

# A Bone to Pick

## By ReadWorks

The fire was the most important thing. He couldn't let the fire go out. If the fire went out, there would be no smoke. If there was no smoke, then all of the day's hard work would be lost and they would have to close the next day. It was for these reasons that Javier found himself awake at 4 a.m., carefully placing wood into the flames. The wood would feed the flames, the flames would produce smoke, and the smoke would barbecue and flavor the meat that the restaurant sold.

Javier had known that he would be waking up at 4 a.m. when he signed on for the job at Bones Barbecue. But still, there is a vast difference between knowing you have to wake up early and actually dragging yourself out of a warm, soft bed in the dark hours of the morning. By now it was closer to 5 a.m. and Javier could see the first fingers of the sunrise, turning the Texas sky a soft pink. Anne, the owner of Bones, would be arriving shortly. Javier did a quick scan of the room—everything was clean, the brisket was in the smoker, the fire was coming along. He ducked out to get a breath of fresh air. The heat and the smell of the pecan wood inside the smokehouse was overpowering and made him dizzy after a few hours.

"Taking a break already, Javier?" a voice asked.

Anne had arrived and was teasing him. "Everything's all set," he replied. "It should be good for the next hour."

"Then you can help me unload the ice," she said. Javier sighed. Anne didn't like to be still for even a moment. The problem was that she believed that all of her employees had the same boundless energy that she did. Anne had inherited the land and the brisket recipe from her father, but it was her drive that had made Bones the biggest barbecue success west of the Mississippi River.

When Anne had begun, Bones was just a small shack on a scrubby piece of land in East Austin, across the highway from the rest of the city. Though it was only a ten-minute walk to the downtown core, that highway was a barrier dividing the haves and the have-nots, the socioeconomic elite and those struggling to get by.

Anne had gotten lucky with timing, she admitted. Just when she had scrounged up enough money to launch the barbecue joint, East Austin had experienced a renaissance. All of the young people flocking to Austin for college were staying in the city and moving to East

Austin when they graduated. There were coffee shops now where there used to be check-cashing stands. Folks from the rest of the city were no longer scared to come to East Austin. The neighborhood had just enough character and grit to excite them, but not enough real danger to prevent them from moving in. The changes made Javier sad. In ten years, maybe, the neighborhood would be nothing but Starbucks and luxury apartments he couldn't afford. But for now, these newcomers were providing the business that paid his rent.

Javier unloaded the ice and went in to prepare the pickles and onions that would be provided with the smoked meat. Bones made only one type of meat, beef brisket, served with white bread. They still managed to sell out every day, and Anne saw no reason to diversify. By the time Javier finished the vegetables, it was 9 a.m. and the first customers were dropping by for breakfast tacos filled with brisket. There was a brief break, and then a steady stream of customers for lunch started at 11:30. By the time Javier finished at 2:30, he figured he must have sold several hundred pounds of meat. He desperately needed a shower and a nap.

"Javier, go home," said Anne. "You look terrible."

He thought that he must really have looked awful if even Anne was telling him to take a break. "I think I'm going to head to Barton Springs Pool to cool off for a bit," he said.

Barton Springs was a natural spring water pool located just south of the city. The water was a deliciously cool 68 degrees, which felt amazing on your skin when the Texas summer consistently clocked in at over 100, day after day. He drove down to the pool and dove in, swimming a few laps before getting out to lie in the shade.

"Excuse me?"

Javier was just falling asleep when he heard a lilting, female voice asking for his attention. He opened his eyes and saw a woman in her early twenties, about his age. She was tan and beautiful, with a certain self-assuredness about her. It was the confidence of people accustomed to others being extra nice to them.

He smiled. "Yes?"

"I'm Kelsey. You work at that butcher, don't you?" she asked. "Bones?"

Something in her tone made Javier defensive. "We make barbecue, but, yes, that's where I work."

"You slaughter animals," she said flatly.

Javier sighed. Austin was full of vegetarians, some of whom seemed to take personal offense at what he did to make a living.

“We don’t slaughter the animals ourselves. Yes, we do serve beef, but most of what we get is free-range from ranches outside Richardson, just 100 miles from here. The cows eat organic grass under the sunshine for most of their lives. They’re killed quickly. They have better lives than a lot of the people who live in this city,” Javier said.

Javier had heard Anne respond to vegetarians so many times that he knew the answers by heart. Personally, Anne didn’t have anything against vegetarians. Admittedly, a lot of the vegetarians in Austin practically glowed with health. However, Javier didn’t like being attacked by people who didn’t seem to know what they were talking about. Bones wasn’t part of the industrial farm system and paid a fair price to all of the ranchers it bought cattle from. He made high-quality food that brought happiness to a lot of people. That, in turn, made Javier happy.

Kelsey looked unconvinced. She squinted at him, dubiously. “Look, you’re really cute,” she said. “I’d love to hang out. But I just can’t be around someone who is complicit in the killing of animals. Understand my dilemma?” She grinned.

Javier laid back in the grass and closed his eyes. “Fair enough,” he said. “But I just can’t leave my job for a woman I’ve known for five minutes. Come by Bones some time, and I’ll give you a free plate.” He opened his eyes to wink, but the woman was already gone.

Javier closed his eyes again and began to slide into sleep. Kelsey had been very pretty, all right, but her strategy was flawed. Attacks were no way to persuade for a cause. She hadn’t even asked enough questions to learn that Javier, himself, was a vegetarian.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Where does Javier work?

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2. Which important character is introduced at the end of the story?

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3. Read these sentences from the story.

"I'm Kelsey. You work at that butcher, don't you?' she asked. 'Bones?'  
"Something in her tone made Javier defensive. 'We make barbecue, but, yes, that's where I work.'  
"You slaughter animals,' she said flatly."

Based on this evidence, what can you conclude about Kelsey's opinion about killing animals for meat?

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4. What does Javier assume about Kelsey?

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5. What is this story mostly about?

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6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"Kelsey had been very pretty, all right, but her strategy was flawed. Attacks were no way to persuade for a cause."

What does the word "strategy" mean as used in the text?

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7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Kelsey tells Javier she would love to hang out with him; \_\_\_\_\_, she can't be around someone who is involved in the slaughter of animals.

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8. What does Kelsey accuse Javier of doing?

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9. Kelsey questions Javier's character. What evidence in the text supports this statement?

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10. Making uninformed judgments about people may lead to missed opportunities. How does this story support this theme? Use evidence in the text to support your answer.

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