**Warm Buns**

Nova Loverro

Two months into the lockdown, we ordered out. The delivery girl showed up at our front door, wearing frayed shorts, cut from Levi 501 Classics, a tight red t-shirt revealing a Raven tattooed on her left bicep, her high-top sneakers laced loosely around her smooth calves. She spoke with a southern sing-song accent, the words, “Fresh and Hot. Special delivery for you Mr. Martin, from Mulligan’s Pub,” crystal clear, even from beneath her bandana mask.

Remembering, my husband pulled the tiger stripped cloth up over his own face and shifted his weight side to side, standing taller, I thought, as he sniffed deeply the tangled scent of food and youthful hormones.

We’d been cooped up too long, inside our high-rise, looking down upon Madison Avenue eight stories below. An occasional bus stopped at the corner, and we’d watch as faceless people would exit, dodging others who passed. We became skeptical of others. Even Charlie and I had forgotten how to look into each other’s eye, often glancing away when we spoke. Heads bowed, we moved about our small one-bedroom apartment, mumbling to our ourselves with monotone voices.

When the buzzer sounded, I jumped and hid behind the gold foyer wall, the one with the mirror on it, and peeked out, observing the delivery girl.

She was what some would refer to as “a sweet young thing,” looking simultaneously naïve and seductive under her pink ball cap with the words *Titties and Beer that’s why I’m here*, stitched in cursive across the top. Charlie opened the door. Delicious sights, smells, and the promise of tastes we’d denied ourselves for months met his longings. She lured him in, I could see that. From beyond her, the stale air of the hallway wafted in and I blurted out, “Don’t take the food.”

“But we ordered it,” Charlie said, handing her a $20 bill. “Keep the change,” he winked. And then, I saw it, what I had feared, Charlie simply forgot himself and let his fingers rub ever so slightly against her palm—just one second, maybe two. I swear I saw it.

I leaped out like a frightened tiger and grabbed the brown paper sack, wiped it down, and washed my hands. “You touched her,” I scolded, “wash your hands.”

But Charlie refused. “I didn’t,” he said, “my hands are clean.” I could see his eyes turned inward, the experience bringing his mind a euphoric glow. “I never touched her,” he repeated, disembarking himself from further discussion.

We sat down, eating in silence at the small pegged legged table we bought only six months before off the Wayfair site, a husky young man hauling it into our home, tracking in the dirt from the sidewalk below.

I was watching Charlie as he licked his fingers, lusting after the spicy sauce that smothered the chicken wings, the melted butter on the warm buns dripping down his cheek, his tongue encircling his mouth, most likely remembering the girl— the word *titties* still in his head.

“You touched her,” I said again, “don’t lick your fingers.” But he didn’t hear.

That night, and the next, angry and worried, I slept alone on the couch and locked myself in my office during the day. “Why,” Charlie asked? “What was it about the delivery girl you didn’t like? Were you jealous of her”?

“You touched her,” I repeated.

On the third night, he coughed, and I moved in with my girlfriend across the hall. “He touched her, the delivery girl,” I told Marge.

For the next two days, Charlie wouldn’t answer my calls or texts. I wrote him on FBM but got no response. I knocked on my own front door. “Charlie, open up,” I screamed. My phone chirped. The text from Charlie read, “Please, just don’t come back, stay where you are.” I was shocked by his annoyance, so I waited another day before knocking again. I was missing my Charlie.

Twenty minutes after my frantic call, the firemen and ambulance arrived. We found Charlie on the kitchen floor, a five-day old chicken wing in his hand, the once hot buns, cold, hard, crumbled next to him.

“He touched her,” I told the fireman. “He didn’t know. She looked innocent, naïve, young, attractive—she was well disguised.”

“I’ve seen it before,” he said. “Beauty and youth, they can often lure us in, make us forget ourselves.” He shook his bowed head. “Some people tell me that they never even saw her coming at all—she was perfectly invisible.”

I thought about the illness, the sadness, and loss this young hero had to endure while fighting this pandemic. I moved closer. I could feel the warmth of his body; I could smell his musky aroma. I leaned in a little and emphatically caressed his hand.