

Huckleberry Pie Al A Mode

Curtis Daniels

October 11, 2023

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Upon entering the restaurant, Charlie could smell the aroma of hamburgers grilling, French fries frying, and of course his favorite smell: pies baking. Guessler's Deli has been a part of Charlie Bensons' life since he moved to the coastal community of Port Hammond in the 1980s. It's located in the Southern part of town, off the main strip between first Avenue and Alder Street, next to a small grocery store and butcher shop. The building is an old wood structure and above the double glass door entrance, is a large, aged sign with white and black letters which reads, "Welcome to Gueslers' Deli, Home of World Famous Pie".

As Charlie walked into the deli, he made his way across the older, lightly stained wood floor past several booths lining the exterior windows until he came to the last booth where he took his usual seat. Charlie always makes it a point to sit in this seat, since it allows him a full view of the restaurant which makes him feel more safe and secure. To his left, is a door which enters the kitchen and then a long bar with stools for guests to sit on. The bar which runs along the interior wall is about ten feet across from the booths on the exterior side and is made of wood with white paneling and a dark countertop. At the end of the bar is a newer cash register with a digital screen, and a couple more tables with chairs in the space between the bar and the entrance. Through the bar is a large cut-out window where Charlie can see a cook working in an industrial kitchen.

The interior design is nothing special or modern but is historical and a somewhat homey. The walls are mostly white with yellow trim, which all seem to come together at the blue kitchen door. The bar stools like the bar are made of wood with chrome padded tan cushioned seats. The booths are also tan with white laminate tabletops and black zebra patterns weaved throughout.

On the walls, are older pictures of the community and the coastal ranges, as well as some pictures of loggers using large hand saws to cut down giant Douglas Fir trees. The area of the restaurant which takes center stage is at the end of the bar near the cash register, a large glass showcase which houses several different pies. Above the showcase is a picture of the original owner Frank Guesler, handing a pie to Elvis Presley. Long-time towns people know of this encounter which occurred in 1963 when Elvis stopped on his way to the World's Fair and ordered his favorite, peanut butter pie. As Charlie sat contemplating, eating his favorite desert, he could smell the buttery aroma of homemade pie which made his mouth begin to water and made him feel warm and happy inside.

Charlie Benson is an older man, with a full head of thick gray hair which he takes much pride in. He's of medium build and stature, maintained by several hours of walking and weightlifting each day. His face is wrinkled, but clear and youthful, and his eyes are dark and partially covered by his black rimmed spectacles. He has a kind smile, yet he can still command attention, having a military posture which he developed in his youth serving in the infantry. Charlie has spent most of his adult life in Port Hammond, much of it working for the local utility company and raising his family. He and his wife Debra began frequenting the deli when they were first married, and after having children they made Gueslers' their regular Sunday outing. When they first ate at the deli, Frank Guesler was the owner and pie maker, but for as long as Charlie could now remember, his son Gary has been carrying on the family tradition. And since the first day of eating pie with his beautiful wife many years ago, his only other true love has been cherry pie a la mode.

As Charlie sat waiting for the waitress, he noticed the restaurant wasn't too busy now that fall had approached, and summer was winding down. As he looked around, he noticed a few

customers, a young couple sitting at a table by the door, and two men sitting on bar stools at the bar. The young couple were attractive and were happily smiling and conversing with each other like young people do who are in love for the first time. As he took in the scene, he couldn't help but think of how he hardly knew anyone in Port Hammond anymore, and how much he missed his dear wife, Debra. As Charlie was pondering, the kitchen door flew open, and a young slender woman wearing a white one-piece dress uniform with a tan sweater opened in the front came through the door moving toward Charlie with a small pad of paper in her hand. Charlie recognized his waitress right away since she had been serving him each week now for the past few years. She was somewhat plain with a natural look to her, not wearing any make up, and having long light brown hair tied back in a ponytail. As Charlie looked at her, he couldn't help but notice that she had a worried look in her caring blue eyes, and this made him feel somewhat uneasy.

“Good morning, Charlie”, the waitress said with a hesitant smile.

“Good morning, Jennifer”, Charlie replied, “how is your son doing?”. Charlie new from previous conversations with Jennifer that she was a single parent of a young child, and this made him have tremendous admiration for her for raising her son while working full time.

“He's being a stinker now that he's back in school”, she replied with some disdain in her voice.

“What grade is he in this year?”, Charlie asked.

“He's in the first grade, but he acts like he's in high school”, she said. Charlie couldn't help but think of his own children when they were in school, and how his wife worked so hard to keep everything organized and on task.

“I feel for you, and I know your son appreciates you for all of your hard work”, he told her. Upon saying this, he noticed a change in her facial expression, and a slight quiver to her lips along with her eyes becoming a little moist. “Well,” he said with a smile knowing he always orders the same thing, “I know you will never guess what I want today, but I think it’s going to have to be cherry pie a la mode”. As the words left his mouth, Jennifer’s face suddenly changed from a nervous look to an almost frantic one as if she had seen something horrible.

“I’m so sorry Charlie”, came the empathetic response, as if she were delivering news of death, “but we’re not serving cherry pie anymore”. At hearing this, Charlie’s heart felt as if it had a heavy pause, he couldn’t seem to catch his breath, and he felt slightly dizzy. He tried to speak, but didn’t know what to say, and after what seemed like an eternity, he only stuttered,

“what, what, what do you mean?”.

“I’m afraid we have changed the menu, and cherry pie is no longer a pie were baking, I’m so sorry, Charlie”, Jennifer again stated. Charlie was now without words or expression and felt as if his life were draining from his old body.

“I, demand to speak to Gary!”, Charlie said with some gruff hostility. Jennifer kept her cool, knowing Charlie was upset and was struggling with the bad news.

“There’s another thing Charlie”, she kindly and somewhat quietly stated, “Gary retired a couple of days ago, and we now have a new owner”.

“What, this can’t be happening”, Charlie spoke slowly while momentarily looking down. Looking back up, “I want to speak to him, the new owner, can I”.

“OK, I will see if she has a minute to talk with you, I’m truly sorry”, Jennifer again said as she reached her hand out gently touching Charlie’s shoulder, and then turning away she left for the kitchen. All Charlie could think about was losing his cherry pie. What in the world, he

thought, why would anyone stop baking cherry pie? This is outrageous, and a new owner as well, what in the world is happening? All these thoughts were moving through Charlie's mind, and he couldn't help but feel confused and somewhat desperate.

As he thought about losing his cherry pie a la mode, he considered there's no way he could ever live without such wonderful goodness. The buttery crust cooked perfectly golden brown. How it was crispy and chewy at the same time and sprinkled with a small covering of sugar. He thought of the firm tart, yet candied cherries and how the pie filling was thick and sweetened. He imagined cutting through the crust, how the top would flake off as he did so, and then through the filling, and how the cherries would roll onto his fork, and then the final push through the bottom crust with a clink against his plate. He could see the vanilla ice cream, how it slowly melted against the warm pie, moving into the crust and soaking into the fibrous material as if it were meant to be. He imagined taking a bite, the pleasant flavors all coming alive, melting in his mouth as he slowly chewed, bringing the cold and warm together into a single heavenly moment. And of course, the smell, the aromatic scent of butter, sugar, cherries, and vanilla all at the same time. Then he couldn't help but to think of his wife Debra, what does this mean for us, Deb? Then speaking out loud, he said, "oh God, Deb, what am I going to do?"

It was four years previous, in the winter when Debra got her diagnosis. By Spring, she was terminal, and just before summer in late May, she passed. Charlie recalled how bad the last few weeks of her sickness were. How his strong powerful wife became so weak and lethargic. And how in the final days, there was so much pain and agony and all he could do was sit there and hold her hand and tell her how much he loved her. These were the darkest days of Charlie's life, and since that day in May, he had been on autopilot. He would wake up each morning and exercise, make breakfast, do yard work, go for a long walk, clean the inside of his house

although it didn't need it, read a book, look at family photos, and then go to bed. Occasionally a friend might stop by, or one of the children with their children. But when company came to visit, all Charlie could do was to reminisce about better times with Debra. His most frequent visitor was his daughter Olivia, who visited at least once a week and called to check on him every other day. Olivia would urge him to move on with his life, she would try to get him to go on a senior cruise, or play golf, or go to the senior center and meet new people. But Charlie didn't want to do any of those things, the only thing that kept Charlie Benson going each day was having his weekly visit to Guesler's deli, and eating cherry pie a la mode.

As Charlie sat there thinking about how none of this should be happening to him, he remembered one of his favorite moments. He and Deb were eating at the deli, it was likely their third or fourth time. Charlie had once again ordered the cherry pie a la mode and Debra asked him "why don't you try a different pie, Charlie?". Charlie told her, "Why would I want to do that, this one is so beautifulicious". "Beautifulicious, what kind of a word is that?", Debra asked curiously. "Well, I meant to say delicious, but I thought about how beautiful the crust was, and I guess that's just what came out". "You know what I think, I think it's the right word for this pie, this cherry pie is beautifulicious!" After that day, beautifulicious became a Benson household word. Whenever Debra would dress up for a special occasion, she would ask Charlie "how do I look?" And Charlie would always answer her, "Baby, you look beautifulicious."

Now Charlie faced the first real challenge of his life since Debra's death, and it came in the way of pie. All Charlie could think of was how his life would never be the same. Why, why is this happening to me he quizzically asked himself? I'm a good person, I've lived my whole life trying to do the right things. I served my country, I worked for the community, I've raised a family, I've been an honest man and have never intentionally hurt anyone, why is this happening

to me? First my beautiful wife, and now this? I don't understand, is there no God who cares for me, why can't God show me some mercy? As these thoughts were racing through Charlie's mind, a sudden voice came from behind him. "Mr. Benson? Hi, I'm Alexis, I'm the new owner of Gueslers' deli, Jennifer asked if I could talk to you about the updated menu."

As Charlie looked up, he noticed a middle-aged woman short and round in stature, her hair was shoulder length and neatly arranged, she was well adorned wearing make-up and nicely manicured nails, and she wore black slacks and a black sweater with a colorful design on the front. "I don't understand, why no more cherry pie?", Charlie asked curtly.

"Well, Mr. Benson", she said very businesslike, "my husband and I purchased Guslers' deli knowing it hasn't been profitable since the pandemic." "As we developed our business model, we had to consider such things as product sourcing, strategic sales, E-commerce, and how this restaurant fits in with our current portfolio of restaurants." Based on our overall assessment and strategic goals, we modified our menu for maximum profitability."

"But I've been eating cherry pie here for more than forty years.", Charlie replied as if it were his right.

"I understand Mr. Benson, and I appreciate your long-time patronage however, if I can't turn things around financially, there won't be any homemade pies at all in Port Hammond." And with this statement, like the proverbial nail in the coffin, Charlie knew there would be no more cherry pie for him at Gueslers' deli. Alexis then said, "Because I appreciate your business Mr. Benson, I'm going to have Jennifer bring you a piece of our best-selling huckleberry pie with vanilla ice cream free of charge, I think you will really enjoy it." And with that, Alexis turned and walked toward the cash register where Jennifer was working wiping things down.

“Huckleberry pie”, Charlie mumbled out loud, “what the hell is a huckleberry?”, he muttered further. That’s not even a blueberry, like some sort of ugly cousin at best, he thought. As Charlie processed huckleberries and blueberries, he started to feel anger growing inside of him as if a wildfire were starting to burn. I just need to get up and storm out of here, he hastily told himself. No, rather I need to stand up and tell everyone how much I hate the new owners, he violently considered. But I don’t even know the new owners, was his next thought. Just another business decision in a world full of them, he considered. But what if I do tell everyone off and storm out of here, what then? Now the wisdom of his age was starting to take over and Charlie’s anger started to slowly dissipate. “This really sucks”, he mumbled to himself. Then he mentally decided on his conclusion, I’m going to get up, go home, and die. Maybe this is the plan, maybe Debra is waiting for me in some afterlife.

As Charlie started to move himself out of his seat, he noticed the young couple he had seen earlier. As he looked at them, he could see a certain radiance. Their eyes sparkled, there skin was aglow, there smiles were bright. He thought what they have is more than love, it’s life energy. Charlie thought about his own energy, how he seemed to have lost most of it the day Debra died. And how he just couldn’t seem to get it back. He thought, I used to have so much energy, I could work all day, lift weights at the gym, run for miles and come home and spend hours with my wife and children. He then considered how those young lovers didn’t care one bit about what kind of pie they were eating, they only really cared about each other. Their energy was coming from the excitement of being together, there energy was communal, it’s something they created and shared by being together. He thought about his friends and his children and how he hadn’t been the same with them. How although they’ve tried to engage him, he just turned them off. He had been invited so many times to do things, but he just said no.

He thought about his daughter's prodding, how she wanted him to do new things. He thought about his young grandchildren which he had also been neglecting. He then pondered about Debra, what would she say if she were here right now, he asked himself? She would say "Stop being a big baby Charlie, you're a strong man now go act like one.". He loved Debra for her directness, she was always the boost he needed. Then she would say, "I love you Charlie, and everything is going to be ok."

While Charlie was contemplating all of this, Jennifer showed up carrying a dish of food in her hand. "Here Charlie, she said, "this is the huckleberry pie a la mode on the house, I really hope you like it." "I don't know what I would do if you stopped coming here for pie.", she said with a warm smile as she set the pie before him. "Your one of my favorite customers", then once again she turned and left. Charlie thought about how those few kind words made him feel cared for. Maybe I do need to make some changes, he considered. Then looking at the pie, he noticed the crust was exactly the same as the crust on the cherry pie. He recognized how the vanilla ice cream absorbed into it in the same way. He looked at the huckleberry filling and seen that the berries were full and plump, and the filling was firm and sugary. The color was different, but he thought it was a nice color of purple, and although the smell was slightly off, he could still inhale the wonderful scent of butter, sugar, vanilla, and sweetness.

He considered maybe this pie was like his life. He didn't need to change everything, he could keep the crust, and maybe change the filling. "That's it", he thought out loud, "I just need to change the filling.". Charlie now felt a sudden surge of new energy, something he hadn't felt in a long time. Then, using his fork, he cut into the top crust noticing how it flaked off as he did so, then through the filling watching the huckleberries roll onto his fork, then through the bottom crust with a slight push until he heard the clink of his fork against his plate. He raised his fork

with the pie on it to his mouth. He looked at the warm pie mixed with the cold ice cream, and he took a bite. As he chewed slowly for a few seconds savoring the moment, he tasted the buttery, sugary sweetness, and noticed how the cold and warm came together in a single heavenly moment. Then he smiled and said out loud “beautilicious”.