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illustrations by Joe Di Vincenzo

I was greeted at the door by two firmly cheerful ladies who reminded me of the elders who used to welcome people at the entrances of churches on Sunday mornings. It was Sunday afternoon, however, and the ladies were presiding over tables in a large rented room in a New York hotel. A few women were seated down in front, before what ought to have been a pulpit but was in fact a bandstand with a set of silver drums and a piano. I was not deceived, though. I am from a long line of churchgoers, and I know a churchy atmosphere when I see it.

I took a seat at the side. A silver-haired, substantial, Methodist-looking man was up in front talking about protein. The audience kept drifting in and the room was filling up. Three quarters of them were old, and about two-thirds were women. They looked well-dressed and healthy, though worried around the edges.

"Will someone tell me some other members of the cabbage family?" asked the speaker.

"Broccoli! Cauliflower! Brussels Sprouts!" The audience rejoined listlessly.

The audience is used to being an audience. They have sat on hard chairs many hours during their lives, listening to one speaker or another. They arrange themselves for listening. They respond when a response seems to be wanted, but they buzz a little, knowing that the man up in front is really filling time before the main speech of the day.

The speaker's voice rises easily above the buzz as he describes various

forms of vegetarianism. He himself is a middle-of-the-road vegetarian, which means that he eats dairy products and cooks his vegetables instead of eating them raw. Vegans, who are all-the-way vegetarians, won't eat or use any animal product at all, including fur, leather and wool.

"I won't eat anything which could run away," says the speaker.

Live and let live.

Someone in the audience wants to know where she can get a good salt-free cheese, and the next five minutes is taken up with people getting the name and address straight. There are great numbers of people who refuse to believe that Kutter is spelled K-u-t-t-e-r until someone says so three or four times.

"What nutritional elements are found in the skin of the peanut?" asks a stout, gray-haired woman down front. "I mean that papery brown skin which is under the shell. Should this skin be eaten?"

I look around the room like any bored church-goer, studying the congregation, and I wonder why there are so many fur hats here. And also: should a vegetarian have a big stomach?

"I really don't know what's in it," says the speaker, in regard to peanut skin. "what nutritional elements, if any."

A few elderly people have dozed off. An old man near me is lolling dangerously in his chair, emitting small rhinoceros snorts from time to time.

"I don't think there's any reason not to eat it," the speaker continues recklessly. "I would say—go ahead!"

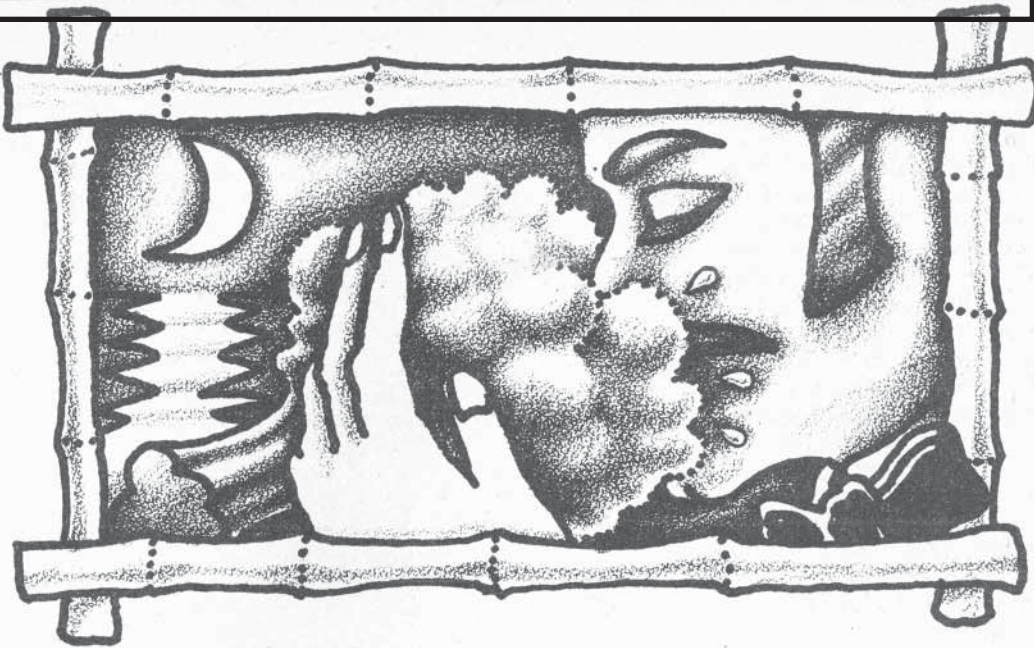


A new speaker comes on. We are all cheered. He is about 35, though he has an off-beat face which doesn't tell age, and he wears a cheerful jumble of clothes — and a medallion around his neck. He looks like the first affirmative speaker on a college debate team—clean-cut, good looking, glib, and slightly counterfeit. But what matters is that he has whatever it is that good speakers have and we can wake up for a while.

This speaker is a Vegan, and was brought up as one by his parents. He has never eaten an egg in his life; his clothes are made of chemicals, his shoes are not leather. His wife also is a Vegan, and their children are being brought up as Vegans. I have a picture of them as a poster sort of family—like the family that Prays Together and Stays Together. He himself must be sort of a landmark, for there can't be too many second-generation Vegans.

He is well-known to many people in the room. Someone down in front apparently makes a pleasantry about his clothing, for he laughs and moves to one side of the speaker's stand, to show his outfit.

"Someone asked me if I was really



going to address such a large and important gathering as this one dressed like this—and I said, this is the way I always dress. This coat is cotton and I've had it for six years. The pants are of some man-made cloth—I'm not so knowledgeable about these things as some of you ladies are—and I don't know how long I've had them. Maybe a couple of years. But why should I buy something new? I've already got more clothes than I need. Most of us do. I think we all should make our lives more simple, and clothing is a good place to begin. Some older, more conservative people might look askance at it, but it's me. Love me, put up with my clothes!"

He pauses to let some late-comers settle themselves, and then starts in again. He says, "What is Veganism? It is vegetarianism carried to its logical extremes. Vegetarianism as a complete way life. A Vegan does not take animal life in any form. He does not eat eggs or dairy products. He does not kill animals for their fur or for their skins. He does not believe that animals should be martyrs to so-called scientific experiments. He has a great reverence for *life*. Animal life or human life in every form. A respect and reverence and love for life. A feeling of loving kinship for our lesser brothers and sisters of the animal world. . . ."

We listen. We are in sympathy. I look at a lady with a fur hat and fur stole. The stole slides off her lap. she retrieves it. Her mild and pleasant features register interest and agreement.

" . . . Man must lift his behavior out of the jungle of selfishness. And knowing the truth is not enough. We

must know it in our hearts and live it. We must listen to that small still voice within us which is so often the voice of truth. I received a letter recently from a young man who wanted to know if he could be deferred from the draft because he would be served meat in the messhalls. Here is a young man, a vegetarian, who would not kill a lamb and yet has not asked himself whether or not he should kill people!"

These are appealing sentiments. All over the hall, heads nod "yes" . . . "yes" . . . "yes."

My head is nodding yes along with the others. Yet, though I like listening to a good speaker, I put more faith in a bad one. This Vegan reminds me of Little David, a young evangelist who converted (temporarily) a number of people in my home town years ago, before he moved on to greener pastures. The way he talks . . . "Those whose hearts have turned to stone won't read this. Those who are frivolous and foolish won't heed this. Those who. . . ."

It is a preacher's style. And how peculiar his English is. Dusty relics like "down the pike" and "whited sepulchres." His slang — "get up and go" and "pardon the French" — goes back two generations. Where has he been all this time? Maybe this Vegan is older, and even healthier, than he looks.



The main speaker of the day is Miss W, an elderly woman who runs a sort of vegetarian retreat in New England where one can stay for a few days or weeks, enjoying the company of fellow vegetarians and eating meals which consist entirely of Live

Food. This term, Live Food, at first made me imagine a herd of vegetarians grazing through fields and hedges, eating food as it grows, or climbing trees to sink their teeth into unplucked apples. It also made me think of an article I once read which theorized that plants are much more complex and sensitive than we suppose. In a remote corner of my mind I hear a carrot—screaming. But I learn now that Live Food means uncooked food, and this is what Miss W's guests eat, in the big old house in New England. In addition to the usual raw vegetables, there are sprouts of different kinds and wheatgrass, grown on the premises in big trays. Wheatgrass can be eaten as is, or made into chlorophyll juice.

Miss W hops — quite agilely — to the platform. She is old, but she seems in good trim. She has a pink, pleasant face, a broad brow, and, behind her glasses, mild and intelligent eyes. The audience greets her with enthusiastic applause. To my embarrassment, she responds by kissing her hand to them — throwing kisses left, right and center. Then she suggests that after so much listening the audience might like to stand up and stretch. Suddenly all those mostly gray-haired people are stretching their arms, shaking their hands around, flexing their legs, shrugging their shoulders. Miss W waits patiently, looking sympathetic. She is used to old people and circulation problems.

Miss W is no speaker — at least, nothing like the Vegan and not even so authoritative as the Methodist — but people listen. Either because they really want to know what she has to say, or because they like her. She is likeable.

Gazing in a kindly fashion over the audience, and speaking in a rather soft voice, she talks a bit about Live Food and the benefits to health and happiness experienced by those who have taken it up. Then she gets on to the particular business of the day, which is a new book she has written called *Our Precious Pets*. It is a book of advice on animal care, including (according to the printed blurb) instructions on how to select the right pet by astrology and numerous animal stories "to delight young and old." And, says the blurb, the reader will be pleased immeasurably by the intimate accounts relating to woolly monkeys. Miss W has a pet monkey named Precious.

At this point I stop paying attention, because I am turned off by pets and also by astrology. I am over 30, and like many people of my age, I associate astrology with elderly aunts, tea leaves, ouija boards and tall dark men who might or might not enter my life.

Miss W has got several big trays of vegetation set out on the platform. One is wheatgrass, another is sunflower sprouts. The audience is invited to try them, and I join a crowd of ladies who are milling around the speaker's stand. Miss W wields a large pair of scissors, snipping off handfuls of green stuff. I try the wheatgrass. It tastes . . . like grass. It requires a lot of chewing, and I am not surprised to learn that old people whose teeth are not up to it run theirs through the blender.

Meanwhile I am in the middle of a weird scene. All over the room people are chewing grass. A hundred or more middle-aged and elderly women have got handfuls and paper platefuls of shaggy green stuff. They look thoughtful, though perhaps it is only the boredom of chewing and chewing. Grass is very durable stuff.

It's also hard to hold. Portly ladies have wheatgrass spilled down their

substantial fronts and laps. It is like Easter morning, with all that green stuff strewn around. Some ingenious vegetarian will have to design new utensils, and add a chapter to the etiquette books, *How to Cope Gracefully with Grass*.

I listen to people talking.

One lady says, "Well, yes, you can buy a lot of carrots for fifty or sixty dollars, but after all you get your room and board, and where else could you find such an economical vacation?"

Someone else says, "My husband thinks I'm crazy, but you feel so good. I just never felt better in my life than I did when I was there."



Two other people have given speeches this afternoon. One was Miss W's business manager, who looked and sounded pretty much like a business manager, and the other was her assistant, a young man who does the cooking. This young man left his job teaching math in a college to join the Live Food people. He said later that he eats nothing but twelve oranges a day, so it is not surprising that he is very very thin. He wears glasses which magnify his eyes. His speech is a torrent of words and disconnected ideas which come from his head and from a collection of cards and clippings which he unearths from his pockets. He is a mass of jittery energy. He laughs when no one else thinks anything is funny, and he makes the audience very nervous. Old ladies blink, gape, and turn to their neighbors for enlightenment (What is he saying? What should I think?). There was one story in particular which left the audience very doubtful — a story about a man who ate his food so hot that he gradually cooked his own stomach.

"Cooked his own insides," chortled the speaker, merrily. "Yes! His stom-

ach was as hard as a football! Ha! Ha! HA!"

He is against hot foods because they destroy enzymes and toughen the stomach to a point, he says, where it cannot absorb nutrients. He has written a cookbook which will be published soon called *Survival into the 21st Century and Beyond*, containing 200 recipes for raw and transition food preparations (20% are cooked). Take the Die out of Diet, says the brochure.



They look pretty harmless, taken all in all. Tranquil and sane. A middle middle assortment of humans, with few mental quirks except eating grass. Maybe what I see before me is a group of people with under-developed ids. This could be the common factor here. They do not think their own appetites justify the death of a cow. Nor even, in advanced cases of self deprecation, the egg of a chicken.

However — never fear — ego is not dead among vegetarians. Many of them are in it because it makes them look so fit. They are first cousins to the weightlifters and the sunbathers. Do not go gentle into that good night.

The speaker seems to be a good Food Fixer — I am looking for terms other than "cook," since all the food is raw. He and some helpers have been setting out food on tables at the other side of the room. All you can eat for one dollar, and there are a dozen or so different dishes. People heap their plates with fantastic amounts of food. And come back for seconds. It is a hungry crowd. Chomp chomp chomp. They're going to gobble it all up, a mountain of food.

Surrounded by people eating, I am suddenly tired of food. I collect my things and start for the door. The vegetarians hardly notice me. Chomp chomp, gobble, gobble. The vegetarians will survive; they may even prevail.

