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Fried Chicken: Love, Death, and Friendship on a Plate

Key Lime Pie and the Great Unknown

It was hotter than hell that August evening when we drove to Council Grove to eat fried chicken and figure out if we should get married.

We had toyed with the idea after being together for over two years and recently buying a house, an old general store in North Lawrence re-formed into a home for us downstairs and a rental apartment upstairs. Beyond bonding over a mortgage, we both were soothed, even if startled out of sleep at 4 a.m., by the trains—over 40 each day lumbering or roaring down the tracks just three blocks from our new house. Having come into being and grown up in Brooklyn with subways always above or below, I felt completely at home, especially with Ken beside me.

We had no idea what was in store for us when it came to bad tenants, broken toilets, and a bounty of mosquitoes that altogether could end wars or start them. We were relatively young—I was 25 and Ken was 29—and life seemed startlingly hopeful despite Ken making tofu for minimum-wage and me running a non-profit that would ultimately lose funding and collapse.

We had no inkling of what marriage would bring to us and out of us, including three spirited children who would delight us and freak us out in equal measure, triumphs and heartbreaks in our jobs, abundant adventures up mountains and rushed trips across the country to funerals, and the garden variety of infinite dishes and laundry. Only in the abstract did we understand there would be visceral and searing grief and fear, cancers and deaths, and near-misses with our kids that would bring us to our knees. There would also be a parade of used cars, many major appliance breakdowns, therapy sessions that hurt and ultimately healed, marvelous late-night talks and some mind-blowing love letters, fights and hard-won apologies, and a new home we would design and help build ourselves on Ken's family land.

All we knew that August night was that we had saved up for a special romantic getaway: the Cottage Inn's bridal suite for the night and dinner of course at the fabled Hays House, the oldest restaurant west of the Mississippi.

We didn't need to look at a menu to know it was fried chicken for dinner, along with the creamy homemade ranch dressing on our salads, those great pickled broccoli stems (better than they sound), and mashed potatoes. We drank iced water and crunched through the greatly textured breaded and fried skin of a chicken breast, a drum stick, maybe a thigh too. I added two pats of butter to my roll, still hot, and bit into Nirvana.

When the waitress came for our plates and left dessert menus, it was time for the big conversation. After all, we said we were going to Council Grove to decide if we were going to get engaged, telling ourselves that no matter how it worked out—we got married or we split up—we could always call each other “my ex-fiancee.” That had such a lovely, captivating, and well, French tone to it as opposed to boyfriend or girlfriend.

Our pull toward marriage vined out of a conversation about how, now that we bought this house together, we needed a ritual with friends, perhaps some family too. The more we thought of the ritual, the more we realized it was called a wedding.

I looked into Ken's eyes, deep blue that would lighten into oceans of paler blue over the decades to come. He looked into my hazel eyes that would turn green over time.

“So do you want to get married?” one of us said.

“Do you?” the other one of us replied.

“We better order dessert,” we agreed.

Key Lime pie. We split a piece, and it was delicious. Then we talked about how we could be engaged for a few years, take our time, enjoy being a fiancee for many seasons, then plan a wedding. We didn't know that after we got back to Lawrence, we would get the news that Ken's sister Karen,

who we loved very much, was going to Kenya to build houses with Habitat for Humanity in December, and she wouldn't be back for three years. That cinched the deal and revolutionized the timeline: we would marry November 2 that year.

After we paid, we stepped out into the twilight, the heat dissolving into the sidewalk, the cooler skies, so clear and tall, relaxing us from above. "Look," Ken said, "the moon is touching Venus. That doesn't happen often."

It was a thin crescent of moon embedded in a Maxwell Parrish sky layering darker and clear as it went higher. We looked at each other and kissed, laughed that this was a good sign. "So what do you think?" one of us said.

"Yes," the other answered.

"Yes for me too."

Three months later, at our wedding, we included this passage from Wendell Berry: "The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to one another we join ourselves to the unknown."

Nothing has been more true, we know now, but back then, getting married on top of Wells Overlook, we just suspected this great unknown. Then we went to our wedding reception in a falling-down but still viable barn where, yes, we served fried chicken.

Crossing Borders

Uncle Murle was kind, quiet, and gentle, often keeping his eyes a little downcast because he was so shy yet joking easily with his four brothers. The second-to-youngest brother to my father-in-law, we had seen him and his wife Edna often at family reunions in Overland Park, weddings in Boulder, and funerals, including for my father-in-law, in Lawrence.

Like all the Lassman men, he was a baby whisperer, and the closest I ever heard them get into argument was over who got to rock whatever baby was in the room to sleep. “Give me that baby,” one would say to each other, then pace happily with the baby on his shoulder and a big smile on his face.

Otherwise, they took life in stride. When the big tornado hit Joplin, Missouri where Murle and Edna lived, but thankfully were in Iowa visiting family at the time, and damaged their home so severely it couldn't be saved, they hauled out everything still useable and moved to a new home, a little north in Carl's Junction. They liked the small-town community there and their fairly new starter home.

But life isn't good at leaving well enough alone, and Murle eventually died from cancer, likely seeded in him from watching atomic bomb tests in the south Pacific when he was a young man in the early 1940s. A lot of the guys who saw the green shadow of light long after the bomb went off (after being told to turn away from it and cover their eyes) had their lives cut short from cancer decades later.

At Murle's funeral in Carl's Junction, the family filled the funeral home for the service and afterwards. With Murle and Edna's four children and dozen grandkids, plus all the rest of the Lassman clan, we were a big group that just wanted to hang out for hours. So we did, filling up all the funeral home leather couches and folding chairs to catch up on years, kids' adventures, job changes, and recent trips to Minneapolis or Florida.

I could imagine Murle there, standing up and stepping back while gesturing that someone else, a little kid or older cousin, should take his seat. He would have counted on people lingering for hours just like his family. Being good planners, they had already ordered a giant box of fried chicken from Chicken Mary's, across the border in Pittsburg.

Pittsburg is known as Grand Central Station for fried chicken, largely because of a tiny mining community called Yale, on the northern edge of Pittsburg, where two fried chicken restaurants sprung up side by side, co-existing and competing for decades. Chicken Annie's, founded in 1934, and

Chicken Mary's, founded in the 1940s, each were brainchildren of need, talent and hunger. Separated by only a parking lot, the restaurants were down Chicken Dinner Road.

I've heard that there are other hard-to-find chicken joints in the area too, but I know Chicken Annies and Chicken Marys mostly because my wonderful father-in-law was a Pittsburg State University guerilla. He earned his masters in the lost art of printing there in the 1960s, driving back and forth from home in Lawrence where he and Alice raised four kids, including Ken, born in four and a half years on his printing teacher's salary.

The fabled fried chicken of Pittsburg came home to roost again (so to speak) at Murle's funeral after a few of his sons drove twenty-three miles each way to fetch it for us. Once the prodigal chicken landed, we dug in, staying more hours than we planned because we were cast under the spell of that crunchy and flavorful chicken.

Yet the whole time, I couldn't help thinking about how Murle was exactly the kind of person who would have insisted on getting the chicken for us all, then he would have sat back quietly, waited until everyone served themselves, before walking his paper plate up to the box of chicken and putting himself together a plate of dinner.

It was nothing for him to cross a border for his family but it was everything for us that such a good man crossed the border out of this life.

A Plate of Hope

Although my dear friend's name was Hope, it turned out her illness was the opposite, but I didn't know that when we met in western Kansas at a rental cabin, a refurbished grain elevator filled with kittens. We were there for a writing retreat together, and we both loved cats, especially tiny ones that meow-purred all over our arms and necks when we sat at our clunky laptops or oversized

notebooks to write poetry. She had driven from Longmont, Colorado, and me from Lawrence to meet in the middle.

We were such fast friends from the moment we locked eyes at a writing retreat a year before that it seemed impossible we hadn't known each other well for decades. Our favorite movie was *Wings of Desire*, we were enthralled with the same "Ninth Elegy" from Rilke, and we adored coconut cream pie. So many of our perceptions and preferences matching that it seemed we were hatched from the same egg even if she grew up in Kansas and me in New Jersey and Brooklyn. We pocketed our survival stories and healing narratives in each other, our husbands adored each other, and my kids were enchanted by these new old friends of ours.

The retreat, kittens all the way down, was such a success that we decided to meet six months later, this time in Sylvan Grove. But what goes up can also go down, and in the rental cottage, right in town with strained hard sunlight breaking through the open doors of that hot weekend, we lost our groove.

After a low-key evening, Hope was depressed the next morning and wouldn't get up from where she fell asleep on the worn loveseat in the living room. I tiptoed around her until 11, tried to quietly nudge her awake with a mug of hot coffee in my hand.

I waited another hour and tried again, then another hour. By 1:30 p.m., my hunger had overtaken my compassion, and I pulled her up to sitting. Her face was full of such despair that nothing I could say or do made the slighted dent. She drank the lukewarm coffee while staring at the smudged window, unable to make eye contact with me. I could see her shoulders trembling as whatever was hurting in her rummaged around in her psyche. Her light brown hair hung sadly around her slumped shoulders.

She was also ashamed to be so sad with me, a relatively new friend who, like her, was a born-and-bred people-pleaser, which put us at an impasse. When I said we needed to get lunch, she said I shouldn't have to put up with her.

"It's okay. Let's get some food," I said gently with my hand resting lightly on her left shoulder. She couldn't help but stiffen, couldn't pause to show me how deep the pain, how vulnerable the soul, how lost the spirit. "I hear they have good fried chicken at the cafe in the next town. Let's go."

She shook her head quickly as if clearing away a swarm of gnats, got up to her feet, and we went.

Twenty minutes later we were seated in a booth at the cafe, joking about why even look at the same hand-written, plastic-covered menu when we knew what we wanted. Before long, we smiled at each other over our matching plates of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and corn.

"This fried chicken is *really* good," she said with more energy than I had seen this whole visit. "I'm so sorry I'm like this, but I'm better now. Please forgive me."

Of course I did, but I didn't actually understand the depth of her depression, and neither of us knew that its source. She had a form of slow-growing leukemia that would sideline her further in such despair that within a year, she would pull away from me and many other dear ones in her life. I would call and leave messages, send occasional cards and more frequent emails asking what was wrong and what I did to cause this, adept as I was in turning in on myself.

Over the years, I missed her terribly—her bubbling-over laughter when we caught up on the phone. Her way of tilting her head closer to me to listen more deeply when I shared some heartache in Colorado, Kansas, Vermont, or California. All the poetry we wrote together in those big-skied places here in western Kansas or in the Rockies. But I told myself, as advised by many a good friend, to let go, to accept that I would likely never see her again or find out why our friendship vanished.

I could never completely put her out of my mind, succumbing to Google to get updates and read poems she had published in various journals. Years went by, but as much as I tried not to look her up, I did every few months, even long after I gave up imaginary conversations on what I would say to someone I thought was a dear friend but ended up ghosting me long before we had the term “ghosting” in common use. I had no illusions about what I was doing, but at the very least, I wanted to understand what happened.

“A lot of times, you don’t get answers in this life,” Ken told me. Repeatedly. So I’d put my yearning for all of it on a high shelf, only to pull up a hair in my psyche a month or season later and take it down to examine again.

Then one day, sitting on the lawn furniture in Ace Hardware while waiting for Ken to find some plumbing tool, I glanced at my phone and noticed the little arrow in the upper right-hand corner of Instagram. I clicked on it, and there was Hope. She was sorry, she took full responsibility for vanishing for years, and she wanted to do all she could to make amends.

You wouldn’t think such a thing could happen or could work, but that was over three years ago, and we’re in a renewed peas-and-carrots close friendship after hours spent on the phone, dozens of long emails, me telling her she had broken my heart and her accepting that while also sharing the layers of what kept her away. Turns out, she was Googling me all along too.

That was over three years ago, and in the interim, we’ve talked, met, emailed, and texted so regularly that I rarely go three days without connecting with her. My long-last friend. The one who was brave, strong and loving enough to return to me and do the hard, painful work of saying everything and making it all right again. It was easier than I would have dreamed to forgive her and open my heart to our friendship again.

Now we were on another writing retreat together, this time to Arkansas, where over a dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn, we couldn't stop cracking each other up. *Anything is possible*, this friendship reminds me.

“It is a miracle, isn't it?” Hope wrote me after I showed her this essay. “And a miracle that my very favorite meal in the whole world could be a vehicle of redemption, both for me and someone else.”

Amen, and pass the gravy.