

National Muffin Day

By Kathy Witkowsky

Georgia stood in the parking lot of the Johnson Street shelter, her black beret snugged down over her ears, her gloved hands holding a basket of homemade muffins nestled in a gingham napkin, and looked around at the two dozen or so homeless people on the sidewalk. Temporarily displaced from the shelter while lunch was being prepared, they huddled in tattered blankets and smudged down jackets, their worldly possessions in tote bags and duffels by their sides. Some sipped from thermoses, trying to inure themselves against the bitter February chill of the Northern Rockies, as they chatted with each other, or, in the case of one agitated man in a stocking cap, who carried a boombox blaring hip-hop music, to himself. Georgia couldn't hear him well enough to make out what he was saying, but he was non-stop, like a machine gun, or a rapper. She and her daughter Suzette used to laugh about the wannabe gangstas here in the whitebread university town of Missoula, as if their ridiculous baggy pants and slouched posture would buy them cred in any self-respecting real inner city. After she graduated and moved to LA, Suzette had performed a stand-up bit about it at an open mic, imagining a couple of born and bred Montana boys trying to navigate Compton. It earned some big laughs, and she had planned to include it in a YouTube special she wanted to record and post this year.

Now what? Georgia wondered.

Suzette wouldn't have thought twice before venturing into the crowd to offer up the treats. No doubt she would have composed a goofy ditty about National Muffin Day she'd have sung. How would that have gone?

Hey, hey hey

It's National Muffin Day,

So I'm here to say

Don't delay

Take your treat today

Cause tomorrow

You'll feel sorrow

When you find out

It's National Day of....

...Sauerkraut.

Except Suzette's song would have been a hundred times more clever.

And in any case, there was no way Georgia was going to sing for these people. Not just these people; she wouldn't sing in public at all.

In fact, she couldn't imagine singing at all anymore. Ever.

You're only human, the word "only" in verbal italics.

That's what Teresa, her therapist, kept saying, in response to Georgia's emotional paralysis--which Georgia described as feeling like someone had filled her limbs with lead, smeared Vaseline on her corneas.

Although the first time she'd said it, Georgia had misheard, thought Teresa had sized her up and said, "Lonely human," to which Georgia had responded, with an exaggerated eye roll: "Well, duh." Because, she went on, unable to stop herself, like a dislodged boulder tumbling off a cliff, of course she was lonely, that was the whole reason she had sought out therapy to begin with. She had spent the last 25 years of her life raising her daughter—not just her daughter, but her best (the hard truth was, perhaps her only) friend, her favorite companion and confidante, and now she had been abandoned. And not simply in a theoretical way—Georgia always knew the ironic gauge of her success would be if Suzette made a life without her—but in the most literal of ways. Suzette was dead. And, Georgia said to Teresa, there's not a fucking thing you or I can do about that.

Admittedly, this wasn't a terribly mature or measured response, not what you'd expect from an intelligent 60-something woman who'd managed to make her way in the world. It surprised Georgia, and caused her some shame, and she quickly apologized, noting that it was not exactly an auspicious start to their therapist-patient relationship. And then when Teresa had clarified, Georgia felt even worse: because now she saw clearly that she was not only lonely, she was also losing her hearing, and apparently her sense of humor, too, because in years past she would have hurried home to FaceTime Suzette and share the story, and the two of them would have laughed and laughed. And that line--You're a lonely human--would have joined the many others they put on repeat as part of their secret shared language, a wink and a nod to their deep mother-daughter bond.

Georgia realized Teresa was telling her this—that she was “only human”—to reassure her, to embrace and ground her in the undeniable reality of her oh-so-limited species, with its greed and neuroses and threat biases, its guilt and depression and mania and petty jealousies and addictions and yes, grief, and well...God knew the list of mental afflictions went on and on (and let’s not even start on the physical challenges: the morning stiffness; the dribble of urine when she sneezed; and when did simple tasks like opening jars become so vexing?). But instead of making her feel better, the notion of her humanness enraged her. It was like when she went to lunch alone, the hostess inevitably greeting her with: “Just you?” More verbal italics. As if a grown woman should apologize for treating herself to a bowl of soup and a glass of Chablis (maybe two) while she amused herself with Candy Crush, which she had mastered (or wasted so much time on?) well enough that she was in the top 2 percent of players, right up there, she had heard on the radio, with former U.S. Fed Chair Janet Yellen. Celebrate your victories, she used to tell Suzette, back when she thought she had something of value to offer her. But her own advice seemed hollow now, her wisdom a convenient myth she’d chosen to believe in to give her the chutzpah to raise a child on her own.

Just me, Georgia would reply to the restaurant host, politely, because after all, Suzette had worked in restaurants, too, once upon a time, trying to scrape by enough income to sustain her performing habit, which fed her soul but didn’t pay the rent. And as Teresa pointed out, that young woman didn’t mean any harm, she was just doing her job, seating random strangers, trying to divvy up the tables evenly among the servers, while she got herself through graduate school at UM or whatever. Who knew? She might even be in the theater department, honing her chops on the same stage where Suzette found her footing (though once Suzette had tripped and fallen off the stage; ever the actor, she’d pretended it was intentional and carried on so no one was the wiser, but it turned out she’d broken her collar bone and couldn’t perform the rest of the show’s run.) So Georgia mostly bit her tongue, except once, as the host cleared away the second place setting, Georgia did mutter: “Yes. Just. Fucking. Me.” To which the host replied, as she wheeled away, “Enjoy your fucking meal.” Touché, Georgia thought.

Suzette had always reveled in her humanness. As a child, she loved exploring language and emotions, always singing and dancing, creating silly walks, and making funny faces. She was a terrific mimic, which sometimes got her into trouble in school. She was loud and overweight and could be overbearing, but on stage—and she was on stage every chance she got, first in school plays and later, doing stand-up comedy—that was an asset. At first, Georgia thought Suzette was shameless. Later, she realized that wasn’t true; it was simply that Suzette was strategic: she had figured out if she took control of the narrative, she could never get hurt. So she made fun of her jiggy butt and her shrill voice; she riffed about the challenges that came with being the only adored daughter of a single mother; and created a whole set about her sperm donor dad. Georgia was sometimes embarrassed, often proud, and always mystified.

Whereas Georgia, who edited science journals for a living, resented her humanness. She wished for feline grace and bovine acceptance, pachyderm loyalty and the extraordinary olfactory nerves of canines. Clown fish could reinvent themselves by changing gender (although only from male to female, not vice-versa, and since she was already female, that wasn't a superpower Georgia envied, though there were times she found herself wishing she could transform into a man, if only temporarily). Camels could live for over a week without water. And recently she'd read that birds were able to sense the earth's magnetic field—something about a quantum radical pair mechanism in their eyes—to help them navigate on their migrations. She didn't understand it, but of all the qualities she wished for, that was the one she most wanted now. A way to orient herself.

It used to be that she baked. Cookies, mostly: butter pecan, chocolate chip, brownies. Lemon bars, if she was feeling ambitious. The occasional quick bread. Nothing terribly complicated—not like in her younger days, when she'd get Suzette into bed and then stay up past midnight making elaborate themed cupcakes she frosted tenderly and decorated with piped flowers for Suzette's school events; outrageous three-layered cakes filled with ganache and topped with a chocolate drip and pulled-sugar bows for her birthday parties to ensure that even kids who didn't much like Suzette wanted to attend; or pies—lemon merengue in spring, peach in summer, and in fall, apple with a lattice crust. Since tomorrow was National Muffin Day, she was, naturally, baking muffins. It was Teresa's idea. Everything these days was Teresa's idea, because Georgia didn't seem to have any. Or none that mattered.

When you're feeling helpless, help someone, Teresa had said.

National Muffin Day? Doesn't that take an act of Congress? Georgia asked.

If I remember correctly, someone in L.A. started it, Teresa said. The idea is to hand out muffins to homeless people. You can Google it if you want.

I'm good, Georgia said, waving her off. Then, after a pause: What makes you think I'm feeling helpless?

Teresa blinked a few times, folding her thin lips into her mouth until they disappeared, like a dried apple doll, but didn't say anything. Georgia hated when she did that. It was a game: who could bear the silence longest. Despite herself, Georgia lost.

Not to state the obvious, but you can't live in a muffin, Georgia said finally. Although I did once hear of an old woman who lived in a shoe....

That got a little chuckle out of Teresa, but she quickly returned to her three blinks and silence.

Suzette used to say that muffins are just cake masquerading as a healthy snack, Georgia added. She had a whole routine about how the muffin wrapper sucked calories from the batter,

and that's why she could eat them guilt-free. The same way eating as you stand in front of the open fridge doesn't count. Something about the magic properties of the light inside.

Sounds funny, Teresa said.

It was okay, Georgia said. Not her best. But the point is, why pretend otherwise?

Who's pretending otherwise? Teresa asked. I'm not. Are you?

Fine, Georgia said. I'll bake the fucking muffins.

The question was: What kind? Googling it after all, she learned that the organizers of National Muffin Day discouraged nuts, since many homeless people had bad teeth. That meant nothing with a streusel topping, which was a shame: she loved streusel. Poppy seeds were another no-go, since they showed up as heroin on drug tests, which a lot of homeless people had to take. That nixed lemon-poppy seed. In the end, she went with blueberry bran, for diabetics, wheat-free sweet potato for people who were gluten-intolerant, and gingerbread for everyone else.

As she spooned the gingerbread batter into the muffin tins, Georgia recalled surprising Suzette one Christmas season with an ornate gingerbread house she had painstakingly cobbled together from a kit (ages 12 and up, my ass, thought Georgia). Suzette, who was five, literally jumped up and down with delight. But that night, when Georgia had to restrain Suzette from trying to break off a piece to eat, because of course the gingerbread house wasn't edible (it was held together with glue), Suzette threw a tantrum and hurled the miniature domicile onto the floor, where she proceeded to stomp on it before retreating to her room. That left Georgia to pick up the ruins and vacuum the trail of crumbs leading to Suzette's room. There was no repairing the gingerbread house; she had to put it out with the trash. The next year, when Suzette begged Georgia to make another one, she refused, telling Suzette she couldn't trust her to treat her creations with respect. Now she regretted that. A mother shouldn't say such things to her child, even if they're true. Because at any moment, that very child, your most beloved creation, could be swept from your life by a burst brain aneurysm and, as if God herself was throwing a tantrum, stomped right out of existence—traumatizing both Georgia and the open mic audience that had witnessed it.

Suzette said writing the jokes was the easy part. It was the delivery that was tricky. Your act could live or die based on your timing and your attitude. That's where the finesse came in.

And so it was with the muffins. Making them was easy, thanks to experience and a good stand mixer, and as she stood in the parking lot of the homeless shelter gazing down into her basket, Georgia took satisfaction in their firm and compact forms.

But how to distribute them? She considered simply setting the basket down, making a quick announcement inviting everyone to help themselves, and fleeing. She could come back later for the basket. She did not want to engage with any of these people, did not want to look at their worn faces, their rheumy eyes, their creased and saggy skin. She did not want to see their blackened or missing teeth. She did not want to hear—or even imagine—their stories. Hadn't she been through enough?

She recalled Suzette saying how tempting it was to skip that second part, the part where you're on stage, delivering your lines, putting yourself at the mercy of strangers who may or may not appreciate your sense of humor, and instead just revel in your ability to entertain yourself.

What would be so bad about that? Georgia asked her once. You're so gifted. You could do so many other things with your life. Things that would make money. And make you happy.

I know that would be a relief for you, Suzette had said. But Mom, it's such a rush when I connect with my audience. When I feel the love. You should try it sometime.

Not a chance, Georgia had said at the time. But today was National Muffin Day. So she took a deep breath and walked toward the people on the sidewalk. Extending her basket of muffins, she looked each of them in their aging, suffering faces. Happy National Muffin Day, she said, and tried—oh how she tried—to feel the love.