

## 10- Ham Sandwiches

January came with its thick snows that turned into slush, and people clothed themselves in their winter clothes in the rushing, often madness of day to day life of New York City. John had no thoughts of working because he was still exhausted from his war experience. We usually spent the evenings at home; occasionally we went to the theater, and John saw many people he had not seen for a long time. He was moody, mean to many people, there wasn't that Steinbeck sense of humor any more. The war had changed him.

Our New Year's celebration was considerably quiet that year of 1944. We went to the 21 Club, a great hangout for the Who's Who of New York and showbusiness people, then did a bar crawl and went home. Early in the new year, John suddenly said to me, "I've got to get out of here. I can't stand New York. I can't stand still. Let's go to Mexico."

If that's what he wanted to do, then that was what I wanted.

"What will we do about Willie?" I asked.

"Call your mother to come here and take care of him. Your stepfather's in the army, and she loves New York. I'll pay for it. We'll only be gone two or three months."

Mother came, and she brought her own dog. New York was still blacked out because of the war, and Mother felt she needed that extra protection. Willie was the kind of darling dog who would have shown any prowler exactly where to find the silver; he would have been most courteous and, in his own direct way, would probably have said "Ha! At last I have a new friend." Willie had a habit of always barking at the wrong things.

We were packing for Mexico, mother had been with us a week, and one morning she said, "Gwyn, you're going to have a baby, aren't you?"

"Not that I know of," I said, surprised.

"Oh yes you are. I know, because John has been throwing up every morning."

"Don't be ridiculous, that's because of his medicine."

"You're going to have a baby!" She was right. I was pregnant, but the trip was still on. Air travel was out; even with priority you could still get bumped from New York to Newark. We decided to take the train to New Orleans then to Corpus Christi and on to Brownsville, Texas. From there, we were assured we would have no trouble getting a flight into Mexico.

Before we went, John and our friends, Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias, led me on about Mexico during one of their high teas. I had never been to the heart of Mexico, and so did not know what to expect. John, Rosa and Miguel kidded me with such remarks as "Wait until you've had the octopus cooked in its own ink," or "You'll love the goosanos, fried worms..." They only did that because I was pregnant and had a squeamish stomach. Several friends, including Rosa and Miguel, saw us off at the station; there was more drinking, John was loaded – on B-12 and B-1 pills and male hormones, all on doctor's orders.

Food was scarce on the train, so we took a wicker basket filled with food and drink. Those wartime days, you did not know if you would eat on the train because troops had priority and ate first.

Besides, John was well fortified with some of the London Gin that Charlie Lytle had given him in England.. He had all the gin to himself. I couldn't drink in my condition, of course in fact, I could hardly say I enjoyed the so-called cocktail hour in our stuffy stateroom, what

with the ham and cheese sandwiches, the rocky-road bed and the large Mexican briefcase with the gin. That briefcase had its own special odor. It kind of stank. An adoring Mexican fan had given it to John, and it was very big and highly decorated with a Mexican calendar seal and it had three large locks. But it had been cured in Mexican fashion – in bull manure! John delighted in carrying it when he had an appointment with someone he did not like, because the effect in a warm room on a rainy day was quite overpowering.

When we arrived in Chicago the de Kruifs met us. We went to the Drake Hotel and dined on delicious red snapper soup. That was the only real food we had time for, before we caught the train for New Orleans. The de Kruifs had sandwiches made for us at the Drake. Back to the train and on to New Orleans where we were met by Marge and Howard Hunter. It was nostalgic to see New Orleans again, a city of so much spirit and life, and music, of course. We pulled into the station on a beautiful afternoon; we had tickets to leave the same day, but we had them changed to the next day. John was tired, and his legs were bothering him, besides, he did not like trains that much anyway. There was in addition to our wicker food basket when we left New Orleans – five bottles of Five Star Metaxa brandy, a parting gift from Howard. “You’ll need it, the train you’re going on has no berths, no sleepers, no anything,” he informed, very encouragingly. The train did take us to Corpus Christi. Howard was right, we did need the brandy.

We were both in a spirit of high adventure leaving New Orleans. John told me about Mexico City and places where we would go as the train clickety-clicked along the tracks. We talked about taking a few side trips with our friends, the Covarrubiases, probably to Mitla. “Of course, I don’t think they’ve finished the roads to Mitla, but we can always take the train,” said John, smiling.

I looked at him, and he burst out laughing. “Do you really want to get on a train that soon again?” I asked. We both broke up and laughed. Late that evening and about half way to Corpus Christi our train stopped and pulled into a siding. It was pitch dark, and John and I decided to walk to the end of the car and investigate. Half an hour later it was obvious that our halt was for the military. Out of the darkness came shouts and semi-abbreviated conversation known best to the Army when something is about to happen. Then we heard screeching wheels. It was an Army troop train. The night was hot and humid; you could smell the sea, and the June bugs were thick. The doors were completely open and I was literally driven back into the car by the mad desire of the bugs to reach the lights. I went back to our room, and shortly afterwards John returned.

“It’s a big sonofabitch, forty cars of kids,” he said. “If you don’t mind, honey, I’ll go back and talk to some of the boys. I might get an idea for an article.” He left. I kicked off my shoes, rolled up his raincoat for a pillow, and settled back. Ninety minutes later, John came back. “Honey, they’re the saddest bunch of kids. I’m going to take back a bottle or two and give some of the kids a snort.” He said the cars were open like cattle cars, but were screened and had bunks. “Frankly, those cars aren’t any cooler than where we are, but at least if we get up to twenty-five miles an hour there’s a little breeze, so come back with me and meet some of the kids,” he said, grabbing another bottle of gin and a brandy bottle, and off he went, and I followed.

We arrived in Corpus Christi at almost daylight. The smell of the sea was strong, and all kinds of insects clung to the screening so you could hardly see out. When we stopped we said goodbye to the young troops and went back to our car. In that hot and sticky town our train moved forward, and then back, forward and back. This went on for half an hour, then a conductor came in and politely informed us that our dinner (if you could call it that) was

about to be removed. He suggested we have coffee in the Corpus Christi station, then held up two tickets and told us that from there to Brownsville we would be eating on an Army diner.

There were three Army diners. We were given an eating timetable: midday meal at one, dinner at four. The conductor went on to tell us that we had better be prompt for our meals. We would be eating straight Army chow. In case we were too late, he said, they were attaching a bar to our part of the train and there would be an open grill where we could get sandwiches and coffee. "What kind of sandwiches?" John asked. With John, you always had to be specific. "Fried ham," the conductor replied.

"My God, I bet they slaughtered every pig west of Kentucky to put on this train! Let's go and see what the thing looks like," John said. We left the car, walked the length of six cars, and arrived at what John called "The Elite Bar and Grille." The conductor had been right, it certainly smelled of ham, years of ham. The air was blue with ham fat; a few officers clung onto the bar, nursing swivelled barrel chairs, beaten-up ashtrays on stands. The lights were still on, even though morning sunlight was breaking in. All the windows were closed. I felt a little ghastly, and sat down on a chair next to the bar.

"How does that go for breakfast?" John asked an officer and pointing to his beer. The officer next to him said, "I think you could drink a gallon of it and not feel it. You sweat it out in two minutes."

John turned and said to me, "Do you want a beer, honey?"

"No thanks, I'll try coffee."

He raised an eyebrow in his own inimitable way (and he had inimitable ways), and said, "And a fried ham sandwich?"

"Why not, I'm game." We began to laugh. All the food we'd had since New Orleans had been ham sandwiches!

"What's the joke?" the young officer asked. John told him about our solid diet of ham sandwiches and then he, too, laughed. "Well," he began, "why don't you and your wife be our guests, we're having chicken and dumplings."

As I have related, John was not a lover of chicken in any form, but the thought of a change in diet made his eyes light up. "I'd like you to meet my wife," he said. As the officer leaned over to shake my hand he hesitated. The briefcase odor was working due to the heavy humidity. I began to laugh to myself for I knew what he must have been thinking, but he was polite enough to continue. "Have a midday meal with me," the officer said.

"We'll be glad to, but I have a feeling that the chicken is going to taste like ham," said John. He showed the officer our food cards with the hours stamped on them.

"Well, this doesn't coincide with my time, but I'll fix it so we can eat together. Let's meet at the diner door around one-thirty, and I'll take you in," he said.

We went back to our bedroom, and by now John was looking a little bleary-eyed and I was exhausted. No sleep and all the heat, plus John's Metaxa brandy were beginning to show on his eyelids. We decided to get some sleep, but that was impossible. There was no air conditioning in those days, and the windows were sealed. We both collapsed in our beds, inhaling the same air over and over again. For whatever it was worth, and that was almost nothing, our inhalations were whirled back to us by a tiny electric fan. Of course, that was not all, there was this darling briefcase; its odor went around the little fan, too. We gave up, wiped each other off with cold, wet Pullman towels, freshened ourselves as best we could and

prepared for our chicken dumpling luncheon. We gradually pulled back on our soiled clothing, which somehow the little fan had managed to dry out. John suggested we walk back to the "Elite Bar and Grille" just for the exercise and to kill time. As we began to walk, the rocky roadbed made it seem as if we were travelling much faster, but we were not. We were going a good thirty-five miles an hour. We shouldered our way into the bar, and John asked the man in charge, "What time do we get to Brownsville?"

The man answered. "Don' know exaklee, suh, but I does know we'se goin' to stop some place midway and drop some cars."

"Lord, not another delay," John said in one of his "Oh Shit!" tones.

"It won' be long, suh, theyse jus goin' to drop some o' de troop train and we shud get into Brownsville aroun' nine tonight."

"Good Lord, do you have enough ham to last?" John asked.

"Yus, suh," was the very serious reply.

That was too much for us, and we both started laughing again: John had a beer, and he asked me for a cigarette. We both smoked too much all our life. I only had two left, which we shared, and then he asked the bartender, "Do you have any cigarettes?"

"No suh, sorry."

"You mean there are no cigarettes on this train?"

"No suh, but I'll get you some of my Luckys, and when we stop midway there's a little stand with newspapers and the like and you can get some there."

"How many do you have left?" John asked the man.

"Don' know, but I'll look." He produced a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket. There were four left. John gave him twenty five cents for them, then went back to nurse his beer, wearily. I smoked. John kept looking at his watch. Finally, he said, "We'd better start for the diner." He paid for the beer and we jostled, painfully, back to the diner. John went ahead, opening the doors chivalrously for me then letting go so I received them, full force! This was, however, unintentional, but it was the way of the roadbed. John could show chivalry as well as his meanness, but then, so can any man or woman. We arrived, no officer. We waited ten minutes in the vestibule, but still no officer. John went in the diner and looked around. A young military policeman demanded to see John's card. He showed it, and when the MP saw the time, he said, "You are too late." John's disposition flew apart like a July Fourth pinwheel when anyone spoke to him with that kind of authority, especially when John felt he was in the right. He was too overtired and hungry to be polite to a uniform. Under ordinary circumstances, John always had the greatest respect for anything in uniform; even had a little fear of a uniform. But this was too much for him. Usually, John was a soft-spoken man and seldom raised his voice, but by now he was in high C and informed the MP that we had been invited to dine by an officer. Sorry, no luck. Finally, he drew up the best resources and informed the young man, "Look here, my wife is standing in the vestibule, she's pregnant, and has had nothing but HAM for thirty hours and, if she doesn't get something decent to eat she will get constipated! I WON'T HAVE IT! YOU HEAR? SHE HAS GOT TO COME IN AND SIT DOWN!"

Complete silence coincided with his utterance of the word, "constipated." Because of his wrath (and it was wrath), he had not heard the train come to a complete halt, and beautiful silence collaborated with "constipated." The next few moments were somewhat of a blur.

John flopped his arms like a duck in winter, and his one eyebrow was practically up to his hairline, yet somehow and quickly the door opened and I was ushered in and seated at a table, the first one on the right of the door. By now, John was mumbling and he pushed my chair up to the table neatly and with the most utmost politeness (he could be so polite when he wanted to be), place the briefcase at my feet. All the uniforms were to my back, but I could tell instantly that the men were finishing their meal. Finally, I understood what John was saying to me. "I'm going to get off here, honey, and get some cigarettes."

"If we're not going to get into Brownsville until nine, and considering the way we both feel now, I think you'd better double our quota," I said.

"Right!" John answered, and began to mumble again. By then it was obvious that we were both absolutely tired out and dirty, and one of us was very overhung. Furthermore, for some reason I was embarrassed by the whole thing, why, I shall never know, but I was, and filled with a bleak feeling. I just wanted to get back to my berth. John kept mumbling and said, "Do you have any money, honey, I've only got twenties?"

"I think you'd better hurry, darling, remember the man said we'd only be here a few minutes." With that, I received a very snappish retort. "Well, if it's anything like the rest of this trip we'll still be here and won't get to Brownsville until tomorrow!" John was angry with everyone, including me. I had the good instinct not to reply, but placed my napkin in my lap and stared straight ahead. "Himself" opened the diner door and his feet clomped down the metal steps as I sat waiting patiently for my Army fare, my first thrilling experience and, I hoped at that moment, my last. I sat for some time, staring toward the diner door when suddenly I was aware that there was daylight between the diner vestibule and the forward car. My first thought, and naturally, was that I was moving, too. Yet somehow through my tiredness (my overtired body seemed to be moving), I realized that the car and I was standing stock still! I jerked my head around to find I was all alone. Behind me, at the end of the car there was daylight. I jumped from the table, opened the door and glanced down into the familiar face of our conductor. The same instant, he saw me. "Lady, what the hell are you doing here? We're taking off after the Army diner."

"But my husband," I cried out.

"Can't wait," he said, and leapt up the steps, grabbed me around the waist, I grabbed my full length Beaver coat and the briefcase and we both jumped. We landed surefooted on the moving vestibule of the car. I screamed again, "BUT MY HUSBAND, HE'S GETTING CIGARETTES!"

"Can't stop now lady."

I interjected, "But we're supposed to have lunch."

"Can't help it, we take this car off here and pick up another one at six o'clock."

For some stupid reason I looked at him and said, "But we were supposed to have dinner at four."

Somehow I managed to get back to our own room, and there was no John. My husband had disappeared. I first thought that he had forgotten about me and was up in the bar car again. Yes, I said to myself, that's what he did, he saw the train moving and went to the bar. I pulled myself together, straightened my hair and began the six car trek forward. I literally staggered into the "Elite" – no husband. "Have you seen my husband?" I asked the bartender. "No, ma'am."

We were not travelling very fast and suddenly we came to a quick halt. There was the sudden noise of joining couplings and, again, we were moving. I sat in a swivel chair waiting for John, aware that we were gaining speed. I was, I admit, frantic. I got up, staggered all over the bar and asked the steward, "If my husband missed this train, where can I catch up with him? Is there another train going through?"

"I don't know, ma'am, but I know one thing, he ain't been in here."

I sat down again, and then I recognized the first signs of maternity. I became quite ill, yet I held it inside. It was not the usual morning sickness, it was a rage that kept growing. I had already lost a child, and somehow this rage and fear kept building. I was beside myself with anger, and tiredness. By now, we were moving at a good twenty miles an hour. A kind of bitterness grew, yet I tried to control it. I got up again and went to the bar. "What did we hitch onto?" I asked the bartender.

"Well, I guess they hitched up to the troop train again, ma'am."

By then, my anger was complete. I thought John must have known about the diner. He must have tried to make the train. I know where he is, the 'sonofagun', I said to myself, he's bought a case of beer and is whooping it up with the troops. I had reached such a point of anger where the thought of desertion entered my mind, cruelty and the nobody-loves-me feeling. Then it happened. Heavy panting. I looked up to see six feet of very dishevelled man, covered with road soot, knees out of both trouser legs, shoulder pads awry, one slipped halfway off, and one cheek embedded with cinders. I hung onto the side of the chair, looked up and said, "Did you get the cigarettes?"

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