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Uncle Phillie and the Plate of Prunes

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Uncle Phillie doesn't have poor table manners, he has no table manners. He also likes prunes. As a result Phillie doesn't eat in restaurants any more. Momma doesn't speak to Phillie any more and I was warned to keep quiet if I knew what was good for me.

Uncle Phillie is my mother's younger brother. Their father died soon after he was born and not long afterward his two sisters married. Phillie grew up relatively unhindered by societal considerations. His mother was too old to actively supervise him and my mother and aunt had children of their own to worry about. Phillie in short was a happy savage. In time he married a quiet mousy little woman who was a good cook and an efficient housekeeper. Phillie had a full stomach and clean sheets. Phillie was happy.

One Saturday when I was about nine years old, my mother dragged me along on a shopping expedition. I hated accompanying my mother on these journeys. She was gifted with unbelievable endurance and a complete disregard for the densest crowds. She rarely went shopping because she needed anything, she went because she felt the urge to pick up a bargain. It was as unexplainable as the suicidal migrations of the lemming.

She would head for the largest store, find the most crowded aisle and then grasping my wrist with one hand and clutching her massive hand-bag to her breast with the other, would sail into the throng and fight her way to the bargains. Her technique in the use of elbows was nothing short of spectacular.

Once at the counter, I would be deposited in front of my mother's comforting bulk to examine my bruises while she engaged in her favorite indoor sport, bargain hunting. Sometimes I think the only thing she enjoyed more than shopping was coming back the following Saturday to return the merchandise for one reason or another and argue with the Complaint Department clerk. This procedure was a constant source of amazement to me but I suppose it was socially more acceptable than hashish.

Her reason for taking me along was, "So you shouldn't get hurt playing in the streets." To this day I'm able to plunge into a traffic filled street but a store full of woman shoppers brings out an unreasoning fear in me.

On the way home from this particularly exhausting experience, (we had successfully invaded Macy's and Gimbel's in one afternoon) we met Phillie, looking rather unhappy and decidedly unkempt. The explanation
was simple. His wife was visiting her relatives and Phillie was a poor laundress and a worse cook. My mother immediately took him in tow and we all went into a restaurant.

I was entranced by Phillie's eating habits. He spread butter with his spoon and picked up his steak in his hands to rip at it like a ravening beast. The soup course was even better, Phillie couldn't get at the few remaining spoonsful of liquid so picking the bowl up, he drank from it as if it were a cup. My mother kept telling me to eat but my eyes kept straying to Uncle Phillie.

We then ordered desert. My mother had pineapple, I discovered chocolate pudding on the menu and Phillie brought shame upon all our heads by ordering a plate of prunes.

Phillie obviously enjoyed the prunes. He rolled each one around in his mouth, squeezing out all its delicious juices and then after swallowing the meat, he tucked the pit in his cheek. This worked fine at first but soon I noticed a look of dismay creep across his features. His cheek, by this time, was distended by half a dozen pits and they were making him uncomfortable. With his rather round head and his swollen cheek he looked something like a chipmunk mouthing a nut. He couldn't put the pits back in the saucer as he intended to drink the remaining juice. Then his face brightened.

He released them all into his hand and beckoned to the waitress nearby. She came over to our table and Phillie held out his hand palm up. (The one without the pits.) The waitress, probably expecting a tip for her services, did likewise, and Phillie deposited the pits in her cupped hand. The waitress stared unbelievingly at her acquisition, then slapped Phillie across the mouth. Pits went flying everywhere. The waitress walked away sobbing bitterly, my mother seemed to be in a state of shock, and Phillie picked up his napkin and wiped the stains off his face. I just sat there and then subsided into helpless, near hysterical laughter. The manager meanwhile had made his way to our table and was requesting that we leave immediately.

We did so, my mother managing to retain some dignity as we passed before the gaze of the other patrons and paused to pay our check. It was one of the few times I have seen my mother get flustered and I wasn't helping matters any by giggling. Phillie stood unconcernedly by picking his teeth.
Outside, my mother told a bewildered Uncle Phillie exactly what she thought of him and warned me to keep my mouth shut if I knew what was good for me. It was a useless admonition. I was probably the biggest blabber-mouth in our entire clan.

And all Uncle Phillie had to say on the subject was, "Business must be pretty good in that joint, if a waitress can get away with slapping a cash customer."

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JUST WORDS

Nothing
Just words
Words words words
Shaping thought
To fit words
Blank meaningless
Creating a void
Of words that
Define
Mean
Limit
Any creation
All nothing
Just words

Lola DeLong

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