



Most of the morning fog had burned away in the July sunlight, but dew still hung on the grass. Betty Rawlins saw droplets of it on her new white clogs as they nestled into the edge of the thick pile of sawdust that served as the base of her blueberry bush. All the bushes at Yoder's Orchard bore similar sawdust bases. It had something to do with the acidity of the soil, or so Mr. Yoder had told her once.

Betty reached for a cluster of the juicy blueberries with both hands and began lightly twisting each one with thumb and forefinger, keeping her hands cupped beneath to catch them as they fell. Only when her hands were full did she deftly drop them into the grocery bag-lined bucket, which was tied around her waist. The berries at Yoder's were far bigger than you might expect blueberries to be—the size of small grapes, really. And while they say things in the past grow grander with age, these berries were a far cry larger than the ones her granddaddy used to grow when Betty was just a kid. In fact, these seemed to grow more gigantic with each passing year.

Betty had been visiting Yoder's farm each summer since the orchard opened, five years ago and she now considered herself old hat at berry picking. She came so often that Mathias Yoder no longer tried to give her his usual picking-tutorial, though he did still strongly encourage her to take all the berries she possibly could from one bush before moving to another, but Betty could never quite manage to follow that instruction. With

the entire row to herself, Betty already felt the urge to move on to a better bush. Not that the berries were bad where she was; she just didn't care for the conversation. On the row above hers, two older gentlemen were yammering on. At first Betty had thought they were angry about birds. This didn't seem right, though, because the long rows of bushes at Yoder's orchard were completely covered in hundreds of yards of bird-proof netting—another far cry from her granddaddy's method, which was to hang vicious-looking rubber snakes in the bushes to scare the birds away. Turned out, though, the men were actually talking about politics, specifically how many structures in the state were named after Senator Robert C. Byrd.

“Just saying it doesn't seem right that every other street, bridge, school, highway, courthouse, shithouse or VD clinic is named after the man,” one of them said.

The other man grunted in a non-committal tone. “Gotta be named after somebody, I guess.”

“Yeah, but does it have to be Byrd, every time? Come on. Throw Peal S. Buck a bone or two. Or Barney Fife. They've both done more for the good of the people than ol' Sheets.”

Betty dropped another handful of berries into her bucket and moved down the row, her plastic bucket slapping against her thigh with each step. She didn't have anything for or against the senator, but she still didn't want to hear anything about him. She had no patience for talk of politics, religion, hunting or sports. No, her tastes gravitated toward talk that was nearly as juicy as the blueberries.

When she was a sufficient distance away from the politicking, Betty turned her back to the row above and paused to listen.

“Oop, I dropped another one!” came a small girlish voice.

“Careful, Annie,” came the motherly reply. “Remember, Mr. Yoder said you can eat the dropped ones, but don’t put them in the bucket or they’ll spoil the rest.”

“There are so many berries!” the girl said. “I’ve been picking and picking, but I don’t think this bush is getting any smaller.” The mother laughed. Betty frowned. During the short weeks blueberries were in season, she heard variations of this phrase repeatedly and it had begun to irritate her. Her own grandson, Tommy Lee, used to say the same thing, back before he turned 18, moved out on his own and got too busy to pick blueberries with his granny. “Yoder! You seek Yoder! Buy my berries, you will,” Tommy Lee would say in a voice that sounded like Grover from *Sesame Street*. “Size matters not! Judge my berries by their size, do you?” Then he would laugh and laugh until he spilled his bucket. Betty never saw what was so funny about it.

Moving down two more bushes, Betty heard another voice, this time from the row below hers. Through the berry-laden branches, Betty could just make out two women with their backs turned. They were as plump as blueberries themselves.

“...that punk’s a sneaky little turd, for sure, with the way he’s always talking bad about the others behind their back,” said one of them. “But *she*’s even worse!”

Yes, this bush sounded better. Betty started picking with vigor.

“Course, everybody knows the two of them are only together for one thing only,” the woman said. “She’s just stringing him along so he won’t vote her off the tribal council and make her leave the show.”

Betty nearly spat. She dropped the handful of berries she'd picked into her bucket and walked away, adding *reality television* to the list of things she had no patience hearing about.

Almost half way down the length of the row, Betty stopped again to listen.

“Our guests love fresh blueberries at breakfast,” a cheerful male voice said. “My wife and I always try to pick some this time of year.”

“Running a bed and breakfast sounds like a lot of work,” said another male voice.

“Oh, it's not so bad. Just have to keep the place clean and have variety of breakfast foods on hand for those who stay for more than a day. The only real trouble we have is when the guests skip out on their reservations. Doesn't happen too often. The last one I recall was back in February—some big shot lawyer from Charleston missed his reservation for two. I kind of thought he was up to something, because I remember he was real nervous on the phone. Especially after I asked how many nights he and his wife would be staying with us. Normally I would have charged him a steep cancellation fee, but he'd insisted on paying cash in person. So I tracked down his home number and left a message about it on his answering machine.”

“He call back?”

“No,” said the first man. “But his wife did. His *real* wife.”

Both men laughed hard, but Betty Rawlins stopped picking. This talk was the juiciest so far, but cheating lawyers from Charleston weren't exactly priority local talk. Betty moved on.

“I tell you, Billy Jack's driving me crazy with all this aggression. I can't let him out of my sight for a minute,” a woman said from the row below. Betty couldn't see her

very well, but she was wearing a bright red sun hat the size of a sombrero. “Have to watch him every second or he’ll be out the door and at it again. Got him a bitch on every corner, that one.”

Betty nearly blushed. Who were they talking about? Billy Jack who?

“And the neighbors are just infuriated,” the woman continued. “Especially Bob Schexnader. He threatened to shoot Billy Jack if he ever came sniffing around his pure bred Pomeranian again. I said, ‘Pure bred, my ass, Bob! Only papers that mutt has are the ones it piddles on.’ ”

Betty clenched her teeth.

“So now I got to keep him inside all day and put up with Billy grumping around the house, barking and snarling at anything that moves. *And* doing his business with that old rolled up rug in the corner of the laundry room.”

“Why don’t you just have him fixed?” the other lady asked.

“Oh, I don’t want it to change his personality.”

Betty resisted the urge to fling a fistful of berries at them.

The next three stops on the row gave Betty an audio vantage point of a group of pickers discussing how much they loved blueberry cobbler. They loved it a lot. They loved it with ice cream. They loved it with heavy cream. They loved it by itself. They loved it warm. They loved it cold. They could eat it for breakfast. They couldn’t get enough of it and could hardly wait to stop picking berries so they could rush home and bake some more. While Betty agreed that blueberry cobbler was indeed very good, hearing about it wasn’t very exciting so she tried to move on. But, with each new attempted stop she heard more and more cobbler-talk and she realized that she had

wandered close to an entire family of cobbler addicts. It was a topic from which they refused to stray, except to comment about how they had been picking berries for nearly an hour and didn't think their bushes were getting any smaller.

Betty looked around to see if Mr. Yoder was watching, because she had a feeling she was going to have to change rows entirely. Then she took a few steps more and hit pay dirt from the row above.

"...and then she tells Stella she's moving in with him, now," a woman said. "And him with a young'un by that Harvey girl, already!"

Betty's ears perked up. Had to be talk of Stella Parsons from up Claypool Mountain. That woman's whole family was always caught up in some kind of drama. And Betty recognized the voice of the one speaking, too. It was Regina Smith, a girl who was almost as big a magnet for gossip as Stella herself.

"Course, Stella was fit to be tied. Just fit to be!" the voice continued. "Told Missy she didn't want to see her around the house no more—least not 'til the baby came, then they could talk about it."

"Oh, sure. A grandbaby is a grandbaby," a second voice said. Sounded like Crystal Shank, another busybody who rarely did anything to draw attention to herself but was always willing to draw it to others. Betty wasn't sure about this Missy person, though, unless they meant that girl of Stella's who lived with her daddy over in Hope County. Seemed like her name was Melissa, or something.

"Don't know what Stella thinks she needs with another grandbaby," Regina said. "Got her hands full taking care of Patty's kids, already. Spends half her check on them and they're all wild and rotten to the core."

That was true, Betty thought, popping three fresh berries straight into her mouth.

Regina dropped her voice low, then. “Course, I guess Missy has a leg up on Patty, to start. At least she knows who the daddy is.”

Betty nearly asked “Who?” aloud, before she caught herself. Fortunately, Crystal was there to ask it for her.

“Well,” Regina began, drawing it out. “You know I don’t like to gossip.”

“Oh, no! You got to tell me, Gina!” Crystal said. “Who is it?”

Betty could almost hear the smirk on Regina’s face. “Well, for sure it’s not the one she’s moving in with.”

“Come on, Gina! Who?”

Regina paused, no doubt relishing the tidbit of news. Then she laughed again and said, “I heard it was that no-good pot-head Tommy Lee Rawlins.”

If her berry bucket hadn’t been tied on with rope, Betty would have dropped it right there. She felt light-headed and couldn’t think clearly for what seemed a long time. The words she had just heard kept tumbling around in her brain like clothes in an overloaded dryer. Tommy Lee. Her own grandson. A father? A pot-head? A *no-good*? It wasn’t true. It *couldn’t* be true. Tommy Lee was a good boy!

Through the bushes, Betty heard Regina emit a half-suppressed snort of laughter and what had been ice-cold blood in her veins suddenly blazed hot. She didn’t bother walking around the edge of the row, but plowed right between the bushes, climbing up to the next row, sending a shower of loose berries onto the sawdust.

“You lying, hateful bitches!” she screamed.

“Why, Betty,” Regina said. “I didn’t even see you there.” The smirk on her face combined with her tight little highlighted curls to make her look like a malicious sheep.

“You take back what you said! You take that back about Tommy Lee.”

“Take what back? I’m just repeating what I heard, dear.”

“Well stop repeating it!” Betty said. “It ain’t true!”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s just the talk.”

Now Crystal tried to suppress a giggle, covering her mouth with her fat little paw.

“Well, *that talk* stops right here,” Betty said.

Regina looked at her as though Betty had coughed up a frog. “Betty, you of all people know that you can’t stop the talk. You could sooner stop the sun from rising or the rain from falling.” She flashed her sheepy smirk again.

“Not this time,” Betty said. “You got no business spreading lies like that and I aim to see you stop. Both of you.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, it is,” Betty said. “See, if I hear even one word about Tommy Lee from anyone else, I’m apt to do some talking of my own. I’m apt to head straight down to Keesh’s Grill after church on Sunday,” she said, turning her full gaze on Crystal Shank, “where I might happen to mention how a certain person’s medical procedure last month wasn’t for ‘women’s troubles’ like she said it was. Unless, of course, by ‘women’s troubles’ she meant to say ‘hemorrhoid surgery.’”

“How in the hell did you—?”

“I didn’t,” Betty said with a sweet smile. “It was just a guess. Well, that and the inflatable pillow I saw in your back seat last week.”

Crystal's mouth worked open and shut a few times but she kept quiet.

"Or," Betty continued, turning back to Regina, "I might have myself a seat down at *Mattie's Hair Crisis* and start wondering aloud how certain tulip beds grown by certain neighbors of certain people mysteriously got sprayed with Round-Up this year." That should shut them up good, Betty thought.

"Where do you think I heard about Tommy Lee?" Regina said. She then reached up and gingerly patted the sides of her perfect frosted sheep curls and Betty saw that they were too tight and fresh to have been more than a day old. Crystal laughed openly.

Betty's world did not drop away beneath her. She was certainly both furious and fearful, but her legs remained firmly in place upon the grass between the blueberry bush rows. She would not faint away in front of harpies such as these. Regina was right, though; if not about Tommy Lee then about the impossibility of stopping *the talk* at its source. The talk had left home and was making its own way in the world. It was wandering from beauty parlor to church social to the checkout lines at *Wal-Mart*, multiplying, shifting and changing in substance depending on the whims of those who carried it. Eventually, it would return to visit Betty herself and who could say what it would look like all grown up?

Betty sniffed loudly at Regina and Crystal. She wanted to smack them both across the mouth or maybe otherwise knock out a few of those teeth they were so cheerfully baring. Instead, she reached out and grasped the lip of Regina's bucket, upending it over the aisle, spilling every last berry. Before either woman had a chance to react, she dumped Crystal's berries on top of Regina's and, smiling sweetly at them both, stomped hard on the pile several times. Then Betty stepped between the women and

calmly walked down the aisle away from them. It wasn't a victory and it would ultimately change nothing, but it was strangely satisfying. Betty thought it was worth every stain on her new white clogs.