



RAINDY DOYLE HAZLETT, PHD



The rickety screen door slammed shut, expelling a small cloud of dust, as she pulled back the scroll of newsprint while failing to restrain the old door springs from doing their job. “Not in my house, and especially not today! I might just bake me a cake, and if I do, I’m not sharin’ it with the likes of you. Birthdays are special – birthdays and family. And *you* are not family!” she chirped at the expelled cricket, unaware that her voice could be heard by any neighbor with a bent to listen, but none did, at least not since Mr. Beauregard passed away. She returned the grocery store flier, rubber band and all, back atop the sixties-vintage refrigerator juxtaposed to the family flyswatter. She left the end protruding so as to provide a handle for easy access the next time it would be drafted into service. The gaping holes in the screen ensured that the wait would not be long.

Anyone tall enough would see the years of unattended grime which glazed the top surface of the refrigerator-freezer combo,

but a woman of low stature was oblivious to it all. A little lower and in plain view and the sight would have driven her crazy, scrubbing and spraying with her can of Lysol® until the surface was thoroughly sanitized. The fact that Leena was twice removed from an accurate eyeglass prescription didn't cut down on her allotted cleaning, only her efficiency. She'd find herself swabbing the same spot over and over again. That's okay, for with time, each surface received its due attention. The little house was neat and clean on the inside, a fact obscured by the layers of peeling honeydew melon paint, ragamuffin shingles, and rotting baseboards on the home's exterior. To Leena, the upkeep of the home on the inside was the calling of a woman, but outside – outside was a man's responsibility.

Leena thought aloud, "Now if I were a cake pan, where would I hide?" Truth was that Leena no longer had such hardware – none for quite some time. Now the recipe was another matter. One simply cannot bake an angel food cake from scratch and misplace the art. The ingredients are secondary to the love invested in the process. All those egg whites had to be whipped just so. However, if there were a hint of doubt concerning the blueprint, a deep breath from the recesses of the mind would be enough to fill in the gaps. Angel food cake leaves an unshakeable imprint. The kitchen just wouldn't cooperate today to make it a reality.

Nevertheless, Leena was dedicated to the search until there was a knock on the screen door. It was a gentle tapping, as one either unsure of the door's integrity or so familiar with it that a tap was all that was necessary to achieve the desired result. It was the mailman. For the first time this day, a smile breached the daily routine of Leena Adams.

In the time-frozen community of Waltham City, Missouri, no one came to Leena's front door unless they had no business visiting. She kept the formal entrance tightly shut and securely locked. Leena Adams used to say, "An old widow woman can

never be too safe.” The less the front door was used, the more of a nuisance it became to access, with all her boxes and knick-knacks. She ran out of space in the home long ago for new things, but old things were more than welcome. Leena’s pride was her collection of depression glass. She could sit for hours admiring each one. When something significant arrived, the only place remaining to display it properly was the entryway. It was a seldom-used space, so it might as well be crammed with dust-hugging curios. If it didn’t conjure memories of happier days, however, Leena had absolutely no use for it.

Why, the last time the front doorbell was used, it took her nearly five minutes to manage clearance for the door. It happened to be a young fellow from the new electric company wanting her to switch electric providers – a monumental waste of energy. If he knew where he was, he’d have gone to the back door, and if he had known the owner, he’d have left much sooner for more fertile ground for a gent on commission. Leena had lots of questions, mainly centered on keeping the conversation flowing and the fellow from leaving. The poor guy mistook social curiosity for business interest, a flaw surely to fill a day without filling a pocket. Perhaps she reminded him of a departed loved one, his mother or grandmother. Perhaps he too needed a word more than a sandwich, but she gave him both. Most of Leena’s questions he couldn’t answer, but she’d just poke and prod until she could give him cause to chime in. He left that day feeling like a million bucks, only to realize that the rent was due next week. He jotted down the address though, in case business was slow another day. He never did come back. Those door-to-door salesmen are a fickle lot. Their bosses are probably even more high-strung.

Despite the occasional sojourner, Leena seemed doggedly lonesome since Mr. Beauregard was no longer a mainstay across the way. He and his family moved into the neighborhood some thirty years ago, causing quite a stir. They were the first black family in the parish. Folks said everything would change, others

would follow, property values would plummet. They were right only on the last account, but not because of the Beauregard family. Their yard was always manicured to perfection, kind of like the window dressings by the fancy merchants on the plaza with foreign words in their names. Mr. Beauregard kept a fresh-paint look on the wood frame and flowers growing along the walk. No matter the time of year, there were flowers blooming of some sort.

Mr. Beauregard was a gardener, but most folks thought he just helped others out after his piece was looking just the way he liked it. Sadly, Mr. Beauregard lost his wife and kids in a bus accident on the way to visit relatives in Baton Rouge. Mr. Beauregard was supposed to join them later in the week, but he never got the chance. He visited the gravesite every Wednesday and Sunday, putting out fresh flowers, mostly from his own yard. Following a particularly cleansing rain, when there were extra, Mr. Beauregard would decorate the graves of those he didn't know, mostly children – those who barely had a chance to start living before the second engraved date caught up with them. Some tried to convince Mr. Beauregard that it wasn't healthy, him spending so much time amongst the dead. He'd just reply, "Rightly so, but whens folk see how much luv I put into this here stretch of God's green earth, they wants me to do the same for them. I try, but I never can do their space justice. There's just so much love in a man, an' no mo'. They still pay for my a tryin'. No, I'z got to do what I can to add a little life to this here patch of dreariness. Time jus' passes a right more slowly here for those not amongst the livin'. That's all."

Mr. Beauregard spoke with a thick Cajun accent, that is, when he spoke at all. Most of the time, Leena would simply cruise by in the Dodge or step out on the porch to pick up the *Daily Gazette* and see Mr. Beauregard working in the front lawn. He'd just raise his pruning shears, and she'd nod her head. They understood one another.

After the kids moved away, Mr. Beauregard crossed over more often. In her younger days, Leena loved to plant flowers herself. She'd never do it alone, though. When the boys were home, she'd make sure at least one was within shouting distance. Leena loved flowers, but she shuddered every time she unearthed a worm – literally shake. She'd holler for one of the boys to fish it out of the hole. She'd say, "Don't kill him. Just send him on a holiday." After the boys grew up, Leena would only plant flowers when Mr. Beauregard was likewise working outdoors. When she chanced upon a wiggler, she'd call Mr. Beauregard over to take care of it. He didn't seem to mind. The boys used to take them out back to the sandpile, but Mr. Beauregard would simply drop them into the front pocket of his overalls. Every so often, he could be seen reaching into that pocket while tending his own flowers. Leena didn't mind. A holiday is a holiday.

Once on a particularly warm summer day, Leena had imposed upon Mr. Beauregard so often that she felt accountable. She asked him if he'd like some lemonade. He nodded and mistook her directness for an invite to the kitchen. As she toddled in to gather the refreshments, Mr. Beauregard simply followed suit. That was the only time Mr. Beauregard ventured into the house. Once through the doorway, Leena caught a whiff of the manly odor of sweat mixed with peat moss that hung to Mr. Beauregard. The scent wasn't altogether displeasing; it just wasn't a combination that Leena sanctioned in her kitchen. Mr. Beauregard must have likewise been nauseated by the lingering fumes rising from Leena's sanitized floors and counters. He much preferred his kitchen to carry the fragrance of cornbread and bacon-seasoned greens near mealtime and fresh-cut hibiscus in between. Leena was particularly nervous; Mr. Beauregard was particularly awkward. She had never entertained black folk in her home, and certainly not alone. They drank their lemonade with barely a word of exchange, but then, none was needed. They understood one another. Words would have just gotten in the way and highlighted their differences. On his way out, Mr. Beauregard tripped over a footstool in front of the divan, but

caught himself on the armrest. In the process, a little too much pressure was exerted on that front pocket. Mr. Beauregard excused himself and hurried home.

The day the truck topped with the flashing red lights stopped on her street, Leena lost a step. Her enthusiasm for life dwindled that day when they carried off Mr. Beauregard. Her call to the hospital to check on his condition was sheer well-wishing, for she knew the truck pulled away much too slowly from the curb.

In such times, a home cooked meal was in order, for Leena knew Mr. Beauregard had relatives scattered across creation – at least all over the state of Louisiana. Surely, they'd be coming to the house. Still, Leena was in a quandary on just what to fix. A reheated casserole just wouldn't do. People don't know what to say to set things right. They just come bearing gifts so that a 'thank you' and 'you're welcome' will suffice. Too often, the gift which supplants words is a green bean casserole. No, a bean assortment just didn't tally up to what Leena wanted to say, but then Leena came to a startling realization. She had no notion of what black folk liked to eat. After some thirty minutes of sifting recipes, Leena took a different tack. She just combed through her feelings on what she wanted to voice, then she selected food to match. She settled on a honey ham, yams, and angel food cake. When the kids were young, she practically lived in the kitchen. While she was a little rusty, carving, beating, and blending gave her a nostalgic sense of belonging.

This meal was a delight. The ham was slow cooked to perfection with ample basting along the way using Leena's special pineapple-orange-honey concoction. Leena wouldn't give anything less than a fully-prepared meal, so she pre-sliced the finished product. The cross-grain cutting of the warm, golden-brown masterpiece released a syrupy aroma that saturated the air. You didn't have to taste it to know that each bite was heavenly. Those yams were not to be outdone. Leena fused together twice-baked choice sweet potatoes with lenient helpings

of brown sugar. When almost done, Leena layered the dish with marshmallows and returned the whole thing to the oven until a toasty brunette deposit capped off just what she wanted to say. To beat all, there was her finale – a cake so light to melt in your mouth. Leena just didn't bake an angel food cake for anybody. She smiled, knowing her choice of meals was truly eloquent.

On that short jaunt across the way, she balanced more pans than she could reasonably carry, only to have her knock on the door fall silent. It was only while standing on the stoop that she realized this was the first time she had come visiting the Beauregard home. The yard looked even more beautiful from this side of the street. The fragrance was breathtaking on the way up the walk: daffodil, hyacinth, and rose, in that order. Never before had Leena wanted to inhale more completely. Had she not been toting a full load, she's have retraced her steps just to repeat the intoxicating sequence. Leena knocked again more forcefully, but the Beauregard home was not entertaining guests. Leena thought she'd just leave her foil-wrapped gifts on the porch for later. Surely, the family was out taking care of arrangements.

Days later, Leena retrieved her untouched dishes and molding angel food cake from the Beauregard property. Ants were the only mourners feasting on her thoughtfulness. The sweet aroma had given way to a foul, musty-vinegar combination. Leena held the stuff at arms length and tried not to breathe in the direction she stepped. Glancing downward, Leena noticed the flowers along the walk were already wilting, as if they, too, were bowing in bereavement. Leena just pitched the food into the rubbish bin, dishes and all, as she couldn't bring herself to clean the pans in order to start afresh on a new recipe on a more pleasant occasion. Those pans would just be a reminder of a day she wished had never happened. She didn't lament the food going to waste, but the sight of those pans unraveled her. Ever since that day, not a pan was replaced nor a fresh flower ever planted in Leena's yard. How could she?