

## **Apple Brown Betty**

The first week of December a cold wind blew in off Lake Champlain, but there was still no snow on the lawn at Wood Thrush Center for Senior Living. Betty always loved the views after the leaves had fallen, vistas to the Four Brothers Islands out on the New York side of the Lake. If you had to be old, Shelburne Vermont wasn't a bad place to be.

Betty sprinkled a little cinnamon mixed with her special seasoning on the oat topping of six single-serving apple crisps in white ceramic ramekins, and set the oven to 350. These would be her little gifts to special neighbors. They baked with the warm aroma of oats and Northern Spy apples.

She told her son "I suppose I like Wood Thrush." But he was usually too busy to call and hadn't visited since June. Even then he was rushed—on his way to see a client in Burlington.

Usually she enjoyed dinner in the dining room, with its views to garden and lake. The food was always good. This fall had been so mild that castor bean plants, with their maple-like purple leaves, had barely been touched by frost.

Still, she hated the cliquishness here; some people got all the attention— stars with others orbiting around them. There was the former governor and her husband, who'd, moved into Wood Thrush after her stint as Ambassador to Luxembourg. Famous, with her radio talk show and new book, she spoke three languages and chatted up everyone. Then there was the retired state senator and her husband the professor—all smiles and good deeds. They all hung out with Abigail, a writer who'd sold her indie bookstore, and her wife, a retired IBM executive, who'd done a term as lieutenant governor but lost her reelection.

Here they were, passing the wine. Betty approached their table, her apple crisps neatly arranged on a round tray, and offered each of them “A little treat for my dear neighbors.” The ex-governor gave her a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Come join us sweetie.”

The first 911 call to Shelburne Fire and Rescue came at 3:11 AM. *Elderly Wood Thrush resident, severe diarrhea, vomiting, very dizzy.* During the five minutes the ambulance was en route, two more calls came in with similar symptoms, one with two sick people. Two more ambulances responded from Charlotte and South Burlington.

The Shelburne EMT’s, responding to apartment 11, found the governor’s 86 year old husband barely conscious, blood pressure 70/53. His wife was nauseous but coherent. By this time three ambulances as well as local and state police cruisers were on the scene, flashing lights reflecting in all the windows. Betty watched from her bathroom window, wide awake, her heart throbbing.

By 7AM the story was on WCAX and FOX 44:

*Elderly Wood Thrush Residents Poisoned With Ricin*

*Ex-Gov, Husband, Four Others Hospitalized*

By 8AM the state police crime lab and a hazmat crew had arrived and sealed off three apartments and the dining room. Residents who couldn’t drive were loaded onto a bus for evacuation to the elementary school. Soon FBI agents in orange vests were on the scene. Betty was as exhilarated as she’d been since she could remember. It was a sparkling morning on the lake; the castor bean plants swayed in a soft west breeze.

Four FBI agents and two Vermont state troopers stomped into her apartment. “You could have knocked.” A female FBI agent shoved Betty into the corridor, patted her down and pushed

her face first against the wall. Betty mumbled “What’s this all about?” A trooper handcuffed her, showed her a search warrant, and led Betty to a cruiser with the FBI agent right behind.

With her cataracts, the camera flashes and TV lights in the parking lot nearly blinded her.

By noon it was all over TV and web news:

*81 Year-old Wood Thrush Resident Arrested in Attempted Ricin Murders*

*Made Toxin in Kitchenette from Castor Beans*

*Federal Charges Brought Against Grandmother*

The holding cell in the basement of the federal building, where they brought her after the arraignment, was cold. They’d stripped her, taken her clothes as evidence, then given her a droopy bra and baggy green jumpsuit. Supper was mini-franks and beans, with apple crisp for desert—not as good as hers.

By evening, as the search and hazmat cleanup continued at Wood Thrush, the story went viral on tabloids and blogs:

*No Bail for Apple Brown Betty*

*Grandma Tried to Kill Ex-Gov*

*Ricin Grandmother Pleads Not Guilty*

Meanwhile the U.S. Attorney was considering additional charges of “Harming a present or former public official with a biological agent.” A lawyer, hired by her son, visited her in a grey, windowless conference room. “Ugly colors,” Betty said.

Betty rather enjoyed the attention. “It was apple crisp, not brown Betty,” she called to reporters as she entered the courtroom in chains to face a federal grand jury for her probable cause hearing. She did miss the gardens and the view to Lake Champlain, though life was better once the feds boarded her at the Women’s Correctional Facility, just up the road from Wood

Thrush. After that it was almost a month in the state psychiatric hospital outside Montpelier. At least the food there was almost as good as at Wood Thrush. Her son visited now. He'd had to sell her apartment to pay the attorneys, but anyhow she was now under court to never set foot at Wood Thrush Center for Senior Living again.

She had three lawyers now, but liked the woman Roxy best—UVM, Yale Law. Roxy actually listened to her, and was able to help Betty plea bargain. It was better than risking trial with an insanity defense and getting 20 years to life. “Twenty to death,” Betty wept. They were able to get it down to 18 months.

Alderson Women's Federal Prison Camp was rather pretty, set in rolling West Virginia hills. Betty was an elderly celebrity. “Hey Apple Brown Betty,” younger prisoners called. They'd carry her tray in the cafeteria and bring snacks to her dorm room. Alice, a former state rep in for kickbacks, pointed out rooms where famous prisoners once lived: Martha Stewart's “Cupcake Suite,” and “Nutcake House,” where Squeaky Fromme lived for 34 years after almost assassinating President Ford. Betty was right up there with famous female criminals.

Everyone at Alderson who could had to work. They soon realized Betty could do more than wash dishes, but she wasn't allowed to cook. So she tutored a couple of inmates from Philadelphia twice a week and was on garden crew the other three days. At her age nobody expected her to work very fast.

The late summer morning was calm and warm. Breakfast had been okay—scrambled eggs and baked apples, toast and coffee—almost as good as the psych hospital. Betty put on her gloves, sipped crappy coffee from a paper cup, and slowly pushed her garden cart with her shovel, rake and weeding tools.

There they grew, inside a border of begonias and marigolds: purple castor bean plants, ready to harvest. She was all alone now. Chickadees and cardinals sang.