

Miss Maizey's Victory Garden

It was a cheerful but well-worn kitchen, painted yellow; the only acceptable color for a kitchen, as far as Miss Maizey was concerned. Sunflower café curtains adorned the large bay windows that overlooked the garden. Hanging baskets and potted herbs lined the windows and sills, infusing the air with herbal and floral fragrances. The refrigerator was dated. Miss Maizey hadn't felt the need to get a new one just to modernize and match the new, professional-quality gas range, the only acceptable stove as far as she was concerned.

Her gait was unsteady, but her hands were quick and sure as she chopped, and stirred and seasoned, and cleared the counter to make it ready for the next phase of preparation. It was a smorgasbord of culinary delights. Moist cornbread with sweet kernels of garden corn baked inside. Succulent roast chicken, stuffed with onions, peppers, and lemon wedges, seasoned with fresh herbs and garlic, a healthy replacement for the crispy fried chicken she was famous for in her youth. There were savory greens, buttery squash, and roast duck, prime ribs. And for dessert, there was sweet potato and key lime pie. Every family member's favorite food was represented in the fare.

"Ma Maizey, what in heaven's name are you doing?" A handsomely dressed woman in her thirties interrupted the quiet busyness of the kitchen, "My god, and look at all this food! Did you do this all by yourself? Where's Mrs. Pearson?"

"She had the day off. Just felt like puttering around in the kitchen. You know how restless I get sometimes. Cooking always cheers me up." The younger woman opened the refrigerator and gaped in amazement.

"My goodness! There's enough for an army in here! You must have been up

since five in the morning!”

“ Don’t give me that ‘have you lost your faculties and need to go to the nursing home look’. I was feeling a little under the weather and I know the best way to make myself feel better is to start cooking. So I just thawed out some meat, gathered some ingredients, and started cooking. I knew it would get my mind off my aches and pains.”

The young woman beamed a good-natured smile and shook her head. “ Well who’s going to eat all of this?”

“We’ll eat some for Sunday dinner after church with the other children and grands. Put some in the deep freeze. It’ll keep forever in there.” Miss Maizey hung up her apron and ambled to her bedroom to get dressed for church.

“I’ll put this stuff away while you’re getting dressed. I’ll clean up for you after church,” the young woman began trying to fit the trays in the already stuffed fridge, still shaking her head in disbelief.

When Miss Maizey was young, she had hair the color of dried corn silk. Her mother had been half Powhattan and had given her the Indian name for corn. With golden brown hair and copper complexion, she was as vibrant and beautiful as the colorful blossoms that proliferated in her garden. She had a way with growing things. From the profusion of colors and scents that distinguished her property from all of the others in the neighborhood, to the rare orchids she nurtured in a small greenhouse, whatever she touched flourished. Her vegetable garden provided peppers, tomatoes, squash, corn, cucumbers, and green beans that she put up in mason jars, to last the whole year through. It was a habit she had acquired from her parents, during WWII, when everyone was encouraged to make victory gardens to support the war effort. She had been just a girl but

already was demonstrating horticultural ability.

Rumor had it that Miss Maizey had been married once. As a young woman in her twenties, she had fallen in love with a handsome insurance salesman. He was a smooth talking man with a flawless smile. There had been a brief, romantic courtship, replete with all the trappings, bouquets of flowers, candy, and picnics in the country after church. He had been the perfect gentleman, never forcing his affections on her, allowing her to make the first move. Everyone had urged her to get married because it wasn't fitting for such a young attractive woman to be on her own, regardless of how capable she was of taking care of herself.

After the modest church wedding, he moved into Miss. Maizey's house that she had inherited from her parents. A few weeks after they had gotten married, her husband came home drunk. She reprimanded him and he rapped her sharply against her chin. Unprepared for such an assault she dropped immediately to the floor. Recovering her bearings, she rose slowly but steadily with her eyes riveted to his. Then with a voice that expressed authority that neither of them was accustomed to hearing from her, said,

"I forgive you because that's what the bible tells us to do, but if you ever raise a hand to me again, I promise you, it will be your last time. God didn't put me here to be nobody's punching bag." He staggered up to bed but not without making a somber note of her response. A few months later, he came home drunk again. Unwilling to provoke his ire, Miss Maizey simply left the living room and went to the laundry room and began ironing one of his shirts. He pursued her slurring his words,

"Wha's a matter, got nothing to say, Miss Smart mouth? I'll slap you silly!" Miss. Maizey shot him a sharp look but just continued, spraying starch on the collar and

pressing it. She turned the iron up to rest while she hand smoothed a sleeve on the ironing board. She sprayed the sleeve with starch and...he slapped her across the face so hard that she thought she felt her brains loose in her skull. The iron dropped to the floor and without even glancing in his direction, she bent to pick it up. With hot iron in hand, she jerked the cord out of the outlet and started after him. He bolted out through the back door and in his drunkenness, tumbled down the staircase. Miss Maizey put all his belongings in the backyard and had the locks changed the very next day.

She had always been self-sufficient. Her parents had died when she was eighteen. She had been an only child. Although relatives had offered to take her in, she was determined to make it on her own. By then she was already baking yeasty breads and tantalizing fruit pies that filled the neighborhood with heavenly aromas. She sold them to supplement the insurance money her parents had left her until her reputation as a cook landed her a job in a local hotel. When she was in her thirties, she started a catering business and did quite well for herself. She never remarried, that first bad experience having been enough for her. She never regretted it, though she missed having a son or a daughter to raise.

One late summer morning, when she was in he early sixties, she donned her wide brimmed, gardening hat and headed out to her vegetable garden, to water the plants before it got too hot. As she approached the tomato patch, she thought she saw a figure dart behind a bush.

“Who’s there? Who is that?” Although she was not a woman to walk in fear, she had noticed how the composition of the neighborhood had transformed over the years. Many of the original homeowners had moved to the suburbs and rented out their houses.

Now there was a new group of people living in the neighborhood, poorer than the ones who had left, desperate and without hope. She grabbed a garden hoe and separated the branches of a hedge, prepared to protect herself if necessary. Hiding behind it was a trembling little girl, face and shirt stained with tomato juice and pulp. She dropped the hoe laughing heartily at her own foolish fear.

“ Little hungry for tomatoes this morning, huh? Bless your little soul. I’ll fix you a real breakfast.” That’s how eight-year-old Samantha first came into her life.

Samantha lived a couple of houses away in a house that had been converted into apartments. Samantha’s mother left early for work leaving her in the care of the upstairs tenant, who seldom woke up early enough to get Samantha to the bus stop in time. The food Samantha’s mother was able to leave for her was often eaten by the constant influx of companions that frequented the cramped apartment. When Miss Maizey walked Samantha home that day, she immediately sized up the situation. The little girl was not being properly cared for despite her mother’s efforts. Miss Maizey offered to pick her up each morning, feed her breakfast, and wait with her at the bus stop. It was an offer that Samantha’s mother couldn’t refuse.

When Samantha’s mother informed Miss Maizey that she and Samantha were going to have to move, Miss Maizey was shattered. She offered them lodgings in her house, but Samantha’s mother couldn’t see her way around that. She was a young woman looking to find the right man. Living in an old woman’s house, especially a church-going woman was sure to curtail her man- hunting efforts somewhat.

“But Samantha’s doing so well in school and all!” Miss Maizey pleaded. “Who’s going to get her off in the morning...give her a hot breakfast?” All her protests were in

vain. Samantha and her mother moved into another town and Miss Maizey did not see or hear from her beloved foundling for another three months. One balmy summer evening, Miss Maizey was relaxing on her screened porch, listening to the gospel station and singing along.

“I got the victory, oh yes oh yes. I got the victory, oh yes oh yes!” Samantha and her mother appeared quite suddenly at her screen door, interrupting her reverie.

“Sorry I didn’t call you or anything,” Samantha’s mother apologized, her insincerity surpassing her rudeness. “I’ve been really busy. Got a good job now. I make enough now to pay for a sitter to get Sammy off to school and to be there when she gets home.”

“Happy to hear that,” Miss Maizey feigned indifference.

“Well...I’ll just come right out and say it. The sitter’s not available on weekends and...I have a date. Would you mind watching Sammy for me tonight? I’ll pick her up tomorrow.” Miss Maizey was not happy with the disruption or the self-serving behavior of Samantha’s mother. However, her fondness for the little girl overcame her annoyance with her mother. Miss Maizey began caring for Samantha on the weekends.

Eventually, the dating reaped the intended benefit of an engagement, but in all of the tellings and retellings of the couple’s plans, Samantha seemed like an afterthought. And the more excited her mother became about her future life with her new husband, the sadder Samantha grew. When her mother announced that she was expecting a child, Miss Maizey wondered what that would mean for Samantha. She ruminated over the situation then decided that she would take custody of Samantha. Without an inkling of reservation, Samantha’s mother accepted her offer.

Samantha grew and blossomed into a lovely young woman. She had acquired Miss Maizey's flair for cooking and decided to attend culinary arts school when she graduated from high school. The two of them had a close-knit relationship that was based on mutual respect and admiration.

One night, when Samantha was sixteen years old they heard a noise in the cellar. At first they thought it was a stray dog, then they heard muffled footsteps on the staircase. They exchanged knowing looks, set off a silent alarm and armed themselves with heavy, cast iron pans. They situated themselves on either side of the cellar door. The neighborhood had continued to decline and they had discussed possible scenarios to defend themselves from a home invasion.

As the door hesitantly opened, an emaciated skeleton of an adolescent boy emerged. When he saw the two women, Samantha, tall and athletic, and Miss Maizey, a stout, strong woman herself, despite being almost seventy, he shyly raised his hands in surrender.

"Please don't hurt me! Please!" He tried to get away, but Samantha caught him and held him with his hands behind his back.

"What are you doing, you little thief? Thought you had two defenseless women here, huh? I ought to flatten your peanut head with this frying pan!"

"No please, please...don't hurt me. I got kicked outta my house. I been sleeping in your basement the last couple a days. I just got so hungry. Ain't had nothing to eat all day. I won't do it again!"

"Come here, boy." Miss Maisey pulled him by the arm. "What's your name? How old are you?" The boy was fourteen years old, but was so undernourished, he

looked twelve. His father had gotten arrested and his father's girlfriend had kicked him out. That's how Milton had found his way into her life. Miss Maizey soon found out that raising a boy was a world of difference from raising a girl. Milton was not book-smart like Samantha. He passed all his classes in school, but it was a struggle for him. But God gives everybody something. Milton was handy with mechanical things and was able to repair things around the house when they broke. He was a quiet boy and well behaved. But the neighborhood had continued to decline and Milton was subjected to the dangerous allure of gangs. Due to his overwhelming desire to belong, he was easy prey.

When he started coming home past his curfew, Miss Maizey's radar went up.

"You're sixteen, Milton. You don't need to be out in those streets at all hours!"

"Ma Maizey, I got friends. They look after me. You don't have to worry about me."

"What kind of friends you got that's gonna protect you from getting stabbed, or worse? I don't want you out there anywhere I don't know about. You hear me? Stick close to home and be in by curfew!"

Milton was grateful for all that Miss Maizey had done for him and tried to obey her rules. But one evening, an auspicious knock on the door invaded the harmony of the household. Milton answered the door and a teenage boy, a little older than him quickly bustled through. The two boys spoke in hushed tones. Miss Maizey came to see who it was. The stranger boldly stepped forward while Milton averted his eyes from Miss Maizey's penetrating gaze.

"Name's Ricochet, Mam." He extended his hand graciously. A little too forward, Miss Maizey thought, but somebody taught him some manners.

“That’s the name your Mama gave you, boy?”

“No Mam, Richard. Richard’s my name.”

“Ma Maizey, Ric... I mean Richard needs a place to stay for a couple of days. He could stay in Samantha’s room.” Milton piped up. By this time Samantha was away at culinary arts school.

“If I decide that he can stay, he will sleep on the cot in your room. Now explain to me where you know each other from and why you need a place to stay.”

Miss Maizey had a soft spot in her heart for young people in need, so she let her defenses down and ignored the signs. There was something dishonest about this boy. He was allowed to stay the night until she tracked down where he came from and what his story was.

Bright and early the next morning a sharp rap at the door woke Miss Maizey up. She threw her robe over her shoulders as swiftly as her arthritis would allow and shuffled into her slippers. Going up and down the stairs was getting to be a chore for her at seventy-five, so she was forced to take it step by careful step. She could hear furtive whispers and hasty movements coming from Milton’s room. When she opened the front door, there were two stoic policemen blocking the sunlight.

“Sorry to disturb you, Ma’am. We’re looking for Richard Cramer, aka, Ricochet. We’ve been told that he’s been seen with your son. May we come in?” Miss Maizey numbly moved aside as a half a dozen Kevlar vested officers appeared from thin air and swarmed her household.

“What has he done?” she mentally admonished herself for letting the boy stay.

“He’s wanted for armed robbery, ma’am. He’s a known gang member. Is your son

here?”

“Milton!” An officer escorted him downstairs. Richard had climbed out of the window only to be captured by policemen posted outside. Milton could not look her in the eye. After the police left, Miss Maizey turned to Milton, ready to thoroughly chastise him for his imprudence. Milton spoke up before she had the opportunity to gather her thoughts.

“I guess you want me to leave, now. I...I’ll just take my clothes...”

“You really think you’re gonna get off the hook that easily? If you do, you got another thought coming! I’m your Ma now and mother’s don’t throw their kids away the first time they do something wrong! But you’ve reaped some serious punishment for what you did... getting involved with gang members...police swarming through my house!” Milton threw his arms around her and sobbed like a baby. He knew that he was finally home.” Now, let’s take some sage up to your room and burn it. Get rid of any evil spirits left behind. Let’s burn some down here too. I learned that from my Ma. She was half Indian, you know.”

Leah was a quiet girl Miss Maizey had seen in church. Although they had exchanged greetings, she had never had more than a perfunctory church relationship with her or her mother. That is why Miss Maizey was surprised when she squeezed in next to her when there was plenty of room in the other pews. She listened attentively to the sermon but Miss Maizey could sense her sadness. When the service was over and everyone was shaking hands and hugging, she whispered into Miss Maizey’s ear,

“I need a place to stay. My mother is going to kick me out.”

“ Now let me see if I got this right. She hasn’t kicked you out yet, but you know

she's going to."

"That's right."

"Well what did you do? How do you know this?"

"Because, because I'm ... pregnant. She kicked my sister out when she got pregnant." Tears trickled down the girl's pretty face. Miss Maizey held her in her arms and protected her privacy by shouting,

"Praise the Lord! This young sister has got the Holy Spirit! Praise the Lord!"

Miss Maizey told Leah to first go home and tell her mother. She owed her that much. Then they would see where it went from there.

Leah moved in with Miss Maizey and continued her schooling. Four months later, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy she named, Lance. Leah never would say who the father was. Leah's mother would have nothing to do with Leah or her infant. At seventy-eight Miss Maizey became a grandmother.

Years went by and the woman who thought she'd never know motherhood raised three children and a grandchild, all discarded from a neighborhood in decline. They all grew up to be healthy, productive adults. Instead of facing a lonely old age she had busy, eventful senior years with children and grandchildren filling her days.

When Samantha, Miss Maizey, and her two children, returned from church they were joined by Leah, Lance, now twelve years old, Leah's husband, Milton, his wife and new baby girl for Sunday dinner. They had a delicious dinner sampling the delicacies Miss Maizey had prepared that morning. After dinner, Miss Maizey donned her gardening hat and went out to her garden to sit a while and enjoy the flowers and the evening breezes. She reclined in her lounging chair, inhaled deeply of the fragrance of

summer flowers, closed her eyes and died.

The repast was at Miss Maizey's home. The family and close friends ate of the fare that Miss Maizey herself had prepared on the morning of her death. Everyone would miss her terribly, but no one was sad. It was her time and they knew that she would want it that way. The neighborhood had gone full circle from deterioration to gentrification. The house, which she left to Samantha, Milton, and Leah, was now worth a half million dollars. The insurance money was also divided up, with the grandchildren receiving a share. Even in her death she gave.