ZELDA BLUE

by

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Zelda Blue! She come to me on the Greyhound bus.

I knowed her the minute she squeezed out the door, backward and butt first, yanking three shopping bags and a feather pillow after her.

She knowed me, too. "Hank," she bellered out when she turned and seen me. That's what she calls me, Hank.

"Yep," I said. Its me, honeybunch.

She dropped the shopping bags and the pillow right there and wrestled me into one humongous hug. She was all fat and jiggly and soft, and strong as a mamma sow. Smelled good, too. A real woman, I mean to tell ya. Sooo-eee!

I mean to tell ya, I was tickled pink.

She let loose of me, finally, and shoved me back to arms length to take another look. "Let's go see them hogs of

yours," she said then.

"Ain't we gonna get hitched first?" I said.

"Why, Hank," she said, "I plumb forgot! Lead me to the preacher!" And she spun me about till she had me hard by the arm, sos we could step out smart, together.

I'm a hog farmer. Zelda, she was a cake baker out East. We was pen pals for three years, so it weren't like we didn't know each other fine afore she popped out of the Greyhound and into Wander Creek here.

We met because Zelda, she put this ad in the Omaha World Herald. She said she put it in the Lincoln Star, too, but I only get the Omaha World Herald, on Sundays, so I didn't see the ad that was in the Lincoln Star. But she says they was the same ad. She'd been out East a long time after coming from the old country, went there with her folks as a kid. But she had her heart set on getting back to farm life. She come from a farm over there. "Wholesome woman seeks farmer with big spread and tractor. Send picture of tractor," her ad said.

Well, I gotta lot of hogs, but not exactly a lot of land, just the north forty, the south forty and a ten.

And I ain't got a tractor that's fit to put in a picture.

But I got Will Wenzl from town to take a picture of me all by my lonesome, wearing my best over-halls and a big smile. On the back of the picture I wrote, "Henry (Hank) Blue, Hog Farmer with Heck of a Big Spread. Partly because ate tractor."

I hoped that might satisfy the requirements of the ad. I had a Big Spread, no kidding, right across the middle. Last time I got on the truck scale over at the grain elevator, I weighed in at close to 350.

I guess Zelda was satisfied, because a week later, here come a letter, with a picture of her as well. She was wearin' a orange dress, which looked darn sharp with her hair, which was pink or red and which stuck out real big.

I wrote back, and she wrote back, and three years later, here she come on the Greyhound bus.

As soon as we got hitched, which was easy, the Greyhound bus stop being in front of the Mayor's house -- the Mayor, he's the Justice of the Peace, too -- we went out and showed Zelda the tractor. Doc Klepac and Mrs. Doc and Will Wenzl and Dot Bernadt, they was our witnesses, we all went out. It was a passel of witnesses. But we ain't small folk, Zelda and me, so I figured to make sure we had enough witnesses between us.

We all went out and I fixed to load Zelda up on the old tractor, like I had promised her in my last 10 letters. She kept writing to make sure that I would take her home on a tractor.

I had got Ms. Dot, the best dagnabbed farm machinery man around, even if she is a woman, to whomp up a surprise for Zelda, so that Zelda wouldn't have to stand on the tractors axle when she was riding. It was a box that Dot welded behind my seat, for Zelda to either stand in or sit in as she saw fit. The box looked like a chariot hanging off the butt end of the tractor. But it wasn't open in the back like a chariot. It had a door on the side to get in and out of it with. And inside there was a seat to set on. And there was handles off the side of my seat, to hang on if you was standing.

You woulda thought that box was better than Ak-Sar-Ben royalty would get the way Zelda carried on when she saw it. "Oh, Hank!" she kept saying, and I thought for a minute she was gonna bust loose crying. "Oh Hank!"

I rocked on my heels and grinned away whilst Zelda walked around and around in amazement.

Dot, she's kind of shy, even if she is the best dagnabbed farm machinery man around, but she looked pleased that Zelda liked her work.

Mrs. Doc, she was still bleary-eyed from blubbering at the hitching and just stood hanging on to Doc's arm and smiling.

Then Doc, he handed Mrs. Doc over to Will so's he could take a closer look at the chariot.

He walked all about the tractor sos he could see the chariot from all sides, whilst I laid Zelda's suitcases and the bags and the pillow into the wagon, and then helped her heft herself up into the chariot. Once she was established, I clumb up into my own catbird seat.

Doc, he was as tickled as Zelda with the new looks of the tractor. He slapped the side of the chariot a good one, like he was slappin' the rear end of a new baby to get it a goin', and looked up to me with a grin. "Fire it up, Hank!" he said.

The tractor shook into life with a roar. "Much obliged! Much obliged to you all for everything!" I heard Zelda beller out, clear and loud even over the roar of the tractor. Sooo-eee, what a woman!

Then we was off for home, right down the main street of Wander Creek, grinnin' and wavin' like yard decorations in a stiff wind. The whole town knew Zelda was comin', because I had mentioned it to Walter Janicek, the town barber, when I had got my hairs trimmed the Monday afore, so there must've been fifteen or twenty people on the five-block stretch of the main street, come out to wave us on.

Two miles west of town and a half mile south, I turned right into the driveway of the home place, and there we was.

I couldn't lift Zelda over the threshold, of course, but we held hands and both made a hop inside together that made the floor boom and echoed around the house about ten times.

I went back out on the front porch for the suitcases and bags and pillows which we had left there. When I got back in, Zelda was already waddling around the living room with her hands settin' on her hips like a couple of flower pots on a wall. She was a lookin' about and frowning.

"Where's Mamma?" says she.

I stopped dead. Holy moly, I thought. Mamma, that was my wife Dolores, 31 years we had and never a fight. Mamma had been dead for eight years, something that was pretty well brought up while Zelda and I was pen pals. "Uh," I said, because I wasn't sure if I hadn't understood her, or if I had just got hitched with a pen pal that was nuttier than a Payday candy bar.

Zelda, she come over and took two of the shopping bags and the pillow from me and started toward the kitchen. "Eyes god, Hank," she said, "You ain't got a picture of her in this here room? What's in here, the kitchen?" She trotted into the kitchen and peeked out to the mud room, and then turned around and run into me as I followed her, which was no small collision even if I hadn't got the suitcases and one of the shopping bags left for protection.

"I put 'em away," said I. "I didn't think you'd want to be reminded of her." I cleared my throat. "This is your place, now."

"Hank," she said, "That just ain't gonna do." She plopped her fat pretty hand on the stair rail to start hauling herself up the stairs.

"I ain't about to be replacing a woman like that," she said. "Now, I'm gonna get started unpacking. Bedroom on the right or the left? The right? All right, now, I'm goin' up to unpack. And I want them pictures back out afore I finish. Put 'em back, ever last one of 'em."

It was the only order that Zelda Blue ever give me, and as soon as she started up the steps, I hopped to it. Back they went, ever last picture that I had put away.

When I got up to the bedroom, I discovered what was under the orange and yeller wedding dress Zelda had worn to get hitched. She was still wearin it when I got there, whilst she stood over a suitcase opened up on the bed between us, rifling through the pocket to make sure it was empty.

She seen me, and she looked across the bed at me, pattin' her cheeks like she was hot. The next thing I knew, she was wrestling with that dress, and it was comin' off over her head right in front of me, like I was her kid sister instead of a fella.

"Oh, Hank," she said, "I'm so glad to be here."

And there she was, standing there in lady things, lady things of every description, as far as the eye could see, up and down and side to side, a considerable distance, with doo dads and gee gaws in ever conceivable place. And every bit of it was lavendar.

And she closed that suitcase and set it aside and popped open another.

I set on the bed and watched her unpack, her wearing nothing but them lavendar lady things, and without one wit of embarrassment. In that second suitcase was more lavendar foo foo lady things, billowin' and snapping as she shook them out and folded them up again and lay them out smooth in the dresser drawers that used to be Mamma's.

Within a few days, Zelda, she shook out and refolded the whole inside of the house, getting rid of the sadness dust, she said. She tugged sheets out of chests, yanked plates off the cupboard shelves and clothes out of the closet, and run anything that moved through suds and scalding water.

She didn't change nothing.

She just set it to rights.

Mamma, bless her, had run a good house, says Zelda, so why change things. The place only needed a womans love again.

So we didn't get new bath towels or remodel the kitchen. The house stayed the same.

But what went on in that there house, now that was different. Real different. I mean to tell you, there was considerable goings on there, up on the second floor, to the right. I mean to tell you, that woman was plain ramBUNCtious. Sooo-eee!

And then there was the cakes. She was turning out cakes of every shape, color and flavor and then gobbing on frosting of every shape and color. Baking, baking, baking. And taking, taking, taking. She watched the Wander Creek Crier for every event worth a cake, and off she would go with one. New baby cake, frosted pink or blue, depending. Cake for the flu, frosted green. Cakes for funerals, black. Cakes for weddings and birthdays, finishing planting, usually, pink or blue of some shade, but sometimes sky blue with angels and white roses.

"Hank," she said to me one day, "I been a cake baker all my life. I aim to make my place in this here town, and I don't know how else to do it."

"Go to it, then, honey bunch," I said. And she didn't slap my finger from the bowl no time.

Of course, folks started stopping by to say much obliged. There was coming and going and going and coming and most everybody walked out of Zelda Blue's kitchen with a might mad glow in their eyes.

All that to doin' in that woman picked you up like you was a slice of bread in a toaster next to a high power line. Some folks couldnt handle much of that, and what they couldn't fit in come popping out their eyeballs. They'd walk out the kitchen gabbin' ten miles a minute and having one happy hissy fit of a hog happy good time, and there was them glowing eyes.

But there was a few folks, they was different. Hen types. The Ying Yang Crowd, I call'em. Its how they talk, through their noses. Ying ying ying yang yang yang. They was used to being the high hogs in town, and they didn't take too kindly to Zelda Blue. Them folks might stop by, but more often, they would write a note on prissy paper.

I saw one of them notes. It was from Mavis Hinkelbum, head of the Ying Yangs. "How kind of you, dear," it said, "You were sweet to think of us on the day our new septic field was re-done. You shouldn't have." Fancy paper and fancy words, but not a thank you in there nowhere that I could find.

But Zelda kept at it. She wanted to fit in, and cakes seemed her best bet.

I told her she was my best hog, and always would be, but all she did was give me a big slobbering kiss on the cheek and say, "I love you, too, Hank."

"Go to it, then, honey bunch," I said. Even the Ying Yangs has got to buckle under to the likes of you!"

And next time I was over in Auburn to look at some hog sheds, I stopped at the Piggly Wiggly and bought up all the powdered sugar they had on the shelf. And then I stopped across town at the Hinky Dinky and got some more.

Before I went to the Jack and Jill in Humboldt for even more powdered sugar, I stopped at the house and got Zelda. When we showed up at the Jack and Jill, though, and made our way to the cake and bake section, there was signs over the sugar and flour. LIMIT ONE, they said. One! So we each got one powdered sugar and one regular sugar, fixin to pay separate and come back later for more. We put them in the same shopping cart and headed for the front of the store to the check out counter. We was in Zeldas territory so she pushed the shopping cart. The aisle was too narrow for the both of us, so she went first and I tagged behind single file like we was cows headed out to pasture.

Wham! Zelda stopped and I rear-ended her, no small occasion. We was almost to the end of the aisle and I was lookin at the Karo corn syrup as we went by, dark, light, clear, and then kabam!

You cannot buy two of each. A voice like an officious chicken. Mavis Hinkelbum! My eyes wasnt focused yet, but Id recognize that ying yang voice anywheres.

Hank is buying one of each, Zelda says, sweet as a newborn piglet. And I am in fact buying only one of each.

He is still alive, then? Mavis says. I peeked over Zeldas shoulder to see what was happening, but my eyeballs wast working yet and all I could focus on was the top of Maviss big beehive hair whipping around and trying to do some serious harm to the instant pudding boxes to her right. Despite the food?

What? Zelda says, and her elbows is starting to wobble, like shes pumping herself up, but her voice is still smooth as blended pig slop.

I see that you have forgotten your cake mixes, Mavis says, changing the subject. Holy moly! A mix! Zelda?! They are in the next aisle. A pity you had to look so hard for them. It hardly makes sense that theyre not with the baking goods, but there are so many, you know.

I were gosh darn happy to be at Zeldas butt end and out of the way. Her elbows is raring back at me like shes getting ready to push that cart like a battering ram. But, my honey bunch, she is a real humdinger, she keeps her cool. She dont let loose with the cart. Eyes god, she says, Cake mix? Mix? What is that? She stayed friendly like as if she was talking to Mamma. Perhaps you would like to come by and show me how it is used, says she. Double holy moly! Mavis was the cake queen of Wander Creek afore Zelda come squeezin off the bus. Intimatin that Mavis knew how to use a mix? This were serious! Im sure you know lots about it. You knew right off where it was, after all.

I heard a test clang of metal shopping cart to metal shopping cart. Mavis and my honey bunch was about to clash like them there sumo wrestlers. The carts would be mashed! Scrappy could afford to pay for one, but I was saving up for a birthday present. I couldnt pay for a cart. Maybe two, if they said it was all my fault.

Whoa! says I.

Whos there? says Mavis. Is that you, Hank Blue? Where are you?

Yep. Its me. I swallered. Uh, I was just tyin my shoes, thats all. Im here. Zelda, she tried to turn sideways to let me get past her, but it werent no use. So I just yelled over at Mavis, I said, Lets save this face off for the cake walk. My honey bunch would win. She is the best. And she dont gotta prove it to every ying yang with a shopping cart. No use going at it here.

I heard another bang of metal. Zelda, she hadnt moved, but Mavis werent settled down yet. You stop that right now, Mavis Hinkelbum, I said, Or Ill tell Scrappy where that dent come from in the fender of his new tractor! I had seen Mavis drive it into town and seen her dent it with my own two eyes. I seen you, thats right! I said.

Whew. That about did it. There was a bit of a set to about which one would back out of the aisle to let the othern through, Zelda or Mavis, but we all come out in one piece. We checked out fast, one of each sugar apiece, whilst Mavis was back at the meat counter ordering veal.

When we got out to the tractor, which was parked right out in front of the store, I helped Zelda heft herself up in the chariot, and stored the food stuff on the floor next to her feet. Hank, she says then, as Im climbing up into the catbird seat, Whats a cake walk?

Dont you worry, honeybunch, I said, You are already the best cake baker in Wander Creek. You dont gotta win the cake walk to prove it. Its fixed anyway. The Ying Yangs is in charge. Thats what I said, but I was hoping she would give it a go anyways. She really could win if the Yings Yangs was out of it. How that would happen, I couldnt say, no moren a jar of hog knuckles could tell whose paw is fishing one of em out next.

When we got home, werent no talk about cakes for some time. Zelda had got new froo froo things in the mail, all lavender.

Like I was telling Walter Janicek, the town barber, sooo-eee, who woulda thunk!

I never figure to tell that guy much, but sometimes it's just too much to sit on! Walter, it's a wonder the Wander Creek Crier has any business at all except for obituaries and legal notices. Tell Walter anything, and everybody knows within hours. With frills that you never even thought about.

But I gotta pick up the news, and Walter, he won't let you just sit there to listen. You gotta be there for a hair cut. So every so often I spend a Monday getting my hairs cut there -- what few are left -- and I hear what's new.

So, "Holy moly, soooo-eee!" I said to Walter, and then I ducked. Just in time, too. I could feel the wind of those scissors of his whistling past where my ear had been. "Pay attention, dagnabbit!" I said. But I felt bad for cursing him. I had said it just as much for myself to hear as to curse Walter. Now Hank, I said to myself, That's all you better say about goings on at home. I changed the subject, for both Walter and for the sake of my ears, which I wanted to keep in one piece. To cakes.

Who got what cake and why, now that's more safe to talk about.

Besides, anybody passin' by and seein' that lavender foo foo stuff flappin' in the wind at our place would gotta be stupider than a John Deere tractor painted orange, not to figure out there was some considerable goings on there since Zelda Blue had took up residence. I don't know where she gets all them doo dads, but they sure make you just wanna -- anyway, I changed the subject to cakes.

Walter always was desperate anxious to hear about them cakes. He had been pretty quick to start measuring the importance of events by the cake Zelda took. He had put together a Zelda Cake Index by the second Monday after the hitching. So that's what he wanted to know from me. Big cake, little, fat, frosted, chocolate, carrot, he had to have all the information before he could apply the index. I didn't have to do nothing about the event, Walter could always make up the details. And did.

I didnt tell Walter about the set to at the Jack and Jill, but I did fill him in about how Zelda, she was trying to come up with just the right cake for the Forty Sixth Annual Cake Walk.

No doubt at all, the Forty Sixth Annual Cake Walk was the big doin's of the year. As the Wander Creek Crier's headlines had blared out that week, "46TH ANNUAL CAKE WALK, BIG DOIN'S OF THE YEAR!" And there was more: "Sandra S. DeLong, Famous Writer And Second Cousin Once Removed To Mavis Hinkelbum, To Attend!"

The Cake Walk, it was a big fund raiser for the library auxiliary, and with Sandra S. DeLong there, it was a gonna be a banner year.

Sandra S. DeLong, she writes them lady books. I never heard of her afore, but all the women folk, they was in a tizzy, even my honey bunch. But especially the Ying Yang Crowd. Ying ying ying, Sandra S. DeLong... gracious...well-bred...lovely...ying ying yang yang yang.

You woulda thought DeLong had been the Pork Queen for the State of Nebraska two years running. I didn't understand it much. I picked up one of DeLong's books that Zelda had set aside while she whomped up a breakfast for me, and I read about half a page. "By then, they were both drenched in sweat. She slid her mouth down to..." I looked at the page again, lower down. "He touched her there, gently at first, and she gasped with pleasure. Then he moved his hand to...." Soooo-EEEE, who woulda thunk that them kind of words would be allowed outside a Future Farmers of America handbook.

Anyways, pretty quick, Mavis got Sandra S. DeLong named as the Grand Marshal and head of the judging committee.

"Zelda is really fittin' to bust a gut to come up with the right cake for the Cake Walk," I told Walter. "She wants DeLong and the town to be plumb astonished."

"What's she doing?" Walter asked, innocent as a baby piglet sucking the wrong sow's teat. As if he wasn't about to run out the door proclamating as soon as I give him the information.

"Dunno," I said.

But Walter kept rooting around until I couldn't hardly stand it no more. Finally, I blurted out something, anything. "Well, actually, I do know. But I can't tell ya."

Walter's scissors stopped moving in mid-air. Lulled by a false sense of safety, I was then, without them slicing machines waving about in a different direction with every word I said. I shoulda knowed there would be trouble. But dagnabbit, I've always got my hair cut there. And afore I knowed it, off I went.

"First, she figgers on a heart," I said. "A big heart. And I mean big. That woman don't do small, as you all know."

The fellas waiting for their hair cuts give a nod. Old Otto Covault, he's up next and closest to me, he raised his eyebrows clear up to his hairpiece, but his mouth stayed in that frown of his. Otto, he's gotta come to Walter's, too, like the rest of us. Has to get new hairpieces from time to time, once they get whittled down under Walter's scissors. But he don't wanna miss the news.

"That there cake was gonna be red. Real red. Then pink. Then red pink. Then white, inside and out, with big old white roses and real satin ribbon," I said. "Then one morning at breakfast, she says to me, she says, 'No, Hank, I ain't gonna do that."

"Yeah?" Walter said. And I heard them scissors start clicking again. Click click click, like a evil space robot looking for something to slice.

"Walter, just put some tonic on up there and call it a day," I said. I had gone too far. This particular cake was supposed to be a secret until the Cake Walk. I knew I had to get out. If I didn't, either my talkin' or those scissors of Walter's was gonna get me sure. But then Walter got the bottle of tonic open, and it sure smelled good. So I set back again and relaxed.

"Well...well..." I said. Walter, he was massaging that tonic in like bacon grease on a burn. Them scissors was far away. And my mouth took off on its own. "Anyways," I said, "Then she says to me at breakfast, give me your hands. And she says, OK, Hank, hold 'em like so. And she says, Now that will certainly work. What? I asks. And she says, I'm gonna make a mold from them, for the Cake Walk cake."

"For a cake?" asked Walter. He was puzzled.

"Yep," I said, holding my hands out in front of me in a position like I was holding two watermelons up and next to each other. "To go on a cake. Like this. The mother hog of cakes. Shes gonna make cakes shaped like my hands to be fastened on to cakes that look like a pair of...."

I looked around. Dagnabbit. I gulped and felt my eyeballs popping past my forehead. But on my mouth went. "To be fastened to a pair of...boobs...like -- you know." Holy moly. I tore the barber bib off me and threw it at Furd Findlay who was sitting next to Otto. "Well, that Sandra S. DeLong, she writes what Zelda says the women folk call bodice rippers. Bodice is what they call the top of the dress, you know. And Zelda was figgerin' to .... well, you know. Make a ripped bodice cake. And inside a bodice is...you know, boobs." It had sounded fine when Zelda explained it at home, anyways. Like I said, that woman is plain ramBUNCtious. And its catchy.

Old Otto Covault sat back on the bench and pushed his hairpiece back to rub the top of his head. He does that when he gets heated or amazed, keeps forgetting it's a hairpiece and not a hat. As hed listened to me, his eyebrows had flew up higher and higher, getting farther and farther away from that frown. Course they don't know where to stop if they hadnt got that hairpiece to bump into. They was pretty far up by the end.

And Walter, even as I clumb out of that there chair, he pulled them scissors out to try to get more information from me, slicing up air. Clip clip clip clip. "I missed a couple places," Walter said, "Sit back, Hank, and let me even them up."

I ain't got but 20 hairs left, and he'd already clipped them five times apiece to keep me in the chair. I weren't lettin' him get any closer to my scalp. I hauled up out of that chair like an old boar coming up out of the mud at feeding time.

"Anyways," I said, trying to think of a way to keep Walter from running out and proclamating about hands and, you know, boobs. "I don't know if that's what she's really gonna do," I said. I was at the door! "She ain't even molded my hands yet." And I was out!

Good thing, too. Zelda was gonna do the molding tonight. At least I had rescued that part of the information from the public ear.

Doc Klepac come toward me, headed for the barber shop. And I said, "Tonight!" afore I could stop myself. "She's doing it tonight!"

Doc, he didnt have no more idea of what I was sayin than a hog has of whats in its swill. But he liked it, anyway. "I'll be dog," Doc said, and grinned. "Well, then, fire it up, Hank!" He ambled on into the barbershop. Hed find out the details in there soon enough.

I headed home. No other choice.

"Eyes god, Hank!" Zelda said a couple of mornings later. She slapped the Wander Creek Crier on the breakfast table. "Look at this."

"46th ANNUAL CAKE WALK TO HAVE RULES!" it said. And in smaller letters, "Information From Barber Walter Janicek Troubles Library Auxiliary Committee." A Janicek report. I knowed it. I just knowed it.

I took a swaller of my coffee and tried to look innocent. Not that it'd do any good. But my honey bunch, ain't she something, she don't even ask how Walter had knew what was going' on.

"It says I can't do body parts," Zelda said. "No kind at all, not even boobs. I don't get it."

I made a show of reading the article and looking real surprised.

Mavis Hinkelbum, head of the committee for the 46th Annual Cake Walk, sponsored by the library auxiliary, announced that, for the first time ever, the Cake Walk will have written rules. According to Mrs. Hinkelbum, the rules merely formalize longstanding tradition. They include prohibitions against the use of cakes in the shape of body parts. No body parts whatsoever of any kind, especially those concerning a woman's body.

"I cant make any sense of it," Zelda said, "I called Mrs. Doc. She said that maybe too many folks got bad hearts and maybe they just couldn't take it."

In particular, no full length representation of a woman without clothes on will be allowed, particular with a representation of a man's hands anywhere close. No clothes falling to the floor, nor cherries as decorations, either. The full rules are printed on page 4 of this paper, below the legal notices.

"I'm sorry, honey bunch," I said. Clothes fallin' to the floor? As per usual, Walter had made up details after hed run out of news.

I turned to page 4 and read through the rules while Zelda went over and give Mamma a freshen up on her tea, and a hunk of coffee cake. As she walked by me to go pull a skillet of fried taters 'n eggs off the stove, she give me a solid love whack on the back of the head that near popped my eyeballs out of the sockets.

"Can't you at least do a heart?" I said, gettin' my eyes focused back, "These rules don't make sense. Is ever last body part out of the question?

I sipped my coffee as Zelda slopped some taters onto my plate from outta the skillet. "I don't know," she said. She set the skillet on the table and settled down in her chair opposite me like a battleship goin' down after a torpedo attack.

"Say, honey bunch," I said, thinking. I do that from time to time. "The paper come out yesterday, didn't it? Was it late?"

"No. Come yesterday. On time."

"If that's so, then how come then you went ahead and took a mold of my hands last night? If you already knew you couldn't do body parts, and all?

"Didn't you have fun?" she said.

I sighed. Like I said. RamBUNCtious. Then I shoveled taters 'n eggs into my mouth. And I looked over at Mamma.

At Mamma's picture, anyway, sitting over in the south-west corner of the kitchen. Zelda had made a Mamma shrine there. There was a picture of Mamma, a snapshot that Zelda had found of Mamma sitting here in the kitchen, wrapped in a yellow apron and flipping a dish towel up at the camera. Our boy Bobby took that picture. "Sugar, lemon or milk?" Zelda had asked the first morning she had put the picture out. When I just gaped at her, she said, "What did Mamma have in her tea?" Then I saw that mug of tea in the picture, a Lipton tag hanging over the side. "Sugar. One teaspoon," I said, and in went a teaspoon of sugar into a mug of tea, and the mug went in front of the picture. And every meal, Zelda set out a cup of tea and a bit for Mamma to eat. Mamma could take what she wanted, as Zelda said. So we never forgot Mamma at our house, and anyone who come to the house got set down right there in the kitchen, and had tea and cakes with Zelda and Mamma both.

While I gulped the dregs of my coffee down, Zelda was up

stackin' the dishes in the sink.

"Good swill, honey bunch," I said. I said that every morning, and I sure did mean it.

She whipped off her apron. "Will you give me a ride on the tractor, Hank?" she asked. She said that every morning, too, and I said, "Yep." And out we go to the tractor.

Zelda, she loved a tractor ride in the morning.

She liked to stand there in the chariot with her arms wrapped around my middle instead of on the handles that Dot welded onto the seat. She looked over my shoulder, and we took a drive to see how the place has weathered the night. Down around the barn, over to the creek, out to the fence line on the north 40, and back, sayin' hello to the hogs and the birds.

We didnt talk much, but she liked me to point out stuff here and there. A sow close enough to dropping a litter to be penned up. A fence to fix. The corn crib getting low. When I said something she liked, she gave me a snuggle that warms me up all day long.

Mamma, she didn't hug me as much, and her lady things was all white. But she was a good old girl. Funny, but I wisht Zelda had been here for Mamma at the last. It were a hard time for Mamma, that bone cancer stuff. She left us piece by piece, Mamma did. The front leg, that was OK with her, she could get around, even when they took it off up to the hip. But after that, when they started with the other one, it were real hard on her. She were a quiet old girl, and she spent all her time looking after me and Bobby for so long, she didn't have no friends, nobody to talk to that she didn't have to act strong for. If only Mamma could have had Zelda as a best friend.

THE WANDER CREEK CRIER:

RULES CLARIFIED FOR 46TH ANNUAL CAKE WALK

Mavis Hinkelbum, chairman of the 46th Annual Cake Walk committee said yesterday in a press conference following a special emergency meeting that the committee had voted to soften the prohibition excluding body parts. Symbolic representations of a heart, such as a valentine, will be permitted. According to Mrs. Peabody Klepac, banning a heart would keep the American Heart Association from entering a cake if they wanted to, and it was not the committee's intent to prevent such an entry. Symbolism is OK. But absolutely none of that graphic stuff will be tolerated.

As to the rest of the Cake Walk, it will be conducted as always. There will first be a judging of the cakes. This year, Wander Creek will be honored by the appearance of romance writer Sandra S. DeLong, who has agreed to be the Grand Marshall and head of the judging committee. After the judging of the cakes, there will be the Walk, following the traditional rules. The music will again be Pop Goes the Weasel.

CAKE WALK NIGHT TONIGHT AT THE WANDER CREEK HIGH SCHOOL GYM! as the poster said in the window at Alf Conradt's filling station and farm machinery fix-it shop. Me and Zelda, us and Doc and Mrs. Doc and Will Wenzl and Dot, we got there early for to help Zelda set up her cake.

When we wandered in, a couple members of the Ying Yang Crowd was arguing about which side of the circles that make up the Cake Walk circle should face inward.

Mavis, she come over and when she saw that Zelda's cake had more than one piece to it, she made us set up over in a corner. Took up too much room, said she, couldn't have that thing out, wouldn't be room for nobody else's. No way polite, was she, neither.

I mean ta tell you, if that woman was a hog, she'd be kin to that big old boar of mine what has its own mind about where it wants to go and when. I gotta get the truck out to nudge it around to get it movin' somewhere that ain't of its own making. One time it were down by the creek, and the creek arisin' and that old boar was just sittin' there, determined to stay. Took me half the night and a full tank of gas to get it to high ground. Anyway, that Mavis, is like that old boar. She is going to get her own way unless you got a truck that is bigger than her. And even then yer not sure she ain't gonna tip you over, if she can, just for the meanness of it.

My honeybunch, now, she could take Mavis if'n she wanted, but shes too polite to try. So instead of watching a fight, we all settled down to watch the building of her cake.

"These cakes bespeak of every facet of love and romance," said this Sandra S. DeLong woman. She ambled along next to the table the cakes was on. "What lovely sentiment, how delicately expressed." She stopped in front of Mavis Hinklebum's cake, a heart with pink and white roses and gee-gaws whomped up so deep on it that you wasn't sure there really was a heart underneath or actually a pair of, you know...boobs -- of course, the latter was against the rules, so that must've been a heart under there. Mavis was walking with the Ying Ying Crowd, they always got themselves appointed to be the judging committee, and the Ying Yang Crowd was right on DeLong's heels.

"And this," Sandra S. DeLong said, stopping in front of a cake that was square and had a picture squiggled on it. She framed it with her hands to view it. "It is a wonderful portrait of romance." There was some sort of conglomeration of roses and a swing on it, but you couldn't tell who the heck was in the swing or what they was doin' in it, exactly.

DeLong kept agoin,' saying something nice and polite about each cake. Even though she was only saying good things, ever' woman in Wander Creek was holdin' her breath until DeLong had passed judgment on her cake.

"Oh my," DeLong said close to the end of the table. "Look at this! That's the best darn..." For a second there, her voice snapped out of that citified sighing of hers. It sounded kind of like someone from these parts. "I mean, what a fabulous example of l'art rustique! Simply fabulous, my dears!" It was a cake shaped like a chicken. A chicken wearing a necklace. A pink heart pendant necklace. "Ce gateau est magnifique," DeLong said. The committee smiled, polite but blank.

DeLong looked at the committee like she expected them to say something back to her. "Jaimerais faire la connaissance de lartiste qui a confectionné ce gateau," DeLong said, evidently trying again.

The committee froze like statues. They was caught off guard. Nobody had warned them that they would have to know French talk to keep up with DeLong.

Sandra S. DeLong looked around the room. "Who made this chicken cake?" she said to the crowd in a loud clear voice, all but ignoring the committee.

Mrs. Doc stepped forward and put her hand up. "Me. Uh, I made it."

"It's a great cake," Sandra S. DeLong said, and she walked over to Mrs. Doc and took her hands and put them together and patted them. "I like it very, very much. So creative and daring, my dear."

Mrs. Doc smiled a bitty smile. She don't like to be in the center of things, and everybody was staring. She was a mighty shy person to be steppin' forward like that. But I thought about her comin' out to the committee about the Heart Association, too, so that the committee of Ying Yangs would at least allow symbolic representations. I thought I might be needin' to change my mind about Mrs. Docs shyness purty quick.

"Walk with us, dear, to see the rest of the cakes," said Sandra S. DeLong. She took Mrs. Doc by the shoulder. "Won't you?"

Off they went. DeLong had more nice things to say about the rest of the cakes, too. They got to the end of the table, and DeLong, she apparently thought that were it, there weren't no more cakes, because she started to sum up the whole collection. But trim my hogs toenails, she hadn't seen Zelda's cake yet! So that's why Mavis had put Zelda off in a corner. "Those were wonderful cakes, ladies of Wander Creek," DeLong said.

Then someone called out from the crowd. "You ain't seen all of 'em!" And someone else called out from another part of the crowd, "They stuck one of the cakes off by itself!" "Go see Zelda's cake!" "Zelda Blue's cake!" "Zelda's!" There was a near enough riot. Every woman that ever had tea with Zelda and Mamma, they was speaking up. I mean to say, my honey bunch had a mess of friends!

Sandra S. DeLong looked about but couldnt seem to see nothing but the end of the table and the crowd. Mrs. Doc said something to her.

Sandra S. DeLong, she looked back at the judging committee and glared at them. Then she turned back to the crowd. "I'm sorry! I understand that there is one cake remaining. Where is it? Over in that corner?" She had another pow-wow with Mrs. Doc, then she turned in our direction. Arm in arm, she and Mrs. Doc waded toward us through the crowd, which was nigh onto ten people deep. The committee followed like little lost piglets. Mavis was coming up from behind and trying to squeeze in between DeLong and Mrs. Doc, all the while saying to DeLong, "Nothing really...not in keeping with the theme...don't bother..." DeLong ignored her. "Sorry....too big for the regular table....."

The crowd parted, and there was Sandra S. DeLong and Mrs. Doc, arrived in front of us. I was still standing up on the bleachers, where I could see everything, up behind the cakes, but Zelda, she was down on the floor, in front of the table, with her back to me.

She was wearin' a new made dress, white with teeny pink pigs all over like polka dots. You could see just a skosh of lavender showin' through the white. Her hair was sprayed solid into curls like it had just come out of hair rollers. The hair spray, it looked like it was put on with a brush. I mean to tell ya, that was one gorgeous woman!

After all the to do, she was afeard and a mite flighty about the cake. She'd got her arms crossed and her hands was making deep caves in the rolls of fat above her elbows.

Sandra S. DeLong walked toward us. She was looking at Zelda, and then up at me. I give DeLong a big ol' wink over Zelda's shoulder and pointed down at the cake, which she couldn't quite see because Zelda was still in front of it.

DeLong, she come up to Zelda. "May I?"

Zelda got her wits about her, finally. We laughed about it later. It was kind of like when she got off the bus and wanted to get on that tractor and go see the hogs and all but forgit about gettin' hitched first. She was so fixed on what DeLong would say about that cake that she forgot that DeLong had to see it first. "Please," said Zelda, and then she stepped aside, gracious as the Mrs. Pork Queen that she was gonna be once they run the annual contest.

Sandra S. DeLong laid her eyes on the cake, and she up and made this terrible sound. It sounded like a tornado suckin' up mud and water from a hog waller. I got this feeling in my belly like the hogs that had run from the tornado had run into my belly and was trompin' around inside.

Then DeLong's voice come back and she was talking that French talk and grinnin and laughin like a crazy woman and she couldn't hardly catch her breath for talking about that cake, she just couldn't shut up. She hooked Mavis Hinkelbum right by the arm so as how Mavis couldnt get away, and looked Mavis right in the face and bellered at her, Je suis etoneé, she bellered, Surprise par la beauté de ce gateau qui evoque le pouvoir de lamour et la tension creative par la robuste engagement de deux incarnations de lamour. Mavis was dead stopped; she tried to smile and turn away, acting like she had understood ever word. But DeLong had her by the shoulders, and she bellered right in Maviss face, Et tu, ma cousin? And DeLongs eyes glowed with that high-power tension line look like somebody leaving the house after theyd just had tea with Zelda and Mamma. And like DeLong wanted an answer from Mavis, and I mean to tell you right now.

Mavis, she looked at DeLong and she looked at the cake and she looked at Zelda Blue and she looked nigh to fainting. Then she pulled away from DeLong and run into the crowd like one of them British fellas in that Johnny Horton song about the Battle of New Orleans. She run through the briars and she run through the brambles, is how I sing it now, She run so fast that the hogs couldnt catch er. Mavis didnt even answer whatever it was DeLong had asked.

DeLong laughed and turned and give the cake all she had, sidlin around the table to see it from every angle and raving about how she must have a picture of it for the cover of her next book.

DeLong called the cake a representation of rambunctiousness. My sentiments, exactly.

And then she called it the best danged cake she ever saw. Them was her words, the best danged cake she ever saw, and I happened to be in agreement with that, too.

Zelda turned to look up at me, her arms still crossed, resting above her belly, and grinned like a politician what had whomped up a good speech and had got it all out afore the tomatoes started aflyin'. I crossed my own arms across my own heck of a spread and grinned right back.

Zelda's cake was a bunch of cakes set together to make a scene.

A purty old farm house, all frosted white and with a porch just like ours, was to one side of the cake. There was even white curtains ablowin' out a open window on the second floor.

There was a clothesline just like ours, six wires stretched from the house and out into the yard, with purple flowers at the bottom of the clothesline poles. And lavender lady things with brown frosting clothes pins was on them clotheslines and flappin' and blowin' in one mighty fierce wind. Well, they wasn't moving, but they looked like they would any minute.

And blastin' through the clothesline was a old green tractor, with lady things and doo-dads flyin' ever which way falling off the tractor and trailing behind the tractor. The clothesline was stretched to breaking, and that tractor was even spitting up real looking dirt clods from behind its wheels.

The whole things was "movement and power," like the Wander Creek Crier later reported DeLong had said, "froze at the perfect moment."

Walter give it a Zelda Cake Index rating that was nigh off the scale.

And it was all made of nothing but cake and frosting, yet fit for a art museum.

There wasn't a heart nowheres to be found, but Sandra S. DeLong, she said it was "startling," and "sensual," and "highly suggestive," and pretty well embarrassed me with some of her words. I just liked them lavender doo dads and the tractor and our house and all that was on it.

Mavis Hinkelbum's cake was given the Committee's Choice award. But Zelda got the grand prize, awarded personally by Sandra S. DeLong, the famous romance writer, with a hug and a kiss on each cheek. And once the Cake Walk got started, Zelda's was the cake that got chose first. Furd Findlay got it and had a dilly of a time gettin' it out to his pickup truck. It took several young ladies to help him out with it, and to help him politely (sort of) beat off the Slater family, what is always around for a free meal.

Folks was comin by and shaking Zelda's hands and Zelda she was chittin' and chattin' a mile a minute and handin' out and gettin' invitations until nigh on ten p.m.

I took Zelda by the hand then, and I didn't need to say one word.

"I'm ready, Hank," she said. "Let's git on home."

Sandra S. DeLong followed us out as we waded through the crowd, Zelda wavin' like a princess. Almost everybody got in a good night to us, and a few folks followed us out and stood outside at the door of the school gym with DeLong.

I helped Zelda up in her chariot. As I give her a heave ho from behind, them pigs on her dress swum around afore my eyes and purty near made me dizzy. I give her a pat on the butt afore she could turn and get herself situated. When she did finally get herself hoisted up behind my seat, she looked down and give me a smile like she give me that first night over the suitcases when she was unpacking.

I drove by the door of the gym on the way out of the parking

lot so Zelda could wave to DeLong one more time. I give my one-finger wave from the steering wheel and a nod of the head. Zelda only had me by one arm, and I knew she was using the other to wave humongous to DeLong and them.

"I'll call you!" DeLong shouted out to Zelda over the roar of the tractor, as I shifted into second gear to move out.

Then we was out on the dirt road and storming home in the moonlight at 30 miles an hour. Zelda was standing behind me and huggin' me round the middle with her head leaned light against my back like a 20 pound sack of sugar.

And I was thinking on that Cake Walk cake, with them little bitty lavender lady things with all the little bitty doo dads on em, and the clods of dirt kickin' out from under that little bitty tractor's wheels, and I was thinking on how many folks there was what had spoke up to make sure DeLong saw that cake.

And I was thinking on how Zelda's hands had dug into the hams above her elbows while DeLong had been making her way over toward Zelda. And on DeLong a lookin' over that cake.

And on how them pig polka dots was jigglin' right behind me right now, right that minute, with them lavender lady things right there underneath them.

And I was thinking on the day what she had come to me, squeezing butt first out the door of the bus, fit to bustin' with her fine pretty ways, and cake know-how, too.

Holy moly, how could all that woman have fit on one Greyhound bus?

Zelda!

Zelda Blue!

She's a real humdinger, ain't she?

Sooooo-EEEEE!