

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

*Leo Racicot*

### Meeting M.F.K. Fisher<sup>1</sup>

**"S**haring food with another human being is an intimate act that should not be indulged in lightly."

M.F. K. Fisher

Some books (sadly very few) cast a magic over us, and over the time and place we read them, that lasts a lifetime. One such book for me, the memory of which even now resurrects a certain summer many summers ago, and the front porch I read it on, during what seemed to me the most beautiful of weather days, was "As They Were" by an author I had never heard of: M.F.K. Fisher. The title still has the ability to thrill.



I liked the book, in fact, so much that I set off, after, in search of another of the author's titles: "A Cordiall Water". I had no luck finding it (all library copies were marked 'MISSING'). The book was out-of-print and a friend suggested I write the publishers to see if a copy could be had from them.

A month or so after, a package, brown-bundled and tied with plain, brown twine came in the mail. It was from the author herself, accompanied by a note thanking me for my interest in her books with a wish that I enjoy this one. Thrilled, I dashed off a "thank you" straight away. She wrote back -- a longer, more personal reply, and so developed between us (me here in Lowell, Ma; she, in California) a regular correspondence that evolved into years of indescribable joy in visiting her, knowing her, loving her...

I can tell you many good stories about her and her open-door policy salon, her family and friends but will start here with the story of the first time I made my way, at her invitation, to her fabled Glen Ellen and 13935 Sonoma Highway because the first visit was a real adventure but not, as you will see, the sort I expected.

The flight out to San Francisco was, as I recall, fine but I hit the city during one of the most relentless rainstorms to swallow Northern California in twenty years. Oh...my...God!!!

I can still picture being soaked to the skin as I wedged myself into an equally wet phone booth at the airport where I tried to summon the courage to call Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher and let her know I was here. I was more than nervous. The voice that answered the other end of the line was a shock and a delight,

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<sup>1</sup> M.F.K. Fisher is the author of more than 20 books most of which deal with the subject of food, its philosophies, its mysteries and the memories induced by it. Her books, among them "How to Cook a Wolf", "Consider the Oyster", "The Gastronomical Me" and the now classic "Art of Eating" act as autobiography and memoir and treat the reader to a glimpse into the author's own life and mind. No less than W.H.Auden said of her: "I do not know of anyone in the United States who writes better prose."

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both, and remained so for all our days together, for what I heard emerging from a woman in her late 60s was the voice of a little girl, musical in its pitch, like little, silver bells ringing. "This is Mary Frances", it said. I said it was Leo calling and that I was in San Francisco and what I heard next was not what I wanted to hear: "Well, dear. I'm so happy you came but I'm afraid we are completely flooded up here. We needed the rain but not this much of it. The roads leading up here are all washed away. I'm sorry, dear, but you'll have to go back home. There's no way up. Maybe some other time..."

"Maybe some other time???" I was not hearing this!! I had come 3000 miles to be told, "Maybe some other time"? I heard her start to hang up and so I hollered, "No! Wait! I'll find a way. I want to see you. I've come all this way. I.....I....." There was a pause, then the child-like voice replied, "Well, Leo, if you think you can get here, I'm here..."

No one at the bus terminal ticket booth knew Glen Ellen, the tiny cow town about 60 miles north of San Francisco where M.F.K. Fisher lived. They kept shrugging and sending me from booth to booth. I was mad. I was sad. I was wet. Good luck came in the form of a bus line, Fedora, no longer extant (nowadays, you must take an airporter limo to get to Glen Ellen, if you can get there at all). Feeling relief, I bought my ticket, found the bus dock and boarded a rattle-y, old coach bound for Santa Rosa. Much to my dismay, and perhaps due to the recluse in me, my delight, I saw that I was the only passenger on the bus. Or should I say the only person crazy enough to be riding a bus in weather this vile? And so we set off into the deluge: one bus, one bus driver, one killer storm and me. Oh...my...God!!!

The further out of San Francisco we went, the more I could see what Fisher had meant; all roads were beyond-belief bad and the rain became more and more like an iron wall of water. We could not see very well but we could see that a major road had been washed away and that we were banned from continuing on by a battery of workhorses. During the ride, I had told the driver whom I was going to see and how determined and excited I was about seeing her. Pshawing the washed-out road, the driver became suddenly imbued with a do-or-die John Wayne spirit and grabbing the wheel with the hams of both hands, he yelled, (I kid you not!), "I'll get ya there, come Hell or High Water!!!" and veered the giant bus into the middle of a mud-filled field as if he were re-directing a VW bug or a Cooper. Once again -- Oh...my...God!!! I thought: I am not going to meet M.F.K. Fisher because I am going to die.

But the shortcut led to the highway we needed and soon we were back on pavement, at least, and not mud and before long, as if in a dream, the kindly driver was depositing me in front of the Jack London Lodge in the center of Glen Ellen. Eureka!!!

It took me the whole night to dry off, and I don't think I slept an hour, if that. I was restless with all kinds of emotion not the least of which was shyness at having to call M.F. in the morning and actually meet a writer who had become, for me, the greatest living writer of all. I was a wreck when I dialed her up and heard her girl's voice again. "Well, I don't know how you managed to make it", she said, incredulously, "but I sure am glad you have. I'll send Pat Moran up in my jalopy to fetch you. He'll be round in an hour or so."

Pat arrived right on time, a cheerful, mustachioed, 30-ish fellow, tall like a

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tree, and just as cheerful. We had a good chat as we made our way up and over some of the wettest country I had ever seen.

Soon, we came to a gate leading off Highway 12, to a path lined with wildflowers of every color and kind, flattened by the weight of the rain but oh, so fragrant, and a tiny, white bungalow, stucco, hidden carefully amid a clutch of trees, and a pond, and a belltower and cows, and oh it was lovely until, as we reached the house and parked, Pat turned and said to me, "How many times have you been out here to visit Mary Frances?" And when I told him this was the very first time, that I had never met her, he gasped asthmatically and said, "Holy Jesus! You must be SCARED SHIT!!!" This, I can tell you, did nothing to relieve my fear and once more, dear reader, if I may be permitted to repeat --- Oh...my...God!!!

But she, the Mary Frances of my dreams, was lovelier than words can describe and more warm and welcoming than the sun that had finally come out from hiding. The years ahead would be filled with the rich and endearing gift of her friendship, her letters, her love. Not a day goes by that I do not miss her and wish she was here and I think, in some animistic way, she still is, and surely is with me now as I write this reminiscence of the first time we met.

LEO RACICOT'S work has been featured in "Co-Evolution Quarterly", "Utne Reader", "Spiritual Life", "Gay Sunshine Journal", "First Hand", "The Poet", "Ibbetson Street Press", "Poetry", "Shakespeare's Monkey" and "Yankee". Two of his award-winning essay-memoirs appear in "Best of..." anthologies, and he is the recipient of the Antonio Machado Poetry Forum Award (1992). His holiday story, "The Little Man" is being published by Snug Harbor and will be available in audio and animated form on fablevision.com. He has been a schoolteacher/librarian/cook/counselor/poet/actor/clown.