

THE CHERRY PUDDING

This little story
is dedicated
to the
sweet, sad
memory
of
Richard

It was a warm August morning in 1912. The Iowa farm and countryside waited for the heat of the day to surround it. The corn was not as high as an elephant's eye, but it was as high as our Uncle Harvey's shoulder and full of promising ears. The wheat lay in yellow waves across the fields with patches of light green at the base of the slender stalks. "It is like a golden river," I told my brother as we looked across the gleaming acres.

In the farm house all was activity. The men had gone to the fields and the breakfast dishes were washed and put away. An air of anticipation filled the house.

The night before my Aunt Harriet (always called Hattie) had said to my grandmother, "Ma, you know Dora could get some sewing done while she is here. I can help and she can make some school clothes for Ruth and shirts for Richard. But we need some goods. Do you think, that is, would you-- well, I wondered if you could put the dinner on tomorrow, if we get things ready today?" She seemed half apologetic, as if it were almost too much to ask. She went on, "I saw some goods in the store and when we took the eggs and it is just right for school clothes-- and reasonable, too. What do you think? We can take the buggy and I'll drive and we will take the baby with us."

The baby was my two year old sister. The family waited for the answer. Grandmother considered a moment. Then she said, "Well, of course. It will be fine. And I'll keep Ruth and Richard here." This was what they were waiting to hear. We would stay at home. Richard and I looked at each other. Neither of us could bear the thought of our mother being out of our sight. But we knew we were going to stay at home with Grandmother for a whole morning. The shoppers would be back at noon.

And so, early the next morning the buggy took off, down the incline to the road. The pony seemed to know where she was going and trotted off at a fast clip, with Hattie holding the reins firmly. Dora and the little girl sat beside her. We listened as the horse clip-clopped across the little bridge and on to the road ahead.

Grandmother wasted no time now that she was alone and in charge. "I am going to peel the potatoes for dinner," she told us. "There's ham, new potatoes, beans all ready to cook, sauce, bread. . .

"What are we going to have for dessert?" Richard questioned. Before she could answer, I interrupted. "Grandma, could we have cherry pudding? Please would you, could you make cherry pudding?" I pleaded with my eyes. "Please Grandma," Richard added, "Please, please, please make it."

"Well," she considered, "It's early. It would get done. I'd have to go to the cave for the cherries and cream. . but things are well along. . . yes, if you two will help, we'll make it."

"Hooray!" Richard shouted. He was always finding something to hooray about. "Yes, we'll help. What can we do?"

She planned now, "You will have to get more cobs for the fire. They are in the cob house, just outside. You know where they are. Here, take this bucket."

We went toward the little house and I reached for the latch. It

was quite high, but I managed to lift the latch and opened the door slowly. We were not just sure about cobs. They were what was left after the corn had been taken off, we knew. As the door opened, the cobs poured out around our feet. I picked one up and looked carefully. "Look here, Richie, all these little holes were the corn came off-- so many on each one." We started to fill the bucket.

As we worked a big white rooster rushed to the pile of cobs around our feet. Richard retreated a step. Always shy, he was not sure about this white monarch, and besides a half dozen hens had discovered that there were a few grains of corn on the ground. They all surrounded us.

The beautiful white feathers shone in the sun light. The brilliant red combs glistened. With squacks and other throaty noises, the chickens gathered up grains of corn and spiders from the ground.

"That rooster is going to be killed and we are going to eat him. I heard Aunt Hattie say so," Richard told me solemnly.

I looked at the shining white feathers, each one so lacy and perfect. The rooster crowed, flapping his wings as if in defiance of any such plan. "Eat him?" I said dubiously. "No, I couldn't--I never could."

We rushed into the house with the bucket of cobs. Grandmother was ready for the next step. "We will go to the cave now." she said, "You can come and help carry back.

The cave was near the house, just a bit to the left of the porch and about 15 feet ahead. The doors were heavy wood hinged at each side and coming together in the middle. It was not locked. Grandmother lifted the first door. We grabbed it and helped. Then the second door was opened and the cave lay ahead. It was down three steps into the ground. The steps were wide, 12 inch wooden boards, planed by hand. One had a large knot hole on the right side. Grandmother went down the steps briskly and we followed. The cave was completely dark except for the light from the door. It took a few seconds for our eyes to get adjusted to the darkness. There was an odor of damp earth, vegetables, milk and a faint smell of apples around us. The cave was about six feet high in the highest place and rounded to the earth on the sides. The walls were made of bricks. The sides were lined with shelves, also made of hand hewn wood boards.

Grandmother wasted no time and quickly picked out a quart glass jar of cherries. There were raspberries, apples, elderberries, pears and a few cans of peaches. These were left from last summer's canning.

"I want to take some milk for the table," she said and picked up a tin bucket. The milk was in large stoneware jars three or more feet high. One jar was heavy cream which had been skimmed by hand from the jars of milk.

"We must get this cream off to the dairy in the morning," she said and pointed to a metal cream can with "BAGLEY" printed on it in large black letters. We knew that our uncle took the cream to the Interurban and put it on the train for Des Moines. We had once gone with him in the wagon. The coolness of the cave was all around us. But there was no time to even look around as we hurried after our grandmother as she went up the steps and carefully closed the doors. What an interesting place, the cave. I thought of "hide and seek," pirates, and all manner of opportunities to hide away.

Back in the kitchen, she prepared to make the cherry pudding. But first the fire had to be taken care of. She opened the front of the stove, put in a cob from the box. "Richard, you can do this. Take one cob and push the last one in with it. Be careful not to get near the fire."

Richard gingerly took a long cob and pushed it toward the fire. I wanted to help but she said he was to do it. He got several cobs into the stove and they burst into flames. "Keep putting them in," she said, "We have to get the kettle boiling."

The kettle was a large, three footed black iron kettle. She put it on the back of the stove and filled it with water from the reservoir. The reservoir was at the end of the stove. The cover lifted up from front to back and it was full of water. The heat from the stove heated it. This water was never used in the preparation of food or for drinking. It was for washing pots and pans and other chores. But she filled the black kettle with it and it started to get hot on the surface of the stove. We soon saw why this was necessary.

Grandmother proceeded with the pudding. She quickly took flour and sifted it with a spoonful of baking powder, a pinch of soda and a little salt. Then she added some shortening which was pure lard, made at home after butchering. She worked this in by hand.

"Let me help," I pleaded. "I know how."

"No," she said, "but you can help with the cherries."

She opened the can of cherries with a deft pull on the rubber ring which sealed it and unscrewed the lid. What a delicious smell filled the air. The cherries had been picked, hand pitted, cooked and sealed in the jar in the summer.

Grandmother took a strainer from a hook in the cupboard. "Here," she said as she set the strainer over a bowl, "you can drain the cherries and don't spill any juice."

I spooned the cherries out slowly and when the jar was nearly empty, I poured the rest into the strainer.

"Now, shake it a little," she said, "to get the juice out." I shook it vigorously.

In the meantime, she had added two eggs and some milk to the flour mixture and it was beaten with sure, hard strokes.

Finally it was ready for the cherries. With great care she folded them into the batter. She stirred very slowly so not to break or mash the fruit. We could hardly wait now. It really was cherry pudding.

She took three tin cans from the cupboard and greased them with butter. Then she shook flour around the cans to coat them so the pudding would not stick. Carefully she filled them with the pudding batter and placed them in the kettle in the boiling water. The cans were about 3/4 full of batter. "There," she said as she covered the kettle, "it will have to cook awhile. Don't let the fire go down."

The big, octagon shaped clock on the wall was ticking away and Grandmother was not unaware of time. She sent us to the well down by the barn lot to fill a bucket with drinking water. No doubt we were not very efficient at the job and it took time-- pump, pump, pump--and the water came out and finally filled the bucket. It took both of us to carry it to the house. When we finally got it onto the oil cloth covered table where it always sat, Grandmother was working in the dining

room. She had put a white cotton damask cloth on the oval cherry table which had been extended to accommodate the family with two leaves set in the center. The table was set with the gray-white porcelain snow-drop patterned china.

"Here," she said, "help with the knives and forks. Spoons were in a spoon holder in the middle of the table. We counted the places as we put on the silver-- eight all together. We counted our little sister and the hired man who was working in the fields. I finished quickly and Richard went around after me and straightened each piece.

"You don't need to do that-- they're all right!" I told him crossly.

"Just let me alone," he retorted. "I'll fix them." I started to reply with anger but Grandmother interrupted, "Now, no fighting," she said sternly. I could feel trouble brewing so said quickly, "We're really not fighting but I want him to do his job and I'll do mine."

Grandmother was not taken in for a minute. "Don't argue, and leave him alone. You can't fool me and remember I can spank."

This was a new and serious development. "Did you spank children in the old days?" I asked, glad to change the subject.

She said, "In the old days, children did not argue. They obeyed and they were quiet and worked hard. You will do the same here." The subject was closed but we were subdued.

The clock ticked on. The potatoes boiled, the ham sizzled, and the beans were almost done. The pudding boiled on in the kettle. We could hardly wait now. But there was no sign of the horse and buggy with our mother, aunt and little sister. We sat on the top step of the porch and watched the road. They had been gone for such a long time. Finally there was activity at the barn and the two men had come in from the fields. The horses were unhitched, watered, fed and put into the barn. The men came toward the house. Their shirts were completely wet with perspiration. They went to the well, pumped water, washed themselves, letting the cool water run over their hair, necks, faces and arms. "It's pretty hot out there," Uncle Harvey said as he wiped his face with a tan linen towel.

Just then the pony and buggy neared the lower gate. Richard and I ran down the hill and came along side, shouting, "You're home, you're home!" It was a great relief--Mother was back.

Aunt Hattie expertly stopped the horse by the yard gate. The baby, little Ella Grace, had gone to sleep and lay like a little doll on Mother's lap.

Harvey went to the side of the buggy. "I'll take her," he said and lifted her up into his arms. Aunt Hattie and Mother got down from the buggy and they all went into the yard. The hired man took the horse and cart.

Grandmother now took charge--"Take the baby to my bedroom and let her sleep. She'll be cross if she waked up now." We all followed and watched as Uncle Harvey tenderly put the little girl on the bed. She was warm and her honey colored curls were damp on her forehead. Mother wiped her forehead and lifted the curls from her cheek.

Grandmother said authoritatively "Now, Dora, open that drawer and get out that light shawl. Never leave a child sleeping without some

light cover." The baby was covered lightly and slept on. One hand was outstretched and Mother said, "Look, she needs to be washed. Mr. Schulte gave her a stick of candy."

Hattie said, "Let her alone. We can wash her when she wakes up," and she bent down and pulled the curls away from the other little cheek. She seemed so small, so dainty, so pretty--exactly like a doll. I looked at her ear-- like a little pink shell. She was a beautiful, perfect baby and we all adored her.

"Come to the table," Grandmother said, "but have you children washed?" We went to the wash room and washed our hands. In the meantime the men had changed their shirts as they never went to the table in their field clothes.

We all sat down. There was no formal prayer but Grandmother said, "It has been a good day."

Harvey said, "The fields are full and the corn looks good."

Mother, "We had a good day in town."

Hattie, "Ma, the dinner looks wonderful."

We all ate with a feeling of gratitude, security and felt the love which surrounded us.

"I wish Papa could be here," I said "You know Grandmother made cherry pudding."

"Ma, you didn't," Hattie said quickly. "It was too much for you to do."

"No," Grandmother replied. "The children helped and it is almost ready."

When the plates were cleared, she served the pudding. It had risen to the top of the cans and formed little peaks at the top. It was golden, light with the red cherries just right in each slice. How Grandmother had managed to make a sauce of the cherry juice we did not know but it covered the golden slices of pudding and tasted tart and delicious. The cream filled in around the edges.

"This is the best, the very best," Richard said as if he knew that something very solemn needed to be said.

"It is delicious," Mother said. "Ma, no one can make a cherry pudding like you can."

Every bite was gone and Richard said, "Hooray, Hooray for Cherry Pudding!"

Ruth Beck
1984