

ELIZABETH RHETT WOODS

Randy

THE SHORT-ORDER COOK started it.

That was back when I was living in Toronto, and working part-time for CBC Radio as a 'gofer' for a current affairs program called *This Country This Morning*. After a late and heavy night I could rise, dress, totter the few yards down the street to the Parkdale Open Kitchen, stuff in enough coffee, scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon to last until the show went off the air, and catch the streetcar, without fully waking up until I walked in the door of the old brick pile on Jarvis Street where the studio was.

Making photocopies, answering the phone, and running errands was not exactly challenging work; but, hey, I was in show biz, wasn't I?—learning on the side how to interview and edit, and earning (relatively) big bucks, for a change. Not to mention the cake under the icing—still having enough time to work on the new novel I had such high hopes for.

One morning I came in too late to snag a booth. I don't like perching on stools, and I was about to leave, when the cook glanced over at me, and indicated an empty place in front of him. His warm brown eyes and broad, gap-toothed smile changed my mind, and I sat down at the counter. He filled my coffee cup as I bent to haul *The Globe & Mail* out of my bag, and I didn't notice him again until he set before me a plate piled high with scrambled eggs and bacon (two extra slices, very crisp, just the way I liked it), and a side dish of butter-dripping toast.

"Thanks, I *am* hungry," I said, and immediately wished I hadn't spoken quite so fervently, as his grin widened. And damn the warm little glow in my chest; I was supposed to be through with all that.

"Da nada," and he moved on up the counter offering refills. He was popular with the customers—city workers wearing yellow and orange safety vests over their blue coveralls, punters deep in the *Daily Racing Form*, a couple of prostitutes going off-duty and a nurse about to go on—dishing out gossip and the scores of last night's hockey games along with platters of eggs and hash browns, the focal point of a loose, disjointed conversation, mostly about sports, sensational crimes, and political scandals. Although he had probably been the cook for as long as I'd been coming here, I hadn't really noticed him before; he'd just been a white-aproned figure in the background, wielding a spatula, and cracking jokes along with the eggs. This morning, my eyes kept sliding off the editorial page to study him. He wasn't handsome, his features were too irregular, the nose too big, the mouth too wide, but definitely attractive with his lively expression and ready smile. Hmmm. Stop that!

We didn't speak again until I went to the cash-register to pay. As he punched in the numbers he asked if I'd enjoyed my meal.

"Very tasty," I said, "and very generous, thank you."

"We like to make our customers happy," he answered, counting the change coin by coin into my hand. The metal discs lay cool and heavy in my palm.

"Well, keep it up," I replied, only recognizing the double entendre minutes later, while reviewing this by-play on the streetcar. I was uneasily amused. What if he thought I'd been flirting? Well, of course, I had been—and he'd been flirting right back. Flirting, nothing more. He looked to be around thirty, fifteen or more years my junior, and he'd probably meant exactly what he'd said, he liked to keep his customers happy. Flirting would work well with all the women who came in. Or maybe he was just keeping up with the times? Newspapers and magazines were full of articles, most of them more approving than not, about the current trend of older women and younger men. Since women on average outlive men by six or seven years, it makes sense for us to look for younger mates, but the gap between that young man's age and mine was over twice as long—thus any relationship would be twice as sensible, right? Right on! I restrained myself from chortling aloud.

The streetcar's interior alternately brightened and darkened as it passed through the bands of shadow cast by the tall office

buildings along the route. Lulled by this strobing effect, I sank into a cozy daydream of the cook and me, tête-à-tête. Only habit got me off at the right stop. Once in the studio, however, the usual controlled frenzy to get the program to air, intact and on time, drove flirtation, and all else, from my mind.

Until next morning when I walked into the Open Kitchen anticipating his warm smile, only to see the owner's wife, who was pressed into service whenever one of the regular staff hadn't shown up, standing at the grill. My spirits slumped in disappointment, or perhaps relief, as I slid into my customary booth, and exchanged good-mornings with Betty, the thin, sandy-haired waitress who, with all the booths and tables to cover, had no time to talk to anyone.

"The usual?" she asked, filling my cup.

"The usual," I confirmed, and unfurled the paper.

Was he sick? Was it his day off? Had some other open kitchen enticed him away? Overnight? Well, he could have given notice weeks ago; how would I know? I jumped as Betty slapped my breakfast in front of me. Only two pieces of bacon, under-cooked. I bent to my meal and the latest news, keeping my attention fixed on wars, famine, and corporate chicanery, although my gaze darted rebelliously to the door every time it opened.

Pretense slipped into reality, however, as I became absorbed in crafting a letter to the editor, pushing my empty plate aside to give myself enough space to scribble my outrage in the notebook I always carry. A flurry of greetings made me look up. Betty, the owner's wife, and the cook were clustered near the sink. He was tying on his apron, apologizing, sincerely but cheerfully to his co-workers, explaining with pride, "You know how Cindy likes to keep things clean, well—," he lowered his voice, and I couldn't catch the rest. All three burst out laughing. Shaking her head, the owner's wife went off to the office at the back, and Betty started making the rounds with the coffee pot. The cook, who had yet to look in my direction, scraped the grill with his spatula, apparently absorbed in his work. I returned to my letter, but all my clever phrases had flown away.

At the cash register, he asked, "Do you always work so hard?"

"Oh, it's not work, just a letter-to-the-editor; they're fun."

"If you say so," grinning in polite disbelief, counting out my change.

I put my wallet away, "Ciao."

"*Ciao, bellissima,*" softly followed me out.

I smiled all the way to work, but I didn't go back to the Open Kitchen for several days, partly because of time off, and the weekend; partly from a rudimentary caution. He was a friendly kind of guy who acted this way with any woman who crossed his path—but I hadn't seen him give anyone else extra bacon. Unfortunately, the risks encouraged by even the mildest fantasy only enhanced its appeal, especially when day-dreaming about him offered such welcome escape from my present narrow life, bounded on one side by a job I wasn't particularly suited for, and on the other by my mother's continuing, miserable existence.

In her ninties, Bea was condemned by the hardy constitution she had always been so proud of to dwindle into death, drained of mind and memory by a series of small strokes. The nursing home she lived in was only a few blocks from the studio, and I used to visit her several days a week at lunch time in order to have something to do, since conversation was by now beyond us. I would offer a bite of stir-fried vegetables on rice, or fish in lemon sauce, or (my favourite) beef pasty covered with a rich dark gravy, but more often than not, she would try to push the spoon away with a little outward rejecting motion of her lips that was about all the communication she had left. I'd put the spoon down and try again a few minutes later, whiling away the interval by picking at the pasty's crust, of which I was very fond. If I didn't watch myself I'd end up eating most of it, offering some to Bea with every other bite. She, more often than not, would continue to stare vacantly at the ceiling, her eyes moving as if she were watching something—hallucinations, perhaps? She no longer seemed to comprehend TV; perhaps she'd found something just as good, or better, to look at. Sometimes, though, our eyes would meet, and someone nearly like her old self would briefly peep out. I figured she didn't mind me stealing her lunch; she'd always liked to see me eat.

One afternoon, walking past the restaurant on my way home from visiting her, I glanced in the window (although the second before I had decided I would not). The cook was alone, sitting at the counter, reading a magazine. On impulse, I went in.

He looked up and grinned. "Long time no see; where've you been?"

"Oh, busy, busy, busy," I babbled, sitting at the counter, bending to stow my purse at my feet, and hide the pleasure his greeting had given me.

"My name is Randy," he said, placing a cup of coffee before me.

"Emma."

We shook hands, a firm strong grip on both sides, held a fraction too long—by him, or by me? I knew I should get out of there, but instead, I ordered a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich and watched him build it. His hands were a pleasure in themselves, long-fingered, rather slender, neat and quick, like the rest of him, which was clad in blue jeans, a blue sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up, and a long white apron. About my height, which is tall for a woman but not for a man. Thick black hair bunched at the back under a white cook's cap. Black eyes, black mustache, a rim of closely-trimmed beard, very white teeth, which he kept flashing in my direction. Gap-toothed. Vague memories of Chaucer stirred.

The sandwich he placed before me was almost too tall to bite into without bits of tomato squirting out, but I compressed it somewhat with the flat of my hand, and managed to get my teeth around a corner of it.

"Very good," wiping my chin with the napkin provided.

"Of course."

I was suddenly reminded of Ali, who had possessed the same serene self-confidence. There being no adequate retort, I asked Randy about the magazine he'd been reading. It was called *This Sailing Life*, he told me, holding it up so I could see the cover—white lettering above a breadth of ocean, a lone white boat in the distance, blue-striped spinnaker billowing; it catered to people who loved to sail, whether on racing yachts, or ice-boats, or little dinghies, just for fun. Sailing, it quickly materialized, was his ruling passion. His hands cut the air as he recounted a race he'd taken part in the previous weekend, describing the boom swinging over as the boat came about, the arc of a spinnaker catching the wind. Next May he was going to Victoria to crew for a boat in the Swiftsure Race, and was angling for a berth on a trans-Pacific race to Maui.

People started trickling in for afternoon coffee break, and Randy was called away to fill orders. Our conversation became sporadic, and soon ceased altogether as every stool and booth was

taken. Time to go. At the till, he said, "I wish I could take you sailing."

Then why don't you? I wanted to ask—but remembering Cindy, held my tongue. She might be a sister or other kin, but his tone of voice had indicated a warmer relationship, one which no doubt took precedence. "One of these days, maybe," feigning indifference. I'd have liked to do something a lot more interesting than go sailing with him, but I didn't want him to know it. "Well, have a good day."

"And you. See you tomorrow."

Was that a statement, a question of fact, or a request? Calm yourself.

"Sure thing," I said, forgetting I was going out of town on an assignment for most of the week. But later, when I remembered it, I decided it was just as well; let him think I was unreliable, and lose interest. And being away for a few days would allow my little crush to cool, add enough distance for some perspective. I'd fallen prey to infatuation as I might to influenza, and a spell of isolation was exactly what I needed, both to recover from this bout, and to gain immunity from further infection. For, really, what did I expect to happen? Even if we made it into bed, what kind of future was there for us? Trend or no trend, hormones or no hormones, it was hard to imagine us settling into domestic bliss together. At his age, Randy was almost certain to want children—or to have some already. I was past having any myself, and was not prepared to become a step-mama; I had other work to do. Nor was a mere sexual romp what I wanted, either. Really, all I wanted was what I had: to play at love, as the knights had played with their (safely married) ladies, nothing more. I was sure he was playing in the same way.

But still. The strength of my response to him both pleased and annoyed me. It pleased me that I could still respond strongly, and annoyed me that he was the cause of it, as if the cook were a carrier—not of TB or some other noxious germ—but of desire, shedding it around him like pollen, cheering every woman he smiled at, or talked to, but always moving on, leaving a cooling heart behind. Something to remember the next time he smiled, or I might find myself standing in line. Oh, no; I'd never stand in line for any reason—not for a celebrity, hit play, movie, art show, or restaurant—and certainly not for any other passing attraction. Although

from Randy's point of view I might already be in line, at the very end? Hah! But if so, as with driving, the end of the line was the safest place to be.

For a while I went in almost every morning for breakfast, lingering on those days when I wasn't working until everyone had left, and Betty was on her break. Mostly, we talked about sailing. Or rather, Randy, who had taken part in long distance races all over the world, told me about them in exquisite detail, apparently remembering every minute of every tack. The few times he flagged, I'd ask a question. I told myself I could tape a piece on sailing for the show, and was searching for an angle, but the real reason was that there was nothing else we could talk about for any length of time. The subjects which interested me—books, politics, economics, the arts—Randy was plainly bored by. He was bright enough, sharper than me in some respects (about geometry, for instance, the angles of wind and sails), but he was not an intellectual, his only reading being sailing magazines. I didn't care. I liked sailing well enough, I liked the idea of it, and I was perfectly happy to keep him company for a bit, keep him talking, my eyes surreptitiously caressing his body, the expressive hands, the lean torso and rounded bum. But I left him there each day without a pang, with a careless wave, and recollected him in tranquility.

Until the day I scurried in, face wet and hair dripping from a sudden shower that had caught me between my door and the Open Kitchen's without umbrella or jacket. It was that dead hour when the place was usually empty, and he handed me a towel, then took it back, and briskly rubbed my head. Suddenly, holding my face between his hands, he kissed me. Lightly. On the lips. And let me go. "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist," he said, confident I couldn't resist him.

How true. I laughed and shrugged, and drank my coffee, while he told me about a boat he was thinking of buying. "Not to race in, just for fun."

Again, I quenched the thought of how much I would enjoy sailing with him, convinced it would never happen, and blew him a kiss on my way out, mocking us both. I wasn't going to take that kiss too seriously, certainly no more seriously than had been intended. A 'lite' kiss from a 'lite'-hearted man. Perfect for a summer afternoon, and lasting about as long. No expectations, I reminded myself—but we were no longer as easy together as we had been.

Not long after this, a young woman with slick blond hair and short, slick skirts started coming in. She liked to sit on the stool closest to the cash register, and as soon as she entered, Randy would break off whatever he was doing to take her a cup of coffee, and fix the dry toast which was all she ever ate. Between orders, he talked to her (and not to me), amusing her greatly, judging by her yelps of laughter, and the way she pawed his arm. I sat at the far end of the counter, eyes fixed on my paper, shamelessly eavesdropping, and learning far too much about their fondness for each other.

As soon as I realized she would be there every morning, I went elsewhere for breakfast, except on my days off when I could go in late, after she had left for her job at Sam the Record Man's.

My coming in less often restored some uncertainty, even carelessness, to our relations, and a sense of intimacy bloomed softly in the warm, close air, with its tasty accents of coffee and fried food. He never asked why I came in less often, and except for the one kiss, we never touched, which only heightened the lively tension between us. I would totter the few yards home exalted with pent-up hormones, and write poems about us sailing away together, destination unknown. From the same excess of feeling, I rashly gave Randy copies of them.

It was a big mistake. The poems were far too explicit, too passionate, and revealing, changing the balance between us. Before, Randy had taken the lead in our little nonsense; now, suddenly I was wooing him, reaching out, as he, in perfect synchronicity, drew back. But never, though they hung between us like a sword, did either of us ever mention the poems.

I knew I should quit going in, but I still had brunch there once or twice a week, unwilling to give him up quite yet. He was such a pleasure to look at with his bright black eyes, and tight black curls, his lithe body and quick, tanned hands, his smile like slow syrup, his teeth, ice cream, his lips—not cherry, paler—metaphor failed me, looking at his mouth. I clung to our crumbling patch of shared ground in the faint hope something might happen, that we might suddenly find something other than sailing to talk about; in reality, waiting for some external force to pry me loose.

Cindy obliged. One day, I walked in to find her there before me. I always checked before entering, and she hadn't been in sight, but as I closed the door she emerged from the washroom. It was too late to turn back. We sidled past each other on route to our

respective seats, I at the far end of the counter, she by the cash register, and as we passed, she fluffed her hair with her left hand. Light flashed from the diamond ring on her finger, heliographing a message that burned straight into my heart.

I don't know why it hit me so hard, I wasn't in the least surprised, but as soon as I saw that blue-white spark, I was desperate to leave, yet damned if I'd skulk out under her triumphant gaze. I hunched over the paper, forcing my eyes along the lines of print, doggedly ignoring the way she continually moved her left hand to set the diamond glittering. I was sure Randy had shown her the poems, and inwardly squirmed at the thought of Cindy, and perhaps their friends, sniggering over my elaborate, ardent phrases. Because of them, Cindy was here this morning, asserting her property rights.

The property in question was his usual smiling self as he served my breakfast, the now customary extra rashers of bacon draped over the eggs. I was equally cool, smiling back, thanking him, and starting to eat, very slowly. Lingering, without really thinking about it, I read every page of the paper, including all the ads, and then the personals, and sipped sparingly at my coffee, while, whenever he wasn't filling an order, they chattered and teased, heads close together, warm laughter rippling. I knew it was masochistic, if not plain crazy, to go on sitting there, but I was too far gone in rage and chagrin to move; my will had shrunk to a single goal: to out-wait her.

I didn't know then, and I don't know now, what I thought I might accomplish by this tactic. If Randy had turned his back on Cindy, walked over and announced he'd changed his mind, I was the one he wanted to marry, I would have been equally paralyzed, and even more dismayed.

Yet knowing this, I still couldn't make myself get up and walk out, walk past her. Impaled by that splinter of light from her finger, too numb to think, too stupid to move, too angry (at everyone, but especially myself) to give in, at a loss, I sat there grieving over my coffee cup (topped up when Randy made his usual rounds with the pot) until finally she looked at her watch, laughed, and said she'd better hurry or she'd be late for work. They nuzzled briefly in the doorway, and when I inadvertently glanced their way, she winked at me over his shoulder.

That was the last time I went in. A few weeks later, Bea died, and my life changed completely.