

Suzie

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2003

I haven't seen Suzie in two weeks and I realize, somewhat to my surprise, that I miss her. So I call and make a date.

Finally Friday comes, the day for our date. As usual, I drive to The Ranch in Menomonee Falls to pick her up about 2:00. And as always, I'm greeted at the door by Joe, a good-looking middle-aged guy who is a living basket of negativity ("Why are you all dressed up?" he asks. "I have to dress up for work," I answer. Then, with a pshaw, "You shouldn't wear that dress.") — and I'm greeted also by Joe's opposite, Pete, tall and gangly, mouth full of toothy smile, delighted to see me, delighted to escort me inside, delighted to go fetch Suzie.

Suzie is waiting, sitting very straight in a chair, her hot pink plastic lunch bag in one hand and her red-tipped cane in the other.

"Hi, Suzie Q," I say, like I always say.

"Oh, happy Friday," she says, like she always says, half-startled and half-expecting me. Then, as she rises (slowly as though she's moving through water), she says in one breath, "Today I took a walk and I got my clothes on all by myself and I made a picture."

They've become sort of a dance, these dates we have. We know our parts. There's a certain rhythm to our conversation ("Oh, how are you to-day?" she always asks). There's a certain grace to our movements (she grabs the crook of my elbow, we say "Hup, two, three, four" as we walk). We're about the same height and weight. We both have short, light-colored hair. Some people have asked if she's my sister or my daughter (she's 45, only eight years younger than me, but her face, like her mind, has the stamp of a child).

Once we're in the car (Suzie can buckle herself in by herself), I say, "Should we put on the country music station?" She answers "Yes." Then as each song comes on, she announces, "This song is called ----." Often she's a long way from the title and just parroting a line, but other times she's amazingly accurate, for title and singer.

As we drive to the coffee shop, I ask questions about her day. She's just spent five hours with a bunch of "clients" and "helpers," and her days vary. Sometimes she gets to ride a horse, always the same horse, "Igor." Other times she rides the stationary bike donated by her family to The Ranch. Sometimes she goes to the library or department store with the helper named Joe

(not the negative client named Joe). The helper Joe is a handsome, gentle man and I wish Suzie could see the hunk with whom she's gadding about town.

After we finish the routine catching up, we start on Suzie's favorite subject: food. I share Suzie's enthusiasm, but I'm aware that food obsession is a social no-no, so I talk about eating less than she does.

"Today I'm gonna have a doughnut," she announces.

It's my job to put my foot down occasionally. I'm not supposed to spoil her completely. She's lost about 30 lbs. and gone off blood pressure pills in the 20 months since she's come to live with her cousin, my best friend Karen. I don't want to undo that good work, so I play the role of the Good But Slightly Strict Auntie.

"Well, Suzie, I don't think we can go to Falls House of Cakes today. How 'bout if we see what's at Kohlmann's Kitchen and then you can eat it at Cup-a-Java?"

"Oh, okay," she answers, as usual, sounding slightly startled but agreeable.

At Kohlmann's Kitchen, Suzie is famous, as she has become wherever I've taken her over the past year. Sometimes when I appear at certain shops without her, storekeepers ask, "Where's Suzie?" or "Where's that blind girl you take around?" (This is sometimes followed by "Who is she, anyway? Are you related?") It's interesting to see how people react to Suzie. Some are absolutely loving and grab her hand because she always introduces herself and invites everyone to her 80th birthday party when she plans to "retire" from The Ranch. Others are clearly repelled, and pull back. I realize I've started to judge people's worth on the basis of how warm they are to my Suzie.

Today Suzie eats a big fudge brownie and washes it down with a huge hot chocolate, no whipped cream — a chocolate-eating feat I cannot imagine. I'm a sort of carrot cake person, myself. I have a cappuccino with almond biscotti, dunked. I read as much of the comics as I can while Suzie munches. She's a very, very fast (and noisy) eater so I don't usually read for long.

As soon as she's done with her brownie, Suzie announces what she'll eat next time. This is her habit at every meal — an obsession that drives Karen slightly nuts.

After our treat, we go to the grocery store. I say, "Suzie, we'll leave your stick in the car because you'll be pushing the shopping cart." (When I told my son my terminology, it made him crazy. He works at Badger Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired. "It's a CANE, Mom.")

"Don't forget your shopping list," she reminds me.

"Thanks, Suzie," I say.

Suzie pushes and I pull the cart through the aisles. “Hup, two, three, four.” We talk about our progress (“Aisle 1, Aisle 2, Aisle 3...”), much like I did when I walked through the aisles with my kids a thousand years ago, it seems.

Sometimes Suzie gets on a talking jag and it’s hard for me to concentrate. I’m searching back and forth, back and forth for the odd item I can never find, the dried apricots or the water chestnuts or the artichoke hearts. Her mouth is going....

“I can name some anesthetics. There’s twilight sleep, Bevritol, Sodium Pentothal, ether, morphine injected in your arm, gas mask, chloroform, twilight sleep....”

She talks in a childlike monotone, slowly, but all in one breath.

Meanwhile, I’m walking back and forth. *Yes, yes, chloroform, and where is that STUPID, stupid Brasso?*

The golden oldie song piped into the grocery store distracts us both. Suzie chimes in: “That’s by the Shirelles.”

She knows every 60’s band, including the really obscure ones. She could make some serious money on a song trivia contest. We arrive at the condiment aisle and I make the mistake of mentioning that I’m grabbing some mayo.

“I know some kinds of mayonnaise. There’s Miracle Whip, Hellman’s, Lady Lee, Roundy’s, Lite n’ Lively, Blend, Kraft, Elf Mayonnaise, Yogurt Mayonnaise, Hellman’s....”

Should I ever be so naive as to mention that we’re passing the candy aisle, I get an accounting of the greatest list of all: the candy bar list.

“There’s Hersheys, Mr. Goodbar, Three Musketeers, Semi Sweet, Peppermint Pattie, Mounds Bar, Peter Paul Almond Joy, Snickers, Caramello, Heath, Mr. Goodbar, Charleston Chew, Baby Ruth, O’Henry, Marathon, Butterfinger....”

I like her lists. She reminds me of Dustin Hoffmann in “Rainman,” counting toothpicks. The lists are amazingly long and always involve some, but not much, repetition.

I don’t know what’s “wrong” with Suzie. Karen has tried to explain some of her cousin’s history. I can’t keep it all straight. It seems Suzie has a combination of brain damage, possibly caused by an operation on her eyes when she was a tot — thus her knowledge of anesthetics. (Aaaargh! I can only imagine how I’d feel if I “caused” damage to my child through elective surgery!!). Plus she possibly has autism, and a garden of developmental delays/mental illnesses.

As a child, Suzie refused to speak for a whole year when her parents put her into the “blind school.” She was violent and threw tantrums. At one point her teachers sent her home with the statement that she was “impossible”; there was no hope for her.

Karen made a promise when she was a teenager that she would care for her cousin Suzie should Suzie’s parents die.

And so, when Karen was 41 years old, in January of 2002, Suzie came to live with Karen and her very tolerant, good-humored husband and teenage son and daughter. The transition wasn’t easy. Suzie dwelled on her father’s death even more than on food. She got the blues. She wept. She had been babied by her parents. She had been allowed to eat until she threw up. Karen was tolerant of her cousin’s grieving but put a quick end to the coddling. Karen told Suzie, “You’re a grown woman and you can do a lot of things.” And so she began the long hard journey of teaching Suzie some self-care and household chores. If it was true that Suzie was “impossible,” her progress with Karen is nothing short of miraculous.

I came into the picture right away. When Suzie moved in, I offered to take her for a couple of hours every week. Our date has evolved to the template it is today. Suzie and I have a lot in common. We like a little variety in our routine. We like music. We like to dance. And we really like food.

Why do I keep having my Suzie dates? For one thing, I like giving Karen a break. She’d do anything for me, like come over at a moment’s notice and weed a flower garden before we hosted my son’s wedding rehearsal dinner. She’s like my husband -- she helps me see when I’m thinking crazy. She works out of her home and I know how hard it is to concentrate with other bodies around. Karen actually pays me for my time, out of some respite care fund Suzie has (I’m not sure of the details). I never expect the money and I don’t count my hours, but it’s frosting on a little good deed I’ve come to enjoy. I would have my “Suzie dates” even if no cash were involved.

Suzie can be frustrating, like when she shuffles along SO, SO slowly, or when she starts obsessing about things that happened 35 years ago in Blind School. Like Karen, I don’t coddle her. I ask “When did that happen, Suzie?” and she does the startle-reaction thing and says, “Oh, I’ll talk about happy things. Are you enjoying the weather?”

Mostly, though, Suzie cracks me up. I always wondered about the sense of humor I’ve seen among people who work with “retarded” folks. Now I understand. You laugh at them just like you laughed at your own kids when they were unintentionally funny out of their own innocence.

If I’m honest, I have to admit that the best part of my Suzie dates is the ME I meet again. I was a stay-at-home mother, crazy about my three kids. I miss them. When I’m with Suzie, I’m that mom again. I go slow. I ask simple questions and get simple answers. I laugh about really, really dumb jokes (“Knock, knock.” “Who’s there?”

“Suzie.” “Suzie who?” “Suzie Sweetheart.”). I talk about numbers and spelling. I sing and dance.

I don't know if I could do what Karen does: have a constant diet of Suzie. Sometimes when Suzie's at The Ranch and Karen and I meet for lunch, the first 10 minutes are a recitation of her frustrations with her cousin. Then Karen laughs and says “Okay, that's enough Suzie talk,” and we proceed to chop and dice the joys and struggles of our lives and the world, like women who talk and eat together anywhere in the world.

Maybe I could be like Karen and take care of a relative with special needs. I suppose it's like getting up night after night, bleary-eyed, with a baby — you never know what you can do until you have to do it. One false move by some driver and it could be me or my husband who needs special care someday. Oh please God let it not be so.

For now, I'm healthy and work part-time. I have the luxury of enjoying my dates with Suzie. I called her tonight before writing this. I told her, “I'm gonna write a story about you, Suzie, but I can't remember your lists.”

Besides the anesthetic, the candy bar, and the mayonnaise lists, she told me one more: haircuts. “There's the pixie, the Princess Diana, the Dorothy Hamill, the Suzie Hairdo, the Shag, the Pageboy, the Devil's Haircut, and Shave and a Haircut Two Bits.”

Suzie, I think I know what your haircut is: the Angel's Haircut.

The End