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Natalie Petesch

MINERVA AT THE PEACE CORPS

FOR ONE THING there is something slightly ridiculous about a woman five feet seven inches and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds going to an underprivileged country to teach them how to boil water. I could only be regarded as a whimsical insult on the part of the U.S. Government, adding ignorance to gluttony. In short, I was ashamed, you understand, to arrive in the Philippines or Tanganyika or Ghana or Peru, or wherever they would finally decide to send me, looking like a solid herd of Texas cattle. There was only one thing to do: this too solid flesh had to go, then I could go. So I wrote to the Peace Corps asking for a six-month postponement in order to finish my studies, and I procured a military-looking calorie counter—and began studying.

Apparently it was a matter of simple arithmetic: I had merely to subtract over two thousand (calories) from considerably over three thousand (calories), leaving somewhat fewer than nine hundred per day, and by some process of painless attrition, like the sea wearing away a continent, I would be reduced to a small but habitable island. It sounded sinister to me, impossible—more like the Norman invasion than simple erosion of laminated deposits—but luckily in our Capitol City—famous for its weight-reducing Lyndon Baines Johnson, who is said to have lost ninety pounds on cottage cheese alone—luckily, we have a Club.

This Club is designed especially for people like me—not saturnine sandwich-stuffers, but those for whom eating is a social delight; for those who partake of their gastronomical pleasures like pros at the local bar—not in solitude, but in high convivial togetherness, for those who, overcome by the joy of living and the blessed bounty and cornucopia of abundance, eat for the pleasure of mutual sharing: surrender, in fact, to the lure and fascination of other people—their recipes, their exoticism, their brimming well-being and outgoingness. I am not one of those who can turn down a smiling host who stands uxoriously beaming over his tower of pink cakes, or who can turn on some swelling hostess—who self-confessedly has spent all afternoon in the kitchen

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concocting her delinquent delicacies—with a chilling, sterile: “No, thank you—I’m dieting.” I just haven’t the heart. It’s painful to me to see that ardent look of conspiracy and desire turn to cold rejection, a contemptuous up-and-down sweep of purple-daubed eyelids, painful to hear her soft but devastatingly suggestive: “Oh, but of course!” Such words are daggers in my flesh. Indeed it might be said synoptically that my one true fault is a love of others. . . .

The Club, therefore, called the Meltaway (the insidious resonance of whose name was sufficient to make me long for a well-known candy bar), seemed to be meant for me. I would be thin; I would immolate ninety golden pounds on the altar of humanitarianism—endanger my health, if necessary; then I would go to Lima, to the slums. I would teach the ill-fed, ill-clothed and ill-literate children how to spot a typhus germ under a microscope and how to read Robert Frost, my favorite poet. They would adore me, and they would say, “But Miss O’Toole, why are you so skinny?” and I would say, “I know you won’t believe this, but I used to weigh two hundred and fifty pounds!” And as if in one chorus my little shabby classroom of angels would cry out in astonishment: “NOoooo!” Of course my whole dream was freely translated from the Spanish, which I hadn’t learned yet; but *that* could wait: the first and most obvious task in my humanitarian role was to lose ninety pounds.

Ninety pounds! Think of it, dear reader. I have a kid sister who weighed only ninety pounds when she got married. The heroic task was tantamount to losing my kid sister.

I also had my eye on an oddball psychology professor at the University—just divorced. Pietr Lieuwen, was formerly from that heroically underfed, underprivileged little country of World War II: Holland. He was a little old for me, perhaps, since I had just put in my first national vote for the Great Weight-loser, LBJ, but then I was a big girl, and mature.

Under the double goal of love and duty I wrote home to Daddy. I explained that although the college year was indeed over (it was June) and I had indeed graduated, nevertheless I was in need of a little money to tide me over till the Peace Corps took me off his hands. I reminded him (inter parentheses) that I had finally passed algebra (knowing that would be worth an extra fifty) and enclosed a Sweet-Young-Thing poem about how a girl feels when she has left the university and is on the Threshold-of-Life (hoping that would be worth a little something). So altogether, using my feminine wiles plus a lot

of real love, I got a simply fabulous check from Daddy by return mail. Though I was weak in math, you see, I was deep in cunning.

My first stop was the Marie Antoinette Shop for a leotard suit, size X. They didn't make them that large, so I invested coquettishly in a charming pair of black velvet pants with long red Oriental jacket to match, a dream of a buy at \$29.50. These made my regulation white sneakers look schizophrenic, so I added a pair of Chinese sandals reduced to \$9.00. I must admit I looked stunning. It made me almost rueful to think that in a just a few months (six at the most) I would have to give that outfit away to some fat slob. Then I drove out Lamar Boulevard for my introductory visit to The Meltaway.

I was greeted at the door by Rock Sorenson, the manager. I remembered having shared a biology lab course with him a year ago and now here he was managing this place that looked like the Palace of Versailles, and which he promptly told me had cost half a million dollars.

"*En écus bien comptés?*" I retorted jealously, deriving desperate ego-satisfaction from my Fine Arts and Humanities background. (Anybody can get a degree in Business Administration, I thought, and then inherit half a million dollars worth of Credit Rating.)

As if to clear the air of intellectual petard, Rock ushered me into the office with herculean graciousness. Each time he breathed I could see his diaphragm; he was big and healthy all right, but standing beside me he looked like just a chubby adolescent. The first thing my business-minded friend did was to explain the contract, which was two hundred dollars for two years. I protested at once it was absolutely necessary for me to be down to a hundred and sixty pounds in less than six months.

"Heart condition?" he asked with the troubled look of a man about to lose a sale.

"Not exactly," I hedged, thinking of Pietr Lieuwen. "Peace Corps training."

"Oh. I didn't know they cared."

"Well, *they* don't. *I* do. All those little starving kids—they make you feel like a giant—I mean, but really, like a—hog." There. I'd said it. I swelled with pride at the poignantly self-lacerating word.

But Rock looked away like a stern priest: he didn't want verbal penance, self-flagellation and rejected Sin; he wanted willpower.

"Exercise alone won't perform *miracles*." I shook to the foundation with volcanic rage at the insult. "You'll have to diet too—and stick to it—do the nine hundred calorie bit."

I managed to gnash my teeth with a smile, though I had a feline urge springing right out of my repressed id to sink fang and claw in the fat brute's fingers as he wrote down my name and a few facts of my life: Minerva O'Toole, aged twenty-one, unmarried. No operations, heart trouble, ulcers, miscarriages, hemorrhoids or flat feet. Not anemic (well, certainly not). Eating habits? I glared at him in silence; he marked down a big X, with a question mark after it.

"Now, let's measure you," he said with a cast-iron smile which Nelson must have worn before Trafalgar. Had I been the heroine of a nineteenth-century novel, I would surely have fainted as I saw him villainously spool out the yards of yellow tape. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, when Rock—looking as glum as Ahab entwining Moby Dick—had rolled up the tape, fifteen minutes later I was undressing in the locker room. After the horrors of the "measuring-in," I just wanted to hide myself away from all the dolphin-like beauties weighing in at a mere one fifty who were gliding around the locker room. When, after prolonged and blushing delay, I finally appeared in my black velvet pants and crimson jacket, a willowy little child-woman, resilient as a serpent approached me: she was as tiny as my kid sister, a thorn in my flesh indeed. She glanced almost with boredom at my hulk, and with light, leafy hand directed me to the exercise room.

I looked apprehensively at this twentieth-century room complete with thumbscrew and boot, which reminded me of scenes from the Spanish Inquisition. Everywhere to my jaundiced view appeared what seemed to be gleaming guillotines and snapping leather belts and heaving omnibuses of wheels and straps: weights like barrels for slenderizing ankles, and a steel contraption built like a falling axe, which was designed for the abdomen: beneath it one relentlessly deposited one's whole torso and pushed forty pounds of steel weight upward with the soles of one's feet. . . . There were straps and stirrups, slanting boards, flat boards, curved boards, and rolling boards; rollers to crush the fat away and rollers merely to bestride like a dude on a maverick until every earthly thought of sin had been flagellated away. There was even a board in the form of a crucifix. . . . But my gaze faltered, and I followed the mistlike tread of my companion to the bar-bells: row upon row of gleaming stainless steel weights neatly arrayed according to size and power, like dental instruments.

The child-woman glanced at my titanic arms, and handed me a pair of five-pound weights: "Here, we'll start with these. They're for de-

veloping"—she repressed an annihilating glance—"for molding the bosom."

We did ten fan-spreads each: it didn't seem to have "molded" her bosom much, I gloated in exhaustion, estimating her at a runty thirty-four. The little lady then "invited" me to try each one of the torture machines in back-breaking succession. I, who had not walked farther than from the parking meter to some institution of learning ever since I got my first car in junior high, I, on this and successive occasions walked a mile uphill, while standing in one place and hanging on to the steering bar for dear life. Miss Morrow (was it Marrow?—indeed she looked like all bone and no flesh) omitted nothing—vibrators, heavers, pullers and pushers; I ran the gauntlet. Finally we came to the electrical chin strap, an apparatus which I could plainly see was crushing some poor harridan's wattles like a train wreck: her eyes bulged out, her flesh hung loose; her teeth rasped, molar for molar. I rebelled: I am only twenty-one years old, I thought, and my chin is as firm as a baby Gouda.

Miss Morrow looked at me contemplatively (at least I *think* it was contemplatively)—at my rosy cheeks, now moist as those of Diana the Virgin in her flight, at my milk-blue eyes, filled with human kindness; and she tightened the strap.

"Try it anyway," she snapped.

Like a hero in a saga of the Far West I placed my head in the noose and prayed for rescue; the strap began at once to jiggle loose the temporary filling in my left molar. I reared from the hangman's structure, protesting: "I'm going into the Peace Corps, *not* a beauty contest."

She immediately told me about a former member of the Club, who had left for the Peace Corps, had gone to Panama, had contracted amoebic dysentery, and had lost forty pounds.

I listened glumly. "Well, that's not—" I began, but she was already ushering me toward the smoking Sauna Room. Here, with a hasty apology she suddenly abandoned me: she had spotted a freckled leviathan cooling her flanks in the swimming pool without a cap—the unpardonable sin.

I decided to explore the Mysteries of the Bath without her guided tour. I removed my sopping exercise clothes (there's a pound! I thought) and wrapped around me stern and aft a pair of beach towels which had been carefully sewn together. First of all, a soaping-down, so that the tried and harrowed flesh would be *clean*: I smelled their soap; it had enough naphthalene in it to kill fleas and dog, both. Then

with the heightened consciousness of one taking unknown risks I approached the swirling (read b-o-i-l-i-n-g) Japanese Mineral Bath. I paused daintily on tiptoe, like my namesake sprung from the head of Zeus. . . . Before me lay a sunken bath, within which, as I stepped timidly downward, the heat ominously increased at every inch of submergence, until at last, neck and craw, I found myself squatting at the bottom of the boiling mass—a buried volcano with lava thundering round my sides. After counting valorously to 180, skipping a few dozen, I emerged—scalded, glowing, ready for the pool. Here, in the green stillness I had my first opportunity to look around. At one end of the pool stood a Venus, draped in sinlessness; at the other stood the fair Apollo: at a distance of thirty feet one could be certain that as the poet said, theirs was a “happy, happy love/ For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d.” For me there was something deliberate about this separation of sexes that worried me. The bath’s a fine and private place/ But none I think, do there embrace (Andrew Marvell, English 314, Professor Stirrup). I then and there, in the hallowed confines of the swimming pool, solemnly vowed that when I had lost the first ten pounds, I would corner Pietr Lieuwen with “a couple of gift tickets my Daddy sent me” and we’d go to a rodeo.

When I left the pool, I inquired of the Negro girl, Lucy, who worked in the Baths, which I should try first—the dry heat of the Sauna Room or the wet heat of the Steam Room. The sweat pouring off her face and staggering under the weight of the hydra-headed mop which she carried everywhere, Lucy led me to the STEAM bath. Even as we walked Lucy wielded her cotton-headed hand-wrung mop; indeed I was never to see her relinquish it: it was like an alter ego. Doomed as Sisyphus, she mopped perpetually the flooding surplus of our hydrotherapies.

Standing near the Steam Room, we chatted briefly. I learned that she worked a twelve-hour day on “women’s days,”—a forty-hour week for \$160 per month; that out of this she was paying \$71 per month for rent at the Meadowbrook Lowcost Housing Project for four rooms for herself, her three children—one set of female twins aged two, and an eight-month baby boy—and her husband; that they did not have a car, so she paid somebody \$10 per month for transportation to work; that her husband had at last found a job paying about \$200 a month after a year and a half of unemployment; that on her alternate days (men’s days at The Meltaway) she cooked, washed clothes, ironed, cleaned house, took the children to the doctor and visited her mother

by bus, with all three children, in East Texas. . . . That she had chronic back trouble from wearing flat pigskin shoes which she bought across the street at Shopper's Delight for \$1.98. She said all three kids had just had the measles and that it seemed to have left Baby with an eye infection; at any rate, she said, his lids remained gummed together and he could not open them. Altogether, she hastened to add, her job was not so bad, because she worked only half days at The Meltaway on Sundays, since on that day the hours were religiously divided between the sexes.

If you ask me how I learned all this in about ten minutes, during which time I slowly trailed after Lucy as she swung her mop in eloquent testimony to her Right-to-Work—I can only explain, modestly, that on my Peace Corps Volunteer Questionnaire, page 8, Item C: "Furnish detailed information of other special skills" I felt obliged to state: "Have a great gift of gab." Personally I think that's why they accepted me: a mediocre English major with a minor in education and with absolutely no previous experience (either with men or teaching).

"My name is Minerva—Minnie O'Toole," I said, and idiotically tried to make her remember my telephone number, which is such a difficult one I can't remember it myself, even now. Then I promised to find a reliable eye specialist for Baby in the morning.

Evidently our little talk had not bolstered Lucy's morale (fine Peace Corps worker you are! I reproached myself), for when she left she was dragging her mop dispiritedly behind her instead of pushing at the ever-present slush with Rock-recommended zeal. I followed her with my gaze a moment as she drifted away into the stream of women. Suddenly, to my surprise I glimpsed Miss Morrow claspng Lucy around the shoulder as she introduced her to a new customer. "And Miz Hunt, this is Lucy. Lucy, this is Miz Claire-bow Hunt. Now, Miz Hunt, Lucy will sure be glad to help you with anything—" Miss Morrow was interrupted by a zealous patron in spiritous falsetto breath who reared up to Lucy, displaying her leathery, unzipped backside: "Zip me up, honey, will ya?" she begged, adding to Miss Hunt with radiant complicity, as if she were offering praise to specially designated talents such as tap dancing, church singing and watermelon eating, "Lucy sure is the best zipper-upper. She's the best zipper-upper and zipper-downer I ever had!" And she laughed with dainty delight at her own bodily charms, striking her puckered breasts for emphasis.

This little scene somehow depressed me; I had a morbid suspicion

something was going wrong with my whole Plan, but I had no time for meditations on Caste and Class. I determined, instead, to bulldoze my way through the night's bathing ritual and see what would result. I forthwith heaved my terrycloth canopy around my shoulders and padded with barefoot, silent tread into the STEAM ROOM: TIME LIMIT THREE MINUTES.

There I sat, a remorseful Buddha in meditation, periodically swathed in eels of mist as they rose, diabolic Miltonic serpents, from the center of the floor. . . . Every thirty seconds the floor, the very benches would seem to hiss violently, and coils of steam would emanate, permeating the atmosphere with reptilian whorls of opaqueness, gradually condensing and drenching again our sodden, sorrowing flesh. And as the fuliginous air boiled upwards out of the "inspissated dark," groans of lamentation rose—self-flagellating, eternal Dantean outcries against the sinning flesh.

"Oh, oh, oh," groaned a voice which seemed to issue from the depths of her dissolving bones. "It's too hot; it's just too hot. I can't stand it."

"Good for me," whispered her companion. "Do me good. Had too damned much birthday yesterday. Gotta sweat it outta me." The speaker's faint voice seemed to rise exiguously from her bulky shadow, as if the steam had indeed penetrated her and worn the flesh away. "Just look at it, look at it, will ya?" she continued, staring between her thighs with philosophical objectivity. "Watch the sweat melt down."

In fascination I watched. I could now discern that this gargantuan personage was wearing a black cotton bathing suit oddly concave at the breast except for two small raised dots and beneath these, with pearlike inverseness, she sat—girded all around with balustrades of flesh from waist to thighs—the latter thrust out like a pair of caryatids supporting the entablature.

One steaming glance at her and I made my second solemn vow that evening: to eat nothing but two raw carrots for supper: I had a mission in life. And with the disdainful look of a woman who has once and for all learned to scorn temptation, I went into the next Circle of Hell, the so-called Sauna Room.

By whatever name such a place is known—whether Turkish, Swedish, Nordic, Russian or Japanese, it is nevertheless an invention of the Devil. The time limit on this 180-degree inferno is three minutes.

In this dry oven, unalleviated even by the ancient ritual of wooden water buckets and swashing poplar leaves, were rocks, yes, rocks imported—the Veblenian rumor was—all the way from Finland. From

the pressure of the diabolical heat sustained in their brick cauldron, it was anticipated that these rocks would be wholly dissolved in twenty-one months. . . . And I? I asked myself. What would happen to my mortal flesh if I subjected its extremely solvent atoms to such heat four times weekly? It took no genius on my part to conclude that *this* room was The Meltaway room *par excellence*, that here one might indeed fear the total pulverization of one's identity: curled to a friable crisp, the vast attritus of humanity could be finely crumbled to a warm, biotic mull. . . .

Nay, dear Reader, after thirty gasping seconds I escaped to the Ice Shower, a bucket full of melted ice dropped barbarously down from three feet above the extenuated body. . . . The shock was just sufficient for me to dress and flee from that Purgatory. Upon arriving home, I fell into an exhausted coma on the couch in my apartment at Highland Towers.

Which reminds me of another minor detail—or rather, expense—in this honest recapitulation of events, an expense for which I must hold myself solely culpable. And that is the affair of the Highland Towers apartment, and because of the apartment: Dauphine.

Now for myself I would never have moved into Highland Towers, one of Austin's most modern high-rise apartments (complete with view of the University and surrounding gas stations). It had all been a part of my former roommate Linda's "strategy." She had become engaged to this real rich boy from Dallas, whose father owns Bell Telephone Company or something, and she was willing to invest a hundred dollars a month (her share) in order to impress her prospective in-laws with the fancy layout when they came to town. That clever, Lissome-Linda: the plot worked, the boy fell into her account book, as it were, and I was left with the apartment.

Only the place was far too big for one person. It seemed, in fact, hauntingly lonely; and because it didn't seem fair to contact a new roommate just for a few months, I finally bought Dauphine, my French poodle, to keep me company. She is legitimate, she has papers, and she cost three hundred dollars. And it wasn't till after I'd had her three days and had utterly fallen in love with her that I discovered she would eat only ground beef liver at eighty-nine cents per pound. . . . But what could I do? *Sell* her? The human soul recoils from such venality. That was how I came to keep both Dauphine and Mrs. Genossen.

Who was Mrs. Genossen? Alas, when one is recounting one's sins,

one must confess them all. She was the maid I was forced to hire to clean the apartment because the very night after my initiation at The Meltaway, the University Drama Workshop began its summer series, and after each performance there were at least a half-dozen friends dropping in for drinks and my famous cheese canapés. I couldn't let them see what a mess I lived in: so I had to hire Mrs. Genossen Saturday mornings at \$1.25 per hour (I prided myself on paying the national minimum wage, not the regional, which was about half that). And of course I followed her mop around as sedulously as I had trailed alongside Lucy's and I learned a few things about her:

That she was a widow, fifty-two years old, her husband having died just a year ago; that the reason she couldn't speak plainly was that she'd just had all her teeth pulled (evidently by some farmer masquerading as a dentist who plucked teeth like onions); that she had worked ten and a half hours yesterday and her arm still hurt from all that ironing; that what she really needed apart from new teeth were sheets and pillowcases because the "rats and mices" had eaten up eight sheets at her house because there were no wall borders along the floor of her house and rats and mice came and went freely; that she paid thirty-two dollars a month to Mr. McElroy who only managed the property; that Mr. McElroy was very good to her and sometimes lent her the money for the rent which she paid back in housework on the other properties, or by cracking pecans for him by the bushel . . . "said he was goin' to get me one of those pecan crackers, so the nuts would come out in two pieces;" that she ironed shirts for the university boys at fifteen cents a shirt, but she was going to have to charge a nickel more than that because running the iron all day made the electricity bill go up; that her husband had died of double pneumonia, incurred by going to work when she told him not to. . . . "I said, Henry, there's no use of your workin' when you're sick, we got enough to eat by, but he said no, we need the money so he went anyway: you can't stop them when they make up their minds. . . . Passed away just a year ago last month, just a bit after my sister's husband got shot in Dripping Springs. You might not a heard about it? They married twenty-five years. . . ."

Needless to say, by the time Mrs. Genossen left, my head was splitting with real-life drama and unsolved moral perplexities, so I lay down on the bed and took a nap. After about an hour I rose and tried out the bathroom scales. I had melted away exactly one ounce of perspiration. Obviously more stringent methods were required. And with the

true zeal of the novitiate, I determined to follow Rock Sorenson's sacerdotal advice—and diet.

The reader is surely better acquainted than I with diets; having more willpower than I, you have doubtless followed them all successfully and successively. Thus did I also, with what are called "spectacular results"—that is to say, I starved. I tried, first of all, the grapefruit diet. Now the logic of this diet is that grapefruit is supposed to attenuate an appetite which has been twenty ravenous years in the making. Begin every meal with grapefruit and thou shalt not be anhungered. Whether or not the inherent fallacy of warding off starvation by grapefruit was immediately obvious to me I cannot say; but my recalcitrant stomach avenged itself upon me at night. There I would lie for hours in a sleepless trance, recalling past glories. Especially did I cast my retrospective eye upon a particularly glorious summer in New York City when the most guileless *flaneur* in the streets could be inveigled—involuntarily and guiltlessly seduced—by vendors into accepting Jewish cornucopias of delight: knishes, cream cheese and lox, apple strudel, sesame candy, hot pastrami—the very reek and ebullience of corned beef sandwiches up and down Broadway. . . .

Weary at last of the well-known grapefruit diet, I tried the well-known apple diet. The mere brief appraisal of a day's menu was enough to make me long for spaghetti and meatballs.

- Breakfast: One juicy apple. Eat s-l-o-w-l-y.
 One slice gluten toast
 Clear tea
- Lunch: Egg, Meat or Fish
 One "fluffy-hearted" Baked Potato
 One baked apple
 Skim milk.
- Dinner: One large apple, with cottage cheese.
 One slice rye bread
 Clear tea

To avoid dullness, one was advised to vary the kinds of apple: Northern Spy, Yellow Newton, Golden Delicious, Baldwin, Winesap or Pippin.

I existed on the apple diet for two whole weeks; then, for variety, I tried the carrot diet, which consists entirely of the juice of freshly squeezed raw carrots. For this I required a raw vegetable expressor,

for which I paid \$49.50. I subsisted for one week on the juice of—more or less—a barrel of carrots.

But, *nihil admirari*, when tedium set in, I listened dutifully to the advice of a “friend” and switched to orange juice and soybean powder, grimly taking in my seventy grams of protein daily with a mere shovel-full of Dr. Stearns’s Soy Bean Powder, whipped to a bilious froth in a blender purchased for the purpose: \$19.95.

You will have readily foreseen that the chief consequence of all these changes was to make food a torment and a burden to me. My psychological reaction against the intake of raw egg yolk and soybean “milk” became such that the approach of the noon hour was sufficient to bring on nausea or worse. Soon, my delicate stomach could tolerate only a mild yogurt with a teaspoonful of honey. The pounds fell away. . . . I languished, looking exhumed and cadaverous. . . . When I had been whittled down to a mere hundred and eighty, I rewarded my months of restraint by inviting Pietr Lieuwen to attend with me The Meltaway’s First Anniversary Banquet.

For the occasion, in my skeletal pride, I drove all the way to Houston—the Corvette was in fine shape too—and bought an evening gown at Joske’s that made me look, from neck to waist at least, like Jayne Mansfield. I glowed with womanly pride when Pietr enveloped my milk-white (soybean milk, that is) shoulders with my mink stole (purchased secondhand from a friend for the occasion: \$175.00). It was my hour of triumph. Tonight I would announce to Pietr that I was leaving for the Peace Corps, and that he, alas, would not see me for—who knows?—a whole year, perhaps, or even two. . . . And he, overcome by my soymilk beauty would say: “But Minerva, I cannot live without you a whole year. . . .”

Alas for imaginary triumphs! Alas for the feeble power of the spirit to overcome the temptations of the flesh. Oh weep for me, ye who weep for Hecuba!

On the night of the Great Banquet, as I say, Pietr led me up the path to The Meltaway. From outdoors, on that fateful summer night we could hear sounds of laughter, of tinkling champagne glasses. Aglow with excitement I smiled up at Pietr; he smiled down at me. He, also, I noted with satisfaction, had approached these armorial fastnesses with fief-like marks of deference—with a properly clipped crew cut and a gentlemanly moustache. How daintily I hung my new svelte hipline and encouraging bosom over his manly arm. We ascended the stairs, two innocents led to the slaughter.

We were greeted at the door by a pair of crimson-clad idols with small shiny hats that looked like New Year's Party hats not-yet-crushed. We entered the banquet with a grand flourish and stood still in surprise.

On two tables—to my amazement, as I had anticipated exotic variations of the Spy, the Newton, the Baldwin and the Pippin—lay a pre-revolutionary banquet that would have delighted Czar Nicholas himself, these tables being guarded on either side by a pair of Romanov Prince Charmings with carnations blooming in their buttonholes.

Now Pietr—an iron-willed Dutchman who had survived the flooding of the dikes in Hollands, and who had boasted (to me!) of having lived for months under German occupation on seven hundred calories a day—Pietr looked around with true Puritan loathing for all this luxury: he was fairly trembling with esthetic shock, and I realized at that moment my tragic error in having brought him; for it was there at that banquet table that I lost him forever.

For I, too, was trembling, with an ardor not meant for Pietr but for the sight and smell of the truly ursine portions of provender regaling my long-repressed and hibernated nostrils. After months of vibrating, stretching, melting, freezing and starving, the tables struck me like a glimpse of Mohammedan Heaven.

The first thing that drenched my yearning palate with a veritable coconut-milk of salivary globules, was the sight of a sledful of red caviar sliding a snowbank of foamy white cream cheese. To me it was more beautiful than the snow-crested Kilimanjaro to a dying man. . . . In my excitement I dropped my fur stole, but my not-too-stolid Dutchman at once picked it up, not so much as looking at me in what he doubtless recognized at once as my tragic fall. But I was oblivious to man and mink alike. What was a mink anyway, but pure Economics Exemplified: it could not be eaten, it had no taste; therefore, it was scarcely real. What was real were little black poppy seed crackers dimpled all over with red caviar like Pompadour's beauty marks. . . .

The Meltaway was anything but parochial, and they had sacked the universe for their delicacies. They offered me (*me*, a one-hundred-eighty-pound weakling) an exquisite castle of chopped liver Russian style, turreted with slices of hard-boiled eggs; and Mexican garlic-seasoned avocado with a tropical flavor as creamy as butter, and crabmeat salad Hollandaise with giant, succulent claws of crabmeat, icy and cold as strawberries, serried all over with tart-looking gherkins which stared upward at one with provocative eyes out of a blanc-mange

of mayonnaise. . . . And smoky little Polish sausages, cut into round heads, projecting each one from its toothpick pike, in the center of which meaty barricade sat a scooped and flaming cabbage head glowing blue with phosphorescent bricks. And each of these mouth-watering tidbits was being warmed and toasted, softly melting the inner juices so that by the time they rolled like a lover's tongue in one's mouth, each morsel was as savoury as the whole of Charles Lamb's roast suckling pig. And immediately beside this *chef d'oeuvre* were myriad little meatballs piled high as a mountain, little rolling heads fit for a Ghengis Khan—concocted, as my delicate palate surmised, of an elixir of curry and lamb, whose every aroma wafted dreams of Eastern opium dens and veiled women. I stood lost in thoughtful strategy before this mound of aromatic dainties, utterly confounded by the single toothpick in my hand. But aha!—I solved the problem by filling a conic paper cup with the little showering balls, and as I lifted the cup to my lips I cried out to Pietr in intoxicated Greek salute: "É viva!" and sipped the morsels down like ambrosia.

Then there were the cheeses. For me the autobiography of a great man is incomplete without an honest revelation of his true attitude toward cheeses. The great thing for me about John D. Rockefeller, even more than his lucky little Foundation, is that he is reported to have mourned so passionately for a piece of cheese, which the condition of his stomach forbade his eating, that he is reported to have said he would give a million dollars if he could eat a piece of cheese.

A million dollars! Think of it! And I had before me not one but a thousand pieces of cheese of every bacteriological variety. Oh, would I were a Melville to sing of Leviathan Cheese, of sprightly, sensuous cheese whom age does not wither nor custom stale: the modest Gruyere, the diaphanous Swiss, the impertinent Cheddar, the lascivious Camembert, the imperious Roquefort, the mild-but-cunning Gouda, the angelical Mozzarella, the impetuous Gorgonzola, the diabolical Romano. Against cheese itself let no contumelious word be uttered: like Caesar's wife, it is above suspicion. For it the cracker who is Guilty, the nibblesome little cracker that is the Evildoer, the little crackers, like the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, that despoil one's youth, that build one up to look like an alpine cliff with layers of geological shale and seismic strata at every gradient. . . .


The Meltaway, with a cheery Machiavellianism which now appears to me the nadir of corruption, served for us that fateful night every sinful variety of niblet known to humanity since the Fall of Eve.

It was, of course, this debauch that destroyed my moral fibers: one cannot live like Louis XIV for a night and then retire to the desert to starve like a saint. Gone forever was the continency of high-protein powder, the purity of sunflower seeds, the colonic atonement of chicory salad, the sacramental serenity of yogurt. I was a free, albeit an utterly debauched, woman.

Quietly I stored my Mermaid juicer in the closet (behind the golf clubs) to give to my Aunt Gertrude at Christmas. I donated the yogurt-maker to the Neighborhood Boys' Club where they use it, I think, for film-developing. I traded my neurasthenic poodle, who lived on high-protein liver and was a perpetual reproach to me, for a huge sheep dog with the appetite of an Anglo-Saxon dragon. Then I added up the expenditures of my folly: altogether, counting Dauphine and Mrs. Genossen and the apartment, contract, and food and household gadgets and incidentals, my expenses had come to over a thousand dollars, and I hadn't even got to Ghana or Peru.

I would have fallen into a deep depression had I not luckily one day passed the University Auditorium where they were showing a VISTA movie on poverty. I stopped dead in my tracks when I heard the narrator declare: "The American nation is the most abundant, the most prosperous the world has ever seen, but the paradox is that in the midst of plenty there is poverty. . . ." Reader, I did not need to stay to see the movie. I had found my *métier*. I hurried home and wrote a letter to the Peace Corps informing them that after due consideration I had decided there were still serious problems in my own country, and that I had decided to switch to VISTA.

Then I packed my bag and headed for the New Slum Clearance Project in Chicago. They were my people, I thought fiercely, soul of my soul, flesh of my flesh, and they would understand the Great American Paradox—that a person can weigh two hundred pounds and have a heart of gold.

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