

Pain, and What to do About It · Sydney Harth

MY HUSBAND CRIES a lot and makes long distance telephone calls to the head of the organization. George cheers him up by telling him jokes. While George is talking, Lenny can sometimes believe, at least for the moment, that things will turn out all right. I don't mind Lenny any more, and I'm even glad that George is nice to him, but living with him used to hurt a lot. While I was pregnant with Stevie he would hardly let me out of the house, and he used to sit across from me every evening reading books about the horrible things that could happen to babies in the womb. Whenever he came to a new kind of deformity, or brain damage, he would make me cry with him about it. After George retires next year, Gladys will be the big honcho, and I know she won't have patience with the way Lenny carries on. If that means that he will be on my back with his organization problems, like tactfully persuading certain department heads to take early retirement, my life will turn into one big headache. I'm subject to headaches because I'm extremely sensual.

Everything that I feel, I feel with my whole being, and I tell my students that if they want to please one of the senses, they must learn to please all of them. The most delicate *selle de veau Orloff* tastes like cafeteria stew if it isn't properly presented with *tartelettes de concombres* on a silver tray. When they can't understand at least that much, I don't even attempt to teach them how to braise lettuce. The result would taste like old gum wrappers that have been kicking around the bottom of a smoker's purse for six months.

When I was a little girl in Atlanta, we used to have long springs. Right after Christmas, I used to start looking for signs of spring, but in the morning, if it was the least bit cloudy, my mama made me carry an umbrella. "If it doesn't rain, you can use it as a sunshade," she would laugh, even though the umbrella weighed me down when I tried to fly, and it gave me a twisting pain that went up my back. On the way to school, when I stopped by to pick up my friend Myrtle, I'd hide the umbrella behind her lilac bushes. She charged me a dime, and although I'm a materialistic person—sensual people are often materialistic—the price seemed fair. The clinker was that while she was hiding my umbrella, I had to stay friends with her so she wouldn't tell, and knowing that, she acted extra spiteful. She had squinty eyes, a long, stringy neck, freckles. I couldn't actually blame her for getting what she could out of me. She didn't have many chances, and she wasn't likely to get many later.

Last summer in Paris, we were royally cheated, considering the price the women had to pay. It was all I could do not to tell Robert Jabot what I thought of his gourmet school. When I bring over twenty-five women to take lessons from a master chef, I don't expect us all to be crowded into a dark little kitchen that would make Mabel complain. The most bizarre part of the experience was the great Jabot, himself. Anything or nothing made him cry. I know that men have to cry, sometimes real tears, and the big shots in the organization would be suspicious if Lenny never did. They would think that he didn't care about the organization, that it wasn't the cornerstone of his life, but they would be

shocked if he started crying about silly things. George comforted him when he cried because he expected profits to be higher in 1977, but he only cried to me when he felt he had not been given enough credit for the success of the big annual meeting last year. Even kind hearted George would not forgive that kind of crying, and no one will forgive a man who cries when a *soufflé* falls. Even I couldn't get away with that, and I don't know what Jabot thought he would get out of such a display. He called us all "Mignon" because he couldn't remember our names.

All that disappointment in Paris brought on the worst kind of headaches. Not the kind that knife through and can be cured with champagne, but the kind that churn around all night. When I have them, I hardly know what I'm doing or saying, and when Jabot came up behind me at the flour bins, I doubt if I slapped him as hard as I should have. In such agony, my body knows what it wants, and it liked the feel of his body coming up from behind. He must have sensed that, and I suppose that's how he got to be a master chef. He certainly isn't bright in other ways.

By the time we left the flour bins, my headache was gone, but I knew it would come back. Such headaches always do. Like that time with Daddy. That was before Mama and I left Atlanta, so I couldn't have been more than about eleven. He was strapping my legs with his belt for some reason—probably I was picking Mrs. Devereux's flowers again. Anyway, he wasn't hitting hard. Because I had this terrible headache, I could barely feel it. I didn't even cry, but Mama did that part for me, bawling and yelping like a hound in March. Pretty soon, I turned so faint and sick, I had to lie right down on the dining room floor. The floor's cool wood felt good, and I lay quiet because my headache was going away.

"You've killed her. My mama told me not to marry a Kentucky man, but would I listen?"

"Nothing the matter with that girl that my belt can't cure. Stand up here, Cindy, and take your punishment."

When I didn't move or hardly breathe, he took me under the arms and pulled me to my feet. One look at his red, sweaty face set my head humping again, and I slid back to the floor where things were better.

"I need a drink," he said and walked out of the house.

"Now see what you've done," my mama howled at me, leaning over and pulling my hair. I bit her hand and ran to my room. Mabel brought up some dinner on a tray, and I didn't come down for three days.

When his agent wrote that Jabot planned a tour of America this year, I naturally invited him to spend a couple of days at my cooking school. Madison, Wisconsin isn't like New York. I mean, when the great master chefs of the world visit this country, they don't necessarily head for Madison, but the agent said that Jabot was going to Minneapolis, and you can't hardly fly to Minneapolis without going through Madison. By the time I left Paris last summer, Jabot knew my name, I was calling him Robert in private, and had less trouble with headaches.

I rarely called him Robert in front of the other women because when I did, he pretended he hadn't heard me, but calling him Monsieur Jabot made my tongue thicken. Or maybe it was his pastry. Before he rolled it out, he mixed it too much, and it wasn't flaky like mine. I said nothing about that because the women in my group were paying big prices for the lessons, and they had a right to their money's worth.

Every night while we were in Paris, I had to pull up my knees and squeeze myself together to make the pain bearable. Sharp jabbing pain through my middle. Robert laughed and said it was *les nerfs*.

When we lived in Chicago, I knew a woman who put her bread out on the fire escape to rise in summer. Somehow the gray soot swirling around it never touched it. My mama told me not to eat any of that bread, that it was dirty and would give me belly aches, but my mama was wrong about that as she was about most other things. The fire escape bread rose high and light, and if they have bread in heaven, it tastes like that. Warm from the oven, thick with butter and honey, Mrs. Worzala used to hand me a piece after school when she heard me trudging up the stairs to our apartment. If I'd come home with a headache, even a bad one, it went right away. "The love in my hands can take care of anything," she told me.

When Stevie comes home from school, Lenny's usually there, and he doesn't fuss about making dinner on nights when I have to teach. Lenny's a pretty fair cook, and if he has an organization problem on his mind—if someone has snubbed him or if his cute little secretary is having her period—Stevie knows how to comfort him and at the same time make sure that dinner isn't spoiled. But Lenny won't do any cleaning. Before I started my school, when Lenny wasn't so high up in the organization, I thought he should help me with the housework because he didn't have much to do. He said that cleaning was women's work and tried to prove it with charts and diagrams. If we'd had any brass, he would have been willing to polish it, but when I said that I thought that ironing might substitute for brass, he thought I was joking. Now that he's moved up in the organization, I don't bother him about cleaning. It works out that he doesn't notice the dirt, and I'm not home enough to let it give me many headaches.

Stevie's feelings are more intense. He keeps his little room immaculate—last year I bought him his own vacuum cleaner—and when he's not in school, he spends most of his time in there. All the witches that he draws, he names Dust or Grime. Evenings when I'm not home, he finishes his homework and then draws witches until bedtime. If he doesn't have many to show me the next morning, it's because Lenny has been particularly demanding. Once I came home at two in the morning to find Stevie weeping into his pillow because a printer in Pennsylvania was cheating the organization. Right then I woke Lenny up and told him that the child was too young for such bad news. "The world is a tough place, and the kid might as well learn it now," he said. "Don't call him a kid. If he's a kid, you're an ass," I told him.

A couple of weeks before Robert's arrival date, I got a letter from a big

magazine saying that they were doing an article on his trip to America, and they wanted to come to Madison and cover his stop at my school. I told them to feel free as long as they were careful not to interfere with my routines. The *Midwestern Gourmet of Old Georgia*, as I call my school, often has important teachers coming to it, and my students pay enough to expect well run lessons. For a master chef, they rarely pay less than fifty dollars.

All this I had to let the magazine know without sounding indelicate, and it was hard to concentrate on my writing just then because Lenny was on the telephone with George and laughing hysterically. George must have been using his famous gallows humor. Usually I welcome that; it's easier to take than crying even if it is louder, but while it's going on, I have a hard time thinking. In spite of the difficulties, I guess my letter did the trick because Mr. Grindlinger from the magazine wrote back that he and his photographers would be careful not to get in my way. All I had to do was tell them when they could have access, and he promised that they would stick to those times. He ended by saying that he didn't want me to think he was being pushy. When a man acts that respectful at the start, I don't expect him to give me a hard time later on. Usually he will fit in my pocket as neatly as a pack of gum.

Ever since it started, my school has been lucky, but even though I'm a materialist, I didn't start the school to make money. I started it out of my sensual side; I started it because I was getting nervous watching my days pass like a row of flat, cold griddle cakes without butter or syrup. A few years ago, Lenny was sure he had an enemy in the organization who was keeping the top management from realizing how hard he was working. At that time Lenny was writing a definitive history of the organization, and he thought that either Clarence or Bill—"And both of them have a lot to hide, let me tell you," he said—was making it impossible for him to get at certain old letters in Bruce's attic, and if Lenny couldn't get the letters, he couldn't complete the history, and if he didn't complete the history, everyone would think he was goofing off. Tim, who was my lover back then, told me I'd feel better if I'd practice the piano or do needlepoint, but we had no piano, and I always lost track of where I was when I tried to do needlepoint. I used to stay in bed all morning reading magazines, but they didn't interest me.

In all the arrangements I made for Robert's first night, my only mistake was letting Immaculata give the dinner party. There had to be a party, even though Robert said he didn't want one, but it should have been a small, exclusive party at my place, not a student party. I was putting Robert up in Stevie's clean little room while he went and stayed with his friend David, and when Robert saw the shining room, the first thing he wanted to do was lie down in it. I didn't blame him. Our house was nice and quiet because Lenny had gone to Atlantic City with George to see if they could work things out with a woman who was bringing an Affirmative Action suit. "I have no need of dinner; I'll eat you," Robert said in that cute French way of his. But when I reminded him that we had to keep Mr. Grindlinger happy, and that Mr. Grindlinger was looking forward to a big dinner and had said so in a letter, Robert pulled himself

together and put on his black tie.

Making Atlanta a modern city meant that they pulled down the beautiful old homes in the center of town and put up a bunch of expensive fake colonials on West Ferry Road. Every night my mama used to weep about all that. In Madison here, instead of tearing down the best homes, they've turned them into student rooming houses, and when people like Immaculata want something grand, they go out to the edge of town and tear down an old farm house to get its space. Most of the farms were dull, but they had a solid feel to them which Immaculata's Norman/Tudor/Salt Box won't have if it lasts another twenty-five years, which it won't. But she does have space, which made her the obvious one to put on the dinner party, even if my aching head told me it would be a disaster.

When she first got the idea, I tried gently to talk her out of it, but she thought I was encouraging her, and I let it go. The great thing is not to argue. If someone believes a thing enough to want to argue about it, nothing will change his or her mind. When Daniel was my lover, he said that if I really was pregnant, he'd take care of the baby, but he wouldn't marry me.

"Take care of it? You mean change its diapers and take it to the doctor?" I asked him.

"You know I couldn't do that, but I'd give you as much money as you needed."

"Would you buy the baby an English pram and hire an English nanny to push it? I always thought that would be nice."

"You know as well as I do that pregnancy is the worst possible reason to get married."

"I have a dreadful headache, and I think I should go home."

I didn't tell him that pregnant or not there would be no baby. Men don't like to hear things like that.

The first time I made *pâté de champagne*, I took the recipe out of the Sunday paper. It wasn't a bad recipe. The seasoning was too tame, but a large percentage of fatty pork did give it a nice texture. Ever since I started teaching *pâté*, I've given my students a corrected version of that recipe, but Immaculata thought she could improve it with more veal, because veal costs a mint. If I hadn't been in such pain, I'd have felt sorry for her, even though she put Robert on her right, Mr. Grindlinger on her left, and me way down at the other end of her long table. The students from her class, whom she had invited to the dinner, sent me a corsage, but Immaculata didn't chip in for it because she thought that giving the dinner was enough.

With my prettiest smile, I thanked Immaculata for her lovely dinner, and Robert even kissed her hand, which might have been going too far. Mr. Grindlinger merely grunted his thanks, and everyone thought him an ill-mannered slob, considering the amount of food he'd put away. I was the only one who realized that he'd been shoveling it in without knowing what he was eating. People think that fat people love and respect food, but they really hate it. I learned that from my granddaddy, and Mr. Grindlinger looked relieved

when I whispered that I understood. He later told me that his specialty is race track stories, but that these days people are more interested in cooking than racing, and the magazine gives him the cooking stories because he's so fat.

"Truth is, I don't know a *hollandaise* from a crock of spit," he said.

"I'll make everything nice and clear for you," I smiled.

"Maybe you'll even write the story for me," he laughed, patting my bottom the way laughing men like to do.

"Maybe I should," I laughed back, not moving away from the patting hand. It wasn't a bad hand, and I thought it would be a great thing to have a story about The Midwestern Gourmet of Old Georgia in a national magazine. While he patted, I thought about how I would arrange everything.

"Why can't you do anything right?" Lenny once asked me. He wasn't exactly crying, but tears were in his eyes.

"I thought the evening went beautifully," I yawned. My dinner had looked and tasted lovely, and all those clods from the organization seemed to be having a good time. A little blonde fellow named Rudolf or Rasputin, or something silly like that had been a new addition, and he told me about this interesting machine that lights a charcoal fire in eight minutes. It's true that Gladys didn't take off her sunglasses all evening, but I assumed that she had another sty.

"You should have let me buy the wines," Lenny said.

"And have you spend all next week's grocery money?"

"With the fruit, Gladys hardly finished her third glass of sauterne, and before that, the Chablis was moving so slowly it creaked."

"They weren't drinking because there were such lovelies to eat. I don't bone and stuff chickens every day."

"When he put down his Sauterne glass, I distinctly heard Clarence say, 'Both of the horses should be shot.' I heard him."

"Eavesdroppers hear what they deserve."

For his first lesson, I thought Robert would do something more amusing than bone a chicken. French chefs do bone things beautifully, but I had one here last year who boned for his class. A lot of the students from that one were repeats in Robert's class, and most of them already had bought excellent boning knives. They couldn't be persuaded to buy new ones, which was too bad because selling equipment is where I make my money. When I have to give the master chef a cut and buy all the fancy provisions he orders—pounds of white truffles, Spanish saffron, and all that—there isn't much left of a student's fifty dollars. I count on them to buy equipment in my shop.

At least Robert didn't do pastry because I told him we'd done a lot of that lately. The thought of having my tongue growing thick again, after all I'd been through, made my head pound wildly, and I had no decent champagne to drink. He got back at me by making his *duxelles* by hand after I'd laid in a lot of food processors. I was sure they'd move.

"To be certain of the most delicate flavor and texture, *duxelles* should always be chopped by hand," Robert smiled at the last class, just before he cut his hand chopping the mushrooms. Blood gushed like a Roman fountain, and I could

tell right away that he would need stitches. Mr. Grindlinger's photographer took pictures of the mess which didn't bother me because Robert was acting so bitchy. While everyone was listening, the man had the nerve to scream, "Why do I come to a farm wives' cooking school and try to work with primitive tools?"

"You were using an excellent French carbon knife which I sharpened this morning. Of course, as I understand it, a first rate chef always travels with his own knives," I said.

Before Robert left, he apologized, and we kissed goodbye like old friends, but I'd had enough of him. While he was in the emergency room, Mr. Grindlinger and I took a walk by Lake Wingra, and the apple trees were just budding. It reminded him of Vermont when he was a boy. He asked for a picture of me for his magazine article. "People like to see a good looking girl," he said. "I'm hardly a girl, Mr. Grindlinger," I smiled. My head was breaking in half. He said his name was "Hiram," but I couldn't quite call him that.

Lenny came back from Atlantic City in a better mood than usual. He had won a fair amount of money, and he said that as soon as the organization would give him a chunk of time, we could take the vacation in Mexico I'd always wanted. When I told him about Immaculata's little tricks, and about Robert's accident, and about how I had to get a new picture taken for Mr. Grindlinger—I still couldn't think of him as Hiram—he seemed almost interested. We had a big laugh about what Robert tried to pull with his *duxelles*, and that was the first real laugh we'd had together since 1975. That evening Stevie came out of his room for dinner, and we all sat down together to a nice plate of red beans and rice.

It wasn't until we were ready for bed that he started to cry about how he might be demoted because of that woman's Affirmative Action suit. She had a good chance of winning because her manager in Atlantic City always called her "Honey" or "Doll" instead of Mary or Miss Reubens. I told Lenny that judges know that lots of people have trouble remembering names, that Robert had done something like that in Paris, but none of what I said calmed him down. He said that I was stupid, that I didn't understand, that the manager called all the men by name, and that he was trying to break off an affair with Mary Reubens because his wife objected.

"The organization ought to fire the manager," I said.

"Fire a good manager because of some broad? I can see that you don't know much about business. It's a wonder you haven't gone bankrupt by now," he said.

Grindlinger got as good a spread in his magazine as he told me he probably would, may his tail freeze in hell. I knew that it would be a mistake to think of him as Hiram. In his article, my school was a sort of comic butt. No picture of me at all. The only picture at my school was of that ass Robert cutting himself. When Immaculata took Robert to the airport, she says he was talking about suing, but Lenny spoke to one of the organization lawyers, and if he tries that, he'll be sorry he did.

The school that got most of the space was one run by my old friend Mrs. Worzala in Chicago. I didn't even know that she'd opened a school, but she's the best chef I've ever known, so it didn't surprise me. Still, she's old enough to be my mother, and I don't see why Grindlinger put in so many pictures of her. I wrote her a letter congratulating her, and telling her that she was the one who got me started with cooking, and asking her if she wouldn't like to visit my school sometime and give breadmaking classes.

I didn't mention the fire escape because I thought she probably wanted to forget about that, but when she wrote back, she reminded me of it. That was her way of crowing about how far she's gone. She said that if we could agree on a fee schedule, she would love to come to my school. She hadn't been to Madison since she was in college, and she had so many happy memories, etc. The sort of person who would put her bread on the fire escape to rise wouldn't have much finesse when it came to discussing money. I put her letter away until I was cool enough to answer it, and then I threw up in Stevie's toilet. When I have to throw up, I like a clean toilet.

That terrible letter from Mrs. Worzala—the one who used to talk about Love all the time—was the last straw. I still thought I could get her to Madison without spending too much money, if I could just hit on the right gimmick, but I was tired of thinking about business. I needed that trip to Mexico right away, and so I told Lenny as firmly as I could. He asked again, but the organization wouldn't let him take time off just then, and I knew there was no point in waiting. When he wants something from them, they either give it to him right away or as good as never. They keep putting him off, and off, and off, until I'm ready to go out of my mind. And after all that had happened to me, I needed a vacation like nobody ever did. It was cheaper going by myself because we didn't have to get a baby sitter.

When he took me to the airport, Lenny had tears in his eyes, but at least he didn't cry. "If you get a chance, come and join me any time," I smiled. He gulped and said he would.

Landing in Mexico, I was sorry at first that I hadn't waited for Lenny. My hotel hadn't sent a car to the airport for me, and somehow one of my bags was lost. Eventually a hotel car did show up, but the suitcase didn't appear for about a week. I'd come to Mexico to lie out on the beach, and the lost bag had every one of my bathing suits in it. When I first got to the hotel, I was so furious, I didn't tip anyone.

A man in the hotel bar, who proved a great help during my stay, told me that there was no reason why the loss of my suitcase should spoil my fun at the beach. "Nobody wears bathing suits," he told me, but I could hardly believe him. As it happened, he was right. My whole time there, I didn't wear a bathing suit once. Nobody did.

And I have never seen so many penises. There were short ones and long ones, and fat ones and thin ones, and brown ones and pink ones, and black ones, and a few yellow ones. Penises everywhere. Tucked in, stuck out. I have never seen so many.