

LAURA BEST

Watermelon Seeds

HER LAST ONE, BERNICE CLAIMED, popped out, wet and slippery, like a watermelon seed. She birthed him right there on the outhouse floor.

"A few minutes more and I'd a been fishing him out of the muck."

I curled my nose up. We were sitting around the table in Bernice's bright yellow kitchen playing cards, waiting for Bernice to shuffle the deck.

"I thought it was the change. What with my age and all. Didn't even show Can you imagine that?"

I looked over at Lillian and we both smiled. I suppose Bernice having had seven kids the last one likely did fall out by itself. It's a good thing too, when you stop to think about it. What good would her body be at a time like that?

My mind produced a clear image of a baby trapped inside Bernice pushing aside all the layers of fat, trying to get out. Somehow I couldn't imagine Bernice laying on a table with her feet in stirrups, panting and moaning, and a doctor with his head between her legs ready to catch it when it came out, saying, "Push, Bernice ... Push!"

I could tell by the way Bernice's mouth was drawn up like one of them clowns from the circus that she was enjoying describing the whole event, right down to the size of the afterbirth and the fact that she had to cut the cord her own self with a pair of sewing shears.

"I was weak in the knees by this time but I knew I had to get in the house and fix up the cord. And did I tell you how Rufus stood back like a big dummy when I walked in carrying a scream-

ing baby in my arms?" She didn't wait for a response from us. "We went to the hospital, naturally. Almost thirty miles away. And they could hardly believe my ordeal. One of them nurses," laughed Bernice, "kept shaking her head and saying I was lucky the baby wasn't damaged."

I guess it was Bernice's strange way of telling us about the facts of life. I hoped she wasn't going to go into the part about how she and Rufus went about making the baby. Besides, we were already learning about that in Miss Anthony's grade-seven health class. It was bad enough to sit there and watch Miss Anthony draw pictures on the chalkboard with fallopian tubes and one-legged sperm swimming up to crack open the egg without hearing an account of Bernice's sex life way back when she was young and Rufus was alive and she could remember what all them body parts were for.

Bernice finally shuffled the cards and tossed them out haphazardly. She says you can tell a real serious player by the way they toss out the cards. She makes sure we play a game or two of auction forty-fives with her every Thursday on account of the fact that she would normally be going to the card party at the community centre if it wasn't for Lillian and me being there. She's happy tonight because she's winning. That's why she's telling us the story about when she lived in that big old house near Windsor and they didn't have indoor plumbing or electricity until they'd been married for twenty some years. She likes to talk about the days when she and Rufus had it so tough. You'd almost think she'd want to forget them days. I guess it couldn't have been as tough as she lets on.

I suppose it's hardly fair of me to criticize Bernice for trying to be a mother to us. The truth of the matter is, we'd have been lost after Mom died if she hadn't stepped in to lend a hand. Dad was hardly able to care for himself let alone Lillian and me.

"Let him get his grieving over," Bernice said in the beginning. "Nobody can expect him to behave any different." She tried her best to cheer him, even had the minister drop in for a couple of visits. It didn't do much good. All he seemed to want to do was sit in front of the television every evening brooding with a pint of vodka stuck between his knees. Eventually Bernice just got fed up. The final straw came when she walked in and found Dad dead drunk in the middle of the afternoon. He hadn't been to work for two days.

She stood in the living-room quivering. I guess that's what anger does to fat people, it makes them quiver like a bowl of jelly. I thought she was about to explode.

"This is no way to bring up them girls," she managed to squeeze out between her fleshy cheeks. "I should report you. Have them girls taken away. Think of Jane Would Jane want you behaving like this?"

I guess Dad was pretty well corked because all he did was make a gurgling noise and suck up the spit that was running out the side of his mouth. I started bawling when Bernice talked about calling the authorities. I guess somewhere between my sobs she had a change of heart, 'cause the next thing I knew she was patting me on the head and telling me everything would be alright.

Later that evening Bernice brought us some leftover stew and a loaf of bread. We must have looked like a couple of half-starved wolves the way we flew into it. We hadn't eaten that good since before Mom took sick. Most times we opened cans or cooked macaroni and cheese.

Dad wasn't up to eating he said, but he did manage to make it as far as the kitchen table to watch us.

"It sure smells good," he remarked, but I'm not sure he really meant it. He got sick on his way to the bathroom. Lillian and I had to flip a coin to see who would clean it up. Lillian won.

Then, we helped Dad get sober. We walked him around the house and made him drink black coffee. Every now and then we'd walk him out to the front door and open it and we made him take deep breaths.

The next day when we got home from school he was cleaned up pretty good. His hair was washed and his skin shaved smooth. He even had on freshly pressed clothes. A wonderful aroma was coming from the kitchen and we went out to investigate. We found Bernice hovering over the stove stirring at a pot full of barley soup. The table was set and waiting for us. Everything looked real nice. Bernice had even folded white paper napkins and set them beside our bowls.

After supper we were sitting around the table all grinning at each other like we were waiting to see what was going to happen next.

"Your father has made some decisions," said Bernice, finally. She began gathering the bowls up. "He's going to get some help for his drinking." Lillian and I looked at each other with doubt.

Dad had promised he'd stop drinking before but until now he hadn't been able to give it up for more than ten days—tops. Even then you could tell he was really missing it the way he was always fidgeting with his hands.

We looked over at Dad. There was a twitching in his upper lip. "There's a place I can go ... a program," he said. "Just thirty days. That's if everything goes well." He sat straight-backed at the table and if I didn't know better I'd swear that some invisible person was holding a shotgun to his head.

Bernice clasped her hands together. "I've promised your father I'd keep you while he's gone. I'll fix up the spare bedroom ... Oh, we'll have a grand old time." Her voice had a musical chime to it like an angelic messenger sent down from heaven. I felt a sudden tingling in my body. And then it was as if the room sucked itself and everything in it into a small, hard lump that deposited itself somewhere in the middle of my throat.

"It's best this way," my father said.

I think the lump stayed there for three days.

Once the thirty days were up we waited anxiously to hear something from Dad. About a week later he was sitting on Bernice's sofa one afternoon when we got home from school. For a moment he looked like a stranger. His hair was slicked back close to his head and I knew the lines under his eyes meant he needed sleep. I wondered if he had started drinking again.

Bernice cooked a pot of potatoes and opened a can of ham for supper. She had even cooked carrots and opened some peas. Two vegetables in one meal. It was against Bernice's rules.

"It's a waste," she once told us, "to be serving two vegetables when you got potatoes too." I figured she did it for Dad's benefit so that he would think she was feeding us properly while he had been away.

"I'm still not well," he admitted after supper. "Not really. Not when I know that any moment I could start drinking." Bernice didn't open her mouth while Dad went into a lengthy speech. You could tell he had been practising because most of the words he used weren't even his. He used words like 'eventually' and 'hopefully' and 'a stable environment.' And I thought likely he was nervous having to talk to us with Bernice standing there waiting to pounce if he said something that wasn't to her liking.

"First things first," he finally said. "Wellington's told me to go take a hike so I got no job." Dad had been working for Welling-

ton's Plumbing since before Lillian and I were born. Still, I wasn't much surprised by the news since Dad had been warned time and again by Mr. Wellington that he'd fire him if he didn't soon shape up.

"Bernice and I talked it over," he continued. "We decided you should stay here for the time being I need to get myself together." I felt small suddenly. In the middle of Bernice's tiny house, standing beside Bernice and Lillian as Dad walked out the door. Too small to cry out and too small to run away. So I just stood there and watched him go. Sometimes I think it would have been easier if he had simply sent a postcard saying, "See you around sometime. Maybe."

There's not much to do at Bernice's in the evenings except watch television. Lillian's lucky 'cause she gets asked out a lot. Bernice says it's okay, her being sixteen and all, but she's not to go getting herself pregnant or there'll be hell to pay.

"It's no fun having babies when you're nothing but a baby yourself. Oh I think to myself sometimes, 'Bernice, what kind of life would you have made for yourself if you hadn't let Rufus knock you up a way back when.' But men got two brains you know, the one between their eyes and the one that's between their legs."

One night as I was laying there in bed watching Lillian undress, Bernice's warning came creeping back to haunt me. I was used to seeing Lillian naked ever since we were small. I remembered when I was nine watching with envy as her breasts began to bud outward, tiny at first, barely noticeable. She went from a training bra to a full B-cup almost overnight. I secretly marvelled at her dark nipples and the smooth, unblemished skin that made up her breasts, and her stomach that was as flat as most of the models I'd seen on the covers of some of them magazines at the drugstore. And then I'd look down my top at my own flat chest and wonder if I'd ever look like Lillian.

I sat up quickly in bed, not wanting to think the worst, and then I realized, much to my horror, that Lillian's once flat stomach was now sticking out over the top of her bikini panties. I scolded myself at once for being overly suspicious, of fretting over Bernice's well-meaning threats. Perhaps it was Bernice's cooking, the thick, rich gravies and creamy white sauces she'd been feeding us for

weeks. Surely if Lillian had done the unthinkable with someone she wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret from me.

"What're you gawking at?" she asked. "You act like you never seen me undress before."

"Are you knocked up?" I asked, expecting her to throw a fit and accuse me of being dirty-minded.

"You can tell?" Her eyes widened to the size of grapefruits, the ones Bernice cuts into halves and sprinkles with sugar every single morning for us. Lillian felt for her stomach. "Can I hide it another five months or so?"

I wasn't no authority on pregnancy, but I was certain that sooner or later Bernice was bound to get suspicious. Lillian wasn't much bigger around than a mop handle—even a small baby would have a hard time tucking itself in close to her body to keep from being spotted. Besides, I wasn't sure a baby would cooperate in that way. At any rate I hoped I wouldn't be there when Bernice found out. She would start to quivering all over and I was certain in that small house of hers it would feel as though an earthquake was hitting us.

After that I didn't watch Lillian undress, because my eyes always zoomed in on her belly and all I could think about was the trouble that she was going to get in once Bernice discovered the truth. I wanted to ask her "Who?" just for the sake of satisfying my own curiosity, but then I decided that I didn't want to know. I didn't want to think of Lillian in that way. I preferred to think that the baby got there all by itself without any help from anyone else.

I couldn't tell if Lillian was worried because she never talked about it. She acted as if everything was the same as it always was. She talked and walked the same as always. She wore her hair pulled back into a ponytail, same as she had for the past two years. And when Bernice cracked a joke, she practically rolled on the floor with laughter. Somehow it didn't seem right to me at all. I kept thinking about this little person with both hands hanging onto Lillian's backbone, wrapping its legs around her mop-handle body, holding on for dear life.

I waited as the weeks went on and the lump in her belly manifested itself into a tight, round bun. We constantly sorted through Lillian's clothing, looking for tops that were big and bulky, and slacks that would stretch. In a way it was like hiding presents at Christmas, and hoping the recipient didn't discover the hiding place.

That spring it seemed as though it rained about every other day. It seemed as though the whole world was soggy, especially my brain. Nothing seemed to be going right. Lillian was in trouble and Dad still hadn't shown up on the scene. Bernice was great but her cheerfulness was dragging me down further. I couldn't be like Bernice. I couldn't pretend everything was going to work itself out. By the time May came I'd pretty much given up hope of Dad coming back for us. It had been over three months since he'd left that first time, and at age twelve, it seemed like forever.

Then one night near the end of May I woke up in the middle of the night and realized that Lillian's side of the bed was empty. I climbed out of bed, thinking it was odd, because Lillian most often slept like a log at night.

I found her on the bathroom floor, holding tight to her bun. She looked up at me and whispered, "There's something wrong with the baby."

I kneeled beside her and put my hand on her forehead. I'm not really sure why I did it—probably because Mom used to feel our foreheads whenever we got sick. It seemed a natural thing to do. She pushed my hand aside. "Don't touch me," she said through clenched teeth. "Get some towels or something." I did as she ordered, hoping that she knew more about this than I did. After all, she'd help put it in there, surely she must have some inkling as to how it was supposed to come out. She gritted her teeth.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, as if you couldn't tell just by looking at her distorted face. I'm sure she wanted to slap me. Instead she grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed it real tight. Her knuckles turned white. I couldn't have run away if I'd wanted to, and I wanted to tell her how truly unfair I thought it was of her to include me in this. Other things went through my brain as well, like, "How could you let this happen?" and "I hope it was all worth it." But I said nothing. I just sat there on the floor beside her, hoping that Bernice wouldn't wake up to use the bathroom and find us.

In a few minutes it was over. The baby came out, all small and bloody, right on top of Bernice's good pink bath towel. It happened so fast that I was reminded of Bernice's watermelon seed. Only this seed was dead and we didn't have to open our mouths and say it, neither. You could tell just by looking. Something that little couldn't survive on its own.

I buried it outside the next morning while the sun hid behind the row of hemlock trees and watched. The ground, moist from last night's rain, opened itself up reluctantly to accept my offering. I kept it wrapped in Bernice's bath towel. It was best that way. I'd never be able to watch Bernice patting dry her face and neck without squirming.

I dug a hole so deep that I knew no one would ever find it. Right in the centre of Bernice's flower patch. I figured it would be as good a place as any to bury Bernice's pink bath towel and Lillian's tiny seed.

Just last week Dad came waltzing into Bernice's house like he hadn't been gone more than a week. He had been living in the woods somewhere, he said. Lillian and I didn't really care. We'd have accepted him no matter what. We flung ourselves at him like a couple of mosquitoes hungry for blood.

"I met these people a while back," he tried to explain, "and they're helping me get back on my feet."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bernice. "You're not mixed up in some cult or other?" Then she went on to tell about the documentary she saw last year all about religious cults who take advantage of people when they're vulnerable.

Dad laughed. "They're just good people," he explained. "Anyways, it boils down to this. They walked into Wellington's and convinced them to give me another chance. They told Mr. Wellington I'd sign a paper, a contract, saying I wouldn't drink no more."

"They?" interrupted Bernice.

"The Millers They live in the woods ... a few miles in. Near Henderson's old sawmill," he said.

"I heard people were living out there, eccentric as hell. Loaded with money, too, although I guess you'd have to be," said Bernice. She searched recklessly about the walls in the kitchen, her eyes looked moist like she'd just finished slicing up a pile of onions. She cleared her throat and looked at Dad. "So, just like that they walked into Wellington's and told them you deserved another chance and you signed a paper promising you'd stay sober?" Bernice seemed confused by all this, as if she couldn't comprehend it all in one sentence.

"Remarkable, isn't it? But Karen, she's the woman. Anyway, Karen says that everything happens according to some plan or

other only we're not supposed to know the reasoning behind it. Karen says God sent them Somehow he led them to me."

"Well hold me up!" Bernice declared. I thought for a moment she was about to take a nosedive into the kitchen table. "And you believe this?" Bernice added.

"I don't know for sure what I believe. What I do know is that I met Karen and Dakota and they helped me see things a whole new way." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Dakota?" whispered Bernice, looking at Lillian and me. "You ever hear a name like that before?"

"All I know is I got my job back and I'm not going to mess it up this time," Dad finally added, as if he realized it was no good to try and explain it to Bernice.

Bernice stood there with her bare arms crossed in front of her. I couldn't tell what she might be thinking even though a part of me desperately needed to know.

She didn't hug us when we left. She just said, "Now don't be strangers, you hear?" I watched Bernice standing in the doorway. I wanted to reach out and touch her jelly arms before we left. I wanted to know if they would feel warm or if she's so well-insulated with fat that her skin stays cool.

Dad kept his promise to stay sober and, although he never said for sure, I think Karen and Dakota were responsible for saving his life that summer in the woods. I asked him once what it was like out there in the wilderness with no TV or radios or electricity.

He thought for a moment and said, "Quiet. Quiet enough to hear your own mind working."

It's funny how things work out. How some things stay with you forever. I think often about Bernice, about her bright yellow kitchen and her massive form squeezed in behind the kitchen table. I think about her throwing cards at Lillian and me while digging up stories about her life with Rufus. The other week I discovered that if I look out my bedroom window and stand on the very tips of my toes I can see the top of Bernice's tiny house through the trees. I look every now and then just to make sure it's still there. And now that spring is coming again when I look toward Bernice's something causes me to shiver. I sometimes think that if I look really closely I'll see myself planting Bernice's pink bath towel deep in the flower-bed. It's as if I'm standing there at the window all the while waiting and waiting for watermelons to sprout.