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**The Plain
White
Wrapper**

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If there are no cigars in heaven, I shall not go.

— Mark Twain

The Plain White Wrapper

Joe Avery was a criminal. He knew it. He was the first to admit that he was a pervert.

Of course he could admit it only to himself, to his wife, and to his pastor. He had a reputation to preserve, a job to hold down. So he hurried down one of the cavernous concourses of the River Heights Middle America International Airport. The concourse was lined with stores. He scampered past a row of choke-and-pukes. The gay laughter of the patrons — innocent couples and families — made him blush with guilt.

Deep down in his body he felt a horrible hunger, a hunger straight out of hell. It was burning like a flame, like a white-hot wire drawing tighter and tighter around his internal organs. Of course he wanted to suppress it, but it was way past being suppressed.

He knew this kind of hunger. It was his daily companion, his dark secret, his disgusting secret that set him apart from civilized humanity. If the crowd around him were to learn it, he'd be an outcast for the rest of his life. They, too, knew hunger, but obviously it was of a different sort, of a clean, sane sort.

Sometimes he would pray to make that hunger go away, but that was no use. Then his wife would do something, something unspeakable, and that hunger would go away. For a while.

At the crossing with another concourse beckoned the gray steel doors of the restrooms. He dived into the gaping mouth of the open double doors, into the men's room. Some commuters were washing their hands. Most stalls were empty, the doors dangling open. Avery washed his hands, slowly, stalling for time. The commuters left. One of the doors opened.

Avery stole a glance at the tall, dark stranger, who stepped to the washbasin next to him, put his black leather briefcase down, and let some water run over his hands. Avery continued the charade. Liquid soap, water, soap, water, soap, water. But the hunger could not be washed away.

The stranger turned to the dryer, cursed when the blower wouldn't start, and grabbed some paper towels from a stack on the counter. He dried his hands perfunctorily, grabbed his briefcase, shot Avery a suspicious glance, and left.

Avery waited. The last door remained shut. He looked under

the partition. Feet. Feet in black socks and wingtips. Some businessman taking a dump. Taking his time.

It was wrong. Avery remembered Reverend Graustalk's sermon at the Savior's Lighthouse Church last Sunday. "Some flesh is clean, and some flesh is not. Some flesh you may put in your mouth, and some you may not."

Now Avery breathed slowly, regularly, steadily. He tried to focus on his breath. Breathing was all he had to do. If he became all lungs, his other organs would go away.

They didn't. Finally, he could stand it no longer. He had to do it. Now.

He needed it. He needed what the boys of the night had to offer. Just wipe his ass...

Avery faced the vending machine. It was an ordinary vending machine, of the kind that had cropped up in restrooms as AIDS ravaged the world. He found some dollar bills in his pants pocket, fed them into the machine, hit one of the buttons, and grabbed the small item that fell out, protected, disguised, by a plain white wrapper.

Everybody knew what was in it, but like with the brown paper bags drunkards used, people feigned ignorance. Civilians did. The law did not.

Whatever. It felt good in his hands, smooth plastic, slick, still cool from the refrigerated machine. Avery ripped the wrapper open. Ah!

Behind him, the stall door opened. "Excuse me."

Like he had been bitten by a rattlesnake, Avery winced, and whirled around. He stared into the cold copper face of a police badge.

"No."

The plainclothesman slipped his ID back into his pocket. "I'm sorry, sir, but we'll have to talk." He pointed to the exit.

"No! I won't go."

"You'll have to. You're under arrest. Don't make no trouble, sir. I don't want no scene, and I don't wanna have to handcuff you."

The officer looked at Avery's hands. "You better give me that, sir."

Avery's heart fell. The shock had driven the hunger from his insides. Now he could only think of what would happen to him,

to his future, to his family if this one ever became known back home.

He held out his hands, but the officer shrank back. The lawman looked at Avery's hands like they were worms. He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, producing two plastic evidence bags and a pair of latex gloves.

Carefully, the officer slipped his hands into the gloves, then gingerly reached out for the chicken sandwich. Like a disgusting maggot, he dropped it into the bag. The torn white wrapper went into a separate bag. Now he sealed the evidence bags before he charily put them into his inside pocket. Then he chucked the soiled gloves into the trash can, in disgust.

As he was escorted to the police operations center, Avery cursed himself. He shouldn't have done it. Don't wanna do the time — don't do the crime.

At the very least he should have retired into a stall before opening the wrapper. Of course, that too was illegal. After all, that sickening sound of someone munching had to be annoying, offensive, even threatening to whoever was clearing the traffic jam on the Hershey highway next door.

Why did he have to do it in a place like River Heights? He should have taken the sandwich home, like the law prescribed. Maybe he could even have had his wife cook for him. Cook. So there. Now he had at least thought the unspeakable.

Avery remembered Reverend Graustalk waxing enthusiastic over all those saints who had lived to the age of Methuselah without ever touching food or drink. Inedia. Maybe he should have given that a try.

He ought to be happy that he lived in the Free World, in the Bright Ages. There were countries where people caught eating in public got summarily stoned to death. In the Middle Ages he probably would have been burned at the stake. He ought to be grateful that the liberal law of the land permitted him to eat all he wanted in the privacy of his home.

It had not always been like that. Even the sandwich vending machine had not been there long. Since times immemorial, thousands of people had dropped dead on the streets every year. Only when scientists had been able to prove that they had died of dehydration had the government permitted drinking fountains in restroom stalls. Only when the havoc wrought by AIDS —

Alimentary Intake Deficiency Syndrome — had brought public life to a standstill had Congress passed legislation that permitted federally funded facilities to have food vending machines in their restrooms.

In the old days, things had been different. Solutions had been different, and more inequitable. A hundred years ago, males used to eat at houses of ill repute, tolerated by city governments. Storyville in New Orleans had been a whole district consisting of nothing but restaurants. While females would not usually go out unchaperoned, and had no access to those houses, their husbands would as a rule bring home scraps of food for them in doggy bags.

Then, during the progressive era, the government cracked down on restaurants, and getting hold of food got harder. In the Roaring Twenties, speakeasies boomed. In the fifties, the going got tough again, but the counterculture revolution with hippies having public eat-ins had the pendulum swinging back in the other direction. Food was easy to come by in big cities. Again, whole neighborhoods, like New York's Times Square and LA's Sunset Strip became, in essence, big buffets.

In the eighties, the moral majority kicked in. Restaurants were shuttered across the nation. Many starved to death. Others turned to eating cats, dogs, and rats. And often even their own children. AIDS, in short.

Now, Times Square and the Sunset Strip had long since been cleaned up. But in the streets of Hell's Kitchen and off the Strip you could still find them: delicatessens, as they were discreetly called, tongue in cheek, due to the delicate nature of their merchandise. And in Paris, there still was the Place Pigalle, a square lined with nothing but restaurants.

Stateside, rumor had it that there was such a house of ill repute atop one of the skyscrapers of Rockefeller Center. Supposedly, it was the best little chophouse in New York. Those who had pull could have their fleshly pleasures their way, as easily as the average Joe would get laid at the Times Square McJohnny's during his lunch break. They only had to keep a lid on it and look like Mr. Clean. It was an open secret that even the top floors of the new One World Trade Center Tower would house a lavish restaurant.

Where the boys and girls of the night served steaks... Just

whack off his horns, wipe his ass, and serve him up. And pizza. And apple pie.

He had to stop thinking of that. That awful hunger was coming back. He could not ask the officer for food. The cop would probably be within his rights to shoot him if he asked him for food.

They passed by the row of choke-and-pukes. Above the counter of the Fucker King hovered the face of the President, on the television screen. He was addressing the annual convocation of the Junior Anti Food League at Bob Jones University. President Mush just explained that abstinence was the only certain way to avoid food poisoning.

Again the laughter of the innocent made Avery wish that the ground would swallow him. A redhead laughed as her companion nibbled at her ear. A crystal-clear laughter. To Avery, it sounded like the laughter of the judge who would fine him or send him to the county jail.

They just wanted to kill some time before their flights, and were brought face to face with a pervert like him. At the counter waited the line of customers who had not brought their own bread. He could imagine what they were ordering. "Just gimme that blonde there, for half an hour, and a can of whipped cream."

Whoever had created the universe, why, oh why, had he created things that could be used for innocent pleasures like body painting — and for the mortal sin of *ingestion*? To think that carbohydrates, fats, and proteins would be broken down into... into shit. In his body. No. That was too gross. Too disgusting to contemplate. To think that some girls and guys just like the innocent prostitutes behind the counter made a living waiting tables, serving food...

To the left of the counter sat the booths and beds for plain vanilla sex. Two couples were standing around a bench. A brunette teenager, probably the daughter of one couple, was riding on the chest of a football player type, probably the son of the other couple. She had tossed her Daisy Dukes onto the floor. Their parents were teaching him how to become a cunning linguist.

At the perimeter of the brothel sat the doggy benches, a new invention ergonomically tailored to doggy style. Gay couples occupied two of the benches. Two expensive, tailored suits on

hangers showed that one couple was probably exiled from New York, to develop what little financial industry there was in River Heights. The denim clothes by the other bench spoke of a local couple, some rednecks. On the bench in between lay a little blonde with a hunk hammering the hell out of her, doggy style.

From the top of her lungs, her voice reverberated throughout the airport. "Sky! Sky! Sky!"

Probably the name of her nailer. In Avery's head, the echo sounded like, Why? Why? Why? Why couldn't he be like everyone else? Those laws were there for a reason, and without them society would simply break down. Why couldn't he be normal? Why? Why? Why?

The End