

A NICE HOME-COOKED MEAL

BY: LARRY ROTHE

A month ago, just like that, the father lost his job, leaving him all the time in the world. The mother, who continued to work, went ahead and claimed ten hard-earned vacation days. Together they chose to proceed with plans laid in more solvent times. They would make the trip from their home outside Chicago to Niagara Falls, just as they'd promised their seven-year-old son. The father and mother had honeymooned at the falls, and when they decided to celebrate the tenth anniversary of their marriage by revisiting the site of bygone bliss, they prepared their boy for his first look at a wonder of the natural world. They attempted to describe the cascades, how the rushing river dropped over the edge in great twisting cables of foam. They recited stories of men who had huddled in barrels and yielded to the current's power, which led in only one direction to a preordained terminus. "Will we ride the *Maid of the Mist*?" the boy wanted to know. "Will we visit Fort Niagara?" His excitement touched them. He was a delicate child, susceptible to anxieties and random episodes of constipation that altered his otherwise sweet nature and increased his inclination to withdraw. Dismayed at their inability to ease the boy's troubles, they assured and reassured him. The *Maid of the Mist*. Fort Niagara. Yes. All that and more. Then one day the father discovered his name gone from his office door and his computer unresponsive to his password.

Bad luck would not hold this family back. Of course they'd be forced to economize—drive rather than fly, and overnight at backroads places that announced themselves in neon and whose invitations to weary travelers could be withdrawn at the flick of a switch, illuminating a red NO that canceled the green-glowing VACANCY on the marquee. As the father and mother reflected on the need to adapt their ambitions to their new financial circumstances, a sense of nostalgia swept over them. The necessary restrictions they would impose on themselves carried them back to their early years together, and they felt lighter and younger, as though they had shed a decade of accumulated worry. Neither of them being inclined to sentimentality, they knew what awaited them when they returned home from the falls; but they were optimists, committed to making lemonade from the lemons life had delivered. And so they strapped their boy into his car seat and

steered east, over the Chicago Skyway, through northern Indiana, past the defunct smokestacks and cinder heap of Gary, into Michigan and from there onto the wide-open turnpikes of Ohio and Pennsylvania, three trailblazers heading toward sunrise not sunset, with the Alleghenies still before them. Traveling toward the Atlantic a century and more ago, they would have passed ox-drawn wagons bound in the opposite direction. As the father pressed the accelerator and the car continued eastward, he pondered the luck that had brought them this far, already in eastern Ohio, somewhere between Warren and Youngstown.

Toward five they pulled off the turnpike at Irwin, Pennsylvania. Vacancies abounded in the three or four motels outside town. At this time of year the day's heat had not yet given way to evening, and as soon as they entered their room at the Colonial Motor Court they turned the air conditioner to high. Knotty pine wainscoting covered three walls. A framed print of a mountain scene hung above the night table between the double beds. The mother smiled. "Just like the old days," she said. The father was happy. The boy inspected the small bars of soap in the bathroom, peed in the toilet, and played with the TV remote, surfing from channel to channel while the mother and father unpacked and readied themselves for dinner.

The desk clerk, bifocaled and despite the season clad in a flannel shirt buttoned to the neck, as if armored against a December he might never see, had neglected to shave, and gray stubble poked through skin translucent with age. He recommended a restaurant within walking distance, just around the bend in the highway. Joyce's, he called it. He grew animated. "It's where to go if you want a nice home-cooked meal. Be sure to try the chicken-in-a-basket. It's one of a kind. Tell Joyce I sent you. Name's Stuart. You tell her Stuart sent you and enjoy your chicken-in-a-basket."

Joyce's was Joyce's Old Manse, two stories of white clapboard, with an overhanging roof balanced on pillars and shading the front porch. The father thought the structure resembled a funeral home more than an old manse. The front doors opened on a spacious dining room, the floor carpeted from one wall to the other in a floral pattern, the vaulted ceiling crisscrossed by rafters from which hung lamps shaped like candelabra. In a corner stood an upright piano. Place settings were arranged atop the white paper cloths covering the tables. The father noted, at one table, a middle-aged couple, the woman in a short-sleeved blouse that revealed her ample arms, the man wearing a baseball cap, strands of dark hair protruding down his neck. At another table the father spied a family of four, mom and dad and two boys, one in his early teens and one younger, perhaps no older than his own son.

On the counter at the entrance stood the cash register and, beside it, a small stack of CDs for sale. The recording was entitled *Re-Joyce!* The cover bore this explanatory text: *10 Reasons to Praise His Name.*

Composed, Sung, and Played by Joyce of Joyce's Old Manse in Irwin, Pennsylvania. The plus-sized woman behind the counter emerged to greet them. In her arms she cradled a set of menus. Her lace-trimmed blouse billowed as she moved, curtaining her waist and most of her dark slacks. Her words sounded propelled through her smile, and she spoke not in sentences, but in declarations.

“Welcome to Joyce’s Old Manse! I’m Joyce. Looks like there’s three of you, so you just follow me.”

Joyce seated them at a table near the family that had caught the father’s eye. While he and his wife studied the menu their son colored his placemat with the crayons Joyce had provided.

The father considered the offerings and their prices. A waiter appeared with the food for the family nearby. The older boy had ordered a burger. Before the younger boy the waiter placed a red plastic basket piled high with what appeared to be an entire chicken, cut up, breaded, and fried. The boy licked his lips and rubbed his hands together. The older one clipped him on the ear. “You’re such a dork,” he said. The parents laughed. The younger boy stuck out his tongue and needled his brother. “The dork just got the best thing in the kitchen,” he assured his tormentor, pointing first at his own meal and then at the forlorn patty that rested on the pale bun half.

The father went back to the menu. His son continued to scribble, ignoring the father and mother’s attempts to interest him in dinner.

“I’m not hungry.”

“But you have to eat something,” coaxed the mother.

“I don’t want to.”

“I’ll have the chicken,” said the father, “and he can have some of mine.”

“The chicken,” said the mother. “You drove all the way from Chicago and you’re going to have the *chicken*? In a basket? You deserve more than that. I’m having a steak.”

Joyce chatted with the family at the other table. She ran a puffy hand through the younger boy’s shaggy blond hair as he leaned over the basket, gnawing at a breast. “That’s my boy, Mikey!” Joyce proclaimed. “Can you eat all that chicken-in-a-basket?” Mikey glanced at her, chewing and, like a child possessed, nodded yes, yes, sure I can eat all this chicken-in-a basket. He laid down the half-consumed breast, wiped his hands, and gave Joyce a big, chicken-fed grin.

Joyce erupted with delight. “Mikey, you take the cake!” She began to address the room. “Do you believe,” she said, “that a week ago this child was in convulsions. Yes, indeed. These poor folks got the scare

of their lives. But that's my Mikey. This boy does not give up! Here he is tonight, eating like a little prince. This boy does not give up! And the Lord does not give up on those who persevere. Praise God!"

The mother gazed at Joyce. Joyce caught her eye.

"Oh, it's true. Just a week ago this young man was in convulsions. And look at him now. The picture of health!"

Joyce marched to the upright piano, seated herself, and began pounding the keys, producing a full-bodied, major-mode melody that could not be mistaken for anything but a hymn, one of Joyce's own making. The father had heard nothing like this since his Sunday School days. Joyce sang:

"The Lord is always ready,
The faithful know he's there.
He offers them a shelter,
Provides the softest chair.

"The Lord says, 'I'm your tour guide
Through heaven's glor'ious rooms!
Sweep out your sinful urges.
Take up your holy brooms.'

"Step smartly to the altar
Oh ye of little faith!
Now to the Lord give praises
Or else you'll be too late!"

The man in the baseball cap applauded. The other diners continued their conversations or concentrated more intently on their food. Joyce slammed shut the keyboard cover. "Praise the Lord!" she cried out. Ecstasy enlarged her as she rose from the bench. The aura trailed her as she strode toward the kitchen, and it hung in the air a moment after she disappeared through the swinging door.

"I don't know how she does it," said the man in the baseball cap. "Music is just part of her. That talent.

Where does it come from?"

His wife agreed. "Music is her life. If you asked Joyce, she'd tell you it came from God, I mean the talent does."

Their food arrived. The mother ate her steak and the father ate from his chicken-in-a-basket. He pushed the basket toward his son. "Have some," he said.

"I'm not hungry."

"You'll wake up in the middle of the night, starving."

"I'm not hungry."

The father pulled the basket back and ate another piece of chicken. When they finished he asked the waiter to wrap what was left. They skipped dessert.

As the kitchen door swung open, Joyce reappeared and billowed toward her post at the cash register. The man in the baseball cap and his wife stood there, ready to pay. They bought a CD. "Joanie will like this," the man said, nodding.

Joyce handed him a few bills in change and clattered a handful of coins into the ashtray on the counter. "Thanks, Fred! And Nancy! You folks come back soon, and tell that little girl of yours I'll see her in church come Sunday."

At the other table Mikey's basket was filled with bones. He slumped back and sighed, rubbing his stomach, a gesture he might have adopted from some geezer. "You are such a dork," his brother reminded him. Mikey flung a well-aimed chicken bone and the brother caught it, shook his head, and clipped Mikey on the ear. "Dork."

As the father and the mother and the boy walked back to the Colonial Motor Court, the day's humidity remained, clogging the twilight and slowing their steps. When the boy voiced his discomfort, the father reassured him. They had left the air conditioner running, and in a few minutes they would bask in its promised chill. They might need electric blankets! When they let themselves into the room all was silent. The thick air closed around them and clotted in their throats. The father eyed the air conditioning unit and moved the switch from on to off and back, but after a few attempts he understood the futility of this gesture as the machine refused to respond. The office was dark when he arrived there, and no one answered his pounding at the door. In the gathering dusk he heard only the hum of air conditioners, droning from the other rooms.

They resigned themselves to the night and watched the last fifteen minutes of a comedy on TV, then

prepared for sleep.

“Dad, what are compulsions?” asked the boy.

“Compulsions. What makes you ask? Sorry. That’s not funny, is it?”

“Funny?”

“I mean, compulsions are when you feel you have to do something, even if you don’t want to.”

“Like when you wanted me to eat?”

“No. It’s like an urge. Something inside is pushing you. Like that lady Joyce. She had a compulsion to sing.”

“That boy at the restaurant had compulsions to eat his chicken.”

“What? Oh, I get it. Joyce said he was in convulsions. Convulsions are different from compulsions. Convulsions are scary. It’s like your body is out of control, like you twitch or shake and can’t stop.”

The boy shifted in bed, rose on an elbow, then lay back. “Sounds like the same thing,” he said. “Compulsions and convulsions. Either way, you’re not in control.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Can I have some chicken?”

“Sure. Hungry?”

“No. But I can’t poop and if I eat something maybe it’ll help me go.”

When the father turned out the lights he lay still. He listened to his son’s breathing. He pondered the beauty of the inhalations and exhalations, their quiet predictability, regular as clockwork, the essential rhythm over which the world’s melodies uncoiled. The mother embraced the father and pulled him close. “It’ll be OK,” she said. “It’ll be OK. I love you.”

From his bed, and though he was almost asleep, the boy heard the mother. Years would pass before he understood her words, or why she spoke them.



Larry Rothe is the author of *Music for a City, Music for the World* (Chronicle Books, 2011), a history of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, and co-author of the essay collection *For the Love of Music* (Oxford University Press, 2006). His fiction has appeared in *Story Quarterly*. He is currently at work on his second novel.