

Chapter VIII

Lapsing into Indolence

Hi there. Hold still a sec—

[WHUMP]

That's for being a man and not having cramps!

Oh, have I not mentioned my habit of clueing in guys about the joys of womanhood, using my fist and your stomachs? Well consider yourself warned.

(Oh please, it was just a love tap.)

Urggh... If it's all the same to you, I'm gonna curl up here in a little ball. And no it's not a fetal position—faaaar from it. Tip-o'-the-pickle, though, that the moment it *finally* starts cooling off outside, *I* should get the Nuisance. I used to collect names for it—like ragtime, Holy Week, and “red sails in the sunset.” Now I just call it the Nuisance.

(Goddam cramps.)

But better, I suppose, than the alternative. Be just my puddleducking luck to have Punchy Frid Jr. show up now, eight years late.

Peyton? I didn't hurt you too much when I tapped you, did I? Oh good. Got any of that lemonade left?... Thanks. (Slurp.)

I really do like this big old sofabed of yours; it's so comfy. 'Member the first time I flung myself onto it and said here I lie, all bashful and defenseless, and you said I was about as bashful as an earthquake? Jeez, that seems like long ago. Instead of—what?—two

weeks? ‘N’ then I said something about always sleeping on my back, didn’t I? Boy, *that* was real demure. Must’ve had on scarlet skivvies that night for sure.

(Did you just laugh at me?)

(Well, you better not.)

Actually when I do sleep on my back is when I have those really weird dreams. That one in particular about being in a bed like a drawer that gets hauled open, rolling forward, and there’s this spotlight shining down on me. (My “cosmic cone of light” at last, har har.) And it’s almost like a molten-lava hangover, though I don’t feel it; but I can’t close my eyes either. I try to blink, and there’s that light and those faces up above, all around, staring down at me, their mouths hanging open. *Oh no* they say, *Oh no*, but I can’t hear the words.

(Maybe they think I’m Yoko.)

(Slurp.)

When we went to see Gramma Otto for the last time, me and Mom and Aunt Ollie, we were chatting about this and that, the goings-on at the Booth County Hospital—which was Gramma’s second home anyway, she being an ex-RN and knowing half the docs there when they were just medical students—all of a sudden Gramma turned to me and squoze my hand, squoze it so tight I can still feel it, and started jabbering about this dresser in her sewing room. “The third drawer from the top, toward the back—”

We never did figure out what she was talking about. There was nothing in that drawer but a bunch of bobbins and safety pins.

(Hunh.)

With Grampa it’d been different; he was bedridden at home for a long time. At first he could move around using a walker, doing the *whump!-tump-shuffa* up and down the hall. All the floorboards in that house creaked anyway, so it was quite processional-sounding: “here comes Grampa”—“there goes Grampa.” He’d *whump!-tump* into my room and we’d play indoor basketball, tossing papercrumps into a wastebasket up on top of a bureau. Everything had to be just so: the crumps had to be regulation size, and you could only throw them in certain ways, and the wastebasket had to be set at a precise distance. It was a lot of fun.

But then he had the second stroke and got bedridden. Though he claimed he was just “loafing” like in a hammock, and would be up by-and-by—would definitely escort Gramma and me to church on Sunday. He’d have me polishing his best wingtips over and over, week after week, but he never put them on.

When I was little he looked like a giant: big arms, big hands, big stomach, big lap. When that man hugged you, brother, you were *hugged*. And boy could he sweat—have to change his shirt three or four times on a summer day. The clothesline would be full of them, all a-flap, and I’d sit underneath in a box and pretend it was a full-rigged schooner.

(Yawn.)

‘Scuse me. Grampa gave me my very first taste of beer, when I wasn’t even six yet. *Falstaff* beer, I’m sorry to say; but you gotta start someplace. He drank it out of bottles, never from cans, and he’d let me finish the last few drops. “Now it’s a dead soldier,” he’d call the empty bottle. Emptied quite a few of ‘em, too; killed off a whole Falstaff army. There on the side of the big silver mailbox out front, in gigantic black letters for all the world to see, was B.L.OTTO. For Bertram L. Otto, Sr.

(Yawn.)

It was when he found out his only son, Bertram L. Jr. (that’s Buddy-Buzz) was more than just roommates with a guy called Gig in Chicago, that Grampa had his first stroke. And Buddy-Buzz never came back to Marble Orchard again, ‘cept for funerals. So Gramma moved across the hall into his room, ‘cause Grampa started going *Oooohhhh* in the middle of the night. “Snoring something fierce,” Gramma called it.

(Yawn.)

Course, if you listen to my cousin Jerry, he’ll try to convince you it wasn’t about Buddy-Buzz at all, but ‘cause I almost had that accident with the skyrockets that one Fourth of July. When I should’ve ended up with a terrible legscar but didn’t, but Grampa—

Hunh. That’s Jerry-the-Creep Hungerford for you. Being his usual sicko crybaby creepazoid self. Last I heard, he’d become *a lawyer in Cleveland*. So ‘nuff said about him.

(YAWN.)

‘Scuse me.

That guy called Gig—he and Buddy-Buzz were both “husky” fellows. I stayed with them the first time I saw Chicago by night ‘n’ everything. Now I’m pretty petite, y’know, and was even petiter then, but there was barely enough room for me at their place—what with their personal heftiness, ‘n’ all those sideboards ‘n’ breakfronts full of knickknacks ‘n’ paddywhacks. “That’s what you get when you’re a crackerjack,” Buddy-Buzz said.

Always had to have nothing but the best—first class all the way. In his apartments, at restaurants, on his stage sets. “True Effect,” he called it. That first trip to Chicago, he took me to gape at the fancy highrises on Lake Shore Drive. “You wait and see,” he said, “we’ll end up there someday, ‘n’ have the lights at our feet.” That’s what he said—‘n’ he did, too, for awhile. Not on the Gold Coast, but ritzy enough for him to say it was “undeniably chic.” Which he did. ‘Cause it was. ‘Cause he wouldn’t settle for anything less.

‘N’ now he’s in a hospice.

“Why?” Why do you *think*?

God knows I don’t know what to think. ‘Cept it’s incomprehensibubble. I mean, if that’s the way things can turn out, how can you *cope*?

He still insists it’s just a bad case of flu. What Gramma used to call “the grippe.” Sounds like a good name for it, if you ask me. Better than having to avoid all mention of braids or grades or parades or arcades, or—or lemonades. Or the ace of spades.

(Yawn.)

I called the hospice on my birthday. Asked him how he was doing. Buddy-Buzz says, “I’m lapsing into indolence.” So then I asked, more or less, how to come to grips with The Grippe. And he says, “No regrets, darling. Give me half a chance ‘n’ I’ll do it all over again, just the same.”

Jeez. I mean—

(Yawn.)

Sufferin’ Sisyphus...

*

Nguh—

Wha’...? Did I drift off? What time is it? Eleven-*thirty*? Not in the morning?!... oh

thank God. Sadie would've had kittens. And that on top of our just getting that puppy...
Where's my poke? There's my poke. Point us in the direction of the potty, willya please?...

(Mrmph glub shmug.)

(PATOOEY!)

Good thing I always pack my toothbrush wherever I go. I always brush my teeth, first thing in the morning—*then* eat breakfast. I'm not awake till my teeth are brushed, and I sure can't enjoy breakfast if I'm not awake. (Do I brush them again after breakfast? No, then I smoke a cigarette.)

Whoooo! You sure it's only 11:30? Okay, 11:45? I feel like I got a whole night's sleep. Course I'm a night person anyway, but this is almost like gaining an entire extra night to play with. Thanks for letting me nap. Tell you what—I'll come back on Saturday and give this place the cleaning of a lifetime! You won't recognize it when I get through with it.

So howzabout I take you out, right now, and you treat me to midnight ham 'n' eggs? Ooh and some poppyseed muffins! Aw c'mon—so what if it is a “school night,” or that we have to be at work in eight-or-so hours? It's not like I'm asking for breakfast in bed or anything. Let's have a bit of fun! *That's* a practical ambition, isn't it? I mean, without practical ambition we'd just be stumblebums and doodlesquats, right?

Attaboy! Let's go. I hope you know some good all-night eateries around here.

Know what? Every morning I wake up and throw back the covers and there I am and I say to myself, “*So this is reality!*” (Oh don't shush me; the night's still young.)

Reality shmee-ality—my Uncle Buddy-Buzz would be the first in line to give a cheer for good old-fashioned just-imagine make-believe. He did it all the time, designing his stage sets, and some of them were pretty avant-garde—you should've seen the one he did for this Off-Loop production of *Toys in the Attic*. (I parked over here.) They were always unreal—“Scenery, not Reality,” Buddy-Buzz'd say. “Maybe it *is* only a paper moon sailing over a cardboard sea, but that's where the magic comes in. Do it right, and you can MAKE people make-believe.”

And if you're able to do a thing like *that*, why should you ever feel perplexed or dumbfounded?

I mean, look at *Flashdance*. Have you ever heard of a blue-collar beer joint with swanky dance routines like that? In Vegas, maybe, but not Pittsburgh. Same thing goes for Jennifer Beals's loft and her audition for the ballet company and that handsome hunk who falls for her being the owner of the steel mill and all the rest of it. I mean, she didn't even do her own flashdancing.

But so what? It's not supposed to be Real Life—it's MAKE-BELIEVE. It's "Let's Pretend." Jennifer Beals is really cute and has frizzy hair and speaking as a really cute frizzyhaired girl myself, I thought it was a *wonderful* movie. It made ME make-believe, all right; to the point that I started working out after I saw it. And getta loada me now! But I didn't go off the deep end and apply for any exotic ballet troupes; I went to work at SMECK.

Course, I'd just come back from having a spring fling overseas.

"Why wait for your ship to come in," I said, "when you can meet it halfway?" So I got myself shanghaied as assistant chef for a bunch of missionaries on the good ship *Van Vooren*, or the "Belgian Bulge" as we on the crew called her. *That* was a challenge: those missionaries belonged to a chain of missions called Hall o' the Hearth™, which turned out to mean "All You Can Scarf"—they could pack away groceries like there was no tomorrow. I lived in constant fear of falling into one of the galley's pressure cookers and being dished up as a between-meals snack.

Mr. Wong would've done it, too. He was the head chef and big as a mammoth and had it in for me, most of the trip—"YOU, KI-FI! YOU, LUBBERGIRL!" (For a moment I was afraid he'd said "lovingirl.") "YOU NOT ON DRY LAND ANYMORE, LUBBERGIRL! BETTER LOOK SHARP!"

He made me study the thickest cookbook ever imported to the Western Hemisphere. Did you know some people eat *calf's brains* with their eggs? You sauté them (the brains) and pour on your eggs, scramble them together, then sprinkle it with paprika. We didn't have any calf's brains onboard, which was just as well 'cause some Scarfer would've ordered them, and Mr. Wong would've made me do the scrambling. "NOW THEY MATCH YOUR BRAINS, HEY KI-FI?"

But when we docked in Greece and I left the “Bulge,” he presented me with a ceremonial jackknife; so you see even hostile ship’s chefs can’t resist my frolicsome charm...

Turn in here? What a cute little diner! “Papavero’s?” You think he and Mamavero and all the little Veros are here tonight?

(Hey there! Is it too late for us to get any ham ‘n’ eggs?... Oh I *luvya!*)

You too, Bald Man—bend down here a sec—

(Smooch.)

Now you’ve got a tattletale smoochmark on the crown of your head, and I hope it’ll make all your other sugarbaby confesseees hotsy-jealous. And don’t let me catch you wiping it off, either. (Couple of over-easies, please, with that ham, and have you got any poppyseed muffins? *Yay!* I may just have to move *in* here. Oh and can I have an OJ too, and maybe a cup of cocoa also? Thank you muchly! You’ll be getting a whopper tip.)

What are you grinning at? Are you grinning at *me*? Okay, you have my permission. I told you being with me’s got to be a nonstop all-night belly laugh. And you ain’t heard *nothing* yet—

Ooh that was fast with the cocoa! Lookit the size of this mug! Need both hands to pick it up—

(Slurp.)

Ahhhhhhh...

You know, for a girl who’s still pestered with the Nuisance, I sure feel good about now. Good ‘n’ *lazy*. I don’t think I’ll ever set foot outside this diner. No more plunging into the glooms again, or the bitters—keep those for Pink Gins! And don’t ever let me end up like my Great-Aunt Emmy, who’s blind and mad (not insane, just mad) or Sadie’s Nana Gubel, who’s a villainous old hag with the *gall* to not accept Desirée as her great-granddaughter—for having been “born out of wedlock” or something. Well it’s her loss, the preposterous old bat.

My ham ‘n’ eggs!!...

(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Gulp.)

...what's that? You want to hear about me in grease? Don't let Papavero hear you impugning his cooking. Oh, *Greece*. The country, not the musical comedy? Well, Greece is about as far away as you can get from places like Demortuis, Nilnisi. All that sea, and all those islands and that sand. They have a different kind of sun out there, too: it turns the sky an entirely different shade of blue. It gets into your eyes, if you're already a blue-eyed person. Or if you drink *retsina*—THAT'LL put the sun into your ever-loving blue eyes, let me tell you.

So I left the "Bulge" and backpacked my way through the Length and Breadth of Asia Minor, by bus and boat and on my own li'l flat feet. And I saw this inscription outside Istanbul (hey! say *that* five times fast!) which got translated for me by a fleabitten amateur tour guide. It said:

*There are sixteen types of grief
But only one of relief.*

He might have been making it up, but it sounds true as true to me.

I think it means the same thing as make-believe. Relief from Real Life.

The good times never do keep on keeping on, not for keeps. Not in this diner; not in Asia Minor. But so what?

"So this is reality?"

Let's improve on it, then.

Okay? Okay. "S'allright? S'allright." Okay.