

Cooking with Cora

1956

Cora: The recipes never work the way they say in *Good Housekeeping*. For one thing, you always have to substitute something. And let's be honest, you really should substitute sometimes, because last week I saw a Tuna Noodle Casserole in *McCall's* that called for canned mushroom soup, and if you can't make your own mushroom consommé from scratch I don't think you really know your way around a kitchen. This modern emphasis on convenience is a real pain in the keister. I was talking to a woman at the market last Tuesday who said that she had started serving frozen meals three or four times a week, because they were fast and because **[Karen voice]** "my husband can't tell the difference anyway."

[Normal voice] Holy cats, right? Well, honey, I wanted to say, "husband" was your first mistake. But it's in all the magazines, and on the television every night. All this "modern housewife" claptrap. Commercials for frozen dinners and instant coffee while you're trying to watch Steve Allen.

I hate the whole phrase—both "modern" and "housewife." This same woman, Martha Tate from over on Belmont, says that her kids are her whole life, and that everything she does, she does for them. So that's nice at least. Nothing worse than a woman who "does it all for her man." She has two sons, both a little skinny to be honest, but they look sweet. Still, if she really wants what's best for those two little dumplings, she'd toss the frozen dinners and make some real food. No wonder those boys are so scrawny.

But what do I know? According to the magazines, I'm an old maid, even though I'm not 40 yet. I do my best to keep to myself; I don't bother the neighbors if I can help it. To be honest I

haven't even met many of the neighbors here on Cleaver Street. I just stay inside and cook. It's my favorite thing—my greatest joy. Trying to perfect a recipe, experimenting with different herbs and spices. There's nothing better than getting a new recipe just right. I know it's chemistry that makes it work, but it feels like sorcery. Combining just the right ingredients, conjuring something that wasn't there before. It's magic.

I keep a little kitchen garden out back, with herbs and greens and a couple of logs that I use for mushrooms. I grow a lot of my own vegetables too, just like grandma used to. I only go to the market if I'm out of meat or sometimes for an unusual ingredient I don't grow myself. The only concession I make to all this instant food is gelatin. If I'm making a congealed salad it's just easier to get some Jell-o. I used to boil down horse hooves, but it's so hard to find those nowadays.

But sometimes things are just serendipitous. I wanted to tell you about something that happened just the other day. This would have been, oh, I guess three weeks ago? I know because it was just after the full moon. So, the last week of May, I suppose. Or maybe the first week of June. I know Elvis Presley had just been on the *Milton Berle Show* because I had eaten dinner in front of the TV to watch. I don't know what the big outcry is about that boy. There are definitely more scandalous things than some gyrating hips.

Anyway, it was a few weeks ago. I was trying an older recipe, one from the Old Book, a Hungarian stew that my grandma used to make. I loved it when I was a little girl, and I thought I could get it close to the way she used to make it. I had gone special to the market a few days before to get beets, and I thought I had everything else I needed in the root cellar. But when I opened the freezer I found that I didn't have any ribs, which the recipe suggests. There was plenty of meat in there, but the stew really needs ribs; the combination of the marrow from the

bones and then tenderness of the meat itself is just—oh it's so good. I must send you the recipe.

I was irritated, though, because I had already gotten everything assembled, and was ready to get started. Beets and parsnips and all the herbs. Some tomatoes I had canned last summer. Fresh carrots and onions. I went back upstairs and finished chopping the carrots before heading out to get ribs. But after I put the knife down and was grabbing my coat, I heard someone on the front porch. I peeked through the curtains to see who it was.

I live in an old house that's been divided into four apartments, so it's not unusual for people I don't know to come to the door, to visit someone else in the house. The woman across the hall has a little boy and he has friends over to play sometimes and those kids' parents will often come to the door to pick them up.

But this woman didn't act like she was here for a visit. She hadn't even knocked on the door. She stood on the porch, looking at the yard and wrinkling her lip, like something smelled bad. She was wearing a white dress with red polka dots and had red shoes and matching gloves and handbag. Her hair was blonde and tied up in a leopard-print kerchief. I had decided that I'd have to wait to go out, when she turned as if making a decision and knocked firmly on the door.

I stepped back from the window and waited, hoping someone else in the house would answer. But everyone was either out or they were hoping the same thing, because there was silence for fifteen or twenty seconds and then she knocked again. So I steeled myself and went out of my little apartment, through the foyer, and opened the front door.

"Hello," I said, "can I help you?"

She took a moment to look me over. I don't know how else to describe it. I was grateful I had put on my best blue dress to go out, but she didn't seem impressed. I may have unconsciously smoothed my skirts as I smiled up at her. Finally she clasped her hands together,

and with the air of making a decision she said, “Hello. I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Peggy McAllister, from down the street.” She waited a beat, like she expected me to recognize her name, but since I didn’t, I simply kept smiling.

“And you are...?” she said.

“I’m Cora,” I told her. And waited.

“Well,” she said, “They voted for me to come and speak to you, so here I am.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Who voted? The neighborhood. Or, well, I suppose the women of the neighborhood. We all felt someone should say something.”

“And you lost the vote?”

“Well, I was happy to do it. I’m the most diplomatic on the street. It only makes sense I should be the one to come.” She looked me over again. I was beginning to feel like a sweetmeat at the market. “You’re a slight little thing, aren’t you?” she said. And again the faintest hint of a curled lip.

“Did you say why you were here?” I asked. “If everyone has gone to the trouble to vote and all, it would be a shame if you never said what you came here to tell me.”

She turned then and looked out at the yard. “*That’s* what I’m here to talk about,” she said.

The house sits back from the road, so the front yard is wide and deep. There’s a big oak tree right by the porch, with a wooden swing that never gets used. The grass was long, above the tops of my shoes in most places, and the flowerbeds here in the front were over-run with ajuga and dandelions. I admit we had collectively let it go a little wild, but I thought it fit the overall feel of the place.

“Gardening tips?” I said.

She chose to take this as a joke. “The yard is more than a little unkempt,” she said, turning back to me. I still hadn’t come out on the porch, so she held the space like a stage.

“Maybe your husband doesn’t have the time to tend to it, but...”

“No husband,” I said, interrupting her. “It’s just me and my cat.”

I believe the word for her face is non-plussed. She repeated my last words: “Your cat?”

“Simon,” I told her. “He’s an old black tom. You must have seen him, slinking around.”

“I didn’t realize you were...” she seemed to struggle to find the least distasteful word, and finally managed to say “alone. I apologize. But isn’t there anyone who could do something about this tangle of weeds? Obviously we aren’t asking *you* to mow the lawn, but it just won’t do to continue like this.”

“I suppose that would be the landlord’s job,” I told her. “But he’s out at the moment.”

“Your landlord? Oh so you don’t own the house. That makes things much clearer.”

“I’m not sure how,” I said, smiling my sweetest smile. She started to say something else, some clarification or explanation, but I kept on: “Would you like a cup of tea?”

And of course, those are magic words. No suburban matron worth her saltiness can resist the call of the cup. It’s the chance to see the inside of the house, you see. And I could see that morbid curiosity cross her face in two seconds—if the yard was in this kind of shape, what kind of horrors awaited within? Never underestimate the modern housewife’s need to judge someone else’s housekeeping.

My front room is always clean, if a little old-fashioned, with its doilies and soft chairs. I could tell Peggy was a little disappointed when she said, grudgingly but sincerely, “Well, this is nice.” I don’t know what she was expecting—some run-down shack, I guess—but I keep my house spic and span. Luckily I had put the broom back in the kitchen after I swept earlier that

morning.

I thanked her and went into the kitchen to make tea. I moved the big knife out of the way so I could fill the kettle with dried leaves, found the sugar bowl, the cream.

“Oh, are you cooking something?” she asked. She was leaning in the kitchen doorway, nosy as a ferret. She gestured toward the big stewpot, half filled with beets and carrots.

“I was making one of my grandmother’s recipes, “I told her, “but I don’t have any ribs, so I’ll need to get some before I can finish it.”

She seemed deeply uninterested in that piece of information. Instead she looked around the room, at the bundles of herbs hanging on the drying rack, the skewers and knives and cast-iron cookware. Then she asked me who the landlord was, so she could complain to him directly.

“He’s out at the moment,” I said. “He’s a doctor, and often has to be out.”

“A doctor?” I don’t know why she needed to repeat everything I said.

“You must have seen him,” I said. I handed her the tea. “He always wears a black suit and carries a black bag.”

She took a sip of her tea. “Oh this is really sweet,” she said, and took another sip. “Thank you.”

“I put extra sugar in,” I said.

We went back into the front room and sat, her on the floral sofa, me on the overstuffed chair by the door. Simon hissed at her from under the side table, and then ran through kitchen into the bedroom. He’s always a good judge of character. Peggy seemed not to notice.

“The problem,” she said, as if answering something I hadn’t asked, “is that the whole place looks derelict. You must see why it won’t do.”

She waited for me to respond to this, but I merely smiled.

“I mean, I understand you must find it a difficult slog, what with being...widowed?” She so wanted it to be that, and not, horror of horrors, “divorced.” But I had to correct her by saying something even worse.

“I’ve never been married,” I said. “I never saw the point.”

She blanched at this and took another long draw on the teacup. “We all have foibles, I suppose,” she said. “But at any rate, the rest of us have talked about it extensively, and we all agree that something needs to be done.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” I said, still smiling.

“It looks like an abandoned building,” she said, her voice becoming firmer. I could hear how this voice would sound when used as a weapon against unsuspecting wait staff, or rival PTA members. She smiled as she spoke, but it was clear she was tired of repeating herself.

“No,” I said, “I mean I don’t understand how it’s any of your damn business.” I admit it was satisfying to hear her sharp intake of breath.

She put down her empty cup with a clatter and stood up, every inch the offended matron. I kept my hands folded in my lap. The knife up my sleeve was very sharp, so I sat very still.

“I can see it’s no use talking to you,” she said. “One look at your dress is enough to...” But then she stopped and put her hand over her heart. “Oh my,” she said. She was looking towards the window, but her eyes were unfocused. “I feel so...so...”

“You should probably sit down,” I said. “Belladonna makes a lovely tea, but it *is* hard on the system the first time.”

She swayed on her feet, confusion knotting her brow. Sometimes the belladonna causes hallucinations, and the tea was pretty concentrated. Who knows what she was seeing just then? It took a moment for her to follow what I had just said, her wide eyes moving from me to the cup

and back.

“You little bitch,” she said, the most honest she had been all day.

She turned and stumbled toward the door and at the same time I stood up and let the big kitchen knife drop from my sleeve into my hand.

I admit I was impressed by her strength. Even with the tea, she made it into the foyer. She might have made it as far as the porch, but you’ll be happy to hear I was faster. I jumped onto her back, knocking her to her knees.

The knife went in just where her neck curved into her shoulder, as my weight combined with her momentum took her all the way down. A sharp blow with the heel of my hand against the base of her skull knocked her face into the floor, breaking her nose, and then it was easy to push the knife forward and pull sideways to sever the trachea.

Normally I plan for this, you understand. I would have had plastic sheeting, and ropes, and that nice icepick I bought at Jensen’s last fall. But it’s like I was saying earlier—serendipity. The universe provides. I needed ribs, and here comes Peggy McAllister with a full rack of them.

I did get out the plastic sheeting for the rest of the job. I carried her into the little room behind the kitchen that I have set aside for butchering, and I cleaned up the foyer as best I could. There was a fairly large pool of blood, and I had unfortunately tracked some across the hardwood. It will definitely stain, but I think the rug will cover most of it. I had moved the rug aside when Peggy knocked on the door; I at least had time for that.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the kitchen, with the big pot happily bubbling away. And not only did I get my ribs, but I was able to restock the freezer with steak, ground meat for burgers, and even a rump roast.

I did speak to the doctor about having someone in to at least mow the grass. I understand

why it might matter to the neighbors, and most of them work so hard to keep up appearances.

You'll be happy to hear that the stew turned out beautifully. Warm and savory and thick, just like grandma used to make. I had a big bowl with fresh cornbread while I watched Ed Sullivan that night. There was enough for leftovers, and it freezes wonderfully. There's your *Good Housekeeping* frozen dinner! Anyway, I must give you the recipe, it's really easy if you have the right ingredients.

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