



## THE PRICE OF CHERRIES

by Kathryn Hughes

**T**here is little to eat in the house. Wilted lettuce, half a dozen unfresh eggs. A couple of cans of tomato soup in the dusty pantry. What a ridiculous way to live.

It is a Saturday morning in mid-June, and my older daughter, Annie, has telephoned to say she is bringing her sister, Chase, for an overnight visit: a slumber party, rent-a-movie night. I don't see my girls often enough and I am happy, looking forward. Single and unattached I live, for the most part, alone. The girls are my only children, ages seventeen and twenty, who are usually away at boarding school and college when not visiting me or their father. I need to make a grocery list.

I don't typically keep fruit—fresh or otherwise—in the house except for an occasional banana to top my Grape-Nuts. I prefer the savory to the sweet, and would take a good hunk of cheese over a bushel of clementines any day. But my girls love it. When they still lived at home, I served up daily platters of glistening fruit and crisp vegetables. My children were nothing if not well nourished. Meanwhile, I indulged my own culinary interests, experimenting with butter-laden and wine-enhanced recipes, hosting elaborate cocktail and dinner parties. Healthy was for children; excess for grown-ups.

If now my cupboards are bare and the refrigerator lone-

some, it's because there's no one to cook for. My meals were a gift-giving, a bringing of pleasure and sustenance by way of the palate. So now, unless I'm expecting a guest or hosting an infrequent party, I stay away from the cookbook aisle at Barnes & Noble, from Williams-Sonoma catalogs, and the counters of Whole Foods. I eat; I just don't eat with the old gusto. Maybe someday my life will widen, and *Joy of Cooking* will reclaim its place on my kitchen counter, next to the idle Cuisinart and a new colander. (I *do* love an arugula salad with cherry tomatoes and mustard vinaigrette; and by way of Crate & Barrel recently invested in an expensive, sturdy colander coated in cobalt blue enamel. Sometimes, when the big things prove mean and insoluble, the smaller stuff can bring a little delight.) So, yes! *My girls are coming*, and food and beverage required. I grab my keys and wallet, and head to the store for their favorites, including real popcorn for movie time. We're thinking *The Girl in the Café* balanced by *Ed Wood*; then *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* for two a.m. hysterics.

On my way to the store, I listen to *The Diane Rehm Show* on NPR. She's interviewing Jon Meacham about his new book, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. The conversation holds my attention, particularly because so much has been said lately about President Bush's claims to talk to God. I deplore Bush's arrogance, but I'm afraid that a liberal backlash would try to cut God's name out of our national rhetoric entirely. I'm not religious, but the nostalgic in me would miss "In God We Trust" on our currency, "one nation, under God" at the start of each school day. Oath-taking without "so help me God" would lose its gravity, and Kate Smith belting out "God Bless America" would ring quaint rather than soul-stirring.

It's a hot day in Raleigh, and I try not to think about environmental energy concerns as a blast of frigid air cools me when I walk in the grocery store. Wheeling a shopping cart, I maneuver along the aisles, heading first for the produce section overflowing with freshness and color. I bag and twist-tie plums, peaches, and tart green grapes, along with a mound of my girls' favorite fruit: bing cherries in their entire, tough-skinned, black-red luster.

After years of my former husband overseeing the finances, I am fiscally irresponsible and rarely pay attention to savings. But today the clerk catches my attention when she states that, as a Very Important Customer, I've saved more than eleven dollars on a thirty-two-dollar bill. And for whatever reason—perhaps the "Have A Blessed Day" button on her red apron has resonated with my concern about the whittling away of God—I actually hear what she says.

"What? *Really?* How?"

"Yes ma'am," she confirms in a drawl. "Y'all saved on cherries. The Co'cola, too, but mostly the cherries."

I had thrust a few fistfuls of cherries into a plastic bag not mindful of the price sign. Apparently, these cherries normally sold for seven dollars a pound. *A pound. In season.*

"It's *fruit*, for God's sake, not tenderloin!" I say, instantly regretting cursing in front of an apparently devout young

person. I wasn't complaining at *her*; I only meant that cherries are simply fruit, requiring mere sun and water and soil to grow. Leaving the store a minute later, I mumble to myself, "I'll grow my *own* damn cherries, build *myself* an orchard." Of course, the idea is absurd. First, I don't have the land; second, although I used to maintain a lush herb garden, I don't remember the last time I planted even a batch of basil.

Heading home I take notice of a large swath of ground that had once been an apple orchard but is now bulldozed, exposing like a wound the rich, red clay that is the soil of North Carolina. A sign is posted with a computer-generated rendition of the subdivision to be built here. "Elegant townhomes starting in the 800's." Across the street stand a couple of acres of one-story, brick, 1950s duplexes, renting for about \$750 a month, the tenants of which will likely find themselves homeless as their own modest housing is eventually and inevitably bulldozed.

**M**y mother was an alcoholic of the first rank. She died of cirrhosis at age fifty, following my father to his own early grave, killed at forty-three by cardiac arrest. My mother lived out the last few years of her life bedridden, drinking bourbon straight from the bottle. And, as often happens, I inherited not only her blonde hair, blue eyes, and Scandinavian curves, but her nasty habit.

Most of my mother's nine siblings died of alcohol-related diseases. Northern Europeans, like the Irish, tend to indulge in too much of "the drink." For the last several years of his life, my father, of German descent, was in and out of AA. Three of my five siblings are in recovery (the other two have been spared). When I was a child, I saw my older brothers staggering down the hallway, tripping up the stairs, passed out on the landing. I rode white-knuckled with them as they drove swerving automobiles down winding roads. I crouched in the corner of the stairwell, covering my ears against their violent, drunken arguments. And as my mother died her drawn-out, cirrhotic death, I emptied her bedpans and threw away her empty bottles. As an adolescent, I feared—loathed—alcohol and swore to never go near it.

But by the time I was twenty, I had married a boy who loved his Budweiser. That was also when I began to take an interest in cooking, using wine as an ingredient in recipes, and then as an accompaniment to them. I began to enjoy a glass now and then, one bottle lasting for days. A couple of years later, I started college, and when I wanted to talk about the art and history and literature and music I was studying, I would gather with friends and professors after class in the local wine bar. With each sip of Cabernet, I felt more connected, bohemian. Worldly.

By the time I got divorced eight years later (no children, no real property, no leftover love or money to squawk about), I'd worked my way up to a couple of glasses every night after work. I married my second husband a few years later, and we drank a bottle every evening. It all seemed harmless, and even sophisticated.

*End of excerpt*