plot down and commit to a nice afternoon picnic. Holding the man's right hand is Timothy, a skinny boy, age about eight or nine with hair slick to the right. Timothy had recently come across his father's comb and hair-wax due to hiding in the Master Bathroom during a game of hide-and-seek with his cousins. He had concluded that his father wouldn't miss it too much if he were to borrow it. Holding the man's left hand is Naomi, a year or two younger than her brother. Instead of walking, jumping forward every few seconds was Naomi's choice of transportation. She had recently learned in second-grade class that stepping on cracks breaks your mother's back, so the only logical thing to do would be to never walk to eliminate the chance of "stepping." Yes, this self-imposed rule extends to grassy fields in addition to sidewalks. Don't ask me, Naomi makes the rules. Her tiny jumps do not cover much distance but, luckily the old man's pace has slowed down throughout the years where they all could move-along together without much trouble.

"This seems like a fine enough spot for a picnic," said the old man. Timothy unravels a picnic blanket he'd been carrying. Timothy straightens out one side of the blanket while Naomi straightens out the other. The old man takes off the picnic basket, which he had been hanging on his right elbow, and starts unpacking the meal.

"What have you brought for us this week Grandpa?" inquired Timothy.

"Is it moosecake?" added Naomi.

"No nothing as fancy as moosecake, dear. For you Timothy, a smoked honey ham and bacon sandwich. Extra lettuce, hold the tomatoes. For you Naomi, a turkey breast sandwich with slices of gouda cheese. Cut diagonally, hold the bread crust. For your old grandpa, an American Classic, a BLT with extra B. Of course, we added bird's eye chili peppers to add some excitement to this old man's life. Finishing things off, some freshly cut apple slices for desserts."

The old man gave each one of them their respective sandwiches. The children stared longingly as their meal. Timothy closes the distance from his mouth and the sandwich. He stops before taking a bite.

"Grandpa, I think you might have dropped some of your peppers into my sandwich," said Timothy.

"Hey, mine too!" added Naomi.

"Oh, those aren't bird eye chili peppers. Those are your run-of-the-mill jalapenos. You kids probably need a few more years before you can hang around Grandpa's big leagues."

"But Grandpa, we don't like spicy foods!" exclaimed the children.

"Don't like spicy foods!?" replied the old man. "Why, no grandchildren of mine are going go through life without knowing the joy of spicy foods. The joy of your ears perking up as contact hit your first taste buds. The slow heat you feel beneath your skin building up as your face flushes red. The freedom of your sinuses freeing up; 'have they always been this clogged before' you'll start asking yourself. The faint yet palpable slaps to the face every bite you take."

"What are sinuses?" asked Naomi.

"I don't think I want to get slapped in the face," interjected Timothy.

“Kids, kids. You aren’t getting the message. It’s important that you guys enjoy spicy food.”

“Why is it important for us to enjoy spicy food?” asked Naomi.

“Yeah, I like meaty flavors way more!” exclaimed Timothy.

“Have I ever told you kids about the story of my first date with your Grandma?”

Chapter 1

"Mom, mom!" shouted a young boy, about 14 years old, as he enters his home and drops down his book bag. "Mom, do you know if we have any spicy food?"

"Spicy food? Why do you need spicy food Darren?" replied a woman in the kitchen blending up a smoothie for herself. On the kitchen table, an array of strawberries, bananas, raspberries, yogurt, milk, and ice are laid out. The woman has the radio on; jazz is playing. She has her curly brown hair tied up in a ponytail.

"I don't need to say. Just, please, tell me we have some spicy food in the house."

The woman cocks back her eyebrow. She's not going to let her son get away with it this easy.

"No explanation, no spicy food."

"Oh alright...but you have to promise not to tell dad."

"What did you do this time, Darren?"

"Mom, I'm not in trouble. I, well, I might have-"

"Darren, out with it."

"Okay, okay. I have a date for Friday night. Oh, by the way can you drop me off on a date Friday night?"

The woman sits down on the kitchen chair. The speed of her change from standing to sitting caused some of the fruits to roll off the table. She turns off the blender and pours herself and Darren a glass. She's all smiles now.

"Oh yeah? What's the girl's name? And wait, why do you need spicy food?"

"Her name's Sammi. For fourth period, my class is right in front of the room of her class and I'm always at the end of my line and she's always at the front of her line. She's super cool. She always talks about the coolest things with her friends."

"Like what?"

"Well, there's this thing called 'Chai Tea' - stop, we're getting sidetracked we have to focus here mom."

"Fine, continue on about your crush."

Darren palms his forehead for a second. His mom just stares, and slowly sips on her smoothie without breaking eye contact. Darren eventually unpalms his hand from his forehead.

"As I was saying, she always talks about cool things and today she was talking about how much she loved spicy foods. And...I might have said I loved spicy foods too."

"But you don't love spicy foods. In fact, you pick out the jalapenos and give them to me anytime there in whatever you're eating."

"Yeah, that's why by Friday I need to build up my tolerance enough to the point where I can eat spicy food in front of her without dying."

The woman sits up a little bit more intently. "Wow, you've certainly gotten yourself on an adventure and it's only the start of the week. What's the place you two are meeting up at on Friday?"

Darren sips his smoothie. "Why couldn't Sammi like sweet drinks instead of spicy food?" he thought to himself. "It's some place called Punjab Cafe."

"Oh, Punjab Cafe? That's a little bit pricey Darren. Are you sure you have enough money to take Sammi out on a date there?" asked the woman.

Darren gave his mom a sly smile. "Can I please also have ten dollars in addition to a ride mom?"

"Hm, I don't know...ten dollars is a lot of money..." To be honest, the woman was going to give her son the ten dollars as she was excited for her son's first date. At the moment though, she just enjoyed watching him squirm and be embarrassed. Hey, don't judge her too much - teenagers are brats the majority of times so you have to find pleasure anyway you can as a parent.

"Please mom, please! Do you know how bad it'll look if I go on a date with Sammi and I just watch her eat? She'll think I'm some sort of complete weirdo. She'll never agree to go out with me again."

"Okay, fine. I can't let my son be known as the weirdo who watches people eat, now can I? I'll tell you what, you can have fifteen dollars for your date."

"Wow mom, you're the bes-"

The woman cut off her son.

"Let me finish. You can have fifteen dollars for your date, as long as you let me tell your father."

Darren puts down his smoothie. His eyes are wide now. He looks directly at his mom and lets out a comically long "but mooooooooooooooooooooooooooom"

"Darren, fifteen dollars is a lot of money." Even back down it wasn't really but we'll let the woman antagonize his son for a bit. "And your dad and I created a partnership together when we got married. As part of a stable and honest partnership, I have to tell him if I spend or give away a *big* sum of money like *fifteen dollars*."

"Okay, fine. You can tell dad."

The woman pulls out fifteen dollars from her purse and hands it to her son. "I'm glad you can respect the sanctity of marriage, Darren," said the woman.

"Alright, now I still need to up my tolerance before Friday. Do we have any spicy food in the house?" asked Darren.

"Nope," replied the woman.

Darren shot a sly smile at his mom. "Can I borrow some more money to buy peppers from the market?" asked Darren.

The mom narrows her eyes. Darren follows suit, not breaking eye-contact. The woman pulls out another two dollars and slides it across the table.

"I won't tell dad about the two dollars if you won't" hackled Darren.

"Shut up, you're doing extra chores for the month," responded his mom. "Oh, and go to the store tomorrow after school. It's already getting too late today and your father will be back home for dinner anytime soon." Now it is the mom who is smiling again. "This will be an interesting dinner, won't it Darren?"

A few hours pass.

Darren comes downstairs for dinner. The kitchen table is now set with plates and utensils. It looks like the family is having spaghetti tonight. Darren grabs a seat between his mom and his dad. Darren wonders to himself if his mom had already spilled the beans to his

dad; she had. Darren's mother took the bowl of spaghetti and meatballs and plopped servings onto each of their plates.

"So, how was school today son?" asked Darren's father. Darren's father was wearing a short-sleeved white button-down shirt and a plain boring brown tie. In the man's pocket protectors were two pens, one blue and one black. The man was wearing large square-brimmed glasses which accentuated his bland demeanor. He had once explained to Darren what his job was but it was such a dry sounding career that for years Darren's brain would remember it as "something like IT or something." For anyone highly curious, Darren's father actually worked as a strategic health and safety regulations analyst at the company's properties, plant, and equipment disposal department.

"Oh, it was okay dad. Did you know they started putting letters in maths? They're calling it variables," replied Darren, hoping that the topic of Sammi would not be brought up.

"Oh honey, why don't you tell your father about your plans Friday with that nice girl Sammi?" added the woman.

"Girl? What's this about a girl?" asked the man.

Darren stabs a giant scoop of spaghetti and shoves it in his mouth. "Sorry, dad. Can't talk with my mouth full," mumbled Darren through his mouth full of food.

"Just finish your bite and tell us about the girl, son." suggested the man.

Darren, with food filling his cheeks, gave a defeated closed smile. He starts chewing the food in his mouth for a second, pauses and swallows, and then chews for a few more seconds. His dad reaches over to pour him a glass of water. Darren drinks some of the water to help him finish his chewing.

"Thanks for the water dad. Gee mom, that spaghetti and meatball was really good. Is it a new recipe?"

"Same recipe as it has always been dear."

"Huh, well ain't that something. I'm definitely noticing things about it that I never noticed before."

"Tell your father and I about your crush, Darren."

Darren relents that his parents are not going to drop this unless he gives them some information. Plus, he did get seventeen dollars earlier so he guesses he owes them some detail.

"Well, her name is Sammi. She has brownish skin and she's pretty tall for a girl I guess. She's like a straight-A student and all the teachers love her because she takes all the advanced classes."

"What's her favorite color son?" ask the man.

"Uh, I don't really know. I haven't really talked to her that much. Friday is our first date."

"Make sure you find out her favorite color and don't forget what it is. It's one of the ways to show women you pay attention to the little things. It impresses them, right honey?"

The woman thought to herself, "no woman is going to care that a man remembered their favorite color. Do people even really have favorite colors? Seems a little childish." She replied, "Uh, sure dear. Just for fun, why don't you explain my favorite color."

"It's obvious. It's green."

"Green?" asked the woman?

“Yeah. More specifically, seafoam green. You wore that seafoam green dress when I took you to prom so I figured that was your favorite color. And that’s why during college when your guitar broke, I bought you that seafoam green electric guitar.”

The woman took a second to internalize what her husband had said. She guesses she does have a favorite color after-all and that she did appreciate the man’s thoughtfulness. “Yeah, I guess pay attention to Sammi’s favorite color,” recommended the woman to Darren.

“So, what else do you know about this Sammi girl, Darren?” added the man.

“Oh, she likes spicy food,” responded Darren.

The man looks at his son. “Spicy food is bad for you son. It shortens your life. That’s why I don’t eat any sauce that’s red. If it’s red then that means it’s spicy.” After reading through numerous nutritional journals, I have concluded that the man’s claim that spicy food shortening one’s life is not substantiated.

“Dad, you’re literally eating red spaghetti sauce right now,” said Darren.

“Yeah, but spaghetti sauce isn’t spicy so it’s not really red,” replied the man. In all honesty, the man had partly forgot that some red sauces are in-fact not spicy but his son’s remark opened up an opportunity to make a dumb comment. Part of being a good father is adding dumb comments or dad jokes wherever you can.

After that last remark, the conversation shifted to other routine and mundane family dinner topics. As each member finished their plate, they moved to the living room to enjoy more family time. At some point, Darren goes back upstairs to his room. Tomorrow he would take the money he had gotten from his mother and bike straight to the grocery store after school to buy the hottest peppers he could find.

Chapter 2

It is afterschool and Darren is riding his red bicycle to a local grocery store. The bike had originally been blue but Darren had painted red because red bikes are faster. Darren locks his bicycle outside the grocery store and enters in. He walked through the isles and found ketchup, mustard, and barbeque sauce but no hot sauce whatsoever. He makes his way to the fresh produce section and starts scouting out for some spicy peppers. He passes cucumbers, carrots, apples, oranges, watermelons, strawberries, cabbages, tomatoes, and blueberries but no spicy peppers in sight.

"Excuse me Ma'am," Darren said to a nearby grocery worker. "Do you happen to know where the jalapenos are?"

"Oh, we don't carry any Jalapenos."

"What about Poblano peppers?"

"Po-what no, now?"

"Nevermind. What type of peppers do you guys actually have?"

"Well we got bell peppers."

"I can't train my spice tolerance on bell peppers!"

"Well we also got salt n' pepper."

Darren facepalmed and walked away dejected. He had failed. He was going to have to show up to his date a low spicy tolerance. He would have to order mild while Sammi orders extra spicy. She was going to judge him and his weak tongue. The date was going to be a disaster and he was going to die alone.

A finger tapped on the back of Darren's shoulder. He turns around and sees an old asian man.

"Hello young man," said the old asian man. "I couldn't help but overhear that you are looking for some...spicy peppers?"

"Uh, yeah. Would you happen to know where I can buy some?" asked Darren.

"Follow me to my shop and I will sell to you some spicy peppers," responded the old asian man.

Girls and Boys, I have to make sure that you are aware not to follow strangers. That's probably just generally a bad idea. Nevertheless, Darren agreed to follow the old man to his shop. In an effort to calm down anyone with anxiety reading this story, don't worry, nothing traumatic is going to happen to Darren by the end of this story besides eating some really hot peppers. Back to the story.

"Uh, sure. Where's your store sir?" asked Darren.

"It's about a fifteen minute bike ride away," responded the old man.

Darren and the old man exited the grocery store. Darren unlocked his bicycle. Conveniently, the old man had also come in on a bicycle and unlocked his as well. They rode together towards the old man's store. As they got further and further away from the grocery store, the surrounding area became more and more foreign to Darren. They passed stone statues of dog-looking lions. There were store vendors propping up stands outside of stores. They were selling things ranging from clothes, to produce, to electronics, to gemstones. Darren overheard a customer and a seller talking.

"I'll give you twelve dollars for this purse."

"Are you kidding me? This is an original. It's worth at least twenty dollars ."

"Highest I'll go is fifteen."

"Sold. No refunds."

Darren and the old man pulled into a store a few square feet larger than the rest of the stores. The old man pulled out a key and opened the door to the store. "Welcome to my shop," he said. "You can leave your bike in here. No point in locking it outside."

Darren followed the old man into the store and noticed a woody aroma with a hint of a floral undertone. The young boy noticed that the aroma was coming from some lit sticks in front of a three-level tower. Each level had different statues, each about a foot tall. At the floor level was sculptures of a monk on a white horse, a monkey-like humanoid with a staff, a pig-like humanoid with a rake, and a man with a red beard. The middle level of the tower had a statue of a woman in a white robe standing on a lotus flower. At the highest level is a green smiling bald guy with a big stomach. Somehow, the man's earlobes reached all the way to his shoulders.

"How come you have burning sticks in front of your action figures?" asked Darren, "and how come it smells so good?"

The old man had moved behind his counter during the time Darren was examining his store. "They're not 'burning sticks in front of action figures,' they're incense for deities," responded the old man. "The incense is used for prayer and to replace negative energy with positive energy. The deity at the top is the enlightened Buddha, the middle deity is the merciful Guanyin, and the deities at the bottom are from the Journey to the West."

"You mean like from Brooklyn to LA?"

"No...not like from Brooklyn to LA. You really never heard of Journey to the West?"

"The only religious story I know is The Ten Commandments. And that's only because it was airing on television one day. Man, that was the longest four hours of my life."

"Listen kid, the Journey to the West is an Asian classic. It's about a magic monkey who...on second thoughts if four hours is too long for you then maybe we should put a pin on this story. When you have a chance read it on your own. It has human-eating demons, dragons, magic martial arts, and somehow the main character gets immortality like five times or something."

Honestly though, you should read an abridged version of the Journey to the West. The Monkey-King could beat up Hercules, no problem.

"Cool," responded Darren. Darren looks around the store and notices dried roots and sealed containers on display. "Is this like a gardening store, mister?" asked Darren.

"Eastern medicine," responded the old man. "However, I grow some peppers that I sell as well. One thing I've learned since moving to the United States is that cuisines here are definitely lacking in the spicy factor."

"How come you moved to America?"

The old man brings out a jar of peppers from under the counter. "I suppose for the same reason any immigrant moves to America. A chance for a better life. An opportunity for their kids to have a brighter future. The American Dream, I guess."

"Oh that makes sense I guess. Mr. Thompson from History Class does say that American is the richest and most powerful nation in the world. It's natural for people to want to come over here."

“And when people come together they get to share stories, like Journey to the West, or tastes, like these hot peppers.” The old man slides the jar towards Darren’s side of the counter. “These are Bird’s Eye Chilli Pepper,” said the old man. “To be honest, they’re probably too spicy for you so slice up a pepper into tinier pieces and only eat a little at a time.”

Darren thought to himself, “I’m definitely not going to do that. I only have like three more days to build up my tolerance before dinner with Sammi.”

“Yeah sure,” replied Darren. Darren’s generally a good kid who listens. Nevertheless, there’s a part of every fourteen-year old boy that believes he’s invincible. We’re just going to have to let Darren learn the importance of adjusting to spicy food incrementally by himself.

“How much are you selling the jar for?” asked Darren.

“Six bucks,” responded the old man.

Darren did some quick math in his head. Seventeen minus six is eleven. Eleven is an unacceptable reserve for a first date.

“Highest I can do is two-fifty,” negotiated Darren.

The old man stared Darren down. Darren doesn’t flinch. “You’re a quick learner kid. But the lowest I can go is four bucks,” responded the old man.

“Oh okay. That sounds fair,” said Darren. Darren hands over four dollars to the old man and takes the jar of peppers.

“Deal, no refunds,” said the old man. “By the way I would have gone down to at least three dollars. Not quick enough of a learner yet I guess.”

“I guess you win this time sir,” said Darren.

“Call me Mr. Chin kid,” responded Mr. Chin. “And anytime you’re around China Town feel free to drop by for some tea.”

“Sounds good Mr. Chin,” said Darren. Darren puts the jar into his backpack and exits the store. He bikes his way back home.

Chapter 3

Darren arrived home and rushed upstairs to his room. He dropped his school bag onto his bed and took out the jar of peppers to examine. He took some of the peppers out and to be quite frank, he wasn't all that impressed - which really says something because fourteen year old boys are usually impressed by anything. One pepper was about half the size of his index finger. The peppers were bright red but instead of reminding Darren of something red-hot like his mother's temper when he brings home a bad grade from English class, they more resembled the red of a salad tomato or the red of the clown's nose hired for birthday parties. Darren brought the peppers closer to his nose to take a whiff. Again, nothing remarkable. It definitely wasn't one of those spicy smells where seconds after you inhale you started coughing. It had much more of an earthy smell which reminded Darren of hanging out at a garden or going on a hike. Darren gently put pressure on a pepper between his thumb and index finger. The texture felt spongy, like it could burst out liquid if pressed too hard. At the same time though, Darren was sure he could feel small bumps along the surface which he had assumed were the seeds.

Darren thought back to the warning Mr. Chin had given him. The smart thing would be to take things gradually and cut the pepper into tinier pieces. However, today is Tuesday and the date is on Friday. Quick maths shows us that Darren did not have the luxury of time for gradual progress. If the young boy wanted to build his spicy food tolerance in a short amount of time; nay, if he wanted to take his first real step into adulthood (*obviously*, the road to adulthood is paved with spicy intentions) then he would have to be bold and eat an entire pepper today. This was a stupid decision, but it was Darren's decision to make.

Laid out on Darren's desk was one pepper and a glass of ice water which Darren had poured for himself just in case. In actuality, Darren should have poured a glass of milk, gotten a scoop of ice cream, or slices of bread. You see, peppers contain a molecule called capsaicin which triggers receptors in your tongue into thinking signalling messages to your brain. The receptors are telling your brain, "hey buddy, I think I'm on fire?" In return, your brain tells you to stop eating that capsaicin-filled deathstick. Since capsaicin is oil-based, water would just spread the molecule around in your mouth rather than providing you that cool-like-a-penguin relief you probably were looking for. On the other hand, dairy products have proteins called casein which helps break down capsaicin molecules, and strachy foods can help physically block the capsaicin from your receptors - anyways, back to Darren.

With the pepper in one hand, the glass of water in another, and a determined face; Darren puffed up his chest and shoved the pepper into his mouth and started chewing. Within the first few bites, the pepper bursts and seeds exploding everywhere in Darren's mouth. Darren chewed for a few seconds more. He quickly felt heat surrounding his mouth and the back of his throat. Liquid started filling up his eyes, and then dripping down his nose. Pain, pain, and then more pain. Darren started trying to drown the sensation with the glass of water he had but the second he swallowed the water, the pain returned. Was this really just spicy food, or did the pepper somehow activate miniature super-volcanoes hiding within each of the cells of Darren's tongue. He gulped down another mouthful of water desperate to subside the pain. Foolish boy you are in another domain now, a domain of endless nightmares and seething agony. Darren's face started sweating, and then also started feeling numb. Darren could no

longer bear the pain. He had now understood why Mr. Chin had given him the warning. Putting aside his pride, he opened his mouth as wide as possible and bellowed out, "Mom!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The woman scoops another chunk of ice cream into two bowls, one for herself and one for Darren. Still drenched in sweat from the pepper, Darren grabbed a spoon and started coating his tongue. "Thanks mom," said Darren. After some time Darren's mouth began returning to normal, and soon Darren found himself just enjoying dessert with his mom.

"Looks like you were in some serious pain," said the woman. "What type of peppers did you end up buying from the grocery store?"

"The grocery store actually didn't have any spicy peppers. But this old man had some so I bought it from him."

"What?" inquired the woman.

"What?" responded Darren.

"There was a random old man selling peppers at the grocery store?"

"No, of course not. The peppers were at his store about a 10 minute bike ride away."

"Darren - you followed a random man you didn't know to a location you didn't know to buy something you would later ingest?"

"Mom, if you say it like that you can make anything sound bad." Darren thought for a second, "on second thought, let's not tell dad about this."

On average, I wonder how many times a parent would look into their kid's eyes and think to themselves, "wow, my kid is an imbecile." For the case of Darren's mother, this may be the first time she had this thought.

"We'll tell your dad you just got these from the grocery store. But if you make a habit of blindly following strangers then I'll become a helicopter parent just to make sure you're a recipient of the Charles Darwin award. Don't make me be a helicopter parent, Darren. I have too much of a life to be one."

Darren promised his mom he would be more aware of stranger-danger from now on.

"So, did you at least like the taste of the pepper?"

"It was okay. To be honest, I couldn't really focus on the flavor while my tongue was on fire."

"Well, it's nice you're trying new things and broadening your horizons. What's your plan till Friday? Are you still going to eat more of those peppers daily until your date?"

Darren took another bite of ice cream and paused. He tried to decipher what type of fondness people derived from experiencing spicy food; however, as he tried to be open minded about his own experience a couple of minutes ago, the juxtaposition of intense discomfort from earlier with the joy of the ice cream he currently is eating seems to point to a clear result - ice cream is a lot funner to eat than spicy peppers. Still, his heart was like a hawk which spotted a rabbit as a prize; he cannot let himself give up on his quest to conquer spicy food before Friday.

"I think I'll probably cut up the peppers into smaller pieces but I'm still going to eat some more before Friday," responded Darren.

"Wow, you must really be smitten by this girl," said the woman. "How much more peppers do you have?"

"Quite a lot."

"If you don't plan on eating them all for your training, why don't you give me some to use. I can make some into chili powder and make some buffalo wings for dinner tonight," suggested the woman.

"That sounds great, but are you sure dad will be up for spicy buffalo wings? It seems like he really hates spicy food," replied Darren.

"Don't worry about that. Like yourself, your dad will go to great lengths to impress the woman of his dreams."

Another evening, another family dinner.