

JESSE
EISENBERG

Bream
gives
me
hiccups
& other stories

‘ Brilliantly witty, deeply intelligent, and just plain hilarious.’

SHERMAN ALEXIE

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also by **JESSE EISENBERG**

The Revisionist: A Play

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Acknowledgments

BREAM
GIVES ME
HICCUPS

I.

BREAM GIVES ME HICCUPS

RESTAURANT REVIEWS FROM A PRIVILEGED NINE-YEAR-OLD



SUSHI NOZAWA

Last night, Mom took me to Sushi Nozawa, near Matt's house. Except she didn't let Matt come with us and I had to leave in the middle of my favorite show because Mom said we would be late for our reservation and that I didn't know who she had to blow on to get the reservation.

At the front of Sushi Nozawa is a mean woman. When I asked Mom why the woman is so angry, Mom said it's because she's Japanese and that it's cultural. The woman at school who serves lunch is also mean but she is not Japanese. Maybe it's just serving food that makes people angry.

Sushi Nozawa does not have any menus, which Mom said made it fancy. The Sushi chef is very serious and he stands behind a counter and serves the people whatever he wants. He is also mean.

The first thing they brought us was a rolled-up wet wash-cloth, which I unrolled and put on my lap because Mom always said that the first thing I have to do in a nice restaurant is put the napkin in my lap. But this napkin was hot and wet and made me feel like I peed my pants. Mom got angry and asked me if I was stupid.

The mean woman then brought a little bowl of mashed-up red fish bodies in a brown sauce and said that it was tuna fish, which I guess was a lie because it didn't taste like tuna and made me want to puke right there at the table. But Mom said that I had to eat it because Sushi Nozawa was "famous for their tuna." At school, there is a kid named Billy who everyone secretly calls Billy the Bully and who puts toothpaste on the teacher's chair before she comes into the classroom. He is also famous.

Mom said they have eggs so I asked for two eggs, but when the mean woman brought them, they didn't look like eggs; they looked like dirty sponges and I spit it out on the table in front of Mom, who slammed her hands on the table and made the plates rattle and so I got scared and spit out more sponge on Mom's hands and Mom yelled at me in a weird whispery voice, saying that the only reason she took me to the restaurant is so that Dad would pay for it. Then I started crying and little bits of the gross egg came out of my nose with snot and Mom started laughing in a nice way and gave me a hug and told me to be more quiet.

The mean woman brought me and Mom little plates of more gross fish bodies on rice. I asked Mom to take off the fish part so I could eat the rice. Mom said, "Great,

more for me,” and ate my fish. I like rice because Mom said it’s like Japanese bread but it has no crusts, which is good for me because I don’t eat crusts anyway. I also like it when Mom says “Great, more for me” because it seems like that is her happiest expression.

When the woman brought the bill, Mom smiled at her and said thank you, which was a lie, because Mom hates when people bring her the bill. When Mom and Dad were married, Mom would always pretend like she was going to pay, and when Dad took the bill, which he always did, she said more lies like, “Are you sure? Okay, wow, thanks, honey.” Now that Dad doesn’t eat with us anymore, maybe I should pretend to take the bill from Mom and say a lie like, “Oh, really? Okay, thanks, Mom,” but I don’t because lies are for adults who are sad in their lives.

The mean woman took the bill back without saying thank you. I guess she is not sad. But she is definitely angry.

I understand why the people who work here are so angry. I guess it’s like working at a gas station, but instead of cars, they have to fill up people. And people eat slowly and talk about their stupid lives at the table and make each other laugh, but when the waiters come by, the people at the table stop laughing and become quiet like they don’t want to let anyone else know about their great jokes. And if the waiters talk about their own lives, they’re not allowed to talk about how bad it is, only how good it is, like, “I’m doing great, how are you?” And if they say something truthful like, “I’m doing terrible, I’m a waiter here,” they will probably get fired and then they will be even worse. So it’s probably always a good idea to talk about things happily. But sometimes that’s impossible. That’s why I’m giving Sushi Nozawa 16 out of 2000 stars.

MASGOUF

Last night, Mom took me to a new restaurant called Masgouf. Mom said that it was an Iraqi restaurant and that we had to go because we are open-minded people and we should support it. I thought it was weird though because Matt's brother is in the army in the real Iraq and their car says support the troops. So it kind of felt like we were supporting the restaurant instead of Matt's brother.

Mom said that all the women in her book club already went to the restaurant, but I didn't know why that meant we had to go to the restaurant too. And I don't know why Mom is even in the book club, because she doesn't read any of the books and, on the nights before the book club meetings at our house, she says "fuck" a lot and asks me to look on Wikipedia. Then I have to read the plot synopsis and major characters to her while she vacuums, which is hard because the vacuum is really loud and I have to follow her around the house holding my computer and reading.

The first weird thing I noticed when I walked into Masgouf is that a lot of the people eating there were wearing big black face masks so you can only see their eyes. Mom said to me kind of disappointedly that she was hoping there would be more people who "look like us." But I said that we don't know what those people look like because they're hiding in the masks. Then Mom elbowed me in the neck, which is what she does when I say things that are either too loud or too quiet or if I'm laughing.

When Mom looked at the menu she said, kind of quietly under her breath, "Figures, it's fucking dry." I'm not sure what she meant by that but I think it has something to do with alcohol, because whenever Mom opens a menu, the first thing she does is look at the alcohol and breathe a sigh of relief.

Mom said that she would order for both of us and that we should share, which she usually says when she doesn't think the food will be good. When the woman came over to take the order, Mom looked at her like she was kind of a homeless person and said, "And where are you from?" When the woman said, "Iraq," Mom said, "Oh, beautiful, what city?" Then the woman said, "Baghdad," and Mom said, "Aww," as though the woman was crying, but the woman wasn't crying, she was smiling. So I looked up at the woman and I smiled very big to show her that I was not always on Mom's side, but when the woman saw me smiling she made a weird face like I was making fun of her, which I wasn't. Then Mom kicked me under the table and my leg

hurt for the rest of the night and a little bit the next morning, which is today.

The first thing the woman brought us was a weird pile of rice on a plate and a big bowl of soupy-looking eggplant in a red sauce. I could tell Mom got a little nauseous by it but she smiled at the woman and said, “Wow. Traditional! Can’t wait to dig in!” But I could tell that Mom was lying because when the woman walked away, Mom took a little bite of it, just with the front of her teeth, and then flared her nostrils like she wanted to puke right there at the table. Then she said, “Sweetie, I think you’ll like this. Why don’t you try it,” so I knew she must not have liked it. Then Mom poured the eggplant stuff onto the rice and kind of moved it around the plate to make it look like we had eaten it.

Then the woman brought us the other dish, which was a chicken shish kabob with French fries. The French fries just tasted like French fries, even though they didn’t have ketchup, and the chicken shish kabob just tasted like regular chicken. When Mom and I tasted how normal it was, we looked at each other in a relieved way, like we were Matt’s brother and we had just come back from Iraq.

On the way home, Mom called all the women in her book club to tell them that we went to Masgouf. She lied the whole time, telling them how nice it was to spend some alone time with me and how interesting it was to see all the Iraq people in their black face masks, and that she didn’t even think about Dad’s new girlfriend one time during the fun and tasty dinner. When Mom lies, she doesn’t just say things she doesn’t mean, she says the *opposite* of the things she *does* mean. And probably most children would be angry at their moms for lying so much, but for some reason it just makes me feel sad for her.

When we got home I read Mom the plot synopsis for *Wuthering Heights* while she vacuumed in her underwear. Then Mom said her stomach kind of hurt and I thought that mine did too. So Mom and I both went to separate bathrooms and didn’t come out for a long time. That’s why I’m giving Masgouf 129 out of 2000 stars.

THE WHISKEY BLUE BAR AT THE W HOTEL

Last night, Mom took me to a bar called the Whiskey Blue Bar, which sounds like a fun blue place but is actually a scary dark place where drunk people wear lots of makeup and pretend like they're happy by talking loudly.

Mom had a date with a guy she called her "Widower Friend." "Widower" means your wife died and "Friend," when Mom says it about a man, means someone rich who Mom is trying to marry. I never get to go on dates with Mom, but Mom wanted me to meet her Widower Friend because she wanted to show him what a good mom she can be to his two daughters, who no longer have a mother.

The Widower Friend didn't know I was coming when he asked to meet Mom at the Whiskey Blue Bar, and since I am not old enough to go to a bar, Mom said that we had to pretend to be staying at the W Hotel. I told Mom that I didn't want to lie to the hotel people, but Mom said it was okay in this case because it was just a white lie, which I guess is a lie that white people are allowed to say without feeling guilty.

Since Mom wanted to show the man how good she was with children, I knew she would be nice to me the whole night, and when the man walked in, Mom put her arm around me, which felt strange because she never does that and I never noticed how cold and bony her hands are.

When we all sat down, the man said, "Didn't know you'd be taking your son here." And Mom squeezed my shoulder again and said, "I just can't bear to be away from this guy. I love kids." I knew that Mom was going to lie about liking children but I thought she would probably think of a more creative way to do it.

The waitress came to our table and knelt down in a weird way like she wanted to show us her breasts. She was wearing a short black skirt and was really beautiful, except up close. She said, "What can I get you folks tonight?"

Mom said that she wanted a Strawberry Mojito and asked the Widower Friend in a kind of babyish voice, "Is that totally girly of me?" The Widower Friend smiled and blushed in a way that made me think he would have preferred to actually be on a date with a young girl instead of an old woman doing a baby voice. Then the Widower ordered his drink in a really serious voice, like it was important to get all the details right: "Dry Tanq Martini. Twist of lemon. Stirred. Don't bruise the gin." The waitress nodded very seriously and I suddenly thought that it was so strange to have a place

that just makes drinks. Since they only sell one thing, they have to take it very seriously, and I guess no one ever tells them that what they're doing is not an important job.

Then the waitress showed me her breasts and asked, "And what can I get for you, little man?" Mom asked the waitress to make me a Shirley Temple, which I didn't want because it's named after a dead little girl named Shirley, but I decided not to say anything. Then Mom said, "Mix it weak, he's driving tonight." And the three adults laughed even though Mom's joke was a lie and also not funny.

When the drinks came, Mom finished hers kind of too quickly and ordered another one. The man sipped his slowly, which meant he probably didn't like Mom, and I just tried to fish out the cherry from the bottom of my drink because I was hungry.

The more Mom drank, the more she asked about the Widower's wife. I could tell that he didn't want to talk about his wife because he would change the subject, but Mom said weird things like, "Did Debbie ever try Cedars-Sinai Hospital? Because my friend Joyce is an amazing endocrinologist over there." I think Mom just wanted to show the man that she had a friend who was an important doctor, but because the wife had already died it seemed like a weird thing to say. The man seemed a little surprised, and I thought that maybe he was trying not to cry, and then he said kind of quietly, "We never tried Cedars-Sinai."

Normally Mom would be embarrassed for saying something so dumb, but because she was drunk, she didn't realize that she made the man upset. So instead of apologizing, Mom said, "I've been friends with Joyce since college. She's brilliant. And actually very well-read." The man just nodded.

Mom said she had to go "freshen up," which meant she had to go poop because alcohol makes Mom poop, and she left me alone with the guy. It was a little strange to be alone with him because I think he didn't really like that I was on his date. And then I couldn't stop thinking about his dead wife either and I just tried to not say anything about it, but I got so nervous that I said, "I'm sorry that your wife died from cancer." I knew it was the wrong thing to say but I couldn't get it off my mind and sometimes accidents happen even with talking. He said, "Thanks." And then Mom came back and I could tell that she must have pooped a lot because her face seemed relaxed.

When Mom sat down she said, "Ready for round three, Mr. Mister?" which meant she wanted to drink more alcohol with the man, but I could tell that the man just wanted to go home. I also wanted to go home but I knew that Mom wanted to stay so I didn't say anything. But the man looked at his watch and said something like, "I'd love to stay, but the girls are probably up worrying about me," which seems like something a normal parent would say, especially since his girls don't have a mom. This made me like the Widower Friend.

The man walked us to our car and gave Mom a hug, which Mom kind of held for a long time even though the man tried to pull away.

On the way home, I could tell that Mom was upset with the date and that maybe she thought it was partly my fault. I could also tell that Mom was drunk because she was driving all over the highway and we almost got into an accident with a man who rolled down his window and yelled at Mom in Spanish. Then Mom yelled something mean about Mexican people and I started to cry because the man kept yelling and it

scared me even though I couldn't understand the words he was saying. Sometimes the things that are scariest are the ones you don't understand. That's why I'm giving the Whiskey Blue Bar 136 out of 2000 stars.

TCBY

Last night, Mom let me choose a restaurant and I chose TCBY, which stands for The Country's Best Yogurt. I know you're not supposed to brag and it's wrong to say that you have the best yogurt in the country, but Mom always says if you want something hard enough, you can get it. And since TCBY wants to have the best yogurt so much that they made it their name, maybe they do have the best yogurt.

Mom also let me take a friend and I chose Matt, who now likes to be called Matthew. Mom always calls Matthew my "little friend," which seems strange because Matthew's taller than me. He's also taller than Mom and I think she doesn't like him, but I think that's just because Matthew and I have a good friendship and Mom doesn't have any real friendships and Dad hates her and he said so in front of me two separate times before he left.

When I asked if we could pick up Matthew on the way to TCBY, Mom sighed loudly and said, "It would be easier for everyone involved if he just met us there." I thought it was a strange thing to say because the only people involved were us and Matthew and he lives on the way to TCBY. But I didn't argue and Matthew rode his bike and met us in the parking lot.

When Mom and I saw Matthew, he ran up to us and gave us both a hug, which is something Matthew has started doing a lot. I like it because I like when people hug me, but Mom kind of pulled back because she's not used to people touching her because no one ever does.

TCBY has a lot of flavor options, which makes me think they're really trying hard to be the best. I wanted Mom and Matthew to think that I made a good choice in going to TCBY so I said, "Wow, look at how many different flavors they have," and then Mom said in a sarcastic voice, "Thou doth protest too much, TCBY!" and Matthew and I looked at each other like we were trying not to laugh because what Mom said made no sense.

Matthew ordered a Mountain Blackberry Yogurt. He said that he got it because it's the most interesting color, which is a kind of light purple, but which Matthew called "mauve." "Mauve" is a word I never heard before and hearing new words is one of the reasons I like Matthew. When I asked why he didn't get the flavor he liked the most, he said he thought that all the flavors probably tasted the same and so it was best to get

something that was “pretty to look at.” Mom rolled her eyes two times: when Matthew said “mauve” and when Matthew said “pretty to look at.”

The woman behind the counter asked Matthew what he wanted for toppings and he said Blueberries and Cherries. And then the woman said, “You just want two fruits?” Then Mom said, “Yup! Two fruits for my two little fruits!” And then Mom laughed in a cackling way that made everyone uncomfortable. When Mom finally stopped laughing, she said, “Sorry, I just couldn’t help myself,” and then we felt uncomfortable again.

When the woman asked me what I wanted, I decided to get the same thing as Matthew because he thought about his order in such an interesting way.

Mom ordered a cup of Dutch Chocolate Yogurt and asked if the chocolate was really shipped in from the Netherlands. The girl said she didn’t know but that she could check. Then Mom told her not to bother and said that she’d get a cup of Dutch Chocolate because it’s “so decadent.” But I could tell by the way that Mom asked about the Netherlands and how she said “so decadent” that she was making fun of TCBY for being not fancy, but the girl behind the counter didn’t know Mom’s sense of humor so she said something real like, “It’s one of our classic flavors.” And Mom said, “Oh, it sounds like a *real classic*.”

When the woman asked if Mom wanted toppings, Mom said, “Oh boy! Where to begin? What does your sommelier think of the Butterfinger Pieces?” But since the woman didn’t realize Mom was making fun of TCBY, she said, “Butterfinger Pieces are really popular.” Mom said, “Oh, I’ll bet,” and laughed again.

Then Matthew and I looked at each other in a secret way because we thought it was weird how two people could have the same conversation but one of them is making fun of it and the other one is taking it seriously. It also made me feel bad for the TCBY woman because she didn’t know she was being made fun of by Mom, which is sadder than someone who does know they’re being made fun of because at least those people can fight back.

After a few bites of the Mountain Blackberry Yogurt, I got brain freeze and it hurt really bad. Mom said that brain freeze is not a real thing and that I should stop complaining, but Matthew told me to relax and to put my tongue to the roof of my mouth and lick. He demonstrated by showing me his tongue licking the roof of his mouth and then he put my head back and told me to open my mouth. But when I opened my mouth with my head back, Mom got really frantic and said, “Jesus Christ, you two, get a room!”

Mom ate a few bites of her yogurt, which had a lot of Butterfinger Pieces on it, but I could tell that she didn’t like it, which I kind of expected because she ordered almost all of it sarcastically. At first I felt bad for Mom that she was eating something she didn’t like, but then I realized that Mom could have gotten what me and Matthew got, which was delicious and pretty to look at. Instead, she chose to be mean and that’s why she got something disgusting.

In a way, Matthew is a lot like TCBY. A few weeks ago, right after he changed his name from Matt to Matthew, he started calling me his best friend. I thought it was strange at first because I didn’t consider him my best friend. I liked Todd and Cara as much as I liked Matthew. But the more Matthew *called* me his best friend the more I actually *felt* like his best friend and the more I liked him and the less I liked Todd and