

## Wild Plum Pie

Three women—well, two women and a girl (mostly)—watched Wyatt from the back stoop.

“She might not mean the same to Wyatt as what you’re thinking, Nita Louise.” Mairie, eldest by two years, with ropy muscles and straight gray hair, cleaned green beans from the garden with a snap-snap about as fast as her heart beat.

Nita, redder haired and plump but not comfortable, snapped slower. “You always did think a thing to death, Mairie. What else could it mean?” Snap, clunk. “Bethy? What does he say about her, this... *Ellie*?”

Bethy, mostly-girl-becoming-woman, sat on the lowest step, struggling to rip off stem-ends and picking at brown spots with her fingernails. She had as many stems as beans in her white bowl. She watched Wyatt, her daddy, walk up through the pasture. She thought the slanting morning light through the standing grass looked like a great slice of translucent, green, honeydew melon.

“Bethy—answer me. What does he say about her?”

“I don’t know, Aunt Nita. He says he just likes her. She likes to go places he likes to go. And she pays about half the time—at least when they take me too. She says one thing young people have got right these days is that when it comes to paying, turnabout is fair play. That’s one of her favorites—‘Turn about is fair play.’ Another one is ‘Absence

does *not* make the heart grow any fonder.’ And she likes to say her mother used to tell her ‘A whistling girl and a crowing hen will never come to any good end.’ Then she whistles some old song.”

They watched Wyatt come out the pasture gate and up the back yard. His steel bucket didn’t look too heavy. When he got to the stoop, he held it out to show Bethy. “Not as many as I’d like, but enough for Ellie to have a taste.” He nodded to Mairie. “I’ll get y’all some next week. There was—I mean there *were*—a lot more coming on to ripe.”

He went to the spigot, ran water in the bucket, swirled, drained, and repeated. He picked out a bug and snapped it off into the grass. Back at the stoop, he offered a handful of the small, red plums to the women. “When I told Ellie we had that stand of wild plum at the edge of the pasture, she said she hadn’t et—I mean *eaten*—wild plums since she was a girl, and she would sure like some. They’re a bit sour. Is this enough for a pie, you reckon, Aunt Mairie?”

Mairie’s face puckered as she bit the plum off from around the pit. “Oooo-eee. Sour is right. Good though.”

Nita peered at the fruit. “Wyatt, you have surely picked enough in your life to know how much of anything you need for a pie, and you know that ain’t enough.”

Wyatt frowned down into the shiny steel of his new bucket. “Well, I promised. Ain’t they—*Aren’t* they—a pretty red, though? Look, Bethy. They almost glow.”

It was such a Wyatt-kind-of-thing, to tell folks to look at the glow in the plums. He was always saying that kind of thing about light, which was why Bethy had noticed the light in the grass. “Daddy, look back at the pasture. Don’t it look just like a big slice of green melon, with the light all through?”

Wyatt gazed awhile. “Sure does, Baby Girl. Just like honeydew.” He smiled at his daughter. Twelve years old, and she was beginning to have some curve to her. Lordy, she wouldn’t be his baby girl much longer.

Bethy grinned and then noticed the stems in her bowl. “Angghh—“ She began picking through.

Wyatt chuckled, dodged up the steps around all three snappers, and disappeared into the house. Nita emptied her beans into Mairie’s big bowl. “He’s thirty-one. Ellie’s eighty-one. If Mama was still alive, she’d be as old as Ellie. Somethin’ ain’t right. If he likes going around with old women, why don’t he go around with us?”

Nita clumped up the steps and let the screen door bang shut behind her.

Nita didn’t hear Bethy’s mumble: “Ellie *likes* him, that’s why.”

Mairie heard her. “*Likes* him. Well. Nita Louise raised him from when he was fourteen years old. Ain’t the same thing as *liking*, I suppose. What about that Karlene he was stepping out with? She like him?”

Bethy concentrated on the beans. “I think she more like *wants* him. For something or other.”

“Or other.” Mairie chuckled. “You are right about that.”

Bethy finished fishing out the stems and handed her bowl of mangled green beans up the steps. “Reckon we can go with him? He can drop us off at the mall and then pick us up on his way back.”

“Bethy, I told you, you are too young to get your ears pierced.”

“Daddy doesn’t think so, I bet.” She clattered up the stoop. “Daddy, wait!”

While the three of them got ready to go, Wyatt moved the laundrymat basket with his work uniforms to the trunk and then sat in the car, in the Saturday-morning hickory shade, with his legs out the door reading the newspaper. He pondered an article about Pacific fishing harvests. He sometimes imagined going to Alaska and working on a fishing boat. He'd like to live for a year where he could see those northern lights most every night, except of course in the summer when there was no night—he'd miss night. Then the women all piled in, with Bethy in front chattering about earrings.

They were getting close to the mall when Nita leaned forward and spoke up. "Wyatt, why don't you carry us on into town and let us see this big house of Ellie's?"

Wyatt thought a moment. "I could do that, sure. I forgot you ain't seen it. Nor ever met Ellie." He switched on the radio to a bluegrass station and began to sing along with *You Are My Sunshine*.

Ellie lived in a steep residential neighborhood running up Red Mountain. On up at the top were genuine mansions built a hundred years ago with steel money. Ellie's house was not a mansion, but it would have been grand enough in the 1920's when it was built. Stucco, brown brick, and brown timbers made it look old and English. The stucco was falling off in patches, and the wood all needed painting. The mossy sidewalk was buckled by tree roots. But the big tiled and shaded porch was cool, and red caladiums spread their tropical leaves in heavy stone planters.

Ellie met them at the door in a brilliant pink kimono with dragons down the sleeves. "Well, Wyatt, it's about time you brought your aunts over here. Y'all come in. Wyatt's told me a lot about you."

They sat in the kitchen, half below ground at the back of the house, dark and cool. Ellie had fresh iced tea, sugared while it was hot, with a spiral-sliced lemon that she fished out of the pitcher with a fork before pouring. “Bethy, why don’t you get those Oreos out of the pantry?”

“This is a mighty big place.” Nita was looking around, craning her neck up to see out the back window. “Steep. I can see why you don’t have the back mowed.” She touched places in the sink where the enamel was worn down and black iron showed through.

Mairie fingered etched roses on the tea glasses. “These are pretty.”

“Thank you.”

Nita sniffed. “Bethy says this house has an elevator.”

“Yes, it does. The man that had it built, his wife was in a wheelchair, so he put in an elevator for her. Then they both were killed when their boat caught fire. I don’t like riding in that elevator, but it’s handy to haul up groceries.”

They went to examine the elevator, with its bronze folding grille, and Bethy took Mairie for a ride up to the top floor, down to the basement garage, and back.

After that, conversation plunked along, reminding Wyatt of a time when he was a bored child picking at somebody’s piano. Then Bethy said she wanted to go and get her earrings. Ellie exclaimed about how nice they’d look on her, and everybody stood up to go.

Ellie smiled. “Y’all come over for supper sometime.”

As they trooped across the porch, Wyatt hung back and kissed Ellie's cheek. “See you later, Sunshine.”

Ellie waved him away. “Say hello to Karlene for me.”

In the car, Nita was quiet for about a minute. “Karlene? You still dating that trashy Karlene?”

Wyatt grinned at her in the rearview mirror. “Yep.”

They went to the mall. Bethy’s ears were pierced, and tiny gold studs with small pink freshwater pearls were installed. Wyatt said they caught the light like little pink minnows swimming in waves of Bethy’s hair. Bethy whispered that in her mind all the way home.

Mairie stood at the car window. “You going to Karlene’s now?”

“Uh-huh. She says she wants some barbecue for supper.”

“You give her a hug for me. Ellie too.”

Wyatt backed out the drive with a little salute.

It was about ten o’clock that night, dark but still warm, when he got back to Ellie’s. His mouth still savored the greasy sweetness of barbecue, and the rest of him still savored the lush sweetness of Karlene. But he was still hungry in a way that neither barbecue nor Karlene quite touched.

Ellie was still wearing her dragon kimono. There was a white splotch of flour on the front.

They sat on the porch in the dark for a while. Wyatt wished he still smoked. It would be nice to watch the orange glow of a cigarette in the dark. But she’d asked him to quit because her doctors said she ought not to breathe anybody’s smoke any more.

“Aunt Mairie said to give you a hug from her.”

“I like your Aunt Mairie. You bring her here any time.” Ellie pushed the porch glider back and forth gently with one foot.

Cars grumbled down the mountain, and cicadas clattered in the trees.

“Come on inside, Wyatt.”

Ellie flipped on the kitchen light. On the table sat a small pie, baked in a glass oven dish no bigger than his hand, with a lattice crust. Ellie nodded toward his usual chair.

Wyatt grinned down at the way the red filling was deep and full of light as ruby.  
“Well, I’ll be dam—danged. Wild plum pie.”

END