



Pink Pickled Pixies

by Wulf Moon

Thirty-four-year-old Dylan Draig pushed the brim of his straw trilby up as his daily routine as prep cook began. He leaned over a counter at the rear of his family's sandwich shop, working a hunk of corned beef back and forth across the spinning blade of a meat slicer as his aged father fired up the grill. The bullfrog blast of the *Kennewick's* horn announced the ferry's arrival. Ten-forty. Right on schedule, bringing a rush of hungry tourists as they invaded the shops on Water Street in Port Townsend, Washington.

Dylan's life had been spent in this town cooking, as had his father, his grandfather, even his great-grandfather. *Honest ingredients with a dash of magic* had been the shop's slogan for as long as anyone could remember. Dylan smiled. What a legacy their family had built. The shop was his heritage, his family's pride, his own pride. Dylan knew in his heart he'd carry on that legacy after his father passed. Even the pandemic's brutal health regulations that restricted indoor service hadn't slowed their brisk business down. In fact, as other restaurants had been forced to close, Reuben's Reubens thrived.

Magic indeed.

"Hey, Pop? This enough for the day?"

The commercial griddle stood in the middle of the shop, adjacent to the serving counter, enabling them to talk to customers as they cooked. Dylan's father never turned, as he divided portions of sauerkraut. "Keep going, Dyl. Sunny summer day. Tourists splurge when it's sunny."

The restaurant was a hole-in-the-wall—just one serving counter with four barstools and a register—but Rueben's Reubens was arguably the most famous food stop in that historic town. Port Townsend had been built by speculators in the age of sail, hoping to be the western terminus of Northern Pacific Railroad's transcontinental line. But fortunes were dashed when the rise of steamships made it possible for steamers to travel inland on the Sound. Northern Pacific responded by choosing Tacoma as the end of the line. Port Townsend went bust, upgrades were forsaken, and lack of funds over multiple decades created an unintentional Victorian time capsule.

"Hey, Pop. This enough?"

"That'll do." His father clacked his spatula against the griddle as he spread cooking oil.

"Ten-fifty, Dyl. Chop, chop. Get the awning rolled out. Gonna be a hot one."

"Sure, Pop. Let me get this meat in the cooler."

As Dylan bagged the remaining chunk of meat, his father scooped sauerkraut from a tub with his spatula and slapped it against the oiled griddle. A blast of steam rose up the exhaust hood, lacing the air with that bite of vinegar mixed with mouthwatering scents of caramelized corned beef.

"Bring me a jar of the pink while you're in there, Dyl."

"Secret sauce, coming up."

Dylan pulled the handle on the walk-in cooler, relishing the cold air that washed over him. He turned to a shelf with a scattering of canning jars. Here lay the secret of Reuben's Reubens success: Pop's secret sauce. So secret, even Dylan didn't know what was in it. Dylan picked up a jar. Why did the glass always feel warm, even though the cooler was kept at a strict thirty-eight degrees Fahrenheit? He tilted the jar under the cooler's light. The sauce was viscous, and pink like the color of wild rose petals. Myriads of shimmering flecks sparkled within. Not like glitter. More like. . . *starlight*.

They used the best local ingredients: fresh artisan bread from Uptown's Pane d'Amore, corned beef they brined themselves and sliced fresh daily, aged Swiss from Townsend Dairy, but customers only seemed to care about one ingredient. "That sauce is to *die* for. What's in it, crack?"

Dylan tucked the jar under his arm and popped the cooler door. Whatever the recipe was, it had been handed down from his great-grandfather Reuben that worked in the saloon in the Palace Hotel, catty-corner across the street. The ladies of the night weren't the only ingredient that had kept that establishment flourishing. And, as each of the Draigs reached the end of their days, they passed the secret recipe on to their firstborn. Dylan had never seen his father make it. He cooked it up in the family's bright Victorian three story in the Uptown district—now just his father's home since Dylan moved out and his mother had passed six years ago.

Dylan placed the quart jar on the prep counter beside the griddle. "Gettin' kinda low, Pop." Then he asked the question he'd wondered about since childhood. "What's in the secret sauce, Pop?"

His father turned on him, drawing down those bushy brows. "Do I look like I'm on my deathbed headin' for hell?" He swung his spatula like the baton of a symphony's conductor. "Door. Awning. Service window. Open up and get that register ringing."

Dylan nodded. It had been worth a try.

Dylan rolled out the awning, went back inside, and locked the entrance. No indoor service in a year since the pandemic struck. Just him and his cranky father working eleven to

close. It used to be more fun working together, but his father had soured since the heart attack. Dylan pulled up a stool, slipped on a mask, raised the curtain, and opened the service window.

A woman with silvery hair, no mask, scowled at him. She was pencil thin with pinched lips that looked like they had been drawn on with eyeliner. She glared at Dylan through oversized gold-framed sunglasses and tapped her watch. "The sign says open at *eleven*."

Dylan glanced at the clock above him. Eleven-oh-three. Sheesh. "Sorry about that. May I take your order?"

"Yelp says your Reuben is not to be missed. Apparently, it's a fixture of this town." She rattled her manicured nails on the counter. "I'll take one Reuben to go, and do you have Monterrey cheese? I simply despise Swiss."

"Sorry, ma'am." Dylan tapped the laminated sign taped to the service counter. "No substitutions." He heard the tap-tap-tapping of his father's spatula halt. Please, God, no. May it not be one of those days.

The woman scrunched up her nose. "Do you have anything besides a Reuben then?"

Dylan took a deep breath. "We're Reuben's Reubens, ma'am. The perfect Reuben is all we serve, all we need to serve, all we ever serve. Trust me, my great-grandfather invented this sandwich in the Palace across the corner. Our family has been making it for generations, despite claims from the Blackstone in Omaha or that deli in New York. One bite, and you'll know the truth."

"Oh, very well, it's supposed to be the best, I'll just have to trust the reviews. Can you make it with a light Russian?"

His father's spatula slapped loudly against the griddle. Dylan couldn't help himself. "Sorry, fresh out of light Russians. You'll have to settle for heavy Welshmen."

Not even the crack of a smile. Tough crowd.

"Then I'll take a diet Pepsi and a Reuben, with the Russian dressing on the side."

Dylan's father rushed to the window waving his spatula. "It's not Russian, it's my family's secret sauce, handed down for generations." He rapped the sign with his spatula. "There is only one way to order this Reuben. *My way*. You want it with light dressing, special order? There's a Subway by the ferry landing."

The woman's cheeks shifted from pink to scarlet. "How dare you! Do you know who I am?"

"Some lady with a stick up her ass that's holding up my line. Move along."

She waved her phone before stomping away. "Yelp will be hearing about this!"

Dylan sighed, placed a hand on his father's shoulder, eased him back from the window. "Pop, you can't treat customers like that. It's not like the old days. People post reviews to apps now. A bad service review can stay with you forever."

"Bah. Technology. I have nothing to fear. Rail lines, steel trolley tracks, my great-grandfather had something to fear. But he got all that stopped, didn't he?"

"Sure, Pop, whatever you say."

His voice rose to a rant. "The Palace survived. We've survived. This pandemic hasn't even dented our sales. And do you know why?"

Dylan shrugged. "More take-out?"

His father shook his spatula. "Dammit, Dylan! You're a Draig. *Secret sauce!*" And then his eyes went wide. His father's spatula fell to the floor, and he followed it down.

Dylan dropped to his knees. "Pop? Pop? You with me?"

His father pressed jangling keys into Dylan's hands. "The recipe!"

"What?"

"Secret recipe! In your mother's cremation urn over the mantle." His father gripped the apron over his chest and shuddered. "Thought I had more time."

...

Keys jangled as Dylan stepped inside the family's Victorian home while dusk settled over the town. He took a deep breath—this was the last place on earth he wished to enter, but the funeral had passed, the sauce had run out, and the customers had stopped lining up at Reuben's Reubens. His father had failed to leave behind a will, tying up the estate in probate. Dylan was over two months late on the shop's lease.

He had no choice. Dylan pushed the toggle switch for lights and headed into the living room. The oak floors groaned as he walked over to the mantle with its ceramic urn that held the reason for his dread: his mother's remains. What a place to store the secret recipe that he hoped would save the shop.

"Good one, Pops," he said to the air. "No one would think to look in there. Ever heard of a safety deposit box? *Thanks.*"

Dylan tipped his trilby in respect. "Sorry, Mom."

He twisted the lid, carefully removed a fold of yellowed paper, grimaced as he shook off clinging ashes. The paper had crabbed cursive on both sides, the ink brown with age. It was indeed a recipe.

Pink Pickled Pixies.

Topping the ingredients? He couldn't believe it. *Pixies!* And not only the recipe, it also came with instructions on how to trap and—

The house had been built over a pixie portal? Capture and processing were carried out in the basement? What kind of sick joke—

Dylan recalled the jars in the shop's cooler. They never got cold. Not ever. Not even weeks after they'd been brought in.

He went to the basement door. Locked. It had always been locked when he'd grown up here. Mom had kept the skeleton key on a chain around her neck—he'd never seen her without it. He shivered. Family secrets! Every horror movie ever made screamed "Don't go down in the basement!", and the only way to solve this mystery was to go down. Dylan stared at the key ring in his hand, the skeleton key cold as a gravestone. He turned it in the lock, swung the creaking door open, pushed the toggle switch, and went down rickety stairs to meet his fate.

...

Dylan sniffed as he stepped onto the basement's foundation stones. The air in all basements smelled musty; this one smelled like wild roses. A single yellow hissing bulb hung from a cord over a stained butcher block table. Skinning knives lay scattered across it, and a cleaver's blade had been hacked into the edge. A food processor sat on the table, trailing a long extension cord plugged into a wall socket. Against that wall stood makeshift wooden shelves, empty except for two jars glittering in its shadows.

Dylan stepped closer.

Dead accusing eyes of diminutive humanoid creatures stared back at him. They floated naked in clear liquid, their flesh as pink as a newborn babe. Starlight pulsed across their skin, and without reading the recipe further, Dylan knew exactly what was in the special sauce.

Bile rose in his throat. Good god. The Draig family legacy he'd been so proud of? They were like Jeffrey Dahmer, only they cannibalized the fey!

Dylan leaned over and retched.

A tiny moan rose from a cage in a corner. It had two connected parts: a wood cage on one end, black iron on the other. A crack in the floor led to it. Every atom in Dylan's body screamed to run to the top of the stairs. The work done in this basement was an abomination.

And then he thought about the sandwich shop. It was all he had, the only place he had ever worked. The landlord had been by that day, threatening eviction if he didn't have his money before the end of the week. Dylan hadn't even been named a survivor on his father's bank accounts. He desperately needed to start turning a profit, and fast, but how could he without the secret sauce?

Dylan could see no other options. He went to the cage and dropped to his knees. On the wooden side, the crack in the stones seemed wider. On the iron side, a trap door had fallen. He squinted. There was an empty bowl which must have held the bait. Shivering within it was a feminine looking pixie in fetal position, just skin and bones.

She lifted her head. "*Free me.*" She scraped glittering dust from her skin, tried to fling it in his eyes, but her hand dropped limply to her side.

Dylan opened the door to the cage and pulled her out. She flopped in his fist like a rag doll. Had she just died? He took her over to the butcher block and held her under the light. No, her chest moved. She still breathed. Barely. How long had she been in the cage? He pushed open her tiny hands. Blistered. Must have tried to work the iron latch. Oh hell.

No wonder no one in the family told their descendants the secret recipe until they were almost dead. Probably made you swear a deathbed oath you'd carry on the family business when you were too emotional to say no. And here he was, out of options. Dylan knew of no other way to make his living. Even if he tried to get a job in a town laying off all its help, the only resume he could present was that he'd been a cook in a one-sandwich shop that had gone belly up.

He looked at the cleaver and cursed. "What the hell, Pop! Why'd you leave me like this? Couldn't you see the handwriting on the wall?" And now, the reaper had come. If Dylan didn't embrace the family legacy, horrid that it was, his future would be over.

Dylan gripped the cold handle of the cleaver and jerked it free. He looked down at the emaciated pixie, surely a step from death's door. It would be a kindness to end her life. And her life would keep his alive. The landlord had no mercy. Dylan had to do this. As his father had done. As his father's father had done. As great-grandfather had done.

Dylan raised the cleaver. Tears welled in his eyes.

Whack!

...

Winter. It was an unusually sunny afternoon as Dylan walked with a dark heart up Water Street. He crossed to the other side to avoid the old shop with the new sign that read "Townsend T-Shirts." Just what the old Victorian town needed, another cheap T-shirt shop. Dylan turned up Taylor, crossed Washington, and sat on the concrete coping that circled Haller Fountain with its bronze sea nymph.

Probate had ended. Dylan had access to his father's savings now, but what good would it do him? He'd already proven that without the secret sauce another sandwich shop wouldn't fly. He looked up at the bronze nymph, pulled a glass flask of Jack from his coat, and poured a splash into the water.

"Here's to you, wee pixie. I hope I didn't scare you too badly when I slammed that cleaver back into the block." He took a pull. The sour corn mash burned his throat, but the numbness eased the pain of failure.

Bushes rustled. A rat rushed across the concrete to the fountain and stood in the statue's shadow. Dylan squinted. It wasn't a rat. It was a pink pixie, wrapped in a brown leaf. The one Dylan couldn't kill. In fact, he had nursed it back to health with clover honey.

"I've been watching," the pixie said.

Dylan tipped his trilby, took another swig. "Then you know I lost the shop."

"By sparing my life!" she squeaked. "Do you know why we come to this town?"

"I suspect you'll tell me."

"We forged a bond between our worlds in the era before steel. But iron and steel are everywhere now, and it kills our pathways and poisons our people. Your town stayed old, mostly wood and stone, so the portal here remains. We miss our bond with your race, and those that treated us kindly. Like *you*."

Dylan looked away. "My family did a terrible thing to your kind. It cost me dearly, but I'm glad I broke the chain."

"What will you do now?"

"Dunno. I could sell the Uptown house, but I love this town. Born and raised here."

"Don't sell."

Dylan grunted. "Don't worry. I'm not willing to put in the disclosures that the crack in the foundation is really a pixie portal."

The pixie gurgled gleefully.

Dylan waved toward the sky. "Hardly notice the stink of the mill in the mornings anymore, and I love the smell of the bay and the sound of the ferry rolling in. Love to cook, but obviously can't make a go of it without my Pop. He was always the secret recipe in my life, not the secret sauce. Tough old bastard. Who knows how his father entrapped him in the secret family business, but he did teach me a good work ethic, rest his soul."

"Cupcakes."

"Scuse me?"

"Cupcakes!"

Dylan screwed the cap on the flask. "I do like to bake. Make a mean double chocolate brownie."

"*Cupcakes!*"

A specialty cupcake shop in Victorian Port Townsend? They had one out on the Olympic Peninsula in Sequim, and he'd seen some wild cupcake shops on The Cooking Network. Did he have the gift to learn new tricks? Or had he only survived by following the lead of his father?

The pixie flicked her fingers. Sparkling bits like fireflies floated before his eyes.

"Cupcakes with *sprinkles!*"

Dylan looked across the street. There was a FOR RENT sign in a building next to that deluxe tattoo shop. How had he not seen that?

The pink pixie stepped from the shadow and patted his leg with her hand. "*Friends!*"

Dylan touched her little hand. So warm. What an offshoot from the family business this would be if he took her offer. Instead of destroying pixies, this Draig would be working with them. A new legacy to the family. *His* family, that would one day come.

"*Sprinkles,*" Dylan said thoughtfully and pocketed the bottle.

###

About the Author

Wulf Moon wrote his first science fiction story when he was fifteen. It won the national Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and became his first professional sale in *Science World* (500,000 print copies/issue). He has won over fifty writing awards in his career.

Moon's stories have appeared in numerous publications including *Writers of the Future Vol. 35*, *Best of Deep Magic 2*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Best of Third Flatiron*, and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds 2*—a borg love story, what could be sweeter?

Moon writes a series on writing craft for the professional magazines *DreamForge* and *Story Unlikely*. He teaches the award-winning Super Secrets of Writing Workshops and is the author of the bestselling book *How to Write a Howling Good Story*, voted Best Nonfiction Book of 2023 in the Critters Readers' Choice Awards.

Moon invites you to step into his wulf den at <http://TheSuperSecrets.com> or to *Join the Wulf Pack* at <https://www.patreon.com/wulfmoon>



Copyright 2024 Third Flatiron Publishing

This story first appeared in the Third Flatiron anthology, “Offshoots: Humanity Twigged.” All Rights Reserved.