

Rush Limbaugh and the French Apple Pie

Billie Travalini

To Mary Rizzo, Rush Limbaugh was god. Every time he preached about the sins of others she would clap her hands in celebration.

“You tell ‘em,” she would smile. “Somebody has to.”

But as soon as he went off the air Mary felt voiceless again. That’s why when she called in to say drug users should be hung, and hours later he was arrested on a drug charge, she wanted her words back. But that wasn’t possible. So, she said ten *Hail Mary’s* and ten *Our Father’s* and prayed about her “transgression.”

“Dio, mi perdoni,” she prayed, and crossed herself a few dozen times to show genuine effort. That evening she had almost convinced herself she had wiped the slate clean, so to speak, when a voice inside her head said, “French Apple pie.” Mary understood this as a sign. If God wanted her to make a French Apple pie she would. She got up from her rocking chair, went to the kitchen, and peeled a bag of Granny Smith apples. When she was done, she glanced at the peelings in the sink, pleased.

Just that morning her daily horoscope had warned her to be extra vigilant because the day was full of hidden dangers and what looked good might be bad and what looked bad might be good.

“Careful,” she warned herself and was about to warm up the oven when she discovered she needed Crisco. She thought about using what she had. It was more yellow than white but she thought it smelled okay. Then she recalled her horoscope and dropped the can in the garbage. “There,” she said, and put the apples in a bowl of cold water so

they wouldn't discolor before she could get to Super Fresh in the morning and back home again. With the apples safely in the refrigerator, she went to bed.

But she couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about how much she had resting on that pie. It had been troublesome enough when it was just Rush, but now that God was involved, everything had to be just so. It took her half the night to decide whether to make a lattice crust or plain. She finally decided on lattice because this was no time to skimp on detail. She still didn't know who was supposed to eat the pie. She considered her husband, Ernie, but since he didn't like Rush, she concluded that giving him the pie would only add insult to injury. God will show the way, she told herself, and said ten more *Hail Mary's* to give herself strength. It was almost morning when the voice came back. The same voice that said, "French Apple Pie," was now saying, "No legs." And as soon as she heard those two little words she fell fast asleep.

In the morning she glanced at the clock next to her bed. It was nine-thirty. She pulled on her clothes and went looking for Ernie. She found him in his bedroom, reading.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she demanded.

"Looked to me like you needed sleep."

"I *need* a French Apple pie."

Ernie opened his mouth but closed it before any words got out. Mary shook her head, disgusted. She hated how he always dismissed her with silence, as if by not talking, he was somehow standing on higher ground and that made everything he did wrong in the past okay.

"You don't fool me," she said, her eyes blazing. "I might have been born in the morning, but not this morning. My poor Rush...how could I have said such a thing?"

Ernie yawned. “Whatever it was, I’m sure he’s heard worse.”

Mary felt the blood rush to her face and she took a deep breath to calm herself.

“You voted for Clinton,” she said, in a loud voice. “Don’t tell me what’s right.”

Ernie opened the door of their doublewide mobile home and stared outside without answering. He didn’t know his neighbors’ names but he knew their cars. They were lined up the same way every day. Ernie liked that, liked the way he could tell which car and which mobile went together with just a glance. It reminded him of the pictures he had seen of the American Cemetery in Normandy: cross after cross lined-up one after the other as if there really is order in the world. Ernie left France in 1944, but his brother Joe died there and was buried in the same row as Theodore Roosevelt’s grandson. Just knowing that gave Ernie a small measure of pride.

“You’re letting hot air in.”

“Just give me a minute,” Ernie mumbled, and walked outside to check for mail.

“I gave you sixty-one years,” Mary yelled, hoping her raised voice would make it through the open door to her husband’s ears.

Ernie walked back inside holding TIME magazine and closed the door behind him. He wasn’t even aware he was smiling until Mary said, “Maybe you can forget but I don’t.”

Ernie gripped the magazine tighter.

“At seventeen,” she scowled. “What did I know about marriage?”

Ernie wanted to say he was sorry for gambling and running with women when he should have been providing for his family. But he had already told her this and he knew

by experience that the more he said, the worse things got. So he headed to his room to avoid saying the wrong thing. He got as far as his bed when he felt a tug on his shirt.

“I need to go to Super Fresh,” she said.

Ernie was tempted to tell her to drive herself, but he remembered how when they were young she would ask him to teach her to drive and he would say, “Quiet, woman.” Back then he believed that a wife belonged at home so a husband would know where his wife was when he needed her. Now he was stuck. He was about to turn around when the cover of the magazine caught his attention. Under a mug shot of O.J. Simpson was “An American Tragedy.”

“Damn shame,” he said. “Good ballplayer.”

“He did it to himself,” Mary said, taking the magazine and setting it on the bed.

Mary went for her pocketbook, and returned with red lips and red cheeks, and a wool scarf on her head.

On the way to Super Fresh she told Ernie to drive slower and turn off the air-conditioner.

“I can’t afford to get a head cold,” she said.

“It’s ninety-five degrees out and you got a wool scarf on your head,” he said, turning off the air and rolling down his window. “Aren’t you hot?”

“No,” she snapped. “Worry about yourself.”

When they pulled in the parking lot Ernie stopped at the curb in front of the entrance like he always did, and Mary got out.

“I’ll be right here,” he said. “Don’t wander.”

She closed the door without comment. As Ernie watched his wife walk into the store, support hose rolled at her ankles and one foot put slowly in front of the other, he thought about when they first met. He was on his way to shoot pool with friends and she was sitting alone on her porch where her father could look out the window, every so often, to make sure she wasn't talking to somebody he didn't want her talking to. Ernie remembered how her eyes brightened when she told him she was waiting for a Hollywood producer to pass through Wilmington's Little Italy -- with its narrow row-houses and stores with names like Papa's Food Market, Riccio's Fruits, and Zappaterini's Bakery -- and spot her, the next Greta Garbo. "It's serendipity," she said, and Ernie wondered what serendipity was. But, back then he was more interested in big breasts than big words.

A short time later Mary got back in the car.

"Drive," she said.

When they got home Ernie went straight to his bedroom and Mary went straight to the kitchen. She pulled her scarf off and set the Crisco on the counter and glanced at the clock over the sink. It was ten-thirty.

"It's getting late," she mumbled, tying an apron around her waist. On the way back from the store she had decided that the pie needed to be baked and in front of the radio by noon for Rush's show. After that she would deliver it to her neighbor, the one with no legs and a pet ferret that slept on top of the television. Mary had only met the woman once. That was the day it snowed for six hours straight and Ernie couldn't dig out the car and she needed ex-lax. It had taken Mary a good half-hour to dress for the two-minute walk. She wore three pair of pants, two coats, two pair of boots, and carried a

baking tray to shield her face from the snow. As soon the neighbor let her in, Mary shook herself off. She was too surprised to see how tidy the house was to notice snow flying everywhere. The woman said something, that much Mary remembered, she just couldn't remember what. She had never seen a woman with no legs. When the woman scurried across the floor on her trunk and lifted herself onto the sofa, Mary told herself it was the most unladylike behavior she had ever witnessed.

Good-bye," she said, forgetting all about ex-lax.

Now God was sending her back. Was the woman's name Betty or Linda? Mary couldn't remember. This is no time to worry about a name, she reminded herself, and read the recipe one more time. The apple-raisin filling went together fine. But it took her nine or ten tries to get the latticework just so. She cut the strips a half-inch wide and twelve inches long and laid them on the pie at one-inch intervals. Then she folded back alternate strips to weave crosswise strips even with the outer rim of the pie plate. Finally, she folded the outer crust over the strips. When she was done, she crimped the edge by pressing the dough between her thumb and bent finger, pushing slightly forward. The extra effort was worth it. "Nothing gets past God's eyes." With these words she brushed vanilla icing over the crust and sprinkled cinnamon over the entire top of the pie. The oven was ready, so she slid the pie in and glanced at the clock. It was almost eleven.

"Right on schedule." She took off her apron and walked to the living room and sat next to the radio.

Mary didn't remember falling asleep but she reasoned she must have because when she opened her eyes she heard the oven timer screaming and saw Ernie running past her to shut it up.

She heaved herself to her feet.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she yelled, and took off behind her husband.

When they got to the kitchen Ernie turned off the timer just as Mary was putting on oven mitts and shoving him aside with her hip.

“Sure smells delicious,” he said, as she lifted the pie from the oven onto a cooling rack on the counter.

Mary could tell by his tone that Ernie was expecting a big piece with lunch, maybe with some vanilla ice cream on top, so she pushed the pie to the back of the counter. “This is God’s pie,” she said. “At least I atone for my sins.”

This was too much for Ernie. ““That man is poisoning your brain,” he said. “Try thinking for yourself for once.”

“I’m finally allowed?” Mary rolled her eyes to help make her point.

Ernie walked to his room in silence.

It was eleven fifty-five. Mary was back in her rocker. She could smell the pie. Its apple-sugar sweetness tickled her nose and began to work on her willpower like the high-heeled shoes she once bought because a sales clerk said her feet were made to wear them.

Rush would be on in five minutes. But now all Mary could think about was the pie.

She walked to the kitchen and carried the pie back to her chair and set it next to the radio, just like she had planned.

“Buon dio,” she said, turning on the radio.

A few minutes later Rush was cheering on the GOP led congress, and Mary was nodding her head like she always did when he talked, but her eyes were on the pie.

“She’s too small to eat a whole pie,” she said, remembering her neighbor with no legs.

Rush was still talking but Mary couldn’t hear much of what he was saying because the apple-sugar sweetness lay heavy on her mind. She tore off a small piece of crust and ate it.

Later she couldn’t remember how a fork came to be in her hand.

“Waste not, want not.” This is what she was saying when she dug her fork into the pie and pulled up sweet-smelling apples and ate them. She could hear Rush talking but his voice sounded faded as if she had a bad signal or something. She ate another forkful, a big one this time, and Rush’s voice went to a low whisper. Mary stared at *her* pie. The latticework was collapsing into the apples so she ate more to even everything out. She was amazed at how little she had eaten and how much pie was gone.

There was only one piece left and it was small and didn’t have any crust. Rush had stopped talking sometime between her first bite and her last but Mary couldn’t say when. She slid her hand across the top of the radio and smiled.

“Grazie, grazie,” she said, and picked up the pie.

She couldn’t help but notice how light the plate felt when she carried it to the kitchen and slid the small, crustless piece of pie onto a paper plate. She covered the pie with Reynolds Wrap and walked over to her neighbor’s. She knocked twice, and then pressed her ear to the door. When her neighbor answered, Mary handed over the pie and said, “Here,” and walked back home.

She was washing the pie plate when she realized that it was twelve-thirty and Ernie hadn’t even told her what he wanted to eat.

She opened his bedroom door and the sweet smell of hot apple pie rushed in.

Ernie took a deep breath and held it.

“It’s late, what do you want for lunch?” Mary rushed her words as if just talking to him annoyed her.

Ernie glanced at a photograph of O.J. and Nicole in happier times, and then turned the page.

“Anything,” he said.