

PROLOGUE: THE WOMAN WITH THE CHICKEN

“You teach best what you most need to learn.”

—Richard Bach, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*

Normally, I do not stalk people in grocery stores.

I confess to the occasional practice of supermarket voyeurism. But who doesn't sometimes notice the curious collections of fellow shoppers, then contemplate what they may reveal about them?

What goes on in the home of a hunched, graying woman with nineteen cans of cat food, iceberg lettuce, a family pack of steaks, and a copy of *In Style* magazine? Or a young woman in full stage makeup ambivalent to the world outside her headphones, a pack of tofu hot dogs and Christmas lights among the contents of a hand basket nestled in the crook of her tattoo-littered arm? Or an elegant man with a perfect manicure who lingers over the imported cheese counter, his cart filled with organic greens, expensive olives, and four bottles of champagne. Every grocery cart tells a story.

Late on an otherwise average Tuesday afternoon, a sight near the canned tuna stopped me dead in my tracks. The cart sat as if abandoned in the middle of the aisle. It contained two dozen haphazardly piled boxes of dehydrated mixes for pasta, casseroles, rice and stuffing, plus those dubious jars of gravy. Despite being half full, the cart contained no *real* food. As I stood contemplating its contents, a heavysset woman in her late thirties, casually attired in an eggplant-colored fleece, claimed the cart. Her preteen daughter twirled impatiently around her, quietly singing a Lady Gaga song under her breath.

Would it be wrong if I followed her to find out what else she might buy?

Small basket in hand, I trailed behind her to stealthily observe. I feigned interest in various items along the aisles as she stocked up on packaged waffles and pizza pretzel bites, a collection of frozen dinners, chicken potpies, and a family-style package of pot roast with mashed potatoes and gravy.

By the time we hit the meat department, I suspected she was onto me. Hugging my shoulders against the damp chill and trying to avoid inhaling the vague harsh smell of chlorine, I clumsily relied upon my peripheral vision to spy her selecting a heavy family-sized pack of ground hamburger at the other end of the case. She pushed her cart in my direction. I pretended to peruse the plastic-wrapped turkey options. “Can you believe how expensive chicken breasts are these days? Crazy,” she said out loud, to no one in particular. She reluctantly tossed a package into her cart.

I seized the opportunity to say something. “Whole chickens are on sale,” I said. “Ninety-nine cents a pound, I think.”

She chuckled. “Thanks, but I would have *no* idea what to do with a whole chicken.”

It hit me. After a year deboning chickens and stuffing meat with other meats at a famous Paris cooking school, I had information this woman needed. For some reason, at that moment, I felt compelled to give it to her. “Come with me. I'll get someone to show you how to cut up a chicken.”

“Ah, no, thanks,” she said. A reasonable response given that I was a complete stranger who had followed her for twenty minutes through the maze of grocery store aisles.

Somehow I assured her that I was not trying to sell a time-share in front of the turkey kielbasa. She shrugged and said, “Okay, why not?” We headed over to the butcher.

“Sure, I’m happy to show you how to cut it up, no problem,” the butcher said as I handed him the chicken. The woman peered over the glass case to his thick white cutting board as he sectioned the bird deliberately. He stopped to show her how each cut was done. As he finished, he crackled fresh butcher paper around the pieces.

“So just how much is that whole chicken?” she asked.

He looked at the tag. “Let’s see, it’s on sale, so \$5.20.”

“How much would that go for if you sold me the pieces all cut up and packaged, like those breasts over there?” She waved toward the meat case.

He looked up, mumbled abstractly under his breath, counting on his fingers. “Well, breasts are out at \$5.99 a pound, the thighs at \$2.29, so I’d say about \$10 or so.”

“Get out!” she exclaimed. “So I pay twice the price to buy it as separate pieces? Well, who knew that!” She smiled broadly.

He winked and passed her the freshly wrapped chicken. It landed heavy in her hand. She looked thoughtful. “What is it?” I asked.

She looked around, leaned forward, and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “I don’t know what to do with the other parts of the chicken. I only know how to cook the breasts.” She shrugged, embarrassed. “But thanks for your help.”

As she pushed her cart away, her daughter in tow, I stopped her. I could not let this woman go without knowing what to do with the rest of her chicken. By chance, this supermarket happened to be carrying the paperback of my first book. I fetched a copy. I flipped to a recipe for braised chicken thighs with mustard and then to one for stock.

At first, she didn’t believe it was my book. I showed her my driver’s license. “I’m not trying to sell you a book,” I assured her. “I’m happy to buy it for you. I can’t explain it, but I just really want to help you.”

For the next hour, I led her around the store, making notes in the margins and writing new recipes in the notepad that I always carry in my purse. We discussed why she bought so many boxes and cans, and as we did, I slowly convinced her to clear out most of them from her cart and replace them with real food that the boxed versions attempted to replicate. A three-pound beef roast replaced four shelf-stable individual pot roast dinners. When rounded out with inexpensive vegetables, the roast would yield a dozen servings for the same price.

“You know, I can’t thank you enough for all this,” she said earnestly as we made our way to the checkout, where, as promised, I bought her the book. “At first, I thought you were some crazy person. But this feels like Wonder Woman stopping to help fix a flat tire.” She and her daughter waved an enthusiastic good-bye. I didn’t even get her name.

That afternoon stayed with me. It awakened a curiosity that I didn’t realize I had. Somehow, I knew this chance encounter was going to change my life.