

Pot Roast Dinner

She used to frequent a small Italian deli where, between two and four o'clock, she could get fresh rotelli and sausage for half price. She got to know the owner and commended him on the excellent quality of the meats.

"Have you ever been to Country House in New Park?" he asked her. "They serve a great pot roast dinner. They open at four-thirty."

When she received her first paycheck for minding the Alzheimer wife—poor soul, there was always somebody worse off than oneself—she decided to treat herself to something special. At four o'clock she drove to New Park, a freeway tract of the sixties whose seedy houses were now inhabited by pink— and blue.

Even with the windows of her old Volvo shut tightly, she could hear the faint shouts of their scruffy offspring pumping their too-small bikes over the dry hills.

Along the freeway edge of this shabby tract, she stopped at the cozy dining spot recommended for its home cooking. She settled into a chair, anticipating the pot roast dinner—seven dollars or so should cover it. She opened her purse to touch the new twenty-dollar bill she'd earned. Yes, it was there all right. Crisp, folded. Then she opened her menu: \$1.10 for iced tea! \$8.50 for the pot roast, "served after 4:30 as long as it lasts."

She couldn't believe it. The homey decor. The crummy location. Why, she used to make pot roast when they lived on Clancy Street, Mac working two jobs and the kids always sick with the croup.

The waitress had spoken to her. And torn a new page from her pad.

“I’ll have the iced tea,” she said.

She could, of course, order a cup of soup and leave. She should have known it would be expensive—eleven dollars, maybe more now that she’d ordered that tea, out of only twenty. . . . And for pot roast!

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. For a moment she was eighteen again, tall and shy and sun-browned, slipping into the icy cold lake water, with Bobby Rooney. She’d seen him years later. He was short and bald then, but his eyes still twinkled. Would things have been different? Refrains of nursery songs she’d taught her children pushed Bobby Rooney from her thoughts. *“Swim little fishy, swim if you can. And they swam and they swam, all over the damn place!”*

The waitress returned with a dripping glass of tea. She felt the exhilaration of that first plunge and blinked her eyes to meet the waitress’ impatient gaze. “I’ll have the pot roast dinner, please.”

The waitress was back in minutes with a glass plate of fresh vegetables, julienned carrots and dainty snow peas, not heaped on the plate but artfully arranged. There were hot muffins, bran and berry, in a basket; crisp lettuce and little tomatoes in a china bowl.

Carefully she put the tiniest spot of homemade dressing on the salad greens and began to eat. Soon the waitress brought another plate, larger than the first one, with four or five juicy slabs of pot roast—brown and tender, not a trace of fat. Creamy white potatoes, smoothly whipped and dressed with fresh parsley, with a little well for the gravy.

Those first bites—wonderful. She’d forgotten how satisfying pot roast could be. When she’d eaten as much as she wanted, she glanced around. Two women behind her were just finishing their meal. One asked for take-out for her chicken dinner, and one, for her salad! *She* had never taken salad home.

But maybe she could. She was glad she’d used so little dressing, only on one corner. And the tomatoes were cherry tomatoes, so the salad wouldn’t be mushy.

She packed up the berry muffin, too (she had eaten the bran one), and the rest of the pot roast. By then it was after five o'clock. She wanted to get home before dark—it got dark early at that time of year, and she didn't drive so well at night.

Drive? She hoped the old car would make it back without incident.

The best part was the next day. In the morning, she warmed the muffin for breakfast and had it with her tea. And in the late afternoon she had another full meal from the doggie bag not a snack, a big, substantial dinner. She ate a little earlier than usual, having looked forward to the pot roast all day.

Two weeks later, she found herself driving once again to New Park, and to the fringes of the American dream. Only the houses didn't look quite so shabby, and the children seemed happier too. She remembered her own children, her own little house. There had been pleasures. Her life had been good.

She seated herself at the restaurant table as if coming home, ordered an ice-tea. And then she added confidently, "I'll have the pot roast dinner, please."

