



County Lines
a Literary Journal

Volume 7 - 2020

Franklin County Arts Council Writers Guild

Golden Delicious

*1st Place - DD's Starving Writers Fiction Contest
Ashley Memory*

Dear Faye,

Emily and David came over yesterday and sat down on the porch, Emily in your spot on the swing and David beside me in front of the window. They told me that folks are whispering about me. They say people driving along old Highway 49 have seen me in the yard talking to myself.

Emily said that she knows I'm talking to you, and David wanted to know if I see you. I just laughed. Of course not, I told them.

Only you know I lied. I don't want to worry our children.

It's been over a year now, but I do talk to you. All the time. I see you too, not as a ghost, but as you always were. Everywhere. You leaning over the sink as you wash dishes, sometimes dropping a saucer because you're distracted by something you see out the window. "Look," you would have said this time of year. "Breath of spring is budding. It'll bloom in a week."

You clipping rosemary from the garden, pressing it to your face when you come inside, and me, smelling its piney crispness on your fingers. And last night, you tilting your head in front of the mirror, taking off your earrings. I expected to hear that little clink, first one, then two, that your earrings made when you put them into the crystal dish you kept in the top drawer. I knew I wouldn't. But still I waited, yearning for those two little clinks.

I won't talk to you anymore, because I don't want people to think I'm off my rocker. So I'll write to you. There's still so

much I want to tell you, and I never got a chance.

Willis

P.S. One thing I never told you was how much I loved your apple pie. I've had others, one at the church potluck and one from Second Street Bakery. But they were nothing like yours. Too dry, too sweet, or not enough crust, you name it. I can still taste your apples, tender but with just the right amount of bite and that cinnamon-y sauce I used to rake off my plate with my finger. How I wish I could go back in time and get you to show me how to make it.

February 26

Dear Faye,

I got real mad at you today, I have to say. The sadness is giving way to anger. This wasn't supposed to happen. We thought I was going to die first, remember? Dr. Hammer told me to get my affairs in order after they found that new tumor on my lung. He knew I wasn't strong enough for another round of chemo. But then it just stopped growing. And it's been stable ever since. Shocked everybody, especially us. We were so happy that Christmas. Even took my name off the prayer list at church.

Then, on Tuesday, January 6, the day we were going to take down the tree and the decorations, my world skidded to a stop. A hard stop, like somebody suddenly yanked the emergency brake on a speeding car. At 7:30, like I always did, I rose from bed and put on the coffee. Thought you were still sleeping. And when I came back, you were gone.

A stroke. At 69. Completely without warning. You were the healthy one, remember? Still slender, and with better cholesterol numbers than me. Didn't make any sense. Still

doesn't.

When I didn't die, I thought we'd gotten lucky. It wasn't the first time. Back in 1961, when I was drafted into the Army, they sent me to Germany, to Göppingen, and for two years the only gunshots I ever heard came from artillery practice. My buddies learned just enough German to get a date, but I was writing you, counting down the days, and saving my money for a ring.

So we cheated fate at least twice. But you never said things like that because you didn't believe in fate. It was God's will, you always said. So I guess maybe my quarrel is with God. How could it be his will that I get better only to be alone like this?

I got mad again when I went through your recipe box. Not really mad, just a little irritated. The card for your apple pie recipe wasn't where it should have been, with the rest of the pies. But I found it. You put it up front with the things you made more often than the rest, like your Chicken Divan and your mother's pineapple upside down cake. I miss those things too. But nothing like that pie.

Willis

March 7

Dear Faye,

You don't say what kind of apples to use! Just 8 cups, peeled, cored, and sliced. But what type? It can't be just any old variety. So I went to the grocery store and lo and behold, they have two aisles worth! Everything from Jonathan to Pink Lady to Jazz. I circled the produce section in a daze. I have only myself to blame. Why didn't I ever offer to help you?

I ended up over by the oranges and that's when I saw Loretta Hanes, one of our neighbors. You knew her better than me, but she was so friendly that I asked her advice. She said she wasn't much of a cook, but then she pointed to a stack of red apples called Rome Beauty. Apples are apples, she said.

We stood there and talked for almost ten minutes. You're right, she's a bit of a flirt, touching my arm from time to time. She told me a joke about a woman who married four times, first to a banker, then a ringmaster, then a preacher and finally, at age 85, to a funeral director. You know why? Loretta asked. One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and here she stopped, waiting for me to fill in the blanks. Four to go! she finally said. I just cracked a smile and scratched my head.

Then she asked if I wouldn't mind swinging by her house and changing out a bulb on her flood light. She doesn't trust herself on a ladder. No rush, she said, just when I have the time. She's alone too, with Eddie dying almost two years ago.

Now, about your crust. Again, you're not specific enough, writing only ice water under the flour and the shortening. How much? So, for my first attempt, I dribbled just a little bit in the bowl. But the dough, if you can call it that, never came together. Even after I chilled it. So I tried again, using five spoons of water. Much better! I ended up with a solid clump this time. It wasn't perfect, but it was firm enough to roll out. So I peeled the Rome apples, cored and sliced them, and tossed them with sugar, flour, lemon juice and cinnamon, along with a dash of nutmeg, and piled them into the pie dish. Then I topped it with the rest of the crust, which I vented with an "X" on top, just as you did.

I had high hopes from the smell that swirled around the kitchen, but I'm sad to say the final result didn't taste like

yours. Not at all. It was halfway decent but halfway decent isn't good enough for me anymore. The apples were too mushy, and frankly, a bit tasteless, even with the spices. But I'm not giving up. I will master this pie, if it's the last thing I do.

Willis

P.S. We never went to Rome, did we? The farthest we ever traveled was that bus trip we took to New York City, remember? Will you ever forget that tour guide? How she stood in the front of the bus and jabbered the whole way. How she annoyed you when she stuck the microphone in your face—you always hated being the center of attention—and made you guess how many M&Ms were in her jar. To shut her up, you just threw out the number 244. Where did that come from? Because you won! The real number was 246 but you were only two away so you came the closest. As embarrassed as you were, you still stood, took a little bow and passed the jar around the bus, sharing with all those strangers. But the best part of the trip was the last day. We'd had enough of the City by then—the lights, the crowds, all that fancy food, the traffic. We were on Fifth Avenue and while everyone else went inside Tiffany's to ooh and ahh, we snuck away by ourselves to a little café where we sat down and ordered, of all things, tomato soup and Cokes. Did I ever tell you how much fun that was? Maybe not at the time, but looking back I'd give anything to do it all over again.

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April 12
Dear Faye,

Loretta has taken to calling me up once in a while, asking for help with other little chores, things like sawing up a tree limb that fell across her driveway or repairing the banister on her

front steps.

She's chattier than you, that's for sure. She's not a bad looking woman, I'll give her that, but like her jokes, she tries a little too hard, with all that makeup and perfume. Still, I don't mind helping her out every once in a while. She asks me in for coffee, and we sit and talk for a few minutes. You're obsessed with this pie, aren't you? she asked me the other day, clucking her tongue at the flour on my shirt. Then she was on the phone to her niece, a baker. Alexis uses Granny Smith, Loretta said, after she hung up. Her voice softened. Try those.

The name made me think of your Granny Ledbetter, and what she always said. When you get up in the morning, you either make the bed or you don't. And for so long, you insisted we make the bed, believing that the day would go better if we did. But after the kids left the house and we retired, we just stopped. And how we laughed, wondering what Granny Ledbetter would think of us. Then one morning, out of the blue, you threw your nightgown over the chair. "And I'm not putting away my pajamas anymore either!" you shouted to the ceiling, as if your granny was looking down on us. Even now, with just me, I still don't make the bed.

Here's something you won't be happy to know. I also quit going to church. I got tired of walking in by myself and leaving alone. Kermit and Betty still sat beside me, and people were friendly enough during the greeting. But things are different now. I'm different. And this is what I miss as much as I miss you. I miss who I was when you were here.

Jerry keeps telling me I should get a dog. Or a boat. Imagine! And that I should go with him to the luncheons hosted by the Civitans on Wednesdays. He says they have speakers talking about how to make the most of your senior years. How we

should eat more blueberries and give up cooking with coconut oil. They say it's bad for us now.

Willis

June 29

Dear Faye,

The tanager is back! Can you believe it? I didn't see him last summer, my first without you, but I wasn't exactly looking. You were the one who first spotted those scarlet wings swooping out of the woods into the yard. And I thought he was a cardinal. But you called me to the window, where we watched him peck at the mulberries. He can't be a cardinal, you said. He doesn't have his hat on. So we looked it up and found out that he's a tanager and comes around only in the summer. This year he brought a wife—a yellow-green gal who likes to shriek at him and give him the what for. I wish you could see them.

I've started seeing Wynn Callicutt's Silverado in front of Loretta's house. He has his ladder in the back so I think it's safe to say she's found a new handyman. No hard feelings on my part. I bet Wynn laughs a little harder at her jokes. It's not that I don't get lonely. I do, but I'm not ready for that kind of relationship. I don't know if I ever will be.

The Granny Smith apples didn't work out. I should have known when I sliced them because I tasted them then. Too sour! Especially with the lemon juice. This was probably the worst pie I've made so far, at least in terms of the apples. But I'm not giving up. There's a million more apples out there. So I'm going to buy one of every variety and just work my way through them.

Willis

P.S. You've stopped appearing everywhere, and when I want to see you, I have to think a little harder now. Still, last night was a tough one. They announced on the news that there would be a lunar eclipse. We used to watch these things together, remember? Well, about nine o'clock the moon rose, and it was a full one, what they call a super moon, larger and brighter than usual. So I sat on the deck and waited, along with the crickets, until I saw the Earth's shadow creep over the moon. And everything went dark. I would have given anything to have felt your hand in mine. But at the worst of it, when I didn't think I could bear the darkness anymore, a little piece of the moon came back. And little by little, the shadow pulled away and the moon was whole again. Maybe this is how it'll be for me.

September 17

Dear Faye,

The hurricane brought down that huge white oak on the front lawn at the church. It depressed me to see it every time I drove by, all uprooted and twisted. So I met with Kermit and offered to help him saw it up and cart it to the lumber yard. Wouldn't you know he talked me into going to Men's Breakfast that very same Sunday? Next thing I knew, I was back at worship too, sitting in the pew beside him and Betty again, and later, shaking hands with the Gunters, the Spiveys, even tickling the chin of the Lambert baby. We've got a new pastor now, a progressive young man from Charlotte, and he's going to hold these question and answer sessions on Friday nights. I think I'll go to one. I've got some questions all right.

I also started going to those Civitan luncheons. At the last one, they said we seniors should fill our days with purpose. Stay active. It's not too late to do something that matters.

And it's okay to eat eggs again, they told us. Now there's a purpose for you, I told Jerry and Kermit, keeping up with what all those experts say.

Now, to the best news, what I've been waiting to tell you. I had almost given up on your pie. Turns out one of the apples I bought had rolled behind the fruit bowl, out of sight. It was kind of homely, yellowish and speckled. Golden Delicious, said the label. As soon as I took a bite, I knew this was the one. Even raw, it was luscious and buttery, with hints of caramel. So I went to the store and bought 3 pounds of them. And whoa, that pie was even better than I remembered. My fingers are still sticky from the sauce. I don't know when I'll make another one, but for now I'm slicing it into the tiniest wedges I can so it'll last a long, long time.

Willis

P.S. I don't know what the future holds for me, but I want you to know I wouldn't have been anything without you. And even though I grumble, I can't be too mad at God, because he brought me you. There I was, back in 1960 at the Tabernacle Methodist picnic, brooding about my life. I went with my cousin Jimmy but he ran off as soon as Betsy Vaughan pulled up in her new Mustang. Should I volunteer now or wait for the draft? I wondered, as I chewed on a sassafras twig. But what I wanted more than anything was to meet the right girl. And then you walked up, in that sleeveless white dress, your light brown hair in a ponytail. You stood in a sunbeam, and I could count every freckle on your face. Faye Brewer, you said, holding out your hand. Oh, that voice. So clear and sweet it sounded like the first note of a wind chime. And you?