

John Hearn's work appears in a number of publications, including *Epoch*, *River Styx*, *Tulane Review*, and *The Big Muddy*. In 2011, John co-authored [Shade It Black: Death and After in Iraq](#).

Salad Days

by John Hearn

The smoked shoulder was boiling, the potatoes were mashed, the peas were warm and waiting, but none of it was on the table. What's up with this, Ma, I said, hungry and staring at the empty table. Your brother wants to make something special for us to have before dinner, she said. Frankie, we're ready she said. He put down his book and took a brown paper bag out of the refrigerator. He removed a head of iceberg lettuce, a cucumber, a green pepper, a tomato, and an onion, chopped them up, put them into our largest bowl, and mixed them around. He dropped handfuls of the concoction into six smaller bowls and put one at each place setting. It's called a tossed salad, he said, as my parents, brother, Billy, sister, Mary, and I took our customary seats. Pour some of this on it, he said, as he handed a bottle to Mary.

The salad appeared in our kitchen because Frankie had found himself a middle-class girlfriend whose parents lived in a large, newer house in a safe and comfortable neighborhood, and they drove trustworthy vehicles. They were rich, our family and neighbors agreed. *Did you hear they had a pool table in their house?* That they prepared and ate tossed salads seemed further proof of the obvious: they possessed both time and

money to waste. I don't see the sense in it, my mother said. You spend all this time chopping and mixing, and for what? It's like pistachio nuts. After all that work, what do you get out of it? My father said that just because those phony bastards liked to make a show of their meals, it didn't mean that we had to. If they jumped off the Braga Bridge, I guess you'd be taking us up there to jump, he said to Frankie. It's like a damned floorshow. The small tossed salads sat in our bowls as my mother brought out the food and my father plopped a slab of smoked shoulder and a mound of potatoes onto his plate. Jesus Christ, my father said, like a bloody floorshow. Give me an honest pork shoulder any day, he said, shaking his head in disbelief. Even though we barely tasted the salad, the unspoken consensus seemed to be that the concoction was frivolous, time-consuming to make, and not at all filling. It was too exotic for our tastes. Looking back, I think we didn't give it a fair shot, but why should I burden myself with another regret at this point in my life? As far as I recall, our first salad was our last. Frankie's bold act failed to take root. My father sighed one of the loud sighs he used when he wanted to show how shocked and disgusted he was.

Frankie got up and walked out the door. Where the hell is he going, my father said. Where do you think he's going, my mother said. Getting away from you, that's where. My father answered, I'm not the one who brought up the pistachios. Maybe he's getting away from you. Then he got up and headed back down to the *Golden Pheasant*, where he

had been all morning. Goddamned pistachios, he said as he slammed the door behind him.

All afternoon my mother walked out onto the stoop and looked down to the corner to see if Frankie was there, standing with his teenage friends, staying out of his father's way. She wanted to tell him the coast was clear, but he wasn't there. That night, when the four of us were in our beds and couldn't sleep, I asked Frankie where he'd been all day. Sue's, he said. How'd you get all the way over to Somerset? Walked. Over the bridge? Yep. What'd you do there? Ate and played pool. Wow, Mary said, impressed. What'd you eat, Billy said. Baked stuffed shrimp. What's that, I said. Shut the hell up, Frankie said.

I want you kids to shut up. This is the last time I'm telling you, my father shouted from his bedroom. Good, Frankie whispered.