

Excerpt from *The Stone Diaries*

Birth, 1905

My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty years old when she took sick, a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper. A cookery book lay open on the table: "Take some slices of stale bread," the recipe said, "and one pint of currants; half a pint of raspberries; four ounces of sugar; some sweet cream if available." Of course she's divided the recipe in half, there being just the two of them, and what with the scarcity of currants, and Cuyler (my father) being a dainty eater. A pick-and-nibble fellow, she calls him, able to take his food or leave it.

It shames her how little the man eats, diddling his spoon around in his dish, perhaps raising his eyes once or twice to send her one of his shy, appreciative glances across the table, but never taking a second helping, just leaving it all for her to finish up -- pulling his hand through the air with that dreamy gesture of his that urges her on. And smiling all the while, his daft tender-faced look. What did food mean to a working man like himself? A bother, a distraction, perhaps even a kind of price that had to be paid in order to remain upright and breathing.

Well, it was a different story for her, for my mother. Eating was as close to heaven as my mother ever came. (In our day we have a name for a passion as disordered as hers.)

And almost as heavenly as eating was the making -- how she gloried in it! Every last body on this earth has a particular notion of paradise, and this was hers, standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving, leaning forward and squinting at the fine print of the cookery book, a clean wooden spoon in hand.

It's something to see, the way she concentrates, her hot, busy face, the way she thrills to see the dish take form as she pours the stewed fruit into the fancy mold, pressing the thickly cut bread down over the oozing juices, feeling it soften and absorb bit by bit a raspberry redness. Malvern pudding; she loves the words too, and feels them dissolve on her tongue like a sugary wafer, her tongue itself grown waferlike and sweet. Like an artist -- years later this form of artistry is perfectly clear to me -- she stirs and arranges and draws in her brooding lower lip. Such a dish this will be. A warm sponge soaking up color. (Mrs. Flett next door let her have some currants off her bush; the raspberries she's found herself along the roadside south of the village, even though it half kills her, a woman of her size walking out in the heat of the day.)

She sprinkles on extra sugar, one spoonful, then another, then takes the spoon to her mouth, the rough crystals that keep her alert. It is three o'clock -- a hot July afternoon in the middle of Manitoba, in the middle of the Dominion of Canada. The parlor clock (adamantine finish, gilded feet, a wedding present from her husband's family, the Goodwills of Stonewall Township) has just struck the hour. Cuyler will be home from the quarry at five sharp; he will have himself a good cheerful wash at the kitchen basin, and by half-past five the two of them will sit down at the table - this very table, only spread with a clean cloth, every second day a clean cloth -- and eat their supper. Which for the most part will be a silent meal, both my parents being shy by nature, and each brought up in the belief that conversing and eating are different functions, occupying separate trenches of time. Tonight they will partake of cold corned beef with a spoonful of homemade relish, some dressed potatoes at the side, cups of sweet tea, and then this fine pudding. His eyes will widen; my father, Cuyler Goodwill, aged twenty-eight, two years married, will never in his life have tasted Malvern pudding. (That's what she's preparing for -- his stunned and mild look of confusion, that tender, grateful mouth dropping open in surprise. It's the least she can do, surprise him like this.) She sets a flower-patterned plate carefully on top of the pudding and weights it with a stone.