

Pears Deluxe

I've been meaning to write to Margaret and explain everything but I guess it will have to wait. I just went to the front desk and asked for a pen, but they waved me away, like I was bothering them. Well I don't bother anyone, I usually mind my own business, and besides, if it were my decision, I wouldn't be here at all. I'm trying to get settled but it's not easy, you know. They said it was too late and I should go back to bed. But I can't sleep, worrying about what it was I did to deserve this. Besides, someone might steal my socks and underwear in the night. They're always disappearing.

The other day I took a walk and got as far as the gas station and was just buying some licorice and a magazine when they came to pick me up and take me back to Raven Arms. They told me I couldn't do that on my own anymore. Later I'll have a look around and see if there is a Woman's Day magazine I can swipe or something at least with sweepstakes forms to fill out—those are my favorite—maybe a Better Homes & Gardens magazine with some pictures to cut out. That is, if I can get a hold of some scissors.

Today we had pork chops and mashed potatoes for lunch. "I'm a *hungry* woman!" I said to the server, just trying to be friendly. But when she brought the dessert, pear compote, I really got upset. It looked so gray and sad; soft fruit floating in sugary syrup. That's when I started missing Margaret, the talks we used to have, and the old laughs about things, the orchard farm, picking pears together. I began to tell Gloria and Jean, who were sitting at my table, about Harvey and Dave's Deluxe Pears but they had never heard of the company. They're both hard of hearing and I had to practically shout, telling them the story.

“Oh, my!” I said. “How I miss those delicious, ripe pears, from North Carolina.” Gloria adjusted her hearing aids but couldn’t get them to stop beeping so she took them out. Jean leaned forward and gave a grunt. While they weren’t looking, I slipped their dessert spoons into my lap. I’m collecting them, just in case. You never know when you might need them. Especially when I move out of here. I’ve got ten spoons now, and three forks, I think, so far, hidden beneath my underwear inside a woolly sock.

I told them about when I was back home, sitting in the sun room in my plaid flannel bathrobe—I remember the icicles, like swords, glinting from the eaves. It was December, after a blizzard, and outside the spruce trees drooped from the snow. The ground was a white blanket, save a scattering of animal tracks. The weather sure has a mind of its own, I was thinking. First that summer heat wave, then torrential rains that flooded the river, muddy roads everywhere. Now this. The mailman wouldn’t possibly make it today. It had been two days before the snow plow came to dig me out and finished clearing the country roads up here in Maine.

I was doing one of my favorite things, leafing through the mail-order catalogues and picked up the one from Harvey and Dave’s. They sell crates of fruit and ship them all across the country. Those pears from last year had been so delicious. The red and yellow ones, especially. At the back of the catalogue, there were several order forms. It occurred to me that it was a perfect time to pre-order gifts for the holiday season. What better thing than a box of deluxe pears? First, I filled out a form for each of my children: Heather, Carla and Dwayne. I wrote in my credit-card number, marked one box for each person, and jotted down each name on a yellow notepad, checking them off when I had finished—mainly to satisfy Heather, who was very meticulous about those kinds of things. Then I got to thinking of Elizabeth, the woman who always invited me for Thanksgiving. She liked pears. And old Mr. Wilson, that man at church,

who had offered to drive me home, after a dizzy spell during the heatwave. A box of pears might just be the thing—especially since the poor man probably missed his wife’s prize-winning fruit pies. Her lemon meringue was out of this world.

Next, I went to look for my address book on my desk, but I couldn’t find it. Heather always put it in the drawer with the stamps. There, I saw another letter from Harvey and Dave’s, thanking me for my business and hoping for complete customer satisfaction. It was a reminder, requesting that I respond promptly if I desired to order the same as the previous year. I read the heading in large red letters that said I would get fifty percent off the second box and save money if I purchased two boxes of pears instead of one. Well, that was a deal I couldn’t pass up.

I thought about some more people I could give pears to. There was my hairdresser, Janie, who came once a week and also gave me a full pedicure. And Alice, poor Alice, so overweight, who cleaned house on Tuesdays and watered the plants—and ate my favorite chocolate on the sly. Heather didn’t believe it but I was positive because it always disappeared on Tuesdays, Alice’s day. Anyway, I would have to be fair.

After I filled out all these forms, I was a little tired, but then I noticed, over by my knitting bag, another shiny new catalogue from Harvey and Dave’s, but with a different picture on the cover, accompanied by a letter, thanking me for my business. The first shipment had been sent off, it said, in time for Christmas, but it was not too late however, to order some more pears, should I need to, or have other gift recipients in mind. Best wishes from Harvey and Dave. Now that got me confused. So, when Heather came over later to help me with the bills, you can’t imagine the hell that broke loose.

I looked sharply at Gloria, rocking back and forth, smacking her lips. She was still poking the pear compote with her fork, wondering where her spoon was. Jean had nodded off, her head on her breast.

“Wake up you two! I’m telling you a story!” I said. I gripped their wrists and shook them.

The servers had cleared all the dishes in the cafeteria and everybody else had gone back to their rooms.

“Do you want to know the real reason I’m here?” I whispered. Gloria’s eyes grew wide, and Jean drooled a bit from the corner of her crooked mouth. She croaked a response.

Now, Heather, she’s the youngest, I explained, after Dwayne and Carla, always the dreamer, the adventurer. She dropped out of college to become an artist, went to Paris, where she lived for years. Unfortunately, she never made much money and asked us for loans, which we were more than happy to provide. Then she met Jacques, who managed to divert those funds into losses at the casino in Monte Carlo and raise their credit card debt sky-high. They lost thousands of dollars in a real-estate scam. At that point, I encouraged Heather to move back home, with a trade-off. She could look after us in our old age—we were comfortably off, but my husband was pretty frail by then—and we would pay their expenses and they could live rent free on the property in the old carriage house.

Anyway, that day, after I finished filling out those orders for Harvey and Dave’s, she came over, bundled up in an old flannel shirt, wearing a wool scarf around her head—no hair at all. She hadn’t been well and had lost weight—she had cancer, you know. *Lung* cancer—and she didn’t even smoke! I asked how she was feeling, she snapped at me. Just terrible, she said.

I remember her standing there, by the sun room window, the icicles dripping, touching the soil of the African violets. She always did that. She complained that I didn’t tend to them

properly; I forgot to water them. I was in my chair, covered with an afghan blanket. I had knit it myself; something I was very proud of, even though, now, with arthritis it's too painful to knit anything anymore. I was quite the expert actually, and helped raise a lot of money selling them at the church guild, although I didn't have much patience as a teacher. My daughters never learned. Heather was now looking through the pile of envelopes and the forms that I had filled out.

She pulled out a flask, which had an electric blue light that flashed, this new-fangled thing, to tell her it was time for her medication. She drank it, making a face of disgust, just as the brown UPS van pulled up the drive and the doorbell rang. He had a shipment from Harvey and Dave's. You're kidding, Heather said, but the UPS man said nope, then grinned and set them down, saying those pears must be mighty good!

Remembering this, I laughed, but Gloria clinked on the water glass with her fork, trying to get the server's attention. I grabbed the fork out of her hand and slipped it under my napkin and she started to say something but I went on, telling my story.

Heather asked me, Mom, have you been ordering pears again? I cackled again, when I told them this part. Yes, as a matter of fact, I have, I said. I thought it would be nice gesture, with Christmas coming and all. Then Heather said she and Carla had received two boxes that morning, and that Dwayne had called to say he received four. Really? I said. I thought that was strange. It couldn't have been me. Although his family could use it, I thought—they don't eat enough fruit anyway. I remembered a visit to their home in Iowa, the whole time eating takeout food and trips to Pizza Hut and the Pancake House. Well if it wasn't you, who was it? she asked. Then she smiled at me in that indulgent way—it was a little irritating actually, how she did that, sometimes. Next, she started sifting through the utility bills, and noticed the pile for Harvey and David's. In total, there were ten or eleven mail orders. She asked me if I had made a photocopy.

“A what?” Gloria asked.

I explained that Heather had bought me a computer, which I had no use for, and a printer, and showed me how to use it. But it made too much noise, and then it jammed, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out how it worked. That was also irritating.

No, I don't need that thing, I told her. I have a list. I showed her the yellow pad, each name with a neat little check mark next to it. She asked me how many boxes, and I said, one each. She said no, I had ordered two. I had duplicated the orders. Then she took out her phone that has a calculator on it and began to tally up the amounts. Let's see. Twelve pears to a box, sixty dollars a box. That's five dollars a pear. But they're *so* delicious, I insisted. That's when she blew up.

“Mom, you've spent over a thousand dollars on pears,” she said. “Plus shipping!”

“That's not possible,” I said. “I did not duplicate anything.”

Well, how was I to explain it then, she asked. I told her to please stop. You'd think I'd robbed a bank. And my own daughter, so stingy, after all help I had given her over the years, supporting her when she lost her job, buying her that expensive camera, not to mention paying for that trip to Florence. But she just got angrier and angrier and said for God's sake I couldn't spend all this money on pears.

I was convinced there was some mistake. Besides, I couldn't understand why Heather was going on and on about this. I never complained when she wanted to buy a new computer and printer, and then upgrade their health insurance, and oh, that other trip to Florida. She had said the computer would help her organize our finances better, and she could pay the bills online. And while she was at it, she and Jacques were coming up to their 25th anniversary, and wouldn't it be nice to rent a cottage on the coast and celebrate at Irvine's Lobster Inn.

“By the way,” I said, to change the subject, “did you know that Alice has been stealing my chocolate again?”

“How do you know that?” Heather asked. I could hear the doubt in her voice.

“Because she works on Tuesdays, and by the end of day, it’s completely gone.” Alice, I knew, had an uncontrollable sweet tooth.

I didn’t have a chance to finish that part of the story about Alice. We were sent back to our rooms to take naps, but I never take naps. I turned on the TV and sat by the window, watching the birds swaying on the birdfeeder. I wished I had Margaret’s phone number. I really have to get a hold of her, tell her that I’m planning on moving out very soon. That I’m coming to Boston soon, for a visit.

Tonight at dinner, the macaroni and cheese wasn’t bad, and I ate a little cucumber salad too. I also got to finish my story.

Alice was in the kitchen, I told Gloria and Jean, rinsing dishes and closing cupboards. She comes out with the vacuum cleaner and Heather says, “Hey Alice, my mother is missing some chocolate in the kitchen. Have you been eating it by chance? Not that it’s any big deal—it’s just that my mother—”

“No ma’am,” she said. “I never touched it.” She’s got long blond hair and she was twisting it around one finger, her eyes lowered, chewing her bottom lip. Couldn’t be more obvious to me. Then Heather said, “I’m sorry Alice, my mother, you know, she’s a little paranoid these days.” *Me*, paranoid! Alice promised that she hadn’t snitched the chocolate and went upstairs to vacuum.

“Really, Heather, must you? You’ve embarrassed her,” I said.

“Well you were the one making such a big deal of it,” she said.

So I changed my tactic. I was tired of her scolding. I had to take charge.

“Look what came in the mail yesterday!” I held up two Waterford crystal ornaments, dangling from red ribbons. Look how they shine in the sun, rainbow colors, like prisms, I said.

“Where did you get those?” Heather asked. I said I didn’t know and she gave me one of those looks.

“They just came.”

“Sure, mom.”

“Really, dear, what’s the matter with you? Aren’t you ever going to feel better?” then I bit my tongue, when I realized what I had just said.

I knew the truth by then. I had overheard Heather and Carla in the kitchen on Thanksgiving, whispering. Radiation and chemo and all, talk about selling the house, paying the medical bills, the insurance that didn’t cover the OxyContin and the Tarceva, that drug that costs seven thousand a month. It makes me tired now, just thinking about this again. Trying to understand. Why her and not me?

Later, my daughter Carla came to take me to lunch. She’s divorced, living down in Farmingdale now with her two sons—both good boys but doing poorly in school, but at least she has a new job at a dental clinic. Carla thanked me for the boxes of pears she had just received, which made me so happy. I beamed. Heather said, oh swell. Then Carla said she had the whole day off and we could pick up some yarn and more chocolate “because *somebody*, you know who” Carla said, raising her eyebrows, “has been absconding with it.” She believed me, at least. And later, when I slid my hands under the chair cushion looking for a pencil I had dropped sure enough, I found several tin foil wrappers for chocolates, balled up and wedged in the crevices. Alice was really getting careless, I thought.

But it turned out that the real reason Carla had come over was so the two of them could have a talk with me about moving out of my home. They started to discuss the pros and cons, Raven Arms, that Heather wasn't well enough, and Carla lived too far away to look after me.

"I'm not leaving this house. I'm going to start working on my memoirs, like you told me," I said.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Heather said. And then she really hurt my feelings. All you do is talk talk talk, she said, about your great volunteer projects, helping the poor and the handicapped; Unicef and the reading program at the public library, not to mention all those trips with Dad, to Hawaii and Cancún, your cruise in Alaska. Why don't you write about it, she said, for posterity you know? If it's so goddamn important to you. A whole lifetime to write your memoirs and what do you do? Sit around, with your mail order catalogues, spending thousands of dollars on pears.

"Heather, what about that trip you were going to take," I said, trying not to take the bait, wondering how she found the strength to berate me about this, "before you got sick. Swimming with dolphins in Florida." There was a bowl of pears on the dining room table. I had to keep trying. I picked out the ripest one.

"Here. They won't keep forever."

Heather took it and examined it, then smelled it. It was red and gold, smooth and unblemished, firm to the touch. A perfectly cultivated deluxe pear, dimpled at the base. She held it up to her mouth, and I thought she was going to take a bite. She touched her lips to it, then hurled it against the wall. It bounced and rolled into a corner and knocked over the kitty bowl.

What had happened to my dear, darling Heather, I thought. So healthy and strong, who at twenty lived in a teepee for a year during a Maine winter, chopped her own wood, changed the

oil in her car, fed slop to the pigs, and preferred to drop out of college, sick of listening to her professors drone on about Western Civilization and Molecular Biology. She had wanted to go to art school and be a painter, she said.

Gloria and Jean shook their heads.

And then not long after, it was my last day at home. I heard Heather and Carla bickering in the kitchen about the house plants and the cat. Heather wanted to burn the stacks of catalogues I had on the back porch. I heard her say, something like, she's the lucky one, isn't she. And then she said something I just can't get out of my head. *Never mind that she sucked me dry.* Sucked her dry? Now what on earth did she mean by that?

Gloria and Jean stared at me, and didn't move a muscle.

I told them how I had showered her with love and attention, always given her plenty of money, a place to stay when her first marriage blew up in her face, a loan when she lost her job. That's when the doorbell rang. It was the movers, and a terrible feeling came over me. They had packed up fifty years of life's memories and mementos, taken the pictures off the wall, cleared out the pantry and the sunroom, boxed up my books and my mother's heirlooms and were about to drop me off with a couple of suitcases at Raven Arms. Carla went to answer the front door.

I leaned in now, to Gloria and Jean, for maximum effect, and to make sure they were paying attention.

But it was *not* the movers. It was the UPS man. He said, Hello, I have a shipment of pears from Harry and David's. Carla's jaw dropped a mile and Heather was seized with a fit, doubled over, retching and coughing. The UPS man set the crate down inside the doorway and held out the delivery slip. He said, Uh, could I get one of you to sign here, please?

“And so you see,” I said, chortling, patting Gloria and Jean’s hands, “I did get the last laugh after all.”

But those two women just looked at me, hard and stony-faced.

“And Heather?” they asked in unison, and I got up and left the table. I just had to write that letter to Margaret.