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S.S. Pierce

Alice Stern

It could have been a ship. An English ship if the letters had been H.M.S. But it was a truck, and the letters on it were S.S. It came thundering along the highway by our house. Such a start it gave me, seeing an S.S. Pierce truck go by! I hadn't seen that name for the longest time, not since we'd moved upstate from the city. Not since the times I'd decide to take the elevator instead of the escalator in the now defunct B. Altman's department store, which meant walking all the way to the back where the elevator bank was and the specialty foods department, past the S.S. Pierce cans stacked in pyramids and the cellophane-wrapped gift baskets tied with big red bows.

Old ladies—not that old, still vital *elderly* ladies with lovely orderly gray hair (never dyed) and good tailored tweedy clothes who walked nice dogs—ordered S.S. Pierce from the B. Altman's catalogue which arrived in the mail regularly. They'd order quality canned goods and household tissues—facial, bathroom—and Altman's own, private label cold cream soap, by the case twice a year. “Such a sensible thing to do, not having to run down to Broadway to the supermarket, saves the bother and ignominy (oh I get out of there as fast as I can!) and when you count up the number of trips to the store, well, it really pays to order in quantity by phone, and have it delivered to your door.”

These vital, elderly ladies were careful, cunning, but by no means poor. They lived, and still do, in old rent-controlled apartments with thick walls and thick doors, and from out of those thick walls and doors seeps the reassuring smell of brisket and leg of lamb, filling the elevator vestibule at six o'clock in the evening. They walk their dogs and agree: “Oh S.S. Pierce, of course, it's the best,” and “I always...” etc. Did they really say these things, or do I imagine it? There are no women like that up here in the country.

I always wondered what was inside those cans to make them so special. Children wonder: what's inside? I am married but I'm still a child. I even have children, but I'm still a child. So I wonder, what's inside? Is the quality really so much better? the freestone peaches? the young, the early, the *baby* peas? Or is it just canned after all, with a you-can-count-on-it-tasting-canned taste?

Once I decided I would try something by S.S. Pierce. And I did try. I tried so hard! The memory of it pierced me as that truck went by. I tried so hard to please him, but it hurt. It hurt terribly. He said: "After awhile it won't; it will stop hurting." But it didn't. We went to a doctor. A friend recommended one, the kind of doctor neither of us would have known about, or had any reason to visit before this. We both felt humiliated. In the waiting room we couldn't bear to look at each other. The doctor examined me. He questioned me. I said: it hurt terribly. He said: "After awhile it won't; it will stop hurting."

I always went for externals, outward symbols, because inside I was such a failure. Circumstances didn't allow me to have a real wedding, so I didn't get to wear a veil and gown, and I missed these very much. I needed them, because I myself was so lacking. The real thing that mattered wasn't there. Its absence hung in the air. His disappointment hung in the air. It hovered over us years later as we ate S.S. Pierce rum cakes by candlelight.

We were alone together in the house, for the first time since the children were born. Every one of them was out of the house—a combination of grandparental visits, sleep-overs with friends. All five at once—quite a coincidence! Almost a joke—it would make a good sitcom episode—and a cause for celebration. What couple wouldn't celebrate? Alone at last! Dinner for two at a card table set up in the living room before an open fire; lace cloth, candlelight.

"It doesn't count," he used to say. "Window dressing doesn't count."

He doesn't say that anymore. He said, "How nice!" about the lace cloth and the candles. And when I brought in the S.S. Pierce rum cakes in fancy glass dishes, he said: "*Quelle supris!*"

"You clever thing, surprising me like that. When did you get them? You must have hid them."

I had. I'd ordered the rum cakes from the not-yet-defunct B. Altman's and hidden them away for an occasion. They came two in a can, and as I opened one of them I thought of the company's name, *Pierce*, as I brought the little steel triangle of our Swing-Away down into the top and punctured it. The cakes were tiny and there was a lot of syrup, really a lot. What a gyp! Pretending to be so fancy and then filling up their cans with a lot of liquid, just like the so-called inferior brands did.

"How fancy of you," he said about the cut-glass dessert dishes, and he lit a match and held it to the rum cakes so they'd *flambe*. But they didn't. They refused to *flambe*.

He tried again and again and they wouldn't. That was a gyp, too. And then we tasted the rum cakes and they were bitter. Not delicious, not yummy—bitter. He said it was probably because of the rum not catching fire so the alcohol didn't burn off.

Too strong, I thought. Not like the rum cakes I remembered from my childhood—which weren't little, or plural, but big and singular, a bundt-shaped cake from a bakery that filled the whole white cardboard box. You untied the string, lifted the lid and there it sat on a paper doily, all plump and golden and gooey; you could run a finger around the edge and then lick your finger. Lots of syrup but not floating in it. Soaked—impregnated with syrup. And so sweet you always wanted more. "More rum cake, please!"

These little S.S. Pierce rum cakes didn't taste like more. A fancy name to cover up what wasn't delicious. We did our best to finish the too strong, bitter cakes and to pretend that we were enjoying the evening, because not to be enjoying it was too humiliating. A special occasion—our first night alone, with all the children out of the house, and everyone knows what that

means! or should mean (time to play hanky pank or is it *poon tang?*), but we knew we weren't going to. And the knowledge lay heavy between us—that after we finished trying to finish the not good rum cakes we'd look to see if there was anything good on TV that we could watch for awhile, and then he'd excuse himself and go out for a spin in the car while I went to bed, sad, ashamed of my failure, my lacking, and read myself to sleep.