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## The Whitefish Eating Contest

by Josh November

As the hot summer days hit hard upon the citizens of Bunzha, young and old alike knew that such a brutal sun could only portend one thing: the final Whitefish Convention—the end of a lustrous chapter in the town's history. For one-hundred consecutive years the convention had hallowed the second Sunday of every July; this would be the last time. And so it was that at midday, two weeks before the event, men in woolen pants and tank-tops began to assemble numerous tents and kiosks at the large clearing in the center of town. The canvas tents and booths had grown dusty and spiritless where they slumbered in the town storage facility since last year's convention, so that when they were first removed, they appeared lifeless and flaccid. But as the constructors hammered the spikes into the ground the air gave breath to the cloth and the tents asserted their old glorious forms.

Much meditation and planning went into the following weeks; committees debated over scheduling and whitefish lecturers, councilmen allocated governmental funds to whitefish scholars, and secretaries contacted representatives from the largest whitefish retailers in the county, who in turn made their pilgrimage to Bunzha. In a way, all this planning was unnecessary, as the same guests, speakers, and whitefish businessmen patronized the same convention every year; and the same scholars received the same stipends every twelve months. Even when the founders and beneficiaries of the event had died or grown too weary, their descendants—their children and grandchildren—took hold of the reins and continued to reap the fruits the convention provided. So, in essence, it was the same crowd every year—a matter of lineage. Nonetheless, the town never tired of the extravaganza, particularly the main attraction—the whitefish eating contest. As with everything it was an affair of inheritance. A first born male of the Lapidus family had come away victorious every year since the championship's inception over a century ago. Accordingly, the Lapidus family trench coat was passed down from father to son, worn only on this destined day in mid July. Over the years they preserved the blue fabric well and the coat became a highly regarded heirloom—a reminder of great grandfather Lapidus's initial triumph and the legacy that followed.

So too, the first born male of the Bubbadika family had solidified his position as runner-up since the very first tournament and the Bubbadika's had grown to loathe the blue trench coat—an emblem that manacled them to their infamy. Despite their history of shortcomings—never scaling the hump of second place—with every approaching competition the whitefish athletes of the Bubbadika family renewed their hope. And with the 101st and final competition almost upon them, they were keenly aware that a victory in this match would erase generations of failure. With this hope,

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flooded in a wave of immense pressure which took its toll on the stomach of Morty Bubbadika—the eldest son of Max Bubbadika and the family's last chance. There he lay in his stiff bed, in his cramped one-room dwelling in the butcher's attic— which had no window, but the portraits of his whitefish-eating patriarchs. He had been waking each morning for the past month with a terrible weight at the center of his abdomen. His sanity was pushed to the brink. A loss meant eternal disgrace for all those who bore the Bubbadicka name.

His vocation as a tweezer-maker offered a scant income, so that Morty had lived on nutshells and kasha for the past months in order save up for the barrels of whitefish he consumed for practice. He knew that in the tournament's allotted time he could easily devour at least ten fish. It was around the twelfth that his stomach's machinery tightened. He remembered feeling woozy at last year's meet as he had approached the double-digits, when he glanced up and beheld Lapidus in his customary position—his face low to the fish plate, his arms shielding his head, his blue trench-coat draped around his slender shoulders—victimizing his thirteenth fish with no visible exertion. Morty assured himself that this time things would be different.

Finally, the morning of the competition arrived. Morty rose early and said a prayer before the portraits on his wall. He descended the stairs past the room where the butcher's son lay sleeping, and headed into the streets of Bunzha in the direction of the fair. The summer air penetrated his nostrils and sank deep into his aching belly, so that each breath seemed to tighten the clamp on his oxygen supply. Eventually he made it to the whitefish fair grounds, which empty in this early hour, took the shape of a vast skeleton hungry for flesh. With more than four hours to the first round, Morty lay his burden down under a tree behind a small booth, nearly eighty yards before the very end of the fair grounds, where the unroofed bandstand—surrounded by numerous fans—would soon house the legendary tournament. Morty tried to rest. But like a fish that pounds its sides into a dock after it has been caught, the pain in his stomach hammered away until he drifted into dreamless sleep.

He awoke to a bustling convention, the solicitation of vendors, and children's voices which expressed their cravings for whitefish souvenirs. The sun was exuberant and the clear sound of a Kletzmer band playing whitefish favorites pierced the fair. Morty quickly lifted himself and headed toward his fate.

As always, Lapidus and Bubbadicka torched through the qualifying rounds, past the dilettante challengers, on a collision course. And then there was only the final round left. The crowd had swollen to immensity. Morty had saved himself for this last lap, never eating more than eight fish in the initial or semifinal matches. Lapidus, hungry as ever, sat to his right, the trench coat draped on his shoulders. History was upon them. The whitefish lay before them. The judge shot his old-fashioned pistol into the air. It had begun. Lapidus lowered his face to the plate and surrounded his head with his arms—his family's perfected formula. Only the dark curly hair on the top of his head was exposed, shaking with his every

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bite. He consumed at a rapid pace, lifting the fish tails in his mouth, plopping them into his pail to be counted. But Bubbadicka's stomach did not fail him, he had never eaten so well. Fish after fish crossed his plate and found it way into his pail. When the meticulous judges had tallied their contents everyone was amazed. Seventeen fish; he had realized a new convention record. He beamed in elation. There was no way Lapidus had topped that. Even if the pistol had not rang for the second time he could have kept going. Yet when it was over, by means of some inhuman form of perseverance, Lapidus had smashed Morty's new record; twenty-two whitefish picked clean to the bone. At the judges announcement, Morty sank into utter dejection. Brazenly, Lapidus dipped a cracker into one of the many jars of whitefish salad that the fans began to lovingly shower him with. Then he looked to Morty and smiled the most crippling smile that one could fashion.

The fans surrounded Lapidus and tried to lift him on their shoulders. He checked them in an attempt to grab the family trench coat he had just carefully rested on the back of his chair. It was no use; in this riotousness a tall man had lifted Lapidus; his coat was beyond his reach. The parade had begun. All Morty could see were the backs of the mob as they hoisted Lapidus away, his name chanted in deafening unison. Morty slid deeper into his chair until he actually lay beneath the table. His forefathers crossed the threshold of his thoughts. They stared at him in desperation and disbelief. He had let them down. Deep in the gut of this despair he heard a rustling. He wondered why even in his agony he could not have quiet; he could not be alone, when again he heard the rustling. It infected his ears, taunted his last semblance of reason. He glanced out from beneath the table to distinguish the source of this tormenting sound that had gone from a rustle to a high-pitched squeak; there it was, the blue trench coat and something moved inside. Morty gathered himself off the floor and in his delirium, threw the coat to the ground as if to wrestle with it. Again the squeak. He lifted the garment from the ground only to discover that behind the inner-lining of both breast pockets there lay two hidden compartments. And snug within these two compartments were two rats with the smell of whitefish heavy on their breath. He now understood all too well the Lapidus tournament posture: of course they hid their heads in their arms; they had to conceal the rats who under a century of Lapidus arms had crawled forth from a century of Lapidus breasts to claim generations of championships. All those years his family had been betrayed, the lamentations that overtook them were unwarranted, brought on by the stitchwork of crafty Lapidus hands.

As if reborn, Morty clutched the coat in pursuit of the mob, in pursuit of the rectification of his family name. As he burst through the cloud of dust the fans had kicked up in their boisterous celebration, a sense of justice and pride pulsed through his frame; he would reveal the Lapidus dynasty for what it really was. He closed in on the crowd and bellowed out Lapidus's name. Every one turned to Morty, who stood proudly with the retribution in his arms.

"Everyone look here," he called out, unfolding the jacket, unsheathing

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the two pockets where the rats resided. “These are the rodents that have won Lapidus all his titles.” And sure enough there were the rats. Their greasy heads poked out of the inner-chambers, their hair spotted with tiny pieces of whitefish. The Mayor stepped forward and grabbed Morty by the shoulders. He cleared his throat, silencing the crowd.

“We know, you fool. How clever of the Lapiduses; for over a hundred years they have defeated the Bubbadickas with two rats.”

**HP**