

The Upper End of In Between

Este Dia

Susannah Emory sat in her breakfast nook, finishing her morning cup of green tea and appreciating her kitchen. Though the decor was a little dated, it was uncluttered, homey, the epitome of cooking functionality. No one was leaving hand towels and dirty knives on the countertop or littering the island with three-day-old junk mail. Did that compensate for eating alone most of the time and sleeping alone all the time?

She gathered up her keys, grocery list, and cloth bags and locked the door behind her, pausing to see if the stairs were frosty, and to soak up the special quality of Seattle's autumn sunlight that always made her euphoric. Something about the way the sunlight slanted in at this time of year made everything brilliant, turning her favorite maples a glowing pinky-orange and reviving the excitement of going back to school each fall—new things to learn, new experiences and challenges, new people, all of life ahead. As she drove to the grocery store, she thought about her rapid swing from glum to euphoric, an instance of what she called Seattle bipolar syndrome. It was gray so much of the time that when the sun came out people acted differently—they wore shorts in December and talked about the weather to total strangers in the grocery line or at the bus stop.

At Central Co-Op, she parked her Prius among three others, confirming her opinion that Seattle was the Prius capital of the world. Inside the trendy grocery store, she worked her way through the supplements and the organic, mostly local produce, pausing before a twenty-foot-by-seven-foot display of chips. "Only in America. This is ridiculous!" she said under her breath,

and, grinning to herself, she selected her favorite—non-GMO organic multigrain high-fiber baked chips with olives, on sale today.

Just ahead a tall, lean man with Teva sandals and socks, jeans, a faded blue chamois shirt, and a bad case of helmet hair was gazing at a bewildering array of chocolate bars.

Mr. Teva's cart was blocking the aisle. "Excuse me," she said.

"Oh, sorry." He moved his cart out of the way. She wheeled past and parked her cart next to his. "Do you think the world needs this many kinds of chocolate bars?" he mused.

She scanned the shelves for her favorite. "Probably no more than it needs forty-seven kinds of chips."

"There's a bar for every kind of animal—look," he said, pointing. "Turtles, cheetahs, leopards, pandas, rhinos, bears, frogs, bats—on and on."

"No baboons," she noted. "What kind of a chocolate bar would have a baboon on the wrapper?"

"Seventy-two percent cacao, with leaves and sun-dried grubs."

They both laughed.

"I think I'll stick with my cranberry-and-almond wolf," she said, putting a chocolate bar in her cart and heading around the corner and down the next aisle.

Fifteen minutes later she was unloading her full cart onto the checkout counter when Mr. Teva stopped his cart behind her. Besides his bike helmet, he had three items in it: a dark-chocolate-and-hazelnut rhino, a bottle of pinot gris, and a salmon fillet.

"Well, I see you've hit three of the major food groups," she said. "Protein, wine, and chocolate."

“Yes,” he laughed, “I pay rigorous attention to my health. Look—more chocolate bars.”

He pointed to a nearby display.

“Have you ever been on the tour at the Theo chocolate factory? It’s really interesting—and they give you samples.”

“Well, I’ll add that to my list of things to do. I haven’t lived here very long.”

She gave the cashier her co-op number. The pleasant tattooed-and-pierced young woman asked if she was Susannah, then started ringing things up.

“Got any other suggestions for things to do in Seattle?” Mr. Teva asked as he watched her finish bagging her groceries.

“If you like wine, the little neighborhood wine store a few blocks north of here has tastings every Sunday afternoon,” she said. “Not to mention the usuals—Pike Place Market, the sculpture park, et cetera.”

“Thanks for the ideas.”

“You’re welcome—have fun.”

She thought about him as she loaded her groceries into the car. He was good-looking, and she liked his sense of humor.

On Sunday morning Susannah spent an hour filling the garden cart with weeds. She deadheaded the roses and dahlias, and made fresh bouquets for the living room and kitchen. Then she ate some lunch and spent a couple of hours on the sofa with the latest novel for her book club. She decided to get out and enjoy the last of the sunshine by walking up to the wine store for the tasting.

She put on her fleece and wound a scarf around her neck, then strolled past the big old houses and trees of the now-upscale neighborhood where she'd lived for more than two decades. *The neighborhood is like my house, she thought. It's beautiful, full of good memories, and yet so familiar—so boringly familiar. At least we paid off the mortgage, and my pension allows some travel now and then.*

The unassuming little wine store was definitely not upscale. It had a bland paint job and fluorescent lights, but the owners were friendly and knowledgeable and they had an excellent selection. She took a sample from the first bottle and joined a dozen or so people wandering around and looking at the little notes on the wine: “The best chardonnay you’ll find for this price. Not too oaky.” “This zin has lots of cherry overtones.” “An astringent, minerally white for your raw oysters.” How did they come up with these blurbs?

Discreetly disposing of the bland first sample, which she could only describe as “wimpy,” she went on to a more agreeable wine that was 80 percent something and 20 percent something else, while listening to a young man talk about a wine region in Spain. Then she took a taste from a third bottle and meandered past the sparkling wines into the German whites.

“It’s Susannah, isn’t it?” someone said. “Are you stocking up on one of the food groups?”

She turned around to see Mr. Teva with a little paper cup of wine in his hand.

“Oh—hi! How did you know my name?”

“The cashier at the co-op mentioned it when you were checking out. I’m Peter.” He stuck out his hand, she shook it, and they were formally introduced.

“So how do you like the wine?” he asked.

“I’ve had three of the five they’re featuring. The first was rather insipid—or maybe it would be nicer to say ‘subtle.’ But I like the second and third. What do you think?”

“I’m only on insipid, but I’m ready to move on.” She waited while he went back to the counter for a sample of the next variety. “Mmm, yes, this is better.” He nodded his approval. “Wine is nice. I like it, but I *really* like beer.”

“Well, here’re some other items for your list of things to do in Seattle—the Belgian pub in the Fremont neighborhood, or the German pub just south of here, on Twelfth. They both have a huge selection, and the Belgian pub’s right across the street from the chocolate factory.”

He laughed. “Sounds irresistible—beer and chocolate!”

She bought a bottle of number two, and they went out into the late afternoon sun. “Can I buy you a beer?” he asked. “Or have you had too much wine?”

Susannah was rather startled at this offer. “Uh, well, maybe . . . If you throw in a slice of pizza or some nachos or something, I could drink a beer without keeling over.”

“It’s a deal. Where shall we go?”

“The tav across the street is my favorite. They have good food and a good selection of beer.”

“OK, across the street it is.”

They settled into a booth with two beers and a plate of fried calamari between them. She learned that he had worked as an electrician, a financial analyst and a charter boat captain, among other things, and lived on a sailboat. She was a retired civil servant and had worked for several elected officials. While the ritual get-acquainted conversation progressed, an additional, inner conversation was occurring. She was asking herself how she came to be sitting in a tavern with a man she knew nothing about, except his name and that he liked beer. He could be an ax

murderer! On the other hand, all she'd done was gather up enough courage to accept a guy's invitation for a beer—it's not like she was jumping in a car with him.

As they talked, he was fiddling with his coaster. She liked his hands, big and calloused, hands that made things and hauled sails around. He mentioned meditation as something on his bucket list. "What interests you about meditation?" she asked.

He pointed at her almost empty beer glass, and she shook her head. "Well, for one thing," he said, "I notice a lot of interest in spiritual things these days. It seems to have evolved a bit from the New Age stuff. Barnes and Noble is full of Thich Nhat Hanh and Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle, et cetera. And you read about meditation being used in therapy and prisons, even training soldiers. Seems to be quite the thing. And of course it's been around for eons, so there must be something to it."

"It's interesting to see it as a cultural phenomenon," she said, "but I think most people won't really try it, or will give it up pretty quickly if they do."

"Why is that?" he asked, leaning back in the corner of the booth.

"Because of the misconceptions about what it is. That's my opinion, anyway. People think they're going to sit in lotus position and their thoughts will go away and they'll achieve bliss. It's not what happens during meditation that matters—it's how it changes your daily life."

"Has your life been changed by meditation?"

She nodded. "Mm-hmm. For example, I don't get angry as easily as I used to. I worry less. I'm less reactive. I can observe my emotions, rather than just getting caught up in them—sometimes." She laughed. "I've still got plenty of hang-ups to work on!"

"Yes, don't we all." He looked thoughtful.

“Hey, I’ve got to get going,” she said, gathering up her purse and bottle of wine. She was amazed to find herself scribbling her phone number on a napkin and sliding it across the table. “Call me if you want some company while you’re doing Seattle things. Thanks for the beer and the conversation.”

He stood as she slipped out of the booth. “I’ve enjoyed it too.” He waved his napkin. “Thanks!”

As she walked home, she wondered what she was doing giving a man in a tavern her phone number—at her age. But they had talked quite a while and he didn’t say anything that set off alarms; he seemed normal. In fact, he was attractive, witty, and interesting—so why not give him her number? And if he didn’t call, she’d had a nice afternoon—the most stimulating afternoon in a long time. She’d thought about the possibility of a relationship, but she didn’t think the odds were very good. She wasn’t unattractive, but she didn’t think she could compete with the twenty-five- to forty-year-olds.

Back home again, Susannah checked her e-mail, finished writing up the minutes for her volunteer committees, and did some more weeding—a never-ending task. She wondered how long she could keep up with all the landscaping. She loved looking at it, but not so much taking care of it. It had been mostly Dave’s thing.

She scrubbed the dirt from her nails, changed her clothes, and drove off for dinner at her friend Cathy’s house—down from the top of Capitol Hill into Madison Valley, then up again to the Madrona ridge, where she enjoyed the view of the Cascade mountains and Lake Washington glittering to the east. Susannah and Cathy had met in their first class on their first day of college

and had been friends ever since—through countless camping trips and holiday dinners, babies, teenagers, graduations, retirements, strokes, and cancer.

At dinner Susannah was telling Cathy and her husband, Max, about a book she was reading. “The author talks a lot about a ‘second adulthood,’ after you’ve had your career and raised your kids but you still have a couple of decades, if you’re lucky, to do something meaningful. More and more of us are in that position, so what are we going to do with that time? You can only fix up your house and travel so much.”

“You don’t consider this an issue for yourself, do you?” Max said, his bald head shining in the light from the chandelier. “You certainly have meaningful things on your plate. Besides the grandkids and your meditation group, you’ve always got something going—lobbying for tax reform, or writing letters to the editor, or organizing seminars on the spiritual aspects of money, or whatever.”

“I try to do my bit—some things I think are worthwhile. Maybe they help make the world a little better,” Susannah said. “And I know how fortunate I am. I used to be so busy that I just did stuff but didn’t necessarily enjoy it. It was just do this and on to the next thing. Now I’m not so busy, and I try really hard to appreciate all the things I’m doing—rowing, dance classes, arts events, book club, and so on.” She drew on the tablecloth with the end of her spoon. “I try to be more in the moment, notice more about what’s happening, and not think so much about what comes next. But you know, a lifetime habit of living in the fast lane doesn’t just go away. You really have to work at it, especially when everyone around you is going at warp speed.”

They sat in the dining room, looking out at the garden bordered with clumps of yellow mums alternating with bronze, and the lace-leaf maple glowing scarlet in the last of the evening light. Empty plates and serving dishes cluttered the table. She covered her wineglass with her

hand as Max moved to refill it. “No, thanks, Max. I’m trying to stay conscious about my eating and drinking. Last week at a dinner party, I overindulged and regretted it—awake at three a.m. feeling woozy, two extra pounds on the scale in the morning, wondering why I keep doing this. I’ve done it so many times, and I always chastise myself and ask why I eat too much and drink too much. But I never come up with an answer.” She got up and began stacking dishes, her lips pursed.

“In all the years I’ve known you,” Cathy said as they loaded the dishwasher, “you’ve been worrying about being overweight, and I’ve always thought you looked great. You still wear a size ten—isn’t it time for you to just stop being neurotic about this?” She put on an expression of mock disapproval, swishing her fading-auburn ponytail from side to side. “I’m your oldest friend—I’m allowed to say stuff like this.”

Susannah laughed. “Yes, you’re allowed,” she said. “And I’ve got the rest of my life to work on not being neurotic—isn’t that what life’s all about?”

When they’d finished up the dishes, Max put his arm around Susannah’s shoulders. “You know, you sound a little lonely,” he said. “You’re busy and doing good things and all, but I think you need a man in your life. I hope I’m not overstepping the bounds of friendship . . .” He trailed off uncertainly.

“No, you’re not,” she said, sighing. “Having a man around would be nice, but I don’t think it’s likely I’ll find the love of my life at my age.”

“If anybody could, you could,” Max replied. “You’re a good-looking woman, fun, intelligent, and you’re not *that* old. If I didn’t have Cathy,” he said, giving his wife a squeeze, “I’d be interested.”

“You’re such a sweetheart, Max. Thanks for the moral support.” Susannah kissed them both as she left.

That night as she went through her bedtime routine—wash, brush, floss, cream—she inspected herself in the mirror. Blue-gray eyes, slightly wavy hair cut in an easy-care bob. She was glad it was a nice gray—she couldn’t be bothered with coloring it, as so many women her age did. No doubt about it, more lines and age spots than a couple of years ago. Why would an attractive man like Peter want to spend time with a woman whose skin looked like hers when he could very easily be with a woman twenty years younger? He probably wouldn’t. *Am I old now?* she wondered. *Not young anymore, certainly, but no, not old either. There’s young and old and in between, but where are the borders?* She placed herself at the upper end of in between and turned out the light.
