

Poke Sally Johnny
[by redgirl and MJ Hajost](#)

A strange silence fell around the table as Chet Kelly dipped into the enormous pot of chili Marco Lopez had just set down. "Boy, this smells great!" he said as he ladled himself a huge helping.

Cap hid a grin behind his cup of coffee.

"Did you get this recipe from Adams at 68s?" Chet went on, sprinkling a handful of crackers atop his bowl. "I heard that he got assigned to that station just because he used to go to that cooking school."

"Evanrude Cooking School?" Marco snorted in amazement. "You'd be better off getting ordained as a minister by mail order."

"I'm going to put a stop to that rumor right now, Kelly," said Cap, directing his gaze toward Chet with a tilt of his head. He took the ladle from Mike Stoker. "He got that assignment by the luck of the draw. If I could get someone in here who could cook, believe me, you'd be drawing duty at 68s yourself."

"Cap!" Chet complained. He put on an aggrieved expression.

Just then the tones sounded a squad alarm. With a sigh of disgust, Johnny tossed the ladle back into the pot, and he and Roy headed toward the bay.

"Once again saved by the bell," muttered Roy as he pulled out of the station and headed left.

Beside him. John Gage snorted. "You don't like Marco's chili?" he grinned.

"Oh, I don't have any problems with Marco's chili," said Roy. "It's Chet's whining that was gettin' to me."

"Yeah, well, Chet's whinin' can get to anybody." Johnny glanced to the right as Roy slowed for an intersection before cruising through cautiously. "You know, it'd be somethin' if Cap *could* actually transfer him--"

"Careful what you wish for, Junior." Roy angled around two cars stopped in the left lane and sped through another intersection.

"Oh, I'm not wishin' for anything," snorted Johnny. "Right at the next street," he added, pointing. "But you gotta admit he does get on everybody's nerves."

Roy gave him a sideways glance. "Don't we all," he murmured.

A few minutes later Roy parked the squad in front of a small duplex set close to the street. A tricycle and a pedal car lay abandoned on the sidewalk in front of the small building.

As Johnny pulled the biophone from the truck, a young redheaded woman wearing a flowered mini-dress raced out of the front door. "I'm so glad you're here! Bobby was pretending to be President Nixon, and he fell off the toilet!" she shouted.

Johnny froze. *President Nixon? On the toilet?*

"I think he's okay, but he's sorta wedged between the toilet and the wall," she went on, reaching down for the tricycle. "And I wish he'd learn to put his toys away!"

"Ma'am," Roy asked, trauma box in hand, "can you take us to Bobby?"

The woman had begun wheeling the trike toward the house, and seemed surprised by Roy's voice. She turned back and looked at him. "Oh, of course, come right this way! I'm Nora Bates, I just moved here from San Francisco, so the place is a bit of a mess."

She led the way into the house and through the tiny living room, which was littered with boxes, some half empty and others still taped shut. "Bobby, honey?" Nora called. "Momma's coming, and I've brought two nice firemen to help you."

If the living room was small, the bathroom was positively minuscule. Johnny stopped Roy at the doorway. "I don't think there's room for all of us in here. Let me go in and see what I can do."

Roy nodded. "Mrs. Bates?"

"That's *Ms.* Bates," corrected Nora.

"Ms. Bates, could you wait out here with me? Let's let my partner go in and have a look at your son."

Nora stepped out of the way and let Johnny enter the pink tiled room. A small boy, who appeared to be about four, was wedged between the tank of the toilet and the tile wall. Johnny squatted and reached in to feel the boy's limbs. "You hurt anywhere, Bobby?"

"Uh-uh."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I think so. I fell." The boy took a shuddering breath. Johnny could see in the dim florescent lighting that Bobby had been crying. "But I can't get out." He sniffled as if preparing to start crying all over again.

"Yeah, it looks like you jammed yourself in here pretty good," agreed Johnny. Bobby's right leg and arm were caught above the toilet and his left leg dangled off the floor "But I think we can get you out in a jiffy." Johnny smiled down at the child. He turned to the doorway. "Roy, can you get me some of that liquid soap? I think if we squirt a little of that down here we can get him out."

Roy found the soap and passed it to him. There was so little room to maneuver that Johnny had a hard time seeing if the soap was doing any good. After a few minutes of trying, he sat back. "It's not working, not that I can see, anyhow." He frowned down at the child.

"Maybe we could get some cooking oil from Nora here," suggested Roy, "and pour it on him." He looked at Nora, who blinked in surprise.

"Cooking oil?" she asked.

Roy nodded. "It works pretty well."

She shrugged, disappeared, and return with a bottle of cooking oil, handing it to Johnny.

"Okay, Bobby, we're going to put some of this oil on you. It'll make you slick and we can pull you right out." Johnny poured a little of the oil his hands and carefully worked the slick material as best he could between Bobby's limbs and the toilet. After a few minutes, Johnny was able to slide his hands under Bobby and free him.

Bobby wrapped thin arms around Johnny's neck and game him a squeeze. "Thank you, for helping me."

"You're very welcome." Johnny passed the little boy over to his mom and brushed ineffectually at his now oil-slicked shirt.

Roy guided mom and son out to the living room. "Let's look at you here, Bobby, make sure you're okay."

Johnny grabbed the trauma box and scanned the tiny bathroom one last time to make sure he hadn't left anything behind. Seeing nothing of theirs, he turned to leave.

He forgot about the one thing that was not theirs... the thing still sitting in the bathroom doorway.

His boot hit the bottle of oil, knocking it over onto the pink mosaic tiles on the floor. The bottle shattered, and oil spread rapidly in a wide, vaguely yellow pool amid minute shards of glass.

"Oh, man," moaned Johnny. He huffed a small sigh, dropped the trauma box carefully onto the hallway floor, and stepped toward the hand towel resting on the rack over the toilet. In the split second it took him to make that step Johnny knew it was the wrong thing to do. In the next part of that same second his brain tried to shift the foot, even before it made him aware of such an attempt. That only made the resulting unbalancing inevitable, possibly even quicker.

Roy's head snapped around at the crash issuing from the bathroom and the ensuing heartfelt epithet that issued from his partner's mouth at the same time.

"Uh..." he started, but Bobby's eyes had opened wide as he stared toward the bathroom. Nora Bates gasped.

"Mommy, are you gonna wash his mouth out with soap?" asked the little boy.

Roy blinked as he rose. "Uh..." he said again, "I think Bobby's okay. Guess I better check on my partner." He disappeared into the hall. "Johnny?"

Johnny merely repeated a couple of the oaths, albeit with less volume and heat. Roy peered around the doorway.

His partner was sprawled partially on his back, one leg snaking between toilet and wall, the other bent more or less upright in front of the sink. He struggled to right himself as Roy, trying hard to contain his snickers, looked on.

Johnny glared at him. "Could you at least stop laughing long enough to give me a hand here?"

"Sorry," snorted Roy, reaching for Johnny's hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

With Roy's help, Johnny managed to get to his feet. Roy carefully brushed glass off Johnny's backside with the hand towel while Johnny scowled at the mess on the bathroom floor. "Wouldn't ya know it?" muttered the younger paramedic. "I just had this uniform cleaned."

"Are you all right?" Nora Bates stood now in the hall, shielding Bobby from the sight in the bathroom.

Johnny turned, saw Bobby peeking around his mother, and had the grace to blush. "Yeah, I'm fine," he managed.

"Ma'am, do you have another towel or something we can use to clean him up a bit?" asked Roy.

A few minutes later, as much of the glass as they could find on him was off Johnny, scattered on the floor with the rest of the bottle. Gage slid his shoes off before setting foot onto the hallway carpet and looked ruefully into the bathroom. "I'm, uh, really sorry about the mess..." he began.

"Oh, it's no problem," Ms. Bates assured him. "I'll get it cleaned up." She smiled grimly at him. "I'm just glad you're not hurt."

She followed them back to the front door and thanked them one more time for their assistance with Bobby.

As he replaced the trauma box, Roy glanced at Johnny opening the passenger door. "Hey, you're not gonna sit on the seat!" He grabbed Johnny's arm and pulled him back.

"What?" Johnny jerked his arm away.

"You're covered with Wesson," Roy reminded him, reaching back into the storage compartment for an emergency blanket pack. "Here. Sit on this."

Johnny stared at it a second or two, then grabbed it ungraciously and yanked it out of its wrapping. "Thanks a bunch," he said through gritted teeth.

Grinning, Roy only slammed shut the compartment door and turned the latch. "Oh, don't waste your time thanking me. You're gonna need time to figure out what you're gonna tell Chet when we get back to the station."

He patted Johnny's shoulder and headed to the driver's side of the truck, controlling his mirth with admirable fortitude.

Johnny mopped inadequately at the oil splashes on his arms with his handkerchief. "Maybe they've been called out on a trash fire."

"Don't get your hopes up, Junior. You might want to make for the locker room quick. Maybe the rest of them will be distracted by Marco's chili."

"Heh, yeah," Johnny turned his head to look out the window. "Just reminds me how hungry I am."

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Johnny's hand was on the door handle as the squad rolled to a stop in the bay, but any hopes of a quick escape to the locker room were dashed when he opened the door almost directly into Chet Kelly's midsection.

"What happened to you?" Chet snickered, taking in the grease stains covering Johnny's shirt.

Marco came from the dayroom, a cookie in his hand. "What did you do, Johnny? Attack the Crisco lady?"

"Ha Ha Ha. If you guys must know, we rescued a trapped little boy."

"Yeah, what was he trapped in, a Florence Henderson commercial?"

Johnny grimaced as he pushed his way past Chet and Marco, and headed to the locker room, drawing his dignity around him. Laughter echoed in his ears.

"Anything left to eat?" Roy asked the two snickering men, his own grin wide.

"Sorry, guys, we kinda had an accident with the chili," Chet said.

Roy's eyebrows lifted and his grin faded. "An accident?"

Marco threw a sideways look at Chet. "Yeah," he said, shoving the last of his cookie into his mouth. "We accidentally ate it all."

Chet nodded agreement. "We just finished cleaning up the dishes." He shrugged. "Sorry. Marco's new recipe is great, though! You guys missed a real treat."

"I'm sure," Roy agreed dryly.

Cap emerged from the office carrying a clipboard. "Sorry about lunch, Roy. Too bad you guys missed out—it was better than his last batch." He patted his stomach with his free hand.

Roy sighed resignedly.

"Here. This'll take your mind off the chili. We need some hydrants checked over on 186th street. Why don't you and Johnny head over there? You can grab a bite while you're out."

Roy took the clipboard. "Sure, Cap. Let me see if Johnny's changed and we'll head out."

"Changed? What happened to Gage?" Cap looked at Chet.

Chet looked at the floor and bit down on his cheek for a minute, then lifted his head. "I think they call it Wessonality."

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"Cheer up, Johnny," Roy told his somewhat grumpy partner as they pulled once more out of the station. "At least you don't have to put up with Chet's cracks for a while."

Johnny made a face. "I'm starving," he said. "Let's head over to Mr. Tubesteak and grab some lunch before we hit those hydrants."

It was Roy's turn to make a face but he kept his comments to himself.

Ninety minutes later found the pair checking the last of the hydrants on the list. Johnny was just tightening one last Kennedy valve when a small voice behind him stopped his work.

"Mister? Hey, mister?"

He turned to face a small, curly-haired girl of about eight years old, standing a few feet from him and Roy on the sidewalk. "Well, hi," he grinned.

"Are you a fireman?" she asked, keeping her distance and watching him with a slight air of uncertainty.

"You betcha." He pointed the tool in his hand in Roy's general direction. "So's my partner."

"Is there a fire?" she asked, staring with similar uncertainty at Roy.

"No." It was Roy's turn to smile. "We're just making sure that the hydrants work in case there is a fire." He returned his wrench to the tool box and stood up, resting his hands on his hips and nodding toward Johnny. "My partner's real good at fixing things."

"Oh." She seemed to consider both men, then nodded. "Do you know how to climb trees?"

Johnny's brow creased. "Climb trees?"

Roy was a little quicker and he knelt down to her level. "You have something in a tree that needs to come down?"

She nodded. "Tabby."

Johnny was catching on, but slowly. "Who's Tabby?"

"I bet it's your kitty," Roy guessed.

She nodded, and then turned and pointed to a tall tree in the back yard of the house fronting the hydrant. "She's up there and she won't come down. My mommy said that firemen could get her down. I don't want Goliath to get her."

"Well, let's go take a look," suggested Roy, ignoring Johnny's "Who's Goliath?" from behind him. He reached for the girl's hand and after a moment she took it, shyly.

As they walked across the yard, a petite and harried looking woman came from around the side of the house. "Celie? Oh, there you are...." Her voice trailed off as she saw Roy holding her daughter's hand. "Oh."

"Ma'am." Roy smiled reassuringly. "Your daughter said her cat was up the tree and wondered if we could be of assistance."

"Oh," she said again, appearing somewhat flustered. "Er..." She gestured vaguely toward the back yard. "She's up in the tree back there. I honestly don't know how she got out of the house." As she spoke, she turned and led the way into the back yard. "She's an indoor cat," she continued, "and has never shown the slightest interest in going outside before."

In the back yard, Roy saw a tall dogwood tree and, high enough up to baffle an eight-year-old, a small black cat, sitting regally on a branch and regarding them impassively with steadily blinking green eyes.

"She won't come down, huh?" he asked the child, who nodded solemnly.

"Do you have a ladder, ma'am?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, it's in the garage." She pointed to the detached building sitting toward the back of the yard.

In short order, Roy and Johnny had manhandled the woman's ladder to the tree trunk. Johnny scampered quickly up to the cat. "Hey, Tabby," he said, reaching for the agreeable cat, who allowed him to pick her up and carry her down to the ground without resistance.

Reunited with her pet, little Celie scampered toward the sliding doors leading from a paved brick patio into the house.

"Celie!" her mother called after her. "What do you say to these firemen?"

"Thank you!" Celie shouted over her shoulder as she darted into the house with her Tabby.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you, but thank you," said Celie's mother as the two men returned the ladder to the garage for her.

"No trouble at all, ma'am," Johnny assured her. "So long."

The two men returned to their truck, deposited the tool box in the back, and climbed back in front. Johnny tossed his hat on the seat and swiped a hand through his hair. "Squad 51, available," he reported into the squad's mic as Roy started the engine.

"Squad 51," came back the disembodied dispatcher's voice.

"What is it with kids today?" he asked Roy, setting the mic back on its hook. "I mean, a *cat*?"

Roy grinned. "Didn't you notice, Johnny? A *black* cat."

Johnny stared at him for about three seconds, his mouth open. Then he turned to look through the windshield. "Oh, man..."

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Chet was the first to feel the effects, as it were, of Marco's remarkable chili. At first he thought he had simply overeaten.

"Hey, Roy?"

Roy didn't look up from his work at the table, where he sat completing the paperwork on their last two runs. "Huh?" he replied distractedly. *No, that was the run after we got that cat out of that tree*, he thought, shuffling through the papers in front of him.

"You guys got anything for an upset stomach?" asked Chet.

Roy made a notation on the paper, nodding but again without looking up. "Uh huh," he answered.

"Roy?" Chet repeated, a little louder.

This time Roy lifted his head. "Huh? Oh, sorry, Chet. Upset stomach?" He dropped his pen and pushed back his chair. "I think we can help you out," he smiled, leading the way to the squad, Chet in tow. "Too much chili?"

"I gotta learn to ease up on that stuff," Chet told him.

Roy handed him some bicarb with a grin. "Kinda hard not to, though," he agreed.

"Thanks," muttered Chet, wandering back toward the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, Stoker was asking for some bicarb, as well. And, shortly after that Cap, followed almost immediately by Marco.

"What'd you put in that chili this time, Marco?" demanded Johnny as he handed the other firefighter his own dose of upset stomach relief. Marco's chili had never caused this problem among the men before. It was usually the more typical bodily response to beans and spices that the men dealt with after a round of it.

"The usual," Marco told him. "Except I tried different meat this time."

Johnny frowned? Different meat? What on earth would you put into chili con carne besides beef? He posed the question Marco as he followed him into the kitchen.

"Pork," replied Marco. "My grandmother told me she used to put pork into her chili for added flavor, and especially when they couldn't get beef."

"Pork?" Johnny was aghast. Who'd ever heard of such a thing? "Doesn't that make it taste funny?"

Marco shook his head as he downed the bicarb. "Nah. It's ground up, just like ground beef. As a matter of fact, I like the taste better."

"Taste of what?" Roy walked into the kitchen and headed to the coffee pot.

"Pork."

Roy lifted one eyebrow as he poured himself a cup. "Pork?"

"Marco put pork in his chili this time," explained Johnny.

Roy's face took on a thoughtful expression.

"What?" said Johnny, slouching into a chair at the table.

"Well, you know if you get bad pork it can cause stomach and intestinal problems," Roy said slowly, joining Johnny at the table.

"You think Marco's pork was bad?"

"Couldn't be," argued Marco. "I bought that fresh a couple days ago! On sale, cheap," he added.

Johnny stood up and walked to the trash can. He dug around for a moment, and then pulled out the wrapping in which the pork had been wrapped. Turning it over and uncrumpling it, he made a face. "Marco," he said, staring hard at the other man, "did you bother to check the expiration date on this stuff?"

"What?"

Johnny pointed. "It was expired. Probably why it was so cheap," he added.

Marco looked pained. "Expired? Why would they sell expired meat?"

Roy shrugged. "So they don't have to take a loss on it," he offered. "They'll sell it cheap to get rid of it, sometimes. If you use it right away, it's not usually a problem. But if you don't...." His voice trailed off.

Marco let out a small groan. "Oh, no...."

"Oh no is right," muttered Johnny, tossing the wrapping back into the can and heading to the sink to scrub his hands.

"Guess it's a good thing that the two of us didn't eat any," sighed Roy. Looked like they'd be in for a long night.

It turned out to be a quiet night, which was a good thing, as the stomach upset headed a little lower south in the intestinal tract. When the morning wake up call sounded, four of the six men on the shift shambled tiredly into the kitchen as if they had fought fires all night long. Dark circles shadowed their eyes, which sat in pale and strained faces.

Cap made a sour face at Roy's offer of coffee, and instead helped himself to a glass of water. "Marco," he mumbled around a mouthful of plain dry toast, "you are officially off kitchen duty for the next ten shifts."

Johnny smothered a snicker in his coffee cup, while the others nodded exhausted agreement.

"I am never gonna touch chili again," Chet groaned.

"Until the next time, you mean," smiled Roy.

His remark earned him baleful glares from four men, and a huge grin from the fifth.

Yup. Until the next time.

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"Chet--latrine duty, Marco--dorm, Mike and Roy—let's go over these inspection reports." Cap turned to Johnny. "Gage, you're chef this shift." He glanced up and down the row of men. "Let's see if you can improve on our last experience."

There were a couple of rueful snickers. "Not to worry, Cap," Johnny promised. "It's gonna be a vegetarian menu for the next twenty-four hours."

A chorus of protesting groans rose from the group.

"Hey, hey," interrupted Johnny. "You're gonna love it. I've become a vegetarian, and I feel ten times better than when I was eating meat. I got some great recipes for you, and—" his voice rose to cover more protests "—*and* they're really tasty. You're gonna love it," he repeated.

"Never mind," cut in Cap. "We've got a lot of work to do, and some training runs this afternoon, so let's get on it."

The morning passed peacefully enough. The shift was proving to be another rare quiet one, but in spite of the lack of runs the men still sat down hungrily at lunch time.

"What is that smell?" Chet's nose wrinkled. "Did something crawl into the trash can and die?"

"Henry!" Marco looked at the lethargic Bassett hound stretched on the sofa. "Take that outside."

Johnny deposited a plate in front of each man, stepping back proudly and smiling at his accomplishments. He snapped his fingers and grabbed a bowl from the counter and set it in the center of the table.

The others were studying their plates suspiciously. Mike Stoker sniffed delicately and back away slightly.

Roy peered at the yellowish goop on his plate and poked at it experimentally. "What do you call it?" he asked, spearing an unidentifiable green thing and lifting it to his nose. A brief whiff was enough to have him dropping it hastily back onto his plate.

Johnny frowned at their faces. "It's Brussels Sprout Omelets," he said, a faint tone of disappointment and disgust in his voice.

"Looks more like Brussels Sprouts Vomit," muttered Chet.

"Kelly!" Cap's voice was only mildly admonishing. He thought Chet actually had a point.

"Fine," said Johnny, tossing aside the pot holder he was still holding. "Be that way. Be narrow minded. Stick to your old artery clogging and intestinal blocking ways—"

"Gage!" Cap warned.

Johnny subsided but not graciously. He dropped into his own chair and grabbed the pepper shaker. "You all can go hungry," he mumbled, exchanging the pepper for the salt. "But I'm going to enjoy this."

"What the heck is THIS?" Chet was staring into the bowl Johnny had placed on the table.

"They're called bean sprouts, Chet."

"What do you do with them, floss your teeth?" Chet lifted a few of the tiny strings and studied them.

"You *eat* them," Johnny informed him, pointing with his fork. "They go great with omelets." He stabbed a Brussels sprout and shoved it into his mouth. The others watched him warily as he began to chew, at first with gusto. His jaw slowed its pace, and Johnny's expression changed markedly. He opened his mouth and spat a repulsive green mass onto his plate. "That's disgusting," he declared, reaching for his water glass and gulping greedily.

As one, the others shoved their plates toward the center of the table.

"Pizza?" asked Marco.

"Works for me."

"No anchovies."

"Anything but mushrooms."

Roy watched Johnny sympathetically as the others dashed to the phone. "Didn't you try this out before you cooked it?" he wondered.

Johnny's face was still twisted. "Try it out?" he asked blankly.

Roy shook his head. "Let's clean this mess up before the pizza gets here."

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"Oh man, Gage, *now* what are you trying to do to us?" Mike Stoker stopped cold in the doorway of the day room and leaned away from the overpowering odor assaulting him. It was like walking into a wall of stench, and he waved his hand ineffectually in front of his face.

"Shut up, Mike, just shut up," Johnny rumbled from the stove. He whirled to face Mike, then back to something bubbling on a burner in front of him, his scowl deepening.

"That better not be dinner," continued Mike, his face contorting.

"Gage, what the hell are you doing in here?" His usual laidback manner was nowhere to be seen in Cap's stance, nor heard in his thundering voice. "I can smell that all the way out front!" He gestured toward the open bay door.

"I bet half the county can smell that," said Mike, "and they're wondering what the firemen are burning in their own station."

"Oh, ha ha," muttered Johnny, "very funny. It just so happens this is only *part* of dinner, and it's not done cooking yet. It might smell...funny...but it'll taste great, you just wait." He poked a wooden spoon in their direction before turning back to poke at the pan on the stove.

"Whatever it is, I'm not touching it," Mike assured him. He turned to Cap. "Is there any pizza left?"

"I'm way ahead of you, pal," replied Cap, making his way to the refrigerator with a show of holding his breath against the aroma issuing from the stove.

"I don't know why I bother sometimes," said Johnny to no one in particular.

"Hey, Johnny, when's dinner—" Roy DeSoto broke off as he entered the day room, and stopped just as abruptly as had Mike Stoker.

Cap wordlessly handed him a piece of pizza as he walked past him and back toward his office.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Mike told Roy, gesturing toward Johnny and the stove. "Not if you want to be able to tell your grandchildren about the early days of the

paramedic program." He bit into the slice of cold pizza he held and continued past Roy toward the dorm.

Roy looked at the pizza in his own hand, and then at his partner. He had promised himself that he would not tease Johnny about his vegetarian menu plans the way Johnny had given him grief over his beef bourguignon experiment a while back. But even he had to admit that the sewer gas smell emanating from in front of Gage was more than a little off putting. He bit into the pizza.

"Traitor," Johnny called at him as he spied Roy chewing with gusto.

"A live traitor," Roy agreed. He headed toward the window. "We'd better air this place out so we can at least sit in here and watch TV later." He opened the windows, then the door. He looked over at Johnny, measured the distance from where he stood to the entry into the equipment bay, and headed out back. Better to walk around the outside of the station and go back in through the front door than face the kitchen again.

"Don't come whining to me later when you're all starving because you wouldn't eat dinner!" Johnny shouted after him.

"Don't worry," Roy called back, unable to hide his grin, "I won't!"

Johnny muttered abstractedly to himself as he stirred the mess in front of him.

"What is it?" said a voice at his shoulder.

Johnny jumped visibly. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry, Johnny." Chet sounded anything but. "But what is it?"

"If you must know—" he started.

"I must, I must," said Chet, leering.

Johnny glared at him a minute, then sighed. "It's an herb," he informed him.

"Looks like overgrown dandelion weeds," said Chet, "and it reminds me of that time we had that sewer explosion—" The expression on Johnny's face stopped him. "What do you do with it?" he asked, deflecting the explosion surfacing on Gage's face.

"You eat it." Johnny's voice said any idiot would know that, but his expression said he wasn't all that sure any more. "It's going into the stew."

"Why didn't you just put it in the stew in the first place?"

"You don't know anything, Chet." Johnny shook his head. "You have to cook it before you can do anything with it. I think." The last two words he said very quietly, to himself.

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say its main use is clearing a room." He turned to the refrigerator. "Wonder if there's any pizza left?"

"I doubt it," mumbled Johnny, lifting a strand of the thing in the pan and staring at it uncertainly. "Stoker and Cap were here first."

Chet shook his head sadly and wandered back out of the dayroom while Johnny sighed and lifted the cover off the large Dutch oven sitting on the back burner. Steam momentarily clouded his view of the contents, which bubbled much more appealingly than the concoction on the front burner. He glanced somewhat doubtfully at the pan of herbs he was sautéing, back at the stew, then shrugged.

"Here goes nothing," he said aloud. He picked up the pan of sautéed herbs and tilted its contents into the stew. Setting the empty pan aside, he stirred the herbs into the bubbling brew in the larger pot. Satisfied that it was mixing properly, he nodded and replaced the cover on the large pot. "Dinner'll be ready in ten minutes!" he called out.

No one answered.

Johnny sat alone at the table in due time, spooning his creation into a bowl. "You guys don't know what you're missing!" he called out again.

"Yes, we do!" came back a lone voice in reply.

Johnny made a face at the empty doorway. "Fine. More for me." He sprinkled some pepper onto his food, stirred it a little, then spooned a small amount into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, and his eyebrows rose in surprise. He shoveled in another mouthful.

"Sometimes I surprise even myself," he mumbled. He polished off the bowl and helped himself to seconds. "You guys are missing it," he yelled out. "This tastes a lot better than it smells!"

"It would have to," Cap shouted back. "Nothing could be worse than that smell!"

Johnny shrugged and swallowed another spoonful. "Their loss, my gain," he said to himself, and continued his meal happily.

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Roy opened his eyes in the darkened dorm, blinking sleepily for a second as if startled. *What was that?* Some sound had awakened him, and as he came more awake he glanced almost automatically to his right and Johnny's bunk.

Gage's bunk was empty, the blanket and sheets rumpled as though his partner had been sleeping restlessly.

That must have been the sound that had awakened him—Johnny getting up to leave the room. Roy shifted down into the blanket and closed his eyes again. The night was still young and with luck he could get back to sleep and hope against hope they wouldn't get toned out before dawn.

Another sound disturbed his attempt, and he realized in a heartbeat two things, and felt his sinking heart. The first was that this was the sound that had awakened him. The second was that the sound was emanating from the latrine. It was not the sound of normal toilet use.

Throwing back the covers, he climbed out of bed and headed toward the closed latrine door, guided by both the sounds from behind it as well as the narrow band of light shining from underneath. A quick glance to either side as he approached showed him that it was, indeed, Johnny that he was hearing in the other room.

"Johnny?" he called softly as he pushed open the door.

He heard a muffled groan to his left and stepped over. "You okay?"

Johnny knelt before one of the toilets, pale and sweaty. He lifted a shaky hand but before he could reply he was leaning once more over the bowl and retching miserably.

Roy dropped a hand lightly on Gage's back, slightly surprised by the trembling. The skin was clammy, not warm or feverish.

"Man..." whispered Gage, breathing heavily as the vomiting ceased temporarily and he lifted his head.

Roy reached around him and flushed. He went to the sink and dampened some paper towels. "Here," he said, pressing the towels against Johnny's forehead. Johnny took them weakly and wiped his face. "You think you can stand up? Let's get you back to bed."

Johnny started to shake his head, stopped at the dizziness that ensued, and abruptly leaned over the toilet yet again.

"I think I'd better get Rampart on the horn," muttered Roy. Moving quickly, he went back into the dorm. Not bothering with formalities, he woke the Cap. "Cap,

Johnny's sick—he's in there throwing up everything in his system. I'm gonna get Rampart on the horn—I think we're gonna have to take him in."

Cap was awake instantly. "A bug?" he wondered, rubbing his eyes with one hand while he reached for his bunkers with the other.

Roy shook his head as he headed for the equipment bay and the squad. "I think it's something he ate—some sort of food poisoning."

Cap froze. "Food poisoning? What could he possible have eaten that we—" He stopped and stared at Roy.

Roy looked back over his shoulder. "Yeah," he agreed with the unanswered question. "That stew."

Twenty minutes later, Gage was bundled into the ambulance, not much improved. "Won't be long now, Johnny," Roy told him as the attendants slammed the door and they headed for the hospital.

"Sorry," mumbled his partner thickly.

Roy shook his head. "Just try to relax. The docs will take good care of you."

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"What did you say he ate?" Kelly Brackett studied Roy keenly.

"Stew," replied Roy. He proffered two labeled plastic bags. "Sample of the stew, and one of the vomit."

Brackett peered at the contents without opening either bag. "Did anyone else eat it?" he asked.

Roy shook his head. "You know Johnny," he smiled. "He was experimenting, and the smell put everybody off. Nobody touched it except him."

Mike Morton stepped into the room. "I hear we have John Gage down again," he said as the door closed behind him.

A groan answered him from the examining table, but said Gage didn't bother to open his eyes. Already he had been given some phenergan and the resulting drowsiness had him in an increasingly pleasant stupor.

"Something he ate," agreed Roy.

"That the samples?" Morton pointed to the bags still in Brackett's hand. "Shall I take them to the lab?"

"Thanks, Mike." Brackett handed him the bags, which Morton studied with interest. "What is it?" he asked, opening one of the bags and sniffing. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, drawing back in almost comical fashion and quickly shutting out the offending smell again. He looked up at the other doctor in some bemusement, and then at Roy. "What the heck was he doing with poke salad?" he wondered.

"With what?" said Roy.

"Poke salad," repeated Morton. "Pokeweed. Nasty stuff." He grimaced. "My grandmother used to cook with it sometimes. The whole neighborhood would reek of it, seemed to me." He repressed a shudder. "If you don't cook it right, it's quite poisonous."

Brackett and Roy exchanged a look, then turned their gaze to the paramedic on the table.

"It figures," muttered Roy.

"Only Johnny," said Brackett.

"You still want me to get this to the lab?" asked Morton.

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Two days later, John Gage bounced into the dorm, whistling cheerfully. "Mornin', everybody!" he called out in a general greeting, throwing open his locker and tossing in his gym bag.

"Gage!" exclaimed Chet Kelly, sidling around the corner of the row of lockers. He finished buttoning his shirt and started tucking it into his trousers. "You're back!"

"Yes, Chet, I'm back," replied Johnny, giving Chet a quizzical look as he pulled off his shoes and flung them into the locker after his bag.

"No lingering effects from your food poisoning?" pressed Chet.

Johnny sighed, stopped undressing, and turned to face Chet full on. "No lingering effects, Chet," he said pointedly. He put his hands on his hips. "Since when do you care so much?"

Chet finished buckling his belt and shrugged. "Hey, John, it's me, remember? I always care about my coworkers."

Gage snorted and continued changing. "Since when?"

"Hey, now, is that fair?" Chet put his hand dramatically on his chest.

"Chet, I'm sorry," said Johnny, only a hint of contrition in his voice. "I'm just not used to you being nice to me after...you know...after I've been out sick or anything."

"It's the new and improved me," Chet told him.

"Well, I'm sorry," repeated Johnny.

"You're forgiven," Chet assured him. He bent down to finish tie his shoes. "What was it that you ate, anyhow?"

Johnny shook his head. "It was that stuff that woman gave me, the one whose son I got unstuck from behind the toilet. She told me it was some herb. Turned out to be pokeweed."

"Poke salad?" Chet's eye's widened.

Johnny paused and turned to him. "Yeah, that's what Morton called it, too. Said his grandmother used to cook it up. Guess I cooked it up wrong." He shrugged.

Chet's expression changed as his eyes began to glimmer. Gage's expression changed, also, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. "What?" he demanded.

Chet shook his head. "Oh, nothing," he murmured. "Just reminded me of something."

"Chet..."

Chet headed toward the equipment bay without answering, but as he disappeared through the door, his voice rose in melody

*Poke salad Johnny, poke salad Johnny
Everybody said it was a shame
Cause his dinner was workin' on his stomach
(A mean, vicious dinner)*

The thud of a shoe hitting the door behind him echoed throughout the bay, followed by a wicked low laughter.

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MJ's note—This was all redgirl's idea. Honest. We did find some interesting information as we wrote, including a yummy sounding recipe for Beef Bourguignon, details about pokeweed, and the original lyrics to the song "Poke Salad Annie" (which was once recorded by the King himself!). Thanks for the nudge to write this story, girlfriend!

http://www.retrofoodrecipes.com/beef_bourguignon.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poke_salad

<http://www.geocities.com/merrystar3/allysongs/PolkSaladAnnie.htm>