

1-Chicken Soup.

One night, in late 1938, I went to a room at the Aloha Arms in Los Angeles, carrying a pot of my own freshly made chicken soup. There, in a room that smelled of drink and tobacco, and lying in an old Murphy bed and obviously in great pain, was John Steinbeck. He looked at me with his cold blue eyes. 'Sit down', he said. 'I really don't like chicken soup'.

Max Wagner, a long-time friend, and then a public relations man, was with me that night. The Wagner brothers were all madcaps, but the most charming Irishmen you would ever want to know. Max had been an admirer and escort for months. Max told me his 'friend from Salinas was in town and was very ill, in pain and hiding out. What do you want me to do about it?' I asked.

Max was what a friend should be, he really cared. "I told him you were the best cook in the world. He hasn't eaten anything. Will you make him some chicken noodle soup? I already told him you and your mother made the best chicken noodle soup in the world." I said I would see his "friend from Salinas" on my day off, but Max made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone that John was in town. At that time, I was a twenty year old singer. I was a staff singer with Columbia Broadcasting Studios, and also worked at a cocktail lounge and restaurant next door to the studios. Max picked me up in his funny little second-hand Buick and we went to the hotel. I entered the room still holding my pot of soup and I asked "have you had any food?" "No, just coffee", he answered. He had had more than that. Obviously, he had been drinking heavily. "Did you bring my scotch, Max?" "Yes." "Pour some and let's all have a drink".

Max did, from a new bottle, and after John drank his scotch, I made him eat the soup. I washed and bathed him, rubbed his back and his legs. He was a man of magnificent physique, yet never in my life had I ever seen such varicose veins of the legs.

We started to talk. Conversation came easily for this man of words and his new-found Florence Nightingale. He had just finished *Fight for Life*, and he was running from the world and a tiff with his wife, Carol. He was in fact, suffering from a nervous breakdown. His whole condition was heightened by his own sense of insecurity as to how *The Grapes of Wrath* would be received but, more than that, he was afraid people were using him. Later, I learned that he felt this way all his life.

As it does so often when we least expect it, life takes us into so many things that we never visualised – as it did that night I met John. I guess it was a night of complete chemistry, a beginning of years of a love that became great and in its way would be forever.

Before I left with Max, John said he would like to see me again. Two nights after the back rubbing, the hours of talking and chicken soup, he did.

To my surprise, he walked into the club where I was singing, leaning on a blackthorn cane like a cripple, and sat down at a table and listened to me sing. During a break I joined him and we had a few drinks. He was quiet, somewhat reserved, yet he was inquisitive just like any man. "What else do you besides sing?" he asked. I said nothing and just sat and looked at my drink. "Who are you? Where are you from?" natural questions. "I was born in Chicago", I began. "My ancestors came here in the late 1600s, and one part of me is American Indian and the rest is Welsh and English...." So I told him of my heritage and he listened, his eyes piercing my whole body, dissecting and undressing me. He stayed until I finished work and we went for coffee. Over coffee he told me a little about himself, but it was

obvious he wanted to talk. He did tell me why he did not like chicken soup. When he was a little kid, his mother used to make him kill chickens. He hated the job.

“I didn’t know it, but my father had bought some fighting cocks and my mother asked me to kill six chickens, because we were expecting relatives to visit. I did. I killed my father’s six fighting cocks! I really got whopped for it. From then on I just hated to wring a chicken’s neck. I hate chickens,” he said. As I was to learn so well in later years, John Steinbeck could not only hate chickens, he could hate many things, especially people who crossed him and even people he did not even know. And when he hated, he hated with a passion.

In those early days of our relationship I began to know John as a man with whom I was falling in love. When John looked at me with those cold blue eyes there was that unexplainable feeling that took over my whole being. In the days that followed our first meeting, he began to be a regular customer at the club. If he did not appear in the evening, he visited my mother and I, in the afternoon. Then, I was living with my mother and my stepfather, who was in the produce business. Times were not easy then, for it was in the last years of the Great Depression. John admired how my mother and I could manage with the small amount of money available. Oddly enough, he always managed to arrive around supper time. “It is just a casual call” he would say, looking me straight in the eye with his Svengali eyes. After we had eaten dinner he would usually say “I would like to take you out to dinner sometime.”

Basically, John was a very shy man. He did not ask me if I liked him yet somehow I knew that I did. At the same time to me he was like a little stray dog, who needed help and I felt I was the one who could help him. Finally I accepted his constant invitation to dinner. First we enjoyed a few cocktails with my mother and my stepfather, and then we went to The Little Bit of Sweden on Sunset Boulevard. Throughout that first dinner together we talked in subdued tones. Again he asked me all kinds of questions. What did I do? Who was I in love with? What kind of books did I read? Again, I went into my background and then he suddenly said, “You are an earth woman”. “I guess I am”, I answered. Now how, at twenty years old, do you know if you are an “earth woman”? You don’t, but since the age of twelve, I had a thirty six inch bust - if that helps.

That night he began courting me like a Don Juan. He rubbed knees under the table and he held my hand, yet, strangely, he kept covering his face with his hands because he was afraid to be recognised in the restaurant. Our dinner was a very pleasant affair, but the time came when I told him I had to go to work. He reached for his wallet and found he had no money! I paid the check. I never forgot that. Apparently, it was the last money he had for the whole week. Of course, John was polite and said he would pay me the next day.

John found himself without any money when we dined together three times in a row!

Naturally, I wondered why such a man of means never had any cash on him. John explained that his wife, Carol, gave him an allowance of about \$35 a week. He did not want to be bothered with money. I found this hard to believe, but apparently it was true. Never in his life did John know how to balance a checking account, and when he was married to Carol she took care of the finances. That was the way he wanted it.

We did not see each other after for quite some time. He kept in touch and sent me little books and little gifts, mostly books, and each one with a short note tucked inside. He said he wanted me to have the books in case he never saw me again; everything between us, which was not much at this point, had to be kept secret, he said. He sent me such books as the *World Anthology of Poetry*, with *Black Marigolds* dog-eared; all of George Burrows and all of Robert Louis Stevenson. Later, when he thought he was going back to Carol and would

never see me again, he sent me the translation of *Synge Marking Patrearch's Death of Laura*. He continued to live with Carol in Los Gatos, and I kept working in Hollywood, singing at CBS and earning an extra dollar, whenever I could by working as an extra. When I sang I either worked with Freddy Garger or Matt Dennis, two wonderful musicians.

That winter, I got a strep throat but continued to sing, which was a mistake, but a dollar was a dollar, and still is. I kept getting sicker and sicker until finally I was put in hospital in Los Angeles. My doctor Alfred Huenergardt, who was incidentally in Palm Springs where in those days, Hollywood's stars were beginning to discover fun, relaxing and loving weekends. In the early 40s, Charlie Farrell's Racquet Club was the only place for tennis, drinking, lazing and trysts.

When you feel sick or horrible all you want to do is get well, of course, but with my throat it seemed as if I were heading for eternal rest. Doctor Huenergardt came into my room and quietly announced to my mother and stepfather that the infection had reached the lower lobes of my brain. I shall never forget it. "I must be honest", he said in a matter of fact voice "there is very little chance you will live. The infection has entered the mastoid". That was far from encouraging, but at least he was honest. The only thing he could think of was to lance my eardrums and hope that some of the infection would come out.

While everything looked pretty bad for me I remembered something that John had told me the night of our first meeting, something about when he had been doing *Fight for Life*, his story about saving a woman from her puerperal fever caused by filth. He had gone to a Chicago clinic where they had saved women's lives by using sulfa for all strep infections. Somehow I managed to get that out to the doctor.

"Send a wire to Doctor Harry Ben-Aaron and he'll get it to you", I managed to say.

More people than Doctor Harry were involved. Paul de Kruif entered the picture and contact was made with Chicago. But by this time I was getting ready for the beyond. Fortunately, Paul mailed the sulfa yet when it did arrive Doc Huenergardt did not know how much dosage to give me. I was given plenty and it saved my life. For a while I climbed the walls and was seriously ill for several days. Gradually I returned to the land of the living and when I was able to sit up I asked for a mirror. Being a woman, I naturally wanted to have a look at myself, and I wanted to braid my beautiful hair. My request was refused. I couldn't understand why. After all, to a woman a mirror often is as important as a husband. I finally persuaded a nurse to let me have one. When I looked in it there before me was not the fairest maiden in all the land. Instead I saw a woman who was blue, beautifully blue! Even the moons on my fingernails had turned blue. I did not get upset. I was alive. The sulfa had saved my life: I said a prayer of thanks. Better blue than dead.

It was a long time before I fully recovered. John called me a few times and said he would try to see me. About that time he had gone to Chicago to have an operation on his back. It turned out that it was not his back that was the trouble - it was his tonsils! So I had a strep throat and he had his tonsils out.

Now I was out of work and running short of money. Bad news. The club had hired another singer. In those days, clubs did not hold jobs open for long. I turned on the female charm and got my job back with CBS through a dear man, Russell Johnson. I returned to the club and did the little afternoon show from the cocktail lounge. I still felt weak, but I had to work. You still have to pay those hospital bills. I was happy because I was singing again, and I still had a good voice. Then one day I received a letter from my father whom I had never seen during my life except once, when I was fifteen. He had remarried and was living in Tampa, Florida. My mother had written to him and told him I was ill. He replied that he and his faith

were praying for me. He was a Christian Scientist. He sent me \$50 and a ticket to come to Tampa. He said he wanted to get to know me better and I could learn to know him better. Isn't that amazing? After years of emptiness between us he suddenly wanted to know his daughter. Perhaps his conscience had begun to bother him. I don't know. Russell told me CBS had a station in Tampa and, if I wanted, I could work there. I thought about it and decided to go.

I wrote John care of Ed Ricketts at his marine laboratory in Monterey. Ricketts was a brilliant marine zoologist and John's great friend. Ricketts, when I came to know him better, was enamored by sex, which didn't stop him from his work with sea creatures. Anyway, obviously John was still with Carol. I wasn't a pusher, and have never been one of those women who will go nuts, if they don't get something they want badly. By now, I was very much in love with John yet I respect marriage and I respected him. Somebody had to drop out, and I was the logical one. So, I went off to Florida and worked at the Tampa CBS Station for six months.

One day Russell called. The San Francisco State Fair had started and he wanted me to join his staff in the Bay City. I had had enough of Florida. I packed my bags and headed back west. It was 1939, and I was soon caught up in the whirl and excitement of the Exposition. Once again I was doing what I loved, singing, but I worked hard and enjoyed myself.

San Francisco is a beautiful city; it is a great city, crazy but great with plenty to occupy the mind. That year of the Exposition there was plenty to see and do. One night, I received a long distance telephone call. It was the Lab in Monterey. John had heard me singing on the radio "I have to see you," he said.

"Fine, that will be nice", I answered. His call was unexpected, but then John always did the unexpected. As our relationship developed over the months you never knew what John was going to do next. He was an extremely impulsive man, always restless, always searching for something, for life....but was I that life?

In those days John was taking flying lessons, and he flew to San Francisco in a chartered plane. We had a long talk over drinks at the Cliff House. "Things aren't getting any better between Carol and me, and I can't get over you," he said over his Scotch and my Vodka. "I think I am very much in love with you. Will you wait for me?" His words came as a shock. By then, I already loved him, but I did not commit myself. All I remember saying was "I'll try."

He went back to Carol and I went back to my singing. Before the Fair ended he was back in San Francisco to see me again, and this time he asked me to meet him at the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel. As people usually do in clubs, we sat at a low cocktail table. I happen to be short-sighted and had forgotten my glasses. He ordered Stingers. We had not been sitting long when John said "Gwen, everybody is staring at you because you are so attractive." I leaned over and patted his knee and happened to look down. "Oh, you have a new keyring," I said. He looked down to find something other than a keyring. Everyone had not been looking at me.

John had his fly open!

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