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### A Delicious Slice of Small-Town Life

In the Oregon town where I spent my childhood, the population sign said 150. Sometimes people moved away, intimidated by the harsh winters, and it said 140. Once a population boom made it 155. On this rare occasion, the summer vacationers growled that the town was getting too crowded, the local workers felt thrilled at the prospect of boosting the local economy, and my aunt, who had lived there for years, simply felt astonished. "People are really moving in all over the place," she said.

My aunt owned One-Eyed Charlie's, one of the two competing restaurants in our town. This brick building had been built in the 1800s, the Gold Rush days when excited miners made Sumpter a boomtown.

Our rivals had optimistically named their restaurant the Gold Nugget, and its pinewood front displayed a picture of a miner in a floppy hat, panning for gold. The Gold Nugget had friendly, chatty owners, and large windows with a view of blue, snow-capped mountains. Whenever we went there, I tingled with excitement at the prospect of experiencing some variety, of sampling the friendly ambiance of the "other restaurant." But I guiltily wondered if I was being disloyal.

Half the town consisted of our family members. My mom worked for my aunt in the restaurant, and Grandma made the pies: huckleberry pies (with berries she picked fresh from the Oregon hills), pecan, lemon, and rhubarb pies. Grandma baked loads of pies in her kitchen and delivered them to the restaurant the same day, hot and oozing juice.

Nearly everyone in the family worked to make One-Eyed Charlie's a success. Grandma recruited me to pick huckleberries. After the early

summer rains, my sister, Amanda, and Mom and Dad and I filled white buckets with morel mushrooms from among the deep, soft pine needles on the forest floor, and sold them to One-Eyed Charlie's. We used caution as we stalked the wrinkled mushrooms among the trees; morels brought a premium price, and the town's inhabitants feuded over them.

In the winter, when few tourists braved the snowdrifts, One-Eyed Charlie's was filled with familiar faces: loggers (including the huge muscular one called Tiny); my bearded uncles, adventurous aunts, and my friends, tousled children with loud, protective mothers. Ranchers came in with frozen mustaches from the morning fields where they had fed the cattle, and farmers stamped snow off their boots. As a child, I enjoyed seeing little Elmer, the farmer who lived next door to the restaurant, because I thought he was Elmer Fudd. When he arrived with his equally little wife, the people already sitting around the warm fire called out, "Here's trouble! And here's more trouble!"

Every time the brass bell rang on the opening door, the crowd inside called out a hearty welcome. "Hello, Tiny! Kelly, where's your better half?" Looking out the window, we recognized every pickup and car that braved the icy street. Everyone knew our pickup especially, because it was spotted black and white, like a Jersey cow. We bought it from a cowboy who started painting it black and then got tired or bored.

Since the restaurant had the only VCR in town, my aunt closed the restaurant on whim to use it as a movie theater. We all gathered for a long-awaited showing of "The African Queen." Our movie screen was a tiny black-and-white TV, set on top of a refrigerator so that we could all look up from our rows of restaurant chairs and see Humphrey Bogart's squint and the dramatic shipwreck.

In the summer, the restaurant increased its profit because of tourists. But it was still a family business. The waitresses didn't have to assume the

false familiarity of city waitresses. They were Mom, or Aunt Venita, or Sudie from down the street, and they knew all about you.

Sometimes my sister and I came into the restaurant after playing tag with our friends, just to visit Mom. Sometimes a friend or relative took us out for lunch. When Grandma took us to the restaurant, she made us eat by the rules. "These kids get away with too much," she claimed. We ordered biscuits with sausage gravy, my favorite, and looked forward to Grandma's exceptional pie afterwards. But Grandma said, "You have to eat every bite of your lunch before you have pie."

Biscuits with sausage gravy, the way my aunt cooked it, was a meal large enough for a hungry logger. "Please, Grandma," I said, "we won't have any room left for pie!"

"If you don't have any room left, you don't need dessert," Grandma said. The sorrowful ending was that we had to forsake all ideas of pie. Glumly, Amanda and I clumped outside, to crawl languidly up and down the hills behind the restaurant in a pitiful imitation of our usual play. We were too stuffed to run, jump, or slide.

The restaurant symbolized a world that seemed to stay the same. As a child, I assumed it really would never change, and that I would live there forever, and forever stop at One-Eyed Charlie's for ice cream on Saturday. But eventually we moved away.

In the modern world, things change fast. We visited our small town again when Amanda and I reached our teens. Our friend Jan walked down the steep, dusty road with us. "This community is really changing," she said, and we sensed the disturbance she felt as a long-time resident of the town.

"Is it?" Mom asked. "How?"

"Well," said Jan, "Ben painted his house bright red. The neighbors don't like it." We laughed. We felt reassured that for a while longer, at least, our

hometown would remain the warm, familiar place we knew, where life still had a flavor as rich as Grandma's huckleberry pie.