

## Chicken Salad on Wonder

I've never forgotten the way those chicken salad sandwiches looked on my mother's best flowered dishes that sunny afternoon in May of 1946. My mother really went all out that day for my sake, even so far as to buy a loaf of Wonder bread, its blazing whiteness rivaled only by a summer clothesline hung with Cloroxed sheets.

She had quartered the sandwiches in those fancy triangles my father made fun of and fanned them out each on a little plate with a handful of Connecticut's own *State Line Potato Chips* right in the center. Alongside were cold glasses of chocolate milk.

It was a Friday afternoon and Maryellen Donovan had gotten special permission to ride the school bus home with me and come to play, not only for the rest of the day, but to spend the night as well! My second-grade schoolmates who lived in town hardly ever got to come out to the farm to play after school, and an overnight visit had never happened before. We were so excited!

Maryellen's mother and mine had been friends from when they were both little girls whose families belonged to the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. So, when Maryellen's mother brought a new baby home from the hospital, my mother invited Maryellen to come spend the night with us and she and her parents seemed really happy to accept the invitation.

Maryellen was the only person I knew who had two names put together, and I don't know why, but this made me a little jealous. Her father drove a big, shiny black car with four doors and every morning when he dropped Maryellen

off at school, he was wearing a suit with a white shirt and a necktie.

My parents and I, on the other hand, squeezed together in the cab of our old gray Chevy pickup which we cleaned out and washed every Friday night. This was a truck that during the week hauled everything from fresh vegetables to bales of hay to dried cow manure, and then carried us to church, all dressed up, on Sunday mornings.

My father's work clothes were very different ... dungarees, flannel shirts, laced up work boots and always a brimmed driving cap with a pack of Lucky Strikes and a book of matches tucked inside. He had one suit that he wore on Sunday mornings. And every Sunday the tie came off before we even left the Zion Lutheran church parking lot.

My mother and I, though, loved getting dressed up in our best clothes. She made almost everything and sometimes she would sew both of us a dress from the same material so we would be sort of matching. Also we got to wear pretty hats and white gloves. My mother kept her gloves on the whole time she was in church, mostly I think, because she was embarrassed about her hands being so rough and chapped.

But back to the story. On this particular Friday afternoon, my mother was wearing her Sunday apron, and she served us our after-school sandwiches on the side porch, where she had covered the wooden table with a colorful cloth printed in big bursts of blue and yellow flowers, and even placed a folded napkin instead of a paper towel at our places. She had really gone all out to make this a happy occasion.

She even took over my job of cleaning and packing the eggs for tomorrow's route and given me this Saturday off. My cousin Buddy, who was nine and had taken my place once before when I was sick with a fever, would be my father's helper this week.

We had already taken Maryellen's little suitcase upstairs to my room, where a bowl of fresh flowers sat on top of my dresser and the pink chenille bedspread usually saved for Sundays was tucked in over my quilt. My room looked pretty with the windows open and gauzy white curtains blowing in the breeze. We hurried to change into our play clothes and came back down to sit at the table, chattering excitedly about what we would do when we finished our snacks.

Dutifully spreading our napkins on our laps, we picked up our sandwiches. I, always the hungry one, bit immediately into mine while Maryellen kept talking. Then my napkin slid to the floor, and as I bent down to get it, I heard a loud choking sound in the middle of her sentence and raised my head just in time to see my friend making a face that could only mean she had something awful in her mouth – a bone or what, I didn't know, but she was spitting it hard into her napkin.

"What's wrong?" I asked, with my own mouth full. "What is it? What happened?"

Maryellen shook her head and flung the napkin down on her plate shrieking "This is chicken! This is chicken!"

"So?" I said, puzzled. Her face was flushed, mouth puckered, eyes big as saucers filling up with tears as her trembling little hand reached for her milk. "I thought it was tuna fish! I can't eat chicken on Friday! What's wrong with your mother? Doesn't she know I'll go to Hell if I eat meat on Friday now that I've made my first Holy Communion?"

What I knew was that the Catholic kids in Miss Kelley's second grade class had just two weeks earlier done what they called their 'First Holy Communion' (it was all the girls had talked about for weeks) and here was poor Maryellen sobbing about going to hell, and loud enough to bring my mother out from the kitchen where she'd been adding water to the pot roast she was cooking for supper.

I remember the horrified look on my mother's face as she apologized over and over for not having realized that Maryellen would, of course, be Catholic. "How could I forget such a thing?" she groaned. My poor mother had apparently overlooked the fact that when her childhood friend married an Irish Catholic boy she had to sign an agreement to bring their children up in The Church; not so different really than what my mother did when she married my father, promising that I would be baptized Lutheran, and then eventually becoming Lutheran herself.

The particulars of what happened next are somewhat vague, but I remember that Maryellen finally stopped crying and insisting she had to go immediately to confession. I think my mother made her a Fluffernutter sandwich (the ultimate treat) and once she calmed down, we went out to the barn and climbed up in the hayloft to play hide and seek, then down to the pasture to pick flowers and throw stones into the trout stream. I do remember quite clearly that instead of pot roast that night for supper, Maryellen had scrambled eggs alongside her potatoes and vegetables.

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I'm pretty sure that my struggles with notions of religious exclusivity and the rightness of one tradition over another actually did begin in earnest on that afternoon when I realized the answers

to questions I had memorized in Sunday school made no sense to me.

I mean .... how could it be true that if my little friend and I both died in our sleep that very night (*if I should die before I wake I pray thee Lord my soul to take*) at the sweet age of seven, only one of us would be allowed to enter the Gates of Heaven while the other would be forever doomed to the horrible fires of Hell. And if such a thing were actually true, I began to wonder how I could be so sure which one of us would end up where. Maybe Maryellen wasn't my best friend in the whole world, and maybe I was jealous of her name, but I didn't want to think about her burning in hell forever. As my father tried to explain later, it wasn't Maryellen's fault that she was born Catholic any more than it was my good fortune to be Lutheran ... But the biggest question that day and the one that continued to visit me off and on for decades was this ... *If there really is a God who could treat His very own creations this way, was this a God I wanted anything to do with?*

I look back, all these decades later, on that day and shake my head at this up close and personal exposure to the actual practices of Roman Catholicism in the 1940s. This was a time when good Catholic parents were measured by the number of children they had, how clean the kids were kept, and how polite they were to adults. It was a time when every Friday was a day without meat, the never-to-be-missed Sunday Mass was droned in Latin, and those spotless children sat still as stones on hard benches through the whole ritual.

We who were lucky enough to be Lutheran children only had to sing the first hymn and sit through a simple prayer or two before marching off to Sunday school, where we were taught The Truth.

I am particularly amused when I remember how, even at that tender age, only same-sex Catholic friendships were allowed.

What a clever way to reduce the possibility of growing up and marrying one of them. Hmmnn.

I have to admit, though, that when my little Catholic girlfriends described in exquisite detail their beautiful white First Communion dresses and shiny white patent leather shoes with lace-edged ankle socks, and when they told about how they marched down the aisle in pure white veils like little brides of Jesus, I couldn't help feeling some pangs of longing or jealousy, or like I was missing out on something. But I didn't dwell on it, still believing as I did then that it was indeed we Lutherans who had the real thing. And I certainly didn't envy my little friends sitting straight as sticks every Sunday morning for an hour on those hard pews and having to kneel and cross themselves every other minute.

One thing our Sunday mornings did have in common was that all children were required to sit up straight. I think someone must have been up in the choir loft taking notes, and if children were spotted slumping in their seats, their mothers would be held up to public ridicule the whole next week. Why else would most of the benign-looking black leather pocketbooks that rested not far from every mother's hand usually contain a wooden spoon or a ruler?

This was the era when the mere threat of public humiliation (like a simple nod in the direction of that sinister black pocketbook) was enough to stop a giggle fit, raise a child's shoulders and restore a straight-ahead gaze.

Now, after years of returning periodically to that Friday afternoon experience, I realize that what really niggled at me most was not so much poor little Maryellen's distress over the dilemma she found herself in, but the certainty of my own, blessedly unspoken reaction. I knew because I had just learned in Catechism Study Class, where we were taught with authority that came

directly from Martin Luther himself, that it really didn't matter what Roman Catholics ate or didn't eat, or how many times they said the rosary or genuflected and crossed themselves. They were all going to Hell in the end anyway because they were the ones who had messed with the teachings of Jesus and somehow (I never could quite figure this part out) had tried to buy their way into Heaven with a thing called *indulgences*.

So how then, you might wonder, could such a thoughtful seven-year-old, less than a dozen years later, come to embrace a relatively unchanged Catholicism, self-righteously renounce chicken salad sandwiches for what would turn out to be hundreds of Fridays, and dress her children week after week in their Sunday best to sit quietly through a ritual they couldn't understand?

What could possibly have caused this seemingly precocious seven-year-old to pledge her faithfulness and what turned out to be abundant fertility to a skinny Irish Catholic boy whose almost black hair was slicked back, all but for a single lock that had surely been coaxed to fall seductively over his forehead, a boy with a beguiling smile that was somehow mistaken by my parents for a smirk, and whose dark glasses and pegged pants drove my father absolutely crazy?

How could I have married a town boy who didn't know a Holstein from a Guernsey or an Early Girl from a Beefsteak; a boy who carried a pack of Camel cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of his brilliant white tee shirt, and drove a canary yellow Ford convertible with not one, but two, wire-whip antennas mounted on its rear fins?

You're probably thinking it had to have been more than a quiet stroll from that spring afternoon in 1946 to a 1958 Wedding

Mass celebrated in Latin across the New York State Line where 18 was the legal age for both drinking and marriage .... to the start of a union whose end would be finalized in a court room twelve years and five beautiful children later. You may be thinking, surely there is another story here. And you would be right.

Perhaps it would be just another story about hormones and the complexities of awakening adolescent lust, or emotional repression and the mid-century rebellion of German Lutheran farmers' daughters.

Or maybe just another chapter in that long mythology of women and *the things we do for love*. You would be right on all counts. But truly that is a story for another time.

