

1963

Some Little Cakes with the Coffee

Catherine Hubbell

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Hubbell, Catherine. "Some Little Cakes with the Coffee." *New Mexico Quarterly* 33, 2 (1963). <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol33/iss2/2>

Catherine Hubbell

SOME LITTLE CAKES WITH THE COFFEE

Mrs. Chojecki, I am sorry to say, was a woman one avoided. In the city, in the whole world, where no one is conspicuous any more, where every person is a character, when to be noticed is possibly more to be desired than rubies, Olga Chojecki could not be liked. Except, perhaps, as a stranger, on whom it is not necessary to expend oneself.

She would be the woman arguing with the bus driver, insisting she had given him fifty cents when he returned change for a quarter. In harsh, barking words she called on passengers to witness this robbery. Others preparing to enter the bus were sucked in with her sobs. Above the green-black cotton of her dress, stretched across a vast, belligerent bosom, her neck rose in an angry red column.

Or she would be the woman on the Express-Checkout line in the A & P, one banana and a can of Spam caged in her heavy hand, making angry noises because the person ahead of her had eight items in a wire cart (when the store's sign specifically stated six). Loudly Mrs. Chojecki would protest to the universe of A & P, to the sea of weary, just-let-me-get-out-of-here faces, "This is the hurry-up line, yes? So I am a woman in a hurry. Eight things, she has. You are something special?" she addressed the woman, "You are a specialty?"

Of course, no one flickered an eyelash, including the woman with eight items.

Beating herself against this imperturbability, Olga's eyes swam in moisture. Small eyes, they were, but of a delft blueness. I had seen her eyes, smiling and gentle in the broad, shiny, cheek-folded face. They had made me uncomfortable, in the way that one remembers an old, uneradicable error.

Or, again, she would be the woman in the basement of a department store at the stocking counter ("69¢ Irregular—If Regular \$1.25") making the salesgirl bring out box after box, all the same size, but she must see the shades. One pair. She would be flanked by other women who knew just what they wanted—color, length, denier—and who had ten minutes left on their lunch hour. But Olga was saying, "Something darker, please." Bracing her elbows to fend off the throng, she would immerse herself in the purchase. The stocking must be measured. Maybe there was a longer pair.

The salesgirl, varnished with indifference, was excellent. She would survive it, this and many things to come.

Mrs. Chojecki was not even middle-aged, but her weight added years. When she was not frowning, there was a small, white V stamped on her forehead where the frown had been. Her hair, dust-brown and lifeless-looking as a bouillon cube, looked like hair that had never had a chance. She always appeared to be a little warm. Even on a December day, her black and white plaid coat hung open. There was a hint of dampness in the deep cleft above her chin, and sometimes smudges of exasperation glistened under the round blue eyes.

I first knew her because we had rooms in the same building in the East Eighties. Not that that was any reason to know her. In the city, it is no reason at all, because one detaches oneself from anything that is not going to work out, or will be a drain, or a nuisance.

Still, when Olga got into the elevator lift with me, there was no escape. Her breathing, her body were animallike in the small cubicle, and over her face fluttered the shadow of anxious thoughts. She wanted so badly to express them. I defy anyone to ignore an Olga Chojecki in a 2 x 3 elevator lift.

"It is warm," she said agitatedly. "Do you have good air in your room?"

I said, yes, it was quite comfortable, because air in a furnished room is just air. You do not make a problem about it. I had fixed up my room, adding a small, white ice-cream table and chair, two paintings and some amethyst-colored glassware.

I did not care to see Mrs. Chojecki's room or learn how hot it was. But she said, "Heat comes right up."

Since it was August, I would have thought the heat came right down from the roof. She went on, "I feel it in corners, heat like from radiators."

"A water pipe," I suggested, settling the matter.

She shook her head sadly, working her mouth as if to form words. Then she smiled. It was then I noticed her eyes. Blue and child-clear.

I fled into my room. When one can shut a door, everything is all right. I was going to have a brief, odorless supper at the ice-cream table of salad, coffee, french bread and sliced pineapple. I walked around my room, though, feeling the walls. They were quite cool.

A few days after that, when I went downstairs one morning, I heard voices quarreling in the hall. The superintendent was stating flatly,

"Bunk! That's bunk! I haven't got the heat up at all. There's no heat coming up through the floors at all, my dear woman." Through his harshness this sarcasm glimmered like an ice cube in a murky glass. Olga Chojecki's voice whined on.

"You just come and feel. I stand in corners, and heat comes. I feel it on my dress, my ankles. . . ."

We all three looked down at her ankles as if seeking the solution there. They were not very good ankles, poor thing.

Olga came from Middle Europe. I had had a vague belief that parts of Europe were always freezing, a remnant of childhood fantasy about people muffled to the ears in scarves, squatting by great stoves—bundled shapes breaking the ice to let down a fishline. Oh, one knew it was springtime in Paris, and that sun blazed over the white ruins of Roman history, but coldness won out in the imagination. I supposed Mrs. Chojecki was used to the outdoors, to walking across a farm in the early mornings, her breath white on the air. But here she was so warm, so unhappy.

Once we met on the street, and she grasped my arm. Her hand was extraordinarily light, if large. It came down on my forearm, but light in weight, the shape of a hand only. And I thought if she would just quiet down and stop making so much noise and get herself a permanent, she could probably do anything with those hands of hers. That is, I thought this hurriedly and impersonally. Olga had a job which she could hardly bear. She was a wrapper in the toy department on the seventh floor of a big department store. The air conditioning only went to the sixth floor.

"You cook in your room?" she asked conspiratorially, holding my arm.

I wasn't admitting anything. "Oh, no. I have a little coffee in the mornings. They're very strict."

"A little coffee," she repeated, and then she laughed. The delft-blue eyes widened like those of a child entering into escapade. "With little cakes, maybe?"

I saw where all this was heading.

"Sometime I come and bring the cake," she offered.

Even as I sidestepped the matter, murmuring something about overtime at the office, being tired, the plea in her voice was as throbbing as the string of a harp. I even considered moving at once. You get that way.

So it inevitably happened that Olga appeared one night with a bag of cakes. "I had no plate," she said, filling the threshold. We put them on an amethyst glass plate, and I made the coffee. I had two matching cups. I sat on the ice-cream chair and she sat on the daybed which sank into an inverted cone under her weight.

It seemed to take so little to make her happy. The white V on her forehead disappeared. She told me about her one girl friend, a Leni somebody, who was so thin, and she, Olga, was so fat. Leni (she encircled her eyes with two fingers to open them) had great eyes, she was all eyes. "We go to the movies once a week. Not slow, sad, you know. The funny ones when we find them."

I imagined them in the movies, Olga Chojecki free of her exasperations, and Leni, all eyes. The two of them laughing in the dark.

"It is cool here," she sighed happily. "How do you do it?"

I assured her I did nothing, not even keep the door open.

"Ah, rooms, rooms," breathed Olga.

I was not going to complain about rooms at this stage of life.

"My last room, I had to leave," she said. "The heat came up. It was in the corners. I felt the heat on my legs and dress and across my back."

I was weary of this recital. She had probably made the life of every superintendent she had ever known miserable.

In time I met Leni. It was inevitable. Olga Chojecki learned about the quick-boil ceramic pots from Japan, and for her, coffee and cake in her room opened up whole vistas of survival.

I tried not to go to her room. I refused often until at last, cornered, I went. It was not so bad. There were two fat bright red cushions and red tiebacks on stiff short white curtains, and two carvings in wood of a man and a woman that were in themselves perfect.

Leni, when I met her, looked very delicate. She wore a white overblouse. Her eyes were indeed large. I wondered why she did not break in two. A cartoonist would have done the eyes, the white collar, and a

stroke of black, for hair—and there would be Leni. I was glad Olga had her for a friend. In fact, I looked at the two of them and I knew I ought to be glad that they had each other.

We ate the pastry and talked rather haltingly about going to work, and the trips you could take around Manhattan.

"Feel!" Olga exclaimed suddenly, standing up. She went over to a corner of the room. "Come feel."

I rose reluctantly, but I was up, anyway. I could leave that much sooner. There were certainly no wall pipes in evidence. The room was warm. It had become warm with the three of us in it. I could admit that. In the corner where Olga was standing, there was a sort of eddy, a gentle gust of hot air. I was pretty surprised.

"It's something to do with the structure of the building, I suppose," I fretted.

My free hours could not be spent this way. Eating food I did not need, placing my hands on warm walls, trying to bridge the communicative gaps between Olga, Leni and myself.

Leni held out her hand, too, to the area of warm air. Then she let it drop. She seemed patient and resigned, as if this was one of the scenes friendship required her to go through.

There came a night of great commotion out in the hall. It was late. Whatever noises take place beyond doors in rooming houses are unimportant. One pretends not to hear them. They are not going on.

But at last I admitted it was Olga Chojecki, making this racket after midnight, and I peered out. Other persons' doors also were on the crack. Poor Mrs. Chojecki, with store shopping bags hanging from both wrists, a suitcase and pocketbook in one hand and something like a blanket in the other, was leaving.

The superintendent and his wife were both there.

"You are making a disturbance," hissed the wife.

Olga's face was wrinkled with unwept sobs.

"I'm leaving this," she said to me.

Since it was obvious, I only smiled sadly. Words in the face of her mountainous despair as she stood waiting for the door of the lift to open, were useless.

"Coming up, like steam heat," she expostulated. "Heat in summer." As she faced the elevator, so heavily laden, she looked pure comedy. But so alone.

"Crazy," the superintendent announced for the benefit of all doors ajar. "Just crazy."

And that was that—almost all I ever had to do with Mrs. Chojecki. The seasons turned, days folded upon each other in the imperceptible manner of time going on. There were new things to do and want. People rushed out from buildings when work was over into the night. One such dark evening as I neared home Olga appeared, and it seemed only a short while since that scene of ludicrous flight.

"I am near," she beamed, "two blocks only."

But in the city, two blocks is another country.

She was the same, a treble pitch to her voice. Today she wore red wedgies from which her insteps rose in firm mounds.

"Come and see me," she begged.

I felt this need would never come to pass, but her hand was on my arm—that light, winning touch.

"Now. Just a little walk. I have something to give you. And I make the coffee. Yes?"

She lived in the same kind of house as before. Maybe the canopy was not as fresh as the one in front of my place, but the lift could not have been smaller. In her room, the two carved wooden pieces gestured from an old-fashioned mantel.

"You take him," Olga lifted the man.

"Oh, you shouldn't separate them," I demurred. "These are very good, Olga."

But she insisted. "You take him. I keep her," she said grandly, rich in the giving.

Over the coffee, she seemed calmer. She had bought herself a sort of thermos bag, too, and something came out of it go with the coffee. "I hope you like it here."

Her face clouded somewhat, the cleft chin set more squarely. "Yes, but sometimes it's very warm. Even now."

("Oh, not again!" I prayed.)

"Feel," she commanded, touching a wall. The radiators were at the other end of the room.

I was going, anyway, never coming back. Yes, the wall had a warmth to it. As I stood here, something seemed to brush my legs. Something as warm, soft and weightless as a cat's tail waved around my legs.

"Well, anyway, you need the heat now," I stated with the positive cheerfulness of one who was never going to be involved again.

Olga hesitated. She, too, was learning to deny existence to exterior situations. But then she burst out, "Labor Day—a warm day. All

September, before the radiators were on. My dress, my feet. I feel it like hot air."

There was nothing I could say or do. Time, as a tree sheds its old leaves, was shedding its days.

Downstairs I met Leni coming in to see Olga. She looked much better, I thought. A vivid blue scarf covered her head.

"You came to see her!" Leni exclaimed happily.

"We met and she insisted on my having this," I showed her my present. "Yes, and I was hoping she would like her room, be satisfied. But—" (I mimicked a little) "'so warm,' you know."

Leni studied my face. Her expression was a strange combination of scorn and tolerance. I couldn't make it out.

"And she will always be, poor Olga. It follows her, you see. Wherever she goes, warm air breaks out. She lost so many. Her husband, mother, a sister and an uncle."

"All?" I asked. "The war? Separation? She never said anything."

"They just—went. Killed? She never talks about it. Those ovens, you see. And there is no explanation, but the heat follows Olga Chojecki. I have felt it. So have you. It comes where she is."

I walked back two blocks slowly, and went up to my room. It was neat and clean, and looked like me. The amethyst dishes shone in the lamp-light, the paintings smiled down coolly. It was all kept a certain way, but moving around the things I had bought, I shrank from them. They were just things, of course. And a room is just a room. Maybe I should move.