

"Hot Liza" Comes Home

By Ann Stout

After dinner I knock on her door asking permission to enter.

"Come In" she says, and I turn the knob and push.

"It's locked," I say and hear her moving off her bed to open it. This time it cooperates.

She hops back on her bed, hair tucked under a clear shower cap, wearing a formerly black T-shirt now blossoming with rust colored Tie-dye shapes like lichen on a rock.

"What have you been up to?" I ask. I've been curious about the sounds of banging drawers, running water and rummaging coming from the room.

"I'm dyeing my hair pink," she says, bent over her computer screen again.

This is the second dye-job in a week, and Monday of the third week of six city-wide stay at home orders. What's a girl to do when her freshman year in college ends prematurely and she is sent home? Earlier in the day she had unpacked our old sewing machine in search of a project. The bobbin wouldn't cooperate, and I was no help. In the end it wasn't for lack of trying on her part; the machine was in need of refurbishing after 30 years of disuse. By evening, the scraps of her efforts littered the carpet-trailing tangles of threads, remnants of blue jeans sacrificed with scissors for stylish ambitions. Her attention had been re-focused on bleach instead, and what it can do besides disinfect.

In the afternoon she had appeared in the kitchen and begun rummaging under the sink. Since the only bottle of bleach we had was old and inactive, she hunted for alternates. She held up a bottle of toilet bowl cleaner.

"Would this work?" she asked, more to herself than desirous of any knowledge from me.

"What are you going to use it for?" I cautiously asked, picturing what damage it could do to hair, scalp and eyes.

"I'm tie-dyeing a shirt," she flung over her shoulder as she headed upstairs. "Don't worry, I'll Google it first!"

What's a mother to do when her independent, brave, bold, lovely adult daughter suddenly lands back at home?

Only recently launched from the nest she returns as a cuckoo, transformed into something mysterious and strange after hatching. She brings with her excess baggage, including the four overweight pieces of luggage that had to be humped solo across country.

Her first week home we try to pick up where we left off, using the jigsaw puzzle started at Christmas to piece us back together. It is neutral and common ground, a place we can share comfortably, talking or not, coming and going as our separate lives beckon. I'm happy when I am allowed briefly into her sphere, realizing the subtle shift of gravity that has placed her once small planet into the position of the sun, leaving me in an outer orbit. I look at her delicate ears bedecked now with rings and studs. Like tips of an iceberg they are deceptively small signs of her large internal shifts. Look out below! Her hair is shorter than when she left, self-trimmed and jaunty,

it bounces above her shoulder blades and her unfamiliar clothes acquired in Boston.

She was initially allowed one friend for playdates, and they were given permission to go to Home Depot for paint, in order to spend an afternoon sprawled on the kitchen nook floor refurbishing some old jeans. I ignored the evidence of stopping for coffee at a non-drive-through shop, but only half-jokingly got out a tape measure to show them what six feet apart really looks like. Despite this their heads drew close as they each bent over their oeuvre, trading stories about college life, and laughing at inside jokes. I moved around in the background, enjoying their radiance, yet avoiding getting so close that my big shadow would block out their light. My daughter transformed white jeans into a black splotched dairy cow, and they looked fantastic.

Two weeks later friends are no longer allowed, and she is grounded, like the rest



Ann Stout and "Hot Liza."

of us. The paints and hairdryer used for the art session are still out. I've not put them away nor asked her to do so. Their presence is as confusing as is hers, on some days a visual reminder of a joyful episode, on others creating a mild annoyance at a teen-aged child leaving their stuff about, again.

We three adults at home

together get into a rhythm of sorts, with occasional solo riffs, duets and battles of the band. Retuning and silent periods restore harmony. Escaping is more difficult, but we have enough indoor and outdoor space to make it possible. We're all on our own in how we handle this quarantine. She prefers to ride her bike at night when

it's dark, to eat the emergency ration pop-tarts before the fresh food, to ignore most of my suggestions about what to eat for lunch or what interesting podcast to listen to.

Despite my best intentions to keep my mouth shut along these lines it keeps opening, a font of wisdom. She's back in the nest and I feel responsible, the Girl Scout troop leader unleashed. It's best when she brings something to me, a poetry writing prompt list created by a friend, a new song she's learned on the guitar, or an interesting discussion they had in class. There is less eye-rolling when she extends the olive branch.

◆◆◆

Before going to bed I knock on her door again which is now unlocked. She opens the door to greet me.

"I came to see your hair." "Do you like it?" she asks eagerly, as she leans towards me, shaking her locks like a horse shakes its mane.

"I love it!" I exclaim, with all my heart. She is bright as a new penny, shiny and full of promise. The color is pinkish-gold, not "hot Liza", the name she gave to hot pink in preschool. But she is not the girl she was in preschool, and I can't hold on to that beloved child any more than I can hold on to the one standing in front of me.

"It really looks great; do you like it?" I ask

"Yeah, I do, I kind of wanted it a little brighter but this is fine," she says, turning side to side in the mirror to admire it.

My thoughts exactly. THIS is fine. We hug each other and say goodnight.

War-Time Comfort Food is Just as Good Today

By Ben Ballanfant

Here in the South, we love our comfort foods. It may be Blue Bell ice cream, cornbread, brisket, gumbo, strawberry rhubarb pie, or a slew of other wonderful food. I have a new one that isn't from around here — okonomiyaki.

Okonomiyaki, which means "grilled as you like it," is roughly a savory pancake. However, that description doesn't do it justice or speak to its myriad of possibilities.

To fully understand okonomiyaki you have to have a feel for its noble Japanese history.

Its roots can be found as far back as the 1600s, where it started as a crepe-like dessert. It went through minor changes until the great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, when it became common to cook the crepes as there were many things in short supply. This led to people using fish, vegetables, and meat.

Then a similar evolution happened during WWII when rice and other supplies were running low and people needed to be able to make things with readily available ingredients.

Using wheat, cabbage, and other things folks could get their hands on, they made an enjoyable, nutritious, and filling meal. This really came into play after Hiroshima was devastated by the atomic bomb.

Cabbage, onions, and flour were readily available after the surrender and you could add whatever you had on hand and enjoyed.

These days there are two distinct and rival styles of Okonomiyaki, the Hiroshima style and the Osaka style.

The Hiroshima style is in layers, starting with a crepe-like base. Top it with cabbage, then soba noodles, and the layers keep adding up, including fried egg — and of course anything you are wanting to add.

Osaka style has the cabbage, batter, and other veggies all mixed together, then grilled with some meat, traditionally pork belly, on one side. Then the okonomi

sauce and mayonnaise get added along with bonito and seaweed flakes.

After seeing a video on it, I immediately wanted to try one and started looking to see if anywhere in Houston had it. I found one nearby. Then I made my mother watch the video and she wanted to know where to get one as well.



Okonomiyaki is cooked on a flat-top grill.

I told her, "Let's go get lunch."

We weren't disappointed and found a place with great Japanese bar food on Richmond, Yokushi Robata, which you will get a story on another time to do that lovely place justice.

Next was making one

myself. Camping and my flattop grill seemed to be a perfect match.

On a cold night at the Renaissance Festival campgrounds, my friend and I started thinly slicing our cabbage, grating our nagaimo root (trying to be fully authentic), and mixing our batter for a good Osaka style okonomiyaki. (Hiroshima

layers seem very intimidating.)

I've never had a head of cabbage taste so good.

The Japanese kewpie mayo, the barbecue-like okonomi sauce, seaweed and bonito flakes on top of my bacon-embedded pancake

See Comfort page 5