Bring Robbie

Frank Foote*
Dear Avonelle,

Hi Sweetpea. Got your letter and you worried me about Robbie's teething. Giving it much review.

Can't say my mind is sharp. Just got up from supper. Lamb stew. You know how your mind dulls when you're full of a delicious broth? Though I might have over salted the stew a trifle. Still, it was delicious. Sweetpea, think I'll nap and resume this later.

Better! What an interesting challenge retirement is, even forced retirement.

Winters stopped by the other day. He's the new Porksters International chairman, the turncoat. His vote made it unanimous when PI kicked me out. A dozen years at the helm, all my working life at the PI plant, and they kick me out!

Winters said he wanted to say "hello." That's a lie. Probably snooping, wondering if I was buying up PI stock on the sly. For a power play to get the chairmanship back. I've considered it.

Your Aunt Carla can't come to Iowa this summer. She just called, interrupted my writing this to you. "Come see us," I told her. "Bill and Kathy are too busy this summer," she told me. "But they've never visited and will be grown up and never know us," I protested. "They have swimming and Little League and Y-Camp and soccer," she excused her kids. I wish she would write instead of calling. Long distance is a frivolous luxury to her.

Winters wondered whether PI's multi-million dollar settlement with me didn't take the sting out of early retirement? "Of course," I shot back, "it's wonderful for finally getting paid for making PI the best hog processing plant in the state."
Made a discovery. A few months ago. You know how I’ve always kept busy. First I poured the cement patio. Then I built the fireplace out of street brick. Cut a mountain of firewood.

Then I came home from the grocery a little steamed. Produce prices are up and the meat counter, worse. Right that day I adopted a campaign to dig a vegetable pit right next to the patio and plant a big garden this summer.

Robbie’s teething bothers me, Avonelle. Are you getting sleep? Edith always stayed up when you cried all night. I don’t remember what she did for you.

Anyway, I hunted down my old golf shorts and a pair of heavy work shoes I always wore on the PI cutting floor. Used to keep them in my office. Dug out my leather gloves with cement still crusted on them, propped the patio window open to catch the stock reports and attacked with a rusty spade. Picked a sunny day. Marched out there and was down three feet when the Chicago Board of Trade came on. Soil was dry, crumbly.

Winters asked if I was still angry because he’s PI chairman. “No,” I assured him, “PI will lose more money with you at the helm than the $78.3 million I earned them before the current recession.” I think he caught my sarcasm. Now that hard times are here, they would still be making a profit if they had listened. Cut wages to the bone and break the union, I advised them time after time.

Digging that pit wasn’t difficult, you know? I got caught up into it. Even excited, if you can picture your former Captain of Industry that. That night I had a pit four feet square and seven feet deep.

“That oughtta do it,” I told your mom, when she got back from the nursing home. Muscles were sore, but she and I had a fine evening. I told her about digging the pit and she told me about her day at Restview. She said the bedpan crew had a couple of probationaries. They dwaddled with George Anson, you remember that contrary old cuss? Maybe you don’t. Maybe he moved in after you left. Anyway, Anson held them up and when they moved down that string of 30 beds you can imagine what was waiting for them! Those people eliminate on cue whether the bedpan is there or not, Edith says. In two more years, Edith will have been chief floor attendant there twenty years. What a steady gal!

Do you think Edith should change the color of your bedroom? I know you always had light pink, but what about Robbie, when you visit? Wouldn’t the proper color be blue? Or a combination cream? When you two visit?

When I checked the pit the next morning the most wild chittering was coming up. You could not imagine, Avonelle. A squirrel. Don’t ask me how the little fart got in there. Ask it! Its “chitter-chitter” got
on my nerves, so I made a decision fast. I was afraid the noise would carry past our hedge, make the neighbors curious. And it was clawing up my pit.

Just a minute. Doorbell.....I'm back. Two Mormon missionaries. They arrive every four months like clockwork.

Whenever I stuck my head over the pit, that brown fart leapt at me. It was dirty. Shaking. Well, I can tell you, it leapt one too many times. Whacked it with the spade.

Tomorrow the forecast says it'll be warm enough to wash the Lincoln. I do that now. Prices at the car wash are outrageous. So whenever our Iris bed needs watering, I back out the Lincoln and hose it down.

I couldn't let that squirrel go to waste, could I? You know me. We had it for lunch. Threw the entrails into the patio fireplace, just as an experiment of course. My birch logs reduced everything to ashes. So as a joke, I threw in the bones and the hide after supper. Everything reduced to ashes. Amazing. I found a recipe for broiled squirrel and brown gravy in Edith's cookbooks.

Think the Lincoln needs a tune-up. I'm not going back to Preferred Garage. Those farts took out my radio-phone and the color TV the last time I took the Lincoln in for an overhaul. Can you believe what those farts said? Said Winters ordered them to do it. Said Winters would yank the PI fleet from their garage if they didn't do it. Winters told them that I don't work for PI now and he would sue them if they keep billing PI for the Lincoln's work. I said PI made me install those gadgets and PI could damn well pay to keep them working. They wouldn't listen. Even when I shouted.

Before I could finish the pit, a stray dog fell in. What a mess. You know the kind of mut. The neighborhood mooch? A fat little white poodle that's always sniffing around my fireplace? Thinks it's so cute with its white curls and little red bow? The young couple, the Finsters on the end of the block have never liked me, I think. Since the time I took a public stand against sidewalks. Anyway, now they have a German Shepherd pup.

Sweetums, just had an idea. They have those free clinics in Rochester, don't they? Sure they do. Take Robbie there. Don't they have medical samples the drug companies hand out. Sure they do.

That poodle was juicy, I had to admit. After the squirrel turned out so well, it was just a hop, skip and a jump to trying it. I made a clear broth stew that Edith loved. Said it tasted like turkey. Lots of carrots and celery tossed in. Little farts better not jump at me from my pit. I whacked it good. My spade gave a very satisfying "chunk" when I cracked it just above the red bow.

Winters' betrayal still bothers me. I spent five years grooming him
for my chairmanship. Another dozen years and he would have been ready. He was like a son. Many's the time I told him, "You and I are the only men in the world that know how to make PI work." If something happens to Winters, I hope they come to me for help. I won't.

Kids from school have been cutting across our back yard. Guess they think I'm no longer a power in the community so they can do anything. I've dropped out of Rotary Club. PI won't pay my dues. That's why I built the patio, so it would be in the way of the trespassers. It didn't stop them. So I built the brick fireplace so they could see my backyard is private. It didn't stop them. You can see the path they've worn.

I really didn't know how to cover the pit properly, when my problem was solved for me. Without effort. Towards dusk the next evening, I was putting in the livingroom near the patio window when I noticed a little fart straggling home. You know the kind. The little farts that stop and stare and climb all over everything? I must have watched him waste a half hour, I don't remember, because I didn't want to look at my PI watch. Dragging his tennis shoes around my Blue Spruce, splashing his hands in our birdbath, wondering if he could sneak into my brick tool shed. Lucky he didn't try, or I would have been out the door like a shot and chase him home. I thought about sliding the patio door open and warning him, about the pit. No, I decided, let the little idiot look out for himself.

Winters said when he left our house that he "was truly sorry that we couldn't be friends. I thought I could get your advice from time to time." What a PI turncoat. I didn't tell him I've just about completed selling my stock in it. I want no further connection with PI.

I almost missed it. I happened to peek out from the drapes just as his feet slid out from under him. He threw his little arms backward and jerked up and was so startled! Never said a word. Couldn't have been much older than fourth grade. I couldn't tell for sure because of the glare on the window, but I think he saw me in the door just as his head disappeared into the pit. Our eyes met as I stepped through the patio door and for an instant there that fat little fart looked just like Winters, which is foolish, because Winters is almost 40 and has a square chin that women like. It was just an impression, you understand, Avonelle. The temporary cover of a couple of old window screens just didn't hold the boy. I had thrown some grass over the screens so the top of the pit wouldn't draw attention. I wanted to keep the squirrels out. Didn't want any noise to bother the neighbors.

Sam Huff dropped by the other day. Remember you always went out to Edith's farm to play with Sam's kids? Huff said renting Edith's farm all these years, he felt he had earned our good will to buy it. Pay
us off on contract. I told him "indeed you have, Sam. Be sure to see me next March." That's when Ranchero Estates, Inc., will announce their shopping center for Edith's farm. I won't have to tell Huff he'll have to find another farm fast.

Little stragglers taste better than poodles. Now I know that sounds strange, Sweetpea. But think just a minute. I'll bet you never had to hunt up a recipe, did you? It posed quite a challenge, but as I was packaging him for the freezer with a brown paper roll I brought home from PI, the bottom line became clear. At PI we made bacon and ham from the hogs, right? I told Edith I had bought some domestic rabbits as a trial run, to see if we could slash our meat bills. Now we have smoked rabbit sausage and rabbit salami and broiled rabbit ribs and the meat is so tender that it drops off the ribs. Edith thinks my rabbit stew tastes like lamb stew so that's what we call it, lamb stew. Our rabbit ham is a bit smoky. She never has once guessed.

Don't you be telling her, either! Our food bills are down. I tell Edith, we'll get a lot more social security if she can hang on another five years. You never know when the economy will take a nosedive again. We use Edith's income for the apartments. If she can just bring home six more payments, we'll have a dozen duplexes, one for each year I slaved as chairman for PI. I think it's right.

Hope Robbie improves. Visit soon. We talk about that a lot. I'm sending the latest bus schedules. Hug Robbie for Grandpa and Grandma. Edith says it has been almost three years since you ran off with that legal bum. Why don't you save your pennies and come visit? Am enclosing a $10 check toward that goal. Pick a week when he has to try a case in court.

You know, Avonelle. I'm beginning to relax these days, enjoy my retirement. Why, I can't even tell you the fun it has been to write you this letter, after all, I'm your father and should, I guess. Wish I had sooner.

I filled in the vegetable pit, too much bother. Planted a lilac bush. Our tomatoes are bountiful. I spread fireplace ashes just before I planted.

And this fall, I'm taking up hunting. Even paying for skeet shoot lessons. Hang the expense!

I may even build a duck blind at Swede's Marsh. I have located a terrific place for the blind. I think it was Winters who said the marsh is a great place to escape the pressures of business.

Did you realize, Sweetums, that when you and Robbie visit, we'll be seeing him for the first time? I just think that if I could scoop him up into my arms and give him a hug it would make everything right.

Yesterday, at the gun range, I advanced to double-target
shooting, where they whip the clay pidgeons from both sides? And you have to stand there and wait? Until the two targets come together and you squeeze off the shot and they explode into nothing right in front of your double barrels?

Edith and I are sure looking forward to seeing Robbie.

Wouldn’t it be funny, just a coincidence, if I were sitting there in my new blind at Swede’s Marsh and Winters just happened to come down into his blind at the other side of the marsh and there we were when duck season opened this fall? And the air is crisp and the ice crackles when you move and just then, a Canadian sails in low and I gather it in my sights just as Winters sticks that square chin up to make the same shot and both of them are in my sights at the same instant? Of course it’s just an idle thought and would be an accident and would never happen.

Please visit soon, Avonelle. Bring Robbie.

Your father,