

RECLAMATION

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Third Place, Fiction

THE ANNUAL CULINARY CONTEST was to the Festus County Fair what freckles are to a blue tick coonhound. The Second World War was finally over, and the citizens of Eureka Springs, Arkansas welcomed their war heroes home with colossal elation. The returning soldiers arrived dull-eyed and shell-shocked, moving through the days tentatively as though they were unsure of the reality of this strange and wonderful new world in which they found themselves. Gradually, they thrived and healed under their women's fervent tender loving care, and the town began to regain its sense of normalcy. Now it was time to get serious and decide who was the best cook in the county.

The crisp fall air and brilliant hues of changing leaves signaled to the townsfolk it was time to get their livestock, smallstock, artwork, stitchery, horticulture, and most of all recipes primed for the Fair. Exhibitors from age five to ancient were gearing up to show off their years of experimentation and successes. No one didn't participate. The competition was for the most part good-natured—they all rooted for each other, whether the prize awarded was a blue ribbon or honorable mention. Except for the Cook-Off—those cooks were dead serious about their craft.

This year Lottie Allgood, after much deliberation, decided to forego her usual baked goods to gamble on her Grandma Winnie's Zucchini Relish and Bread & Butter Pickles recipes. They'd been staples at family meals for generations and, after years of persistent pestering, Grandma finally knew Lottie was ready to learn her secret methods. Lottie was one of the war wives who had gone missing for a while as she and her soldier-boy holed up in their little powder-blue house to recuperate from the war. For many days, she and Abel had just touched and gazed at each other, almost unwilling to blink for fear they would open their eyes to find the homecoming had been just a dream and they were still a world apart. But with each new sun, they awoke to disentangle their limbs from each other's like it was the first time all over again. She adored cooking for him and watching him fill out as he appreciatively wolfed down everything she put in front of him. He would grimace and groan with pleasure and exclaim with his mouth full how unbelievable, how delicious, how had she ever learned to cook like this?

One morning she was looking at some nice gingham fabric at the five and dime store when she was suddenly aware of the overpowering scent of rose water. She turned and was startled by Mrs. Althea Hudspeth, whose face was inches from her own. Althea's chest was puffed out like one of Mr. Duncan's prize Norwich pigeons. Lottie knew what she was up to.

"Good morning, Missus Allgood," she enunciated formally. "And how is Sgt. Allgood recovering these days?"

"He's doing very well indeed, Mrs. Hudspeth, thank you. He'll be grateful to know you asked after him." The younger woman steadily met her gaze.

“And have you decided what you’ll be bringing to the Fair?” Althea wasted little time getting to the point. She was married to the Honorable Judge of the Circuit Court Harland Hudspeth, which made them the crowned heads of Festus County. All that was missing was the tiara. She carried herself like royalty; with her head tilted slightly back she took on the appearance of looking down her nose at people. More than a little stout and always overdressed, she wore white gloves even while running errands. Mrs. Hudspeth’s Jewel of the Ozarks Rhubarb Pie had won the Home Arts Rosette two years in a row, after she switched over from her Mile High Marble Layer Cake, which took the Blue Ribbon twice before that. But Lottie gave her a run for her money last year with Mom’s Gold Standard Applesauce Bundt Cake, which took the Red Ribbon after many long minutes of suspenseful discussion by the jury. Besides, it was a well-known ‘secret’ that Mrs. Hudspeth cheated. All entries were supposed to be anonymous, for obvious reasons, but Mrs. Hudspeth had cut her signature leaf pattern into her piecrust, so all the judges knew which was hers. Her pies were good, but were they that good? Or was the panel subliminally coerced into awarding the queen of Eureka Springs the coveted prize year after year?

“Oh, I’m still mulling it over, Mrs. Hudspeth.” Lottie tried hard not to giggle at the daisy bobbing comically from the matron’s hat. Did that old biddie honestly think she was going to show her hand this early in the game? Or was she trying to get a psychological advantage? Well, two could play at that: “My grandmother has been going through her recipes – we’ve been discussing several very nice options.”

Althea’s carefully arranged expression fell only slightly, as she did her best to look supremely confident.

“Why, that’s a lovely idea,” she trilled in a voice coming from high up in her nose. “I’ll be happy to have some good stiff competition this year.”

“Oh you will!” Lottie just had to have the last word, so she turned on her heel and waved breezily as she walked away, without the fabric. “Good day, Mrs. Hudspeth!”

The Festus County Fair’s attendance broke all records that fall, and the number of exhibitors was twice what it had been the year before. Several new categories were added: Fine Arts now included oils and charcoal; Home Arts had added separate categories for smocking and stitchery. Spectators strolled through the exhibition halls, admiring the photography entries featuring wonderfully diverse subjects. There was a long shot of a breath-taking Ozarks vista hanging next to a cute little girl dressed up in a lady’s frock, with many strands of pearls, in high heels, admiring herself in the mirror.

The women gravitated to the sewing, smiling fondly and cluck-clucking at the youngest entrants’ primitive yet earnest attempts at dishtowels, and marveling at the veterans’ expert detailed quilts, representing years of practice and hard work. The gentlemen liked to stop by the homemade beers and wines tent. Here Lottie sipped a smooth Vermouth Aperitif, while Abel sampled an American Pilsner, nodding his approval. They waved at Velma and Walter Tutwiler, who were coming from the Beekeeping competition. Walter proudly showed off the Blue Ribbon he’d won for his

King Tut Alfalfa Honey. Velma made the younger couple promise they'd come by the house for biscuits and honey next week.

A happy group of high-school students ran past, carrying aloft their grinning Mountain Man scarecrow, which they'd dressed in overalls, a colorful flannel shirt, and a big straw hat. He was losing stuffing as he was being jostled; he'd be lucky to get to the hayride in one piece.

The "Largest Vegetables" exhibit always attracted a crowd—and the biggest laughs. Fairgoers had to get there in the first few days, though. By the end of the week, the oversized pumpkins took on an uncanny resemblance to a toothless old grampa.

As Lottie and Abel wandered arm in arm, her heart swelled as she watched him marvel at every little detail she took for granted - the leaves crunching underfoot, the promise of frost in the fragrant mountain air, the foot-tapping rhythm of the Dulcet Tones, who'd come up from Little Rock to perform. The couple was joined by Trudy Sumner, whose husband, Arthur, hadn't come home from the war. He was lost in the first offensive at Normandy. The town had folded around her like a warm blanket, providing comfort, food, words of kindness, tears, hugs, babysitting, clothing, home repairs; they'd tried to anticipate her every want and need. She wore a brave face, but had an exceptionally difficult time as the war ended and the men returned. Tonight she looked flushed and cheerful, however, as though she had something new to think about and look forward to. Lottie slipped her arm through Trudy's and kissed her cheek.

"Having a nice time tonight, Sweetie? How'd your little brother do with his dairy goat?"

"Oh, he's beside himself—she took a Red her first time out!" Trudy couldn't contain her secret any longer. "I've entered the Cook-Off with my own recipe. I've been working on it for months and it's perfect!"

A dark horse! "You're amazing! What is it?"

"I call it my Celebration Blackberry Pie. The berries grow wild out back against the fence—I've been feeding and fertilizing 'em; I do everything but sing 'em to sleep at night! They're the fattest, sweetest, juiciest in Arkansas."

They laughed together and said at the same time, "Althea will die!"

Lottie suddenly grew serious. "Is your pie good enough to beat her rhubarb?"

"Her rhubarb pie is going to skulk home with its tail between its legs." They screamed and hopped and hugged. Abel looked on and smiled broadly, as much for the sudden hilarious drama as for the big piece of blackberry pie he was going to dive into by the end of the night.

It was time. The crowd was murmuring with anticipation as everyone gathered to hear the judges' decisions in the Cook-Off. The products of all the talented cooks' months of preparation were on spectacular display. The sheer variety of vittles was staggering. Adele Waxhaw posed proudly next to her candied figs, which had taken first place in the Homemade Candies last year. The glistening jars

of preserves and jams and jellies stretched as far as the eye could see; the deep red cherries, rich amber peaches, royal purple grape all conspired to make one drool shamefully. In the Novelties category, Lamont Calhoun was grinning and explaining to a small attentive crowd how he engineered his Edible House. He modestly dismissed his expert workmanship with, "Honest, it's just stuck together with gobs of icing!"

Sophie Monroe was a war bride; Gary had brought her home from France. Lottie theorized that they'd started kissing when the Americans chased the Nazis out of Paris and they hadn't stopped yet. Sophie was charming and irresistible as she struggled to learn the language and mores of this mountain culture, much to everyone's amusement. She ran unopposed in the International Division with her light-as-air Crepes Suzettes la Parisienne and melt-in-your-mouth buttery Continentale Croissants. But she didn't cut corners just because she was the only contestant. She had a reputation to uphold!

And on and on—the dried meats and fruits, canned vegetables, decorated cakes, yeast and quick breads. Lottie swallowed hard as she eyed the stiff competition in the Pickles & Relishes Division. But her Grammy had taught her well; she knew she had an edge.

The judges announced their decisions in each category, with the accompanying exclamations of approval from the crowd.

"In the Pickles & Relishes category, Third Place goes to—Eunice Hall, for her Crowning Glory Sweet Pickle Relish! Good work, Eunice. The Second Place Red Ribbon—Verna Webb's My Secret Chili Sauce! Verna—c'mon tell us, what's your secret?"

Verna could hardly speak, she was breathless with delight and amusement: "Cigar ashes!" The assembly roared with laughter.

"And the Blue Ribbon goes to—" Lottie held her breathe, afraid to hope... "Lottie Allgood's Winnie's Winning Zucchini Relish!" Lottie was jolted by the rush of happiness and the congratulatory jostling from all around her. "Lottie, you mass-produce that yummy relish, you'll be a millionaire!" Abel thrust his arms up in the air in a triumphant gesture.

"And our last category of the evening, the Pies Division." As the announcer dramatically paused, there was a sudden expectant hush. Nobody made a sound. "None of us on the jury can remember when we've had a tougher time arriving at a decision." A ripple of murmur with shushes.

Mrs. Harriet Scott was foreman of the judge's panel for the eighth year in a row. She didn't waste time or increase the tension with any more comments or niceties. This was serious business.

"The Third Place White Ribbon goes to Lucinda Winston for her Family Crest Blueberry Pie." Boisterous applause, and Lucinda smiled happily, knowing third place in such towering company was nothing to sneeze at. This kind of recognition could translate into dollars. She and Cal had been working on a plan to produce a cookbook and sell it at the local bookstore.

“Second Place,” Mrs. Scott intoned soberly, then paused. It almost seemed like she wanted to say something about something, but she continued. “The Red Ribbon goes to Trudy Sumner’s Celebration Blackberry Pie.” Shouts and congratulatory pats all over Trudy’s person, and she smiled bigger than anyone had seen in a very long time.

“The Blue Ribbon and the Home Arts Rosette for the Best of the Fair goes, for the third consecutive year—” and the noise of the crowd would have drowned her out had she not shouted, “Althea Hudspeth!” Mrs. Hudspeth received a peck on the cheek from her beaming husband and glided up to the podium to receive her award, nodding to her subjects first to her right, then to her left, then back again.

As the people began to disburse from the awards arena, Lottie, Abel, and Trudy waited with the cluster of people who crowded around Mrs. Hudspeth to offer their congratulations.

“Excuse me, ladies?” A velvety deep voice came from behind them. They turned around to see Zachary Johnson bowing slightly with his hat in his hand. Zachary had also returned from the war, but not to a loving waiting wife. Just before he enlisted, he had married a high-spirited gal named Lily from the next town over, and they moved to New Jersey where he’d been promised a job at her uncle’s factory. Not long after he shipped out, she grew tired of waiting for him and became distracted by too many ways to have fun; he’d received a Dear John letter while overseas—it broke his heart in two. When he returned from the war, he came home to the Ozarks, where his folks ran a diner. Et Yet? was very popular with the locals, known for its outstanding country-fried steak and fried okra, as well as the friendly waitresses and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson’s custom of fixing a generous plate for people who came to the back door with no means to pay. Zachary had rejoined his parents to heal and help out with running the business.

He now introduced himself and explained his reason for approaching them: “We’re always looking for new products to serve at the diner. Miz Sumner, my parents would like to meet with you about purchasing your pies on a larger scale. My mom *knows* pie, and she’s quite taken with your blackberry—the way you did your piecrust. She’d like to feature it as Pie of the Week. And Miz Allgood, my dad is especially fond of bread and butter pickles. If you’d be able to produce a sizable quantity, he had in mind serving them as a garnish and even selling them by the jar if you could manage it.” He bowed again and backed away. “So, think about it; talk it over with Mr. Allgood, Miz Allgood, and we’d love to sit down and chat with you about it someday soon.” He shook hands with Abel and each of the ladies and disappeared into the crowd. Trudy and Lottie looked at each other with mirrored expressions of wide eyes and slack jaws. Abel looked on and grinned, so completely in love with his wife he couldn’t see straight. And wondering if he’d imagined that Zachary had held Trudy’s gaze for an extra second or two, heightening the color in her cheeks til she had to look down.

They were suddenly standing in front of Mrs. Hudspeth, who raised her eyebrows at them in triumph.

Trudy spoke first. "Congratulations, Mrs. Hudspeth."

"Thank you, my dear girl. You made a valiant effort." She bowed her head in a show of gracious gratitude.

Trudy took a step closer and drew herself up her full height, all 5 feet 2 inches of her. Her chin barely cleared Mrs. Hudspeth's ample bosom. The held their breath as one.

Trudy leaned closer still and lifted her chin. "Next year."

Mrs. Hudspeth narrowed her eyes and slowly nodded up and down. "Next year."

