

Chapter VI

Like a Couple of Horses

Hi. Figured I'd find you at home on a Sunday morning. Here: I baked you some brownies. Peanut butter swirls.

You know those people who say if you get something really weird off your chest, you'll quit dreaming about it? Those people are *wrong*. So I got out of bed and headed for the oven—not to stick my head in it, but to bake swirls. My first in months; it's been too hot out to be baking in. Wasn't so bad in the wee hours. I shocked the beejeebers out of Sadie, though; she thought wacky burglars had got into the kitchen.

Don't mind me dropping by this early, do you? Well I should hope not. Got any coffee? Want me to make some, then? I make a *darn* good cup of coffee. Learned how from my Gramma Otto, who learned from her Grandma Wunderlich; so that's *darn* good cups of coffee unto the fourth generation. Let me at that percolator.

The trick is to never let your raw ingredients forget who's boss, right up to the point where you transform them into coffee or brownies or whatever. Keep the upper hand, every step of the way. Gramma started me off with the fine arts of Stirring and Tasting, back when I was so little I had to use a footstool to reach the top of the stove. I had my own personal potholder with my name on it, and my own wooden spoon and everything; so I was the little big cheese of *that* kitchen, and everything I Stirred and Tasted knew it.

Gramma Otto was one hell of a cook—*heck* of a cook; sorry, Gramma. (Sunday, you know.) She could do things with parts of a chicken I don't think were intended to be edible.

I have all her recipes, so if you ever want Fried Gizzards à la Marble Orchard, just let me know. Back before I was born they kept their own flock of live chickens, and Gramma got to do all the wringing and plucking and beheading and so forth. THANK GOD that was passé by the time I showed up, 'cause *I* would've had to help her.

You know something? I've never been with you in the morning before—'cept that first day sliding down the corridor. I've never seen you drink a cup of coffee. I don't know if you take cream or sugar or stir it with a cinnamon stick or *anything*... Black? Really? Me too. 'Cept I add a ton of Sweet 'n' Low. Lucky I always carry a ton of it in my poke.

So—good to the last drop—

(Clink.)

What was I talking about? Oh, chickens. All we had to do was go down to Market Square and buy poultry that was already headless and featherless—raw stuff for a master chef to work her abracadabra on. (Including the gizzards.) In Marble Orchard we had these *chowdowns*, let me tell you: eggs-over-easy and biscuits-and-gravy and ham loaf and meat loaf and pot roast and croquettes and apple brown Betty. Not all at one meal, but Gramma always put plenty on the table and I was taught to clean my plate. And I always did and Gramma'd say I had an appetite like a couple of horses, but with me being a hyperactive energy bundle it all got burned off right away, and I was always ready for second helpings.

Speaking of which, those peanut butter swirls look soooo yummy... I think I might just nibble on the outer edge of one... Oh God—oh Jeez—oh *bliss!* I can't believe I used to chainscarf these, and not stop to savor each 'n' every crumb!

*Away in a cage eating sunflower seeds
The little brown gerbil has all that he needs
But gerbils have appetites vaster than vast—
No way that my gerbil can make those seeds last!*

See what a brownie can DO for you? Give your tongue wings!

(Don't let me eat another one, please.)

Anyway: "family" was a big thing with Gramma Otto. She kept harping on about it, probably 'cause Mom was off in Demortuis being a cocktail waitress and having nose jobs.

Meanwhile here's me in Marble Orchard with these old family pictures all over the house, and a double extra helping in my room—up high where I couldn't get at them. I mean here I am sitting at my desk, pretending to do my arithmetic homework or whatever, and if I glance up there's someone like "Aunt Claudia" or "Uncle Stanley" glaring down at me. We're talking Gramma's aunts and uncles here, the Wunderlichs; it was their house originally. Every darn one of them had an abruptly-pointed chin.

They also had a professional family quartet back in the olden days, and would sing things like "Go Tell Aunt Rhody Her Old Grey Goose Is Cooked" at funerals all over Booth County. Their leader was Uncle Willie Wunderlich, the one I wish I'd known; they say he was a real charmer. Taught himself to play the piano and mandolin and saxophone, and wore boutonnières in the Lutheran church on Sundays *that weren't Easter*, and belonged to every social club in town and escorted lots of eligible widows around, but never married any of them so got chalked up as a "fickle lazybones"—all this while running a grocery store by day and singing "Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie" with his barbershop cronies by night. A real charmer!

He died the year I was born but I think a lot of him lived on in my Uncle Buddy-Buzz, who certainly cornered the charm market so far as *my* male relatives are concerned. He didn't have any competition from my Hungerford cousins, Aunt Ollie's boys. One of my truly deep regrets is that the Hungerfords never cherry-bombed the old chicken coop at Gramma and Grampa's—they were forever *saying* they were going to, but never got around to *doing* it. (Is that a distillation of men, or what? No offense.) *I'd* have done it, if they'd've let me. Ha! I pleaded just to be allowed to set fire to the trash in the *incinerator*, for crying out loud. Finally Gramma let me, and a week later Booth County BANNED outdoor burning! (What a bunch of spoilsports.)

Those Hungerfords. They convinced me that a little girl who "looked just like me" had coughed herself to death in Gramma's bedroom closet, years ago, and that her ghost would swoop out around midnight and smell like rotten eggs and so on. I tried to catch her doing it a bunch of times, but never managed once.

Actually I think the first part was true—what with all the TB and typhoid fever and

foot-and-mouth disease, way back when. There were all these Wunderlich markers at Rosewood Cemetery saying **Taken from us too soon** *Alas* and the like. I only went to two funerals there: Grampa's during a blizzard, and Gramma's during a heatwave. Oh and my cousin Mickey Hungerford's, who "bought the farm in Cambodia" as his charming brothers always put it.

One time we buried a guinea pig in a shoebox in the back yard—oh don't look like that, we *had* to. Though I'll admit he was so dull you could hardly tell he'd died. And my old cat Whippy ended up in honest-to-goodness Kitty Heaven, which is a pet plot over by Welmer's Lake. I had to leave Whippy behind when I moved to Demortuis 'cause she was a country cat and didn't care for city life. Gramma renamed her "Margaret," which incidentally was her mother's name (Gramma's, that is; Whippy's mother was named "Puff"). Originally I'd called Whippy "Ann-Margret" 'cause she was so orange, but then Buddy-Buzz made all these wisecracks about kittens with a whip...

Jeez, this has gotten to be a *cheerful* conversation. Pretty soon you'll have me singing about old grey cooked geese. So let's change the subject. And have another brownie...

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It was nice of you to take me out to dinner. Though I'll appreciate it even more if you'll "regulate" me when dessert comes; there's this little item (with spaghetti straps!) on a hanger at home that I hope I'll still be able to fit inside, if you ever want to take me somewhere dressy-up sometime.

But I like this place! This "trattoria"—rolls right off the tongue, doesn't it? So *Italiano*-ey. Puts me in mind of when I was allowed to add my first "soupsong" of garlic in Gramma's kitchen:

*Sing me a soupsong of garlicky cloves
that season ev'rything from pickles to loaves
of bread fit for I-tal-i-an eating—
(best avoided at vampire meetings).*

Can I have a bite of your manicotti? The one on your plate, har har. I always swipe a bite from the plate of whoever buys me dinner. And by “bite” I do mean “half.” Thanks... ooh tasty! deeLISHus! Where would we be without tomato sauce, I ask you? Bereft and bereaved, believe me. Breaking bread with the bleached bones of brute beasts, “you better you better you bet.” (Hee hee! Sorry. When my stomach’s full of good food, I tend to get a bit silly.)

Okay! To cap it off, I think I’ll order some spumoni—oh all right, gelato then—oh come *on!* Regulate shmegulate—what’s the matter with one tiny dish of gelato? Are you hinting maybe you think I look *fat*? You better not (better not bet). Now that I’m on the Sweet ‘n’ Low chariot, those nasty calories sizzle away with a ZAP and a FLASH, just like my li’l flat feet used to do when I was a kid, wherever they set me down on them—PX, County Courthouse, downtown Honolulu. I never knocked anything over (till I met you) but a lot of stuff did tend to *totter* as I went galloping past it.

That’s what got Gramma started on her Absolutely Not, Young Lady! list. In extreme cases she’d even make me “take my oath,” which is to say I’d have to swear I wouldn’t do something on the family Bible. (Well you know what I mean.)

(Why yes, I *would* like a lemon sorbet, thank you kindly.)

My Absolutely Not list got pretty elaborate, but nothing like my friend Janey Orrick’s. She was the *intensest* person I’ve ever known, even more than Sadie; always blurting out things the rest of us barely dared to say under our breath—this at the age of seven, eight, nine.

(Hey, this sorbet isn’t half bad. Maybe it’s really gelato in disguise.)

Janey’s folks were all the time grounding her for “sassing back.” Then they forbade her to watch some TV show ever again—*Laugh-in* or *The Smothers Brothers*—so she went and swallowed an entire bottle of Bufferin after writing this dramatic suicide note: “If that’s the way it’s going to be, what’s the point of being alive?” Janey was an existentialist before we even knew there were such things.

Got her stomach pumped, too. The Orricks pretended it was due to food poisoning but the whole town knew the truth, and a couple months later they moved away to Utah.

Janey wrote me one postcard about how much life sucked in Salt Lake City. I kept that postcard for the longest time; it had a picture of the Fifth Dimension on it. You know, as in “Up Up and Away in My Beautiful, My Beautiful Bal-loooon...”

Her leaving really did suck ‘cause I finally got my two ponies shortly afterward and Janey would’ve been a blast to go riding with—hurdling fences and chasing steeples.

I’d been lobbying for a horse ever since I first came to live with Gramma and Grampa. Make that *two* horses, so the first one wouldn’t get lonesome. And why stop at two? Why not a whole barnful, like Ruthie Mundt had? Ruthie was the coolest girl in Marble Orchard—the first one I knew personally who got talked about for “putting out,” which Janey and I thought meant French-kissing.

(Well it involves putting out your *tongue*, doesn’t it?)

ANYway, my standard demand every birthday and Christmas was for a couple of ponies, but it took years to get them and I had to make do with the Two Timmys. Real Life Timmy was a stuffed horsie—half-stuffed, actually; I’ve still got him—while Invisible Timmy was a magnificent bucking bronco that only I could see, of course. (Don’t ask me why I named them after the kid on *Lassie*. Probably ‘cause he looked Scandinavian.)

Finally everybody chipped in—this was after Grampa died, and Gramma went back to work part-time at the County Hospital, and Buddy-Buzz began to hit it big as a set designer—and they bought me a couple of beauties: a pinto I named Supertimmy and a sorrel we called New Junebug, since Mom and Aunt Ollie’d had one named Junebug when they were kids. I loved them both so much, those ponies, and I got to be a pretty fair equestrienne despite a whole slew of additions to my Absolutely Not list. But, you know, you have to *clean up* after genuine hossflesh. And that kind of loses its novelty-charm after the third or fourth time.

Obviously they got left behind too when I moved to Demortuis, and after awhile they were sold to the Hooplemans. Talk about dumbfounding! Cathy Sue Hoopleman was such a drip. I mean literally: she had this constant case of the sniffles, every type of allergy and hay fever you could think of. Plus she was completely suggestible: when we’d play with her Barbie dolls I could remark that Ken looked like his *brain* was exposed, and Cathy Sue

would choke right up and start dripping like an open faucet. I'm sure if she ever tried to ride a horse, she'd've sneezed herself right out of the saddle.

Her nose was as red as a Borscht Belt beet. I always envied that about her...

