

Happy F-ing Birthday*

By MARK GILCHRIST

This week, our conversational couple is dining in Chişinău, the Republic of Moldova's capital, in a small restaurant just a few blocks off the main street, Strada Stefan Cel Mare, (Stefan the Great...) The topic? Why birthdays on social media make him so... social.

"Well, happy birthday to me!" he said, trying to change to his favorite subject; himself.

"I noticed," she said, giving in, because she knows better.

"Noticed what?"

"All over Facebook," she said, retrieving a black olive from between tomato wedges, cucumber slices and shreds of carrots and onions from their shared platter. "You sure made some commotion."

"What? Who, me?"

"You must have a lot of time on your hands, mister" she said. "Or did you hire..."

"I just did the least anyone could do, that's all."

"You personally 'Liked' and thanked everyone who posted even a simple 'Happy Birthday' to you," she said. "Must have taken hours."

"It's the least I..."

"Not the least," she said. "The least is just posting something like; 'Thanks to everyone who... blah, blah, blah. That's what most people do.'"

"Well, how about just; 'Thanks everyone!'" he said. "That would be even least-er."

"Oh no, you can't do that; you have to put the brag on."

"The what on...?" he said, softening the crust of a chunk of bread in his burst.

"Well, you have to let people know — or make them think, at least — that you have many, many friends and that they all just 'loveee' you and they celebrate your birthday!"

"Well, yeah, I guess I sort did that too..." he said. "But, please, it just feels lame if a hundred people take the time to write 'Happy Birthday' to you, and then you ignore them all with a blanket statement."

"A what?...?" she said.

"A what what?"

"A hundred? People?"

"Well, a hundred-twenty, or so, if you count tag-alongs..."

"You actually tracked that? You, 'Mister-I-don't-have-time-to-rub-your-feet tonight?'"

"Well, I mean, umm it's not hard," he said. "Wait, back to why I respond to each one, okay? Seriously, it took maybe an hour..."

"That all? couldn't you have spent that time on something productive, like cleaning out your toilet kit or something..."

"Like scroll my newsfeed?" he said. "Or watch cat videos?" C'mon, this is quality time with my F-buds..."

"What? Your what?"

"My..."

"I heard you," she said.

"Your F-buds..."

"My Facebook, um, buds..."

"You need help," she said.

"Aww, thanks! Anyway, I actually enjoy replying to them."

"I knew it..."

"For most people, I just write a quick 'Thank you!'" he said.

"But if I actually recognize their name, I try to connect with them, talk about old times, invite them back into my life... it's rewarding."

"Say, you forgot to pick on me for that other thing I do," he said. "You know, for other people's birthdays."

"Oh, you mean that promotion for your website?"

"Is it that obvious?" he said.

"Duh..."

"I'm a photographer, so I give friends photographs as gifts."

"Wow, cheap!" she said. "And smeared with your watermark, an advertisement for www.OnThisPlanetEarth.com."

"Thanks for the free plug," he said.

"It's not free..."

"You know, I like to think that people actually look forward to..."

"They don't..." she said.

"C'mon, I just know that they say; 'Oh, I wonder what photos Mark will send me!'"

Don't kid yourself," she said, staring blankly at him over her potatoes in cream sauce. "It's not healthy."

"Some of them do?... maybe... one?"

A pregnant pause followed as they both chewed, on their food and on the topic at hand.

"But, c'mon," he said. "It's not like I have a lot of family to gather 'round and spend all my free time with."

And that, folks, was when the fork dropped. She just sat there, rice and bell pepper working its way past the lump in her throat.

"Well, who's fault is that?" she said. "You made a choice, mister, to not settle down and have a family."

"Choice?" he said. "You know I can't have children." She just stared at him...

"Racituri de pui," chicken served in a gelatin sauce is a Moldovan favorite in formal settings.



In a Moldovan home, season your food with just a pinch of salt...



"Mămăligă is a staple of Moldovan food. It is similar to Polish polenta, or American grits, (dried.) Served here with brânză, a salty, homemade cheese.

"Not by myself, anyway. Was I just supposed to recruit someone? 'Wanted; Babymaker.' I don't think it works that way."

"It does," she said.

"Far too often."

"May I change the subject? Thanks." he said, washing down his bread with sips of hot milk served in a teacup.

"Here, I will," she said. "I honestly don't know why Facebook even makes it sooo difficult just to wish someone a happy birthday."

"Honestly?" he said.

"What, you didn't hear me smirk? So, why do we have to actually type out all those silly letters?" she said. "H a p p..."

"Oh no, all caps..." he said.

"Seriously?" he said.

"Well, I mean, Facebook tells you it's their birthday, Right? So why not just give us a button to click, and automatically post a message with their first name, blah, blah... one click, done."

"And spoon-feeds you Soy-lent Green..."

"Yeah... what's that?" she said.

"Oh, you're so young. But don't you think that an 'auto-fill' birthday message would be just a little... too much? I mean, a little.. too little?"

"No," she said. "In fact, why do I even have to click to send it? Why can't I just adjust my settings so all my contacts get an automatic, stupid, little 'Happy Birthday' message on their birthday? Why do I have to WORK SO HARD?"

"Oh no, all caps..." he said.

"Must listen now..."

"Or not," she said. "See, I was saying the opposite of what I..."

"Oh, like usual..."

"Keeps you guessing."

"My head is spinning."

"Eat your mamaliga."

* "Facebook"-ing, the 4-letter + 4-letter word.

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Boiled potatoes in cream sauce, ("Cartofi in sous de smintina.")



In preparation for our visit, the mayor of a nearby village prepared "lunch," salami and cheese on bread, and vodka shots.



American egg processors wash the cuticle off eggs, ("ouă,") making them vulnerable to salmonella and requiring them to be refrigerated. But around the world, eggs stay fresh for weeks. They haven't caught on to the craze of carrying them gently in cartons yet, either.



Delicious, beautiful Moldovan bread, ("pâine"). Most bread comes in simple, white loaves, but ornate, loaves are made for special occasions.



Bell peppers, ("ardei,") from left, ready to stuff, stuffed with rice, and boiled.