

The sixth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize  
for Food & Drink Writing 2018

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‘Dried Apricots & Clotted Cream’

*by Irem Alici Silk*

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...a huge success! Over 800 entries  
were received for the 2018 prize...

parsonage grill



old parsonage



‘Dried Apricots & Clotted Cream’

It was a cold Friday afternoon and the wind was making Ruby's hair whip around her face and her eyes water. She was exhausted after a long day at the bakery, and her feet ached painfully with each step she took towards her destination. Her husband had told her to cancel her appointment with Mr. Lewisham and come straight home from the bakery, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Ruby hated disappointing people. Especially disappointing the elderly.

Once she made it to the small house by the end of Victoria Street, she released her long hair from the ponytail on top her head and knocked on the door three times. The knock was an act of courtesy, to let Mr. Lewisham know that she has arrived, since she had already been given the extra key to the house.

“Good afternoon!” Ruby chirped, as she walked into the

house and took her boots off by the door. Mr. Lewisham was sitting in his usual spot by the window in the small living room and greeted her with an affectionate smile.

Mr. Lewisham was a retired police officer with greying hair and piercing blue eyes. His partner had passed away last year and he had no children, or any close relatives other than his terminally ill older brother. Ruby learned of him from one of her regular customers in the bakery, Juliet, who was the head of a charity that worked with the elderly. Juliet was looking for a volunteer to drop by Mr. Lewisham's twice a week. Mr. Lewisham had asked Juliet's charity to find a volunteer that would read to him as he couldn't do it himself anymore due to his failing eyesight. Ruby had offered her help without hesitation much to Juliet's surprise.

"I hope you like Dostoyevsky, Mr. Lewisham." Ruby said, waving the hefty novel in front of his face with excitement. "I absolutely love this one! We read this in English class when I was 15."

"I haven't read it before, but I think they did a mini series for TV a few years back."

"Oh, TV never does justice to books!" Ruby responded. "I will put the kettle on so you can have some tea with today's pastry."

"Today's pastry" was a game they played since her second

visit to the house. Ruby would bring a freshly baked mystery item for Mr. Lewisham to taste with his eyes closed, and he would try to guess the name of the pastry as well as the ingredients that she used to bake it. Ruby came up with this game to make Mr. Lewisham feel better about his eyesight. "You don't need your eyes to enjoy dessert," she had said with a mischievous grin, when he expressed embarrassment about the fact that he needed someone else to read his bills and newspaper to him.

Once Ruby prepared the tea in the kitchen, she unpacked the pastry from its box and placed it in a small plate. "Close your eyes, Mr. Lewisham," she called out. "I won't be letting you cheat this time!" She heard him chuckle in the distance. His eyes were closed when she entered the living room. Placing the plate carefully on his lap, she moved his right hand towards the pastry. "It is ready to be tasted now."

Mr. Lewisham grabbed for the pastry blindly. He took a few small bites before he made a guess, "Some kind of puff pastry with custard?"

Ruby nodded enthusiastically forgetting that he can't see her with his still closed eyes. Mr. Lewisham continued, "A peach tart? No...It's something similar...apricots. Puff pastry with apricots and custard."

“Well done! You can open your eyes now. It is an apricot Danish. I also used cardamom to give it a Scandinavian twist.”

“It is delicious Ruby,” Mr. Lewisham said, as she served them both tea and settled across from him on the sofa to read the first chapter of Crime and Punishment.

The following Tuesday afternoon, Ruby unlocked Mr. Lewisham’s front door after picking up his post from the letterbox outside. “I brought a special dessert today,” she announced as she made her way to the living room. Mr. Lewisham was, once again, sitting by the window. He switched off the radio he had on, and greeted her with his usual affectionate smile. “You know, I am really thankful for all the desserts you have brought me so far,” he pointed towards the plastic bag Ruby was carrying, “but you don’t have to bring me a treat every time you visit. I can imagine it takes a lot of effort and time.”

Ruby waved a hand to dismiss his worries, “I am a baker Mr. Lewisham. It is my job to bake.”

“You know you can call me Ed,” he replied. “Everybody else does.”

Ruby laughed, “I will try but I am too used to saying Mr. Lewisham now.” She went to the kitchen to unpack the pie she baked for him in the morning. She cut a generous slice from the pie for Mr. Lewisham and a thinner slice for herself. “You

will need a fork this time,” she informed him. Mr. Lewisham was getting better at tasting with his eyes closed. He cut a piece from the plate on his lap and raised the fork to his lips expertly.

“I would say crumble but it doesn’t feel right.” He took another bite before he made another guess. “There is a familiar taste to it...is it apricots again? Also, thyme... My wife used thyme a lot in her cooking.”

Ruby took a bite from her slice with her eyes still fixed on him.

“Is it an apricot and thyme pie?”

“Yes, it is! Although, I am disappointed that you couldn’t taste the almond flour I added to the dough. This recipe might need some tweaking before I start selling these at the bakery.”

“I would like to visit your bakery sometime,” Mr. Lewisham said.

“You definitely should. I will arrange for John to come pick you up,” Ruby replied referring to her husband.

Mr. Lewisham laughed, “Is he still jealous of our appointments?”

Ruby snorted, “He thinks I work long hours and I should be spending more time with him, but he is never home either. Never mind him.” She took their empty plates to the kitchen and put the coffee machine on. “Shall I read the next chapter

whilst the coffee brews?”

Ruby sat on the armchair across from Mr. Lewisham and started reading third chapter of the novel she picked out for him.

“The dessert I brought to you today is different from the previous ones,” Ruby explained to Mr. Lewisham on her second visit to Victoria Street the week before Christmas. “It’s not a baked good and needs to be served in a bowl. I adapted it from a family recipe.”

“Can’t wait to taste it,” Mr. Lewisham answered. “I am starting to think that I got better at this blind tasting thing.”

“Today’s one might be quite challenging. I will give you a tip – it involves dried fruit.”

In the kitchen, Ruby opened the glass container she brought with her, and scooped a serving of the dessert to a small bowl. Mr. Lewisham was waiting eagerly for her in the living room with his eyes closed. She placed the bowl in his lap. Mr. Lewisham mixed the bowl slowly and managed to pick up one of the pieces of dried fruit. He made a surprised “oh” sound.

“It’s soft and crunchy at the same time. I think there is a pistachio topping and some kind of cream filling.” He tasted another piece from the bowl. “You said dried fruit...I think it’s dried apricots and clotted cream.”

Ruby clapped her hands in excitement. “I am impressed. I didn’t think you would figure it out this quickly. Dried apricots poached in sweet syrup, and then filled with clotted cream. So easy but also very satisfying.”

“This is the third dessert you brought me that had apricots.” Mr. Lewisham observed, opening his eyes.

“Apricots are special to me. They were my mother’s favourite.” Ruby told him. “My mother’s paternal grandfather came from the Malatya region in Eastern Turkey. He owned a small factory there that specialised in dried apricots and other apricot products like jam.”

“My mum spent most of her summers in Malatya running around apricot fields when she was growing up. She helped with the factory too, learning everything to do with apricots. Recipes, trivia, weird hacks with apricot seeds - you name it.”

“This is the first time you spoke of your mother,” Mr. Lewisham said as he indulged in another spoonful of poached apricots. The clotted cream filling inside of the apricots was cold and soothing.

“I don’t like talking about her. Brings back bad memories. She passed away when I was doing my A-levels.”

“Were you two close?”

“Yes, we were.”

Mr. Lewisham’s blurred eyesight made it difficult for him

to see Ruby's teary eyes but he recognised a profound sadness in her voice. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said softly. "How did she die?"

Ruby didn't reply straight away. When she did, Mr. Lewisham was taken aback by the emotion he heard in her voice. He expected grief, but instead Ruby's voice was laced with anger and irritation.

"She got run over by a drunk driver. He just left her in the middle of the road, bleeding. As if she was a piece of garbage." Her breathing was uneven, her rage bubbling in her throat. "She was in a coma for months. My dad and I, we watched her wilt away. And the worst thing was, the police did nothing. They didn't even search for the driver. They closed the case after a month saying there wasn't enough evidence on the scene for them to identify the car."

Mr. Lewisham took another bite of his bowl with a shaky hand. Something had finally clicked in his head. He understood why Ruby had volunteered to spend her every afternoon in his small house, and why her novel of choice was *Crime and Punishment*.

Ruby was staring at his face intently. "I later learned why the police was so eager to close my mother's case."

Mr. Lewisham took a deep breath and coughed. He was starting to feel dizzy.

"You see, the drunk driver's brother was a police officer. After running down my mother, the driver had called his brother to the scene. His brother just told him to go home and forget about it. He wrote an inaccurate crime scene report and made sure to close the case as soon as possible."

Mr. Lewisham's face was now swollen. His pale cheeks were specked with blood red bumps. "You are a retired officer Mr. Lewisham. What do you think of my story?"

Mr. Lewisham could feel his tongue getting bigger and bigger in his mouth. He opened his mouth to speak but it felt impossible for him to form any words. "What-" he stammered, "what did you put in-"

"Like I said, my mum knew everything about apricots. She would never throw away the stones." The bowl that Mr. Lewisham's hands were wrapped around during Ruby's story was now on the floor, broken. "Apricot stones have this very nutty and delicious kernel inside. These kernels are a local delicacy in Malatya. One or two kernels won't do anything harmful but huge quantities can cause cyanide poisoning." She laughed nervously. "I poached those apricots in kernel extract. And those crunchy bits you thought were pistachios are actually crushed kernels."

"Sorry. For. Mum...my brother...accident..." Mr. Lewisham puffed out painfully. "Help...please..."

Ruby ignored his plea. “I couldn’t believe it when Juliet came to the bakery to talk about you. I had been following you quite closely before that. I hired a private investigator. He found out about your wife and your brother’s illness. He even managed to get your brother’s medical reports from his doctors. I had to make sure he will die a painful death, or I would have found a way to kill him too. Your brother will be dead in the next six months,” She shrugged nonchalantly and took her phone out of her jean pocket. “And you will be dead in the next hour. I will call an ambulance when you stop breathing.” Ruby paused for a second before she said, “It was a pleasure to know you.”

