The Understandenest Woman

Emmett McGinley

Well, Sir, this Mrs. Webb is the understandenest woman I ever run across. They ain't none other like her in my territory. It would sure make things easier if they was. The way things are now, it's gettin' so I just can't quite stomach this mail carryin' business. 'Specially since the war sneak up on us. Seems like everybody is lookin' for a letter from everybody else. Mothers lookin' for letters from their boys, grandmas from the grandsons they used to bounce on their knee, daughters from their sweethearts, and the brothers and dads are in there too, but they don't pester so much as the womenfolk. Can't say as I blame 'em much, it's just human nature to worry about your kin gone off to some faraway place to dodge bullets of some kind 'er another, but dagblammit, they don't have to shove the blame off on me for the poor service they're gettin'. They just can't seem to understand I can't bring 'em a letter till somebody brings it to me. With the new help the government's using, expectin' a letter on time would be just like expectin' the war to end tommorra. Why, they even got me worryin' and frettin' with 'em. My wife sez I'm gettin' grumpy as a bitch with pups.

Well anyway, as I was sayin' this Mrs. Webb is the understandenest woman. Let me see now, I reckon it was about '22 when her and her husband moved into the new house they had built on Lake Street. Now I watched that house go up comin' by every day like I did, still do for that matter, and I could see they didn't skimp none. Later on I found out that her husband was a salesman at the mill here in town, so he naturally got the best lumber they had, and he knew what carpenters was best at their trade. It's kinda hard to beat a combination like that, so when their place was finished it was the envy of the block, pretty as a picture and plenty solid. It's the kind of a house you build when you're thinkin' about havin' a parcel of kids kickin' up their heels in it.

Yessir, those folks were as proud of that house as they were of the little boy that came with it. That's right, they hadn't no sooner got moved in and situated some, than that little rascal came along and moved hizzelf right in with 'em. He was a cute little mite, healthy and strong and full of pep. And lungs, say when he started lettin' you
know he was hungry or wanted himself some dry pants, his hollerin' purt near took the roof off the house, but it didn't 'cuz like I said, that's the kind of house it was.

He was a healthy little imp alright, but his mommy had a purty tough time of it. Some women is made so's they can have babies every year and shake it off in a week or so; as luck would have it, Mrs. Webb wasn't made that way. She'd sure liked to have had 'em reg'lar, but the doctor put the quietus on that right then: no more babies for her, 'cuz it could kill her easy as not. For a woman who was hankerin' as much as she was for a house full of kids, she took it mighty fine, didn't let it throw her a bit, leastways not so's anybody could tell. She's the understandenest woman.

When he got so's he was old enough to walk, he'd come toddlin' out to meet me, and we'd have some man to man talks. 'Course at first it was me that did all the talkin', but it wasn't long 'fore I had to fight like fury to get a word in edgeways, with his mouth openin' and closin' like one of those department store doors at Christmas time. While we were standin' like a couple of old maids at a hen party, his mommy would be up on the porch smilin' and watchin' to see I didn't slip him any peppermint sticks 'tween meals so's he wouldn't eat his dinner when she wanted him to. After a while though, the two of us got purty slick at it, I'd kinda slide it in under the letters and she'd give me a wink with those big eyes of his, all the time lookin' like a cat that had just caught hisself a nice fat mouse, and run up those steps like a squirrel up a tree. That gave the whole thing away 'course, but like I say, Mrs. Webb was the understandenest person.

Once they get started growin' they sprout up like sweet potato plants. 'Twasn't no time at all 'fore he started in school. After that about the only time we ever got together was on Saturdays and summer vacation. He clicl right fine in school though, stayed close to the top of his class all the time. Mrs. Webb seen to it that I got all the particulars. I remember the time they had open house at the school, Mrs. Webb asked me if I wouldn't like to go and I snapped up the chance right away. I wouldn't have missed that for all the stamps in Washington.

Well, that night little Webb walked into class lookin' as bright and shiny as a new Model A. Hair slicked down, that is all 'cept for an ornery cow-lick at the back, cheeks rosy from the scrubbin' his mommy had given 'em and wearin' his first double-breasted suit. He walked over to his desk, sat down, folded his hands, and started givin' everybody the once-over, cool as a shade tree on a warm day, and not the least bit jumpy. I caught his eye and he gave me a great big wink, that almost got lost in the grin spread all over his face.
Class got started right after that and little Webb was all business. He'd pounce on those questions the teacher asked like the devil after a sinner, then he'd take 'em all apart and put 'em back together. I could see some of the people 'round me were mighty impressed and they weren't nothin' compared to his folks. You could almost see proudness poppin' out all over 'em. Soon as she finished up with all the reg'lar work in the class, the teacher got the kids lined up for a spellin' bee. They started out with some easy words and purty soon they began gettin' harder 'n harder. Those kids started droppin' fast and furious, just like apples in a windstorm, but not little Webb. When it come his turn he'd stop, screw his face up, think for a minute, then look that teacher right in the eye and spell it out real fast like. Purty soon there was only him and another boy. It was his turn and his word was "occasion." Well, little Webb thought a little longer this time, but he put one too many S's in it. You could tell he was disgusted with hisself, but just the same he marched right up to that other fella, patted him on the back, and told him what a good job he did. Well, when that happened I don't think his daddy would've been any prouder if he had've beat the other boy and he sure won hisself a lot of friends that night. Yessir, for a fact, he was a lot of boy.

'Fore long little Webb was in high school, the little didn't fit anymore, but I still called him that out of habit I guess. He got on all the school teams and I tried not to miss a game if I could help it. Once though, when my wife was down with the flu, I had to stay home and doctor her, but I guess he played that game just like he did all the rest of 'em and just like he done in that spellin' bee, bein' a good sport and a gentlemen and all the time tryin' just as hard as he could to win.

He finished high school and then his folks sent him to that engineerin' college upstate. He used to write his folks a letter every day. Yessir, every day I walked up to that house on Lake Street, that was built to hold a parcel of kids, and brought a letter from the only one who ever had a chance to know how nice that house was to kick up your heels in.

Then this dangd old war come along and Webb was just goin' on twenty. The Monday morning after Pearl Harbor he come back from college totin' all his belongin's. I got to see him for a spell and he told me he was goin' over to Indianapolis the next day to join the Marines. From that day on I didn't get to see Webb anymore. The letters started comin' again, only this time from Parris Island in South Carolina, then Camp Lejune, North Carolina, then from Camp Pendleton in California, always two or three of 'em a week. After that they were always Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, and they weren't reg'lar like they used to be.
Still Mrs. Webb never deviled me for 'em like most of the other people did. Why I've got so now that I'm scared to walk by some of those people's houses, knowin' that if they see me I'll have to tell 'em, "No, I don't have any letters for you," and then on top of that I'll have to listen to 'em cry about not havin' 'nough sugar or gasoline or meat or a raft of other things.

Today, I brought Mrs. Webb a letter from her son that was post-marked three months ago, where on earth that letter's been God only knows, but one thing I know for sure is, that I would've sooner rassled a bear than walked up to her house with that letter. She's an understandin' woman though, like I told you. Her eyes were red like she'd been cryin' a lot, and her voice sounded kinda tired, but she thanked me and smiled, which is more than other people would've done in the same spot. You see her son, little Webb, was killed in action two months ago.

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**It Ain't Etiquette**

Forrest A. Dunderman

The other day I was having lunch with a friend at a restaurant particularly noted for its delicious soup. I had just begun to relish the flavor of my own bowl and was about to make some comment on it when I turned to find my friend rather furtively breaking crackers into his own. Now I would not have objected to such action, assuming, of course, that my friend really enjoyed the additional flavor of crackers in his soup, if he had not hastened to apologize for what he considered a serious, a monstrous breech of etiquette. His tone was as ashamed as if I had burst into his dining room to find him at the table wearing only his undershirt and trousers, his un-napkined face smeared with grease, and gnawed chicken bones strewn on the floor as if he had thrown them over his shoulder in the manner of Henry VIII. I could see in a moment that he was deadly in earnest and, feigning a kind of innocence of what is considered genteel à table, asked him why he apologized for an act which, in no way, could be thought repulsive or unsightly by even the most fastidious of diners. His reply was one that I expected: "It is not considered good etiquette," he said, as seriously as if he had just recited one of the Ten Commandments. It was then that I exploded. At the risk of having indigestion for the rest of the afternoon, I launched into a vigorous and, I will have to admit, angry rebellion against the ridiculous taboos to which society has fallen heir. Whence they came, no one seems to know, but they are so firmly entrenched in upper and middle class society that any breech is regarded in almost