III

Coming from the East Coast, it was only natural that the further westward that these two ladies went, they’d eventually get into Flyover territory.

Nothing but plains and country as far as they eye could see meant that they had to be conservative about how much gas they used. That meant stopping at every station, stopping at every roadside diner (if only for directions, if not a slice of pie) and perhaps *most* importantly, driving into town every now and again so that they could have some fun while they were around.

And boy, was this barbecue-eating contest fun.

“Oohhh boy… m’startin’ ta get full…”

“B-But if you quit now, we’ll never have enough money to pay for that flat tire!”

That might have been a teensy-weensy smidge of a lie. Wendy’s mama had squirreled her away a good fifty dollars from her Bingo winnings, and that could certainly have been used to pay for the tire if, for some reason, Ella couldn’t steady her lead in the contest. So far it was just her, this really big dude in overalls, and another smaller dude in flannel, but Ella was eating circles around Flannel boy and still maintaining a healthy gap between her and Mr. Overalls.

Healthy as in “healthy appetite”—which Ella certainly seemed to have.

“Ooogh… you’re right ‘bout that…” Ella leaned back in the chair, turgid stomach swelling forward into her lap as the flaps of her high-waisted bells furled to either side, “Alright… I think I can… *borp*… manage…”

“Atta girl~”

Wendy had always been Ella’s biggest supporter. She might have been a little chubby and kind of awkward around the boys, but she and her best friend had been down for one another since day one. And this might not have been how she had *pictured* spending the next few days of their Summer of Love, but Wendy would be lying if she said that she wasn’t having fun. A *lot* of fun, actually—getting to see Ella riled up about much of anything was always a hoot and a half, but this was a whole different animal from the ones she’d been spotting back in her hometown.

When did this woman learn to *eat* like that?

Another plate of barbecue ribs getting carried out by Miss Abercrombie to the contestants was all that the slowly gathering crowd needed. When all of this started, there were hardly enough people around to hoot and holler at the seven contestants that had entered. But now that they were down to three, and one of them was a pretty little hippie girl from a little further East, there was plenty of incentive to gather ‘round and watch the show. But no one was watching more intently than Wendy.

Sitting right below Ella on the stage, her little tummy pressing against the cheap wooden stage, Wendy propped herself up by the elbows with her head in her hands as she fawned over the sight of her best friend just plowing through rib after rib. There was simply no stopping her—Ella was like a woman possessed!

Of course, with how she’d been eating over the course of this little trip up, Wendy couldn’t say that she was *too* surprised…

“Shooo-wee y’all, thisn’s gonna be close!” Miss Abercrombie batted her big fake eyelashes at the crowd as she held up her bullhorn, “This li’l southern gal can *eat*!”

“That’s *my* Ellie!” Wendy whooped loudly from the stands, “Chow down, babe!”

At a certain point, it was almost like Ella stopped hearing her. She got this glazed look in her eyes as she sort of descended into the rhythm of the feasting. She’d been stuffing her face for well over ten minutes at this point, and even as Flannel boy and Mr. Overalls began to get green around the gills, she still looked like she could go strong.

“Hahahhhhhhhh…” Ella rasped out once the big boys fell face-first into their plates, “That’s…. how we… do it down…”

And here, Ella let out the most ear-splitting belch that anyone had ever heard. The crowd laughed, Wendy laughed, and even Miss Abercrombie laughed. But now that the adrenaline rush had faded and the competition was over and done with, Ella looked like she might pass out with the other two contestants at any given moment. Wendy, perhaps wisely, walked up the stairs that lead to the stage in the center of town to help her friend come to a standing position.

And *boy* did she look like she was ready to pop.

Her little tie-dye tank top ran up hard along the curvature of that little buddha belly. She’d been pigging out pretty much nonstop since this trip had started, but this really pushed it over the line! With her tummy all round, flexing hard in the space where there used to be a button and red denim flaps, Wendy was sure she’d have to get her to waddle swayback to the hotel—and that was only if they didn’t have to wheelbarrow her there instead!

“South.” Ella concluded her braggadocios stance with a little pat on her belly as Miss Abercrombie lowered a white sash that said BBQ KING over her shoulders, the silky white material resting over the slope of her prominent pot-belly, “Ain’t that right, Wen?”

“It sure is.” Wendy laughed, carefully helping Ella off the stage as she waved to the crowd of onlookers in a tired, sleepy sort of way, “You, um… you okay there, Ellie? You’re lookin’ a little green around the gills…”

“I feel like I’m gonna *pop*, dude.” Ella rasped out a laugh as she leaned heavily on her hippy hippie wingwoman, “But at least we can get out of this town soon. If I see one more rib, I’m gonna barf.”

IV

*“Are you girls getting enough to eat out there?”*

It was a reasonable enough question to ask, Wendy supposed. Her mother’s biggest concern, growing up poor, had always been that Wendy never went hungry. But having been on the trip and crammed into that van with Ella, pulling over for every pitstop and trying a little bit of everything along the way, it seemed downright silly.

Were they getting enough food to eat? Surely they were—if anything, they were eating just a hair too much! Wendy had hoped to lose a little bit of weight once she was away from her Hostess With The Mostest mother and her insistence on piling plates high with seconds to boot. But with Ella being the one in charge of when and where they stopped, mostly because Wendy wouldn’t dare harsh her friend’s mellow, they were spending more and more time at diners, truck stops, and gas stations than they were in the towns that they were passing by! Wendy hadn’t exactly *ballooned* on this trip, but she’d have been hard pressed to jog around that little van while they were going cross-country.

“Yes mama, we’re doing just fine.” The hippy redhead said into the receiver, her hip squishing against the glass of the phone booth as she leaned to the side, “Tell Daddy I love him, okay? He’s not still sore that we went through with this whole thing, is he?”

“Oh he’s… fine; you girls just focus on having fun while you’re out there getting your groove on or whatever it is you girls say these days.” Wendy’s mother lied through her teeth, “S-Speaking *of* though, *when* exactly were you and Ella planning on getting—”

“Whoops, almost time to go mama!” Wendy laughed, “Love you, love daddy!”

“Now hold on just a min—\*”

With a click of the earpiece against the holster, Wendy’s mother’s voice was cut off like it’d been hit with a pair of scissors. The sound of the gas station door opening and Ella coming out right foot first with two hot dogs in hand was what commanded Wendy’s attention at the moment. She’d focus on how mad her parents were later; right now, she was ankle-deep in the most fun Summer she’d ever had in her life.

“Did you get me one?” Wendy sounded more peeved than grateful, “Ellie, one little slip-up doesn’t mean that I’m not *still* a vegetarian.”

“Oh I know.” The brunette flower child said into her chili dog, scarfing down a sizeable bite and scraping her fingers with her teeth along the way, “Theesh are mine—ulp!—don’t worry.”

“You’re gonna turn *into* a hot dog if you keep this up.” Wendy hip-checked her curvy copilot with one chunky hip, “You didn’t get your fill at the Meat ‘n’ Three we stopped at for lunch?”

“Guess not—y’think there’s a meat ‘n’ *four* ‘round here?” Ella chuckled, developing double chin rolling slightly with her little laugh, “Oh lighten *up* Wen, that was funny.”

“Outta sight.” Wendy laughed, “Let’s get you outta here before they roll you out with the tires.”

The plump redhead laid a hand on Ella’s growing paunch, a wet slap sounding from the jelly belly that had been steadily growing since this trip began. Ella had always been a little more cornfed than some of the other girls in the neighborhood, but whether it was just the lack of home cooking or the fact that they weren’t getting any exercise, Ella was blowing up with every mile that this trip took—starting with that cute little tummy that had cropped up underneath her hooters, and ending with…

Gosh, everything else.

Where was the skinny little tomboy that Wendy had grown up with all these years? In her stead was a heavyset hippie who was practically licking her chops every time they passed someplace that had a vaguely tasty advertisement on the road. Sure, she spent most of her time driving, but Wendy would reckon that Ella had spent more than her fair share of time eating along the way. With her hips widening against the newest pair of pants that they’d picked up in town and her full figure testing the confines of that tie dye crop top, there was hardly as much hope of them getting home when they said they would as there was anyone recognizing Ella by the time she got back!

“Hey, gotta have fun while I can, right?” Ella scarfed down a whole half a hot dog in one bite, “Whensh the necksht time ah’ll be all the way out here?”

Ella visibly struggled to swallow with how big her bite was.

“That sign’s right—these’re the *best* chili dogs this side of the Rockies.”

And Wendy would have been lying if she had said that she hadn’t enjoyed this. At least, more than in the sense that she’d enjoyed feeling free and away from her parents for the Summer. Watching Ella eat herself from Coast to Coast was something that Wendy hadn’t known that she would look forward to—sure, there were times when she wished that Ella would just pack it in and they could continue their trip to California, but the longer that this went on and the tighter that every new pair of pants got, the more that Wendy found herself drawn to the softening figure of her friend behind the driver’s seat. Leaning back in that big roomy cabin, snuggled up next to one another on the mattress that they had in the back on nights when they couldn’t get (or afford) a hotel…

It was all something that Wendy had grown *surprisingly* attached to. She wasn’t sure if she ever wanted this to end. Maybe once they got back home, she and Ella really *would* move in together. Maybe they really *could* live sorta like this, all the time…

Maybe Ella could eat like this… all the time.