"Keep stirring quickly or it’ll be all lumps," Bebe told her gravely as she watched over Jessie’s shoulder. "No lazy woman ever made a decent gravy."

Picking up the pace of her fork in the rich brown gravy Jessie chased the lumps, flattening them out and whipping the spots smooth. She’d been taking gravy lessons at Bebe’s elbow since she was tall enough to see in the pan and had never managed to deliver the thick creamy confection Bebe made without thinking. Her arm was tired and the kitchen was too warm. She wished she had taken off her sweater before coming to the kitchen since it was inevitable that she would be put to work.

"Nobody has gravy anymore," Jessie murmured, a dark brown curl failing down across her damp forehead. Bebe leaned in closer and covered Jessie’s hand on the fork, moving it over to a fresh crop of lumps that had risen to the surface.

"Every wife needs to know how to make gravy, even if you only make it at holidays." Bebe let go of Jessie’s hand and turned back to the sink, rinsing off a pile of fat strawberries in a stainless steel colander. Shaking the cool water off the first berry she sliced it quickly in half, dropping the two sweet sections into the fruit salad.

"You’re slowing down, keep stirring or it’ll burn."

Turning the burner off Jessie stretched her arms over her head, relieving the tension in her arm and shoulder and wondered if she would ever make gravy, or if she would ever be a wife. "It’s finished."

"Pour it in the gravy boat," Bebe told her, mixing the fruit salad. "Then take it on out to the table and call everyone in for dinner."
The older woman didn’t look up but began arranging mint leaves around the edge of the salad bowl. That was Bebe for you. Everything perfectly presented. Just like the pictures in the cookbook. Jessie poured the gravy out, then wiped away what had spilled down the side of the serving dish with a paper towel.

Bebe was humming “Sweet Lorraine.” Jessie knew all the songs her hummed. They were all Nat King Cole tunes. When she wasn’t humming them Bebe was playing the scratchy old records she’d had since she was a teenager. There was a big black scrapbook on the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the living room with ticket stubs from the seven times Bebe had heard Nat King Cole sing in person. When Natalie Cole began singing her daddy’s tunes Bebe had gone to some of her concerts. She always came home unhappy. It just wasn’t the same as hearing Nat sing, she would say at odd intervals for days afterwards.

Sometimes George would come in after work and hear “Unforgettable” playing. He’d sneak up behind Bebe who’d be at the stove, stirring dinner and humming. George would just start singing along in that low baritone of his and slide his arms around Bebe from behind, kind of dancing slow to the music. She’d always blush and laugh, relaxing back against him, his round tummy pushing against the small of her back. Jessie liked to see them that way, as if they were sharing a secret. It was always over too fast. They’d both start laughing and George would say, “What’s for dinner, Bones?” All that time in the kitchen and Bebe was still painfully thin.

The wooden screen door was pulled back smartly by the new spring George had installed yesterday and slammed behind Jessie, barely missing the cat’s tail as he darted past her to freedom. Already he was slinking through the grass in search of baby birds fumbling through their first flights. Bebe put a brand new collar and bell on the cat each spring in a futile attempt to restrict his hunting. The collar and bell always disappeared within a few days whereupon the old cat’s hunting season opened in earnest. Every morning on her way out to work Jessie
would find a collection of dead mice, baby birds and once in a great while a small rabbit. Bebe said the cat brought them home as a gesture of love, providing for his family, but Jessie found that hard to stomach, particularly with the smell of hot bacon grease wafting from the kitchen. She would push the limp bodies of the night’s victims off the porch with the toe of her shoe. They fell into the garden where George collected them with a shovel and put them in the compost pile before he got the newspaper from the mailbox. Jessie hated the fact that her father performed this morning ritual in his boxer shorts and T-shirt and had begged him when she was in high school to put on pants before he went outside.

The sun was high overhead and warm, splashing over the grass, showing off its own bright green along with the red and pink of the season’s last tulips, raising and dipping their heads in the breeze. Donna’s laughter rang out across the yard, always a bit too loud but impossible not to laugh along with. John had set up the lawn chairs in the shade of the black walnut tree when he arrived an hour ago. George along with John and Donna, were there now, drinking ice-cold beer and talking.

John was five years older than Jessie. He lived in Brownsville in the old Thornton house with his girlfriend, Donna, and their wildly friendly golden retriever, Julius. Jim Thornton had broken up his parent’s house into four apartments after they died; much to the chagrin of the neighbors who had been afraid of the riffraff the apartments might attract. But Jim had been careful selecting tenants, only accepting friends and family he was sure wouldn’t cause a ruckus. Bebe had gone tight-lipped and pale when John told her he and Donna were going to live together. It just wasn’t the way George and Bebe believed things ought to be done. Still, Bebe had accepted Donna as another daughter, gently but firmly guiding her right along with Jessie.

George’s older brother, Floyd ambled across the yard, his tall angular body always seemed as if it were put together too loosely and the joints were a bit out of
control. His limbs did a jerky little dance each time he took a step. Floyd looked down at his feet as he walked; his silver hair, in desperate need of a trim, sparkled in the sun like a huge dandelion. Floyd was a widower. He never seemed to quite recover from his wife’s death, moving through his days in a kind of absent fog. Bebe, Jessie and Donna did for him as best they could, taking turns cleaning his house, stocking his refrigerator with homemade frozen dinners and doing his laundry.

"Time to eat!" Jessie called out. "Better hurry, Mothers got dinner on the table already." Continuing across the yard she met Floyd, wrapping an arm around his waist and placing a kiss on his cheek.

"I made the gravy just the way you like it," Jessie whispered.

"Lumps?" Floyd responded with a grin and they both broke into laughter. Arm in arm they followed the family into the house, Jessie’s light cotton dress dancing in the breeze to tangle around their legs.

The table was set with Bebe’s best china, which seemed at odds with the beer cans the men sat next to their plates before taking their seats amid the sounds of scraping chairs and voices still a bit too loud for inside. Along the edges of each plate and cup there danced a garland of pink roses, faded with age. The china had belonged to Bebe’s mother who only used it at Easter and Christmas. Bebe could never understand reserving the luxury of a finely dressed table to the occasional holiday and had used the china nearly every Sunday of her married life. The crystal vase in the center of the table was full of leggy red and pink tulips, the blossoms full-blown, drooping down to almost touch the steaming plates of roast beef, mashed potatoes and peas. The fruit salad was perfect, ringed with the mint leaves; three purple pansies perched at the peak. A basket of hard-crusted rolls sat to one side of Bebe’s plate, a warm linen cloth folded around them so only the yeasty smell gave them away.

Despite the fact that the same people came each Sunday for dinner, Bebe still fluttered among them, suggesting the proper chair for Floyd, or asking John
if he'd like ice water. These were the moments Bebe wished still came every day, not just after services on Sunday. With a final glance around the table Bebe settled into her seat and placed her hands together for grace. Her movements were as familiar to all of them as breathing and on her cue they all bent their heads and folded their hands.

"God, it's been a fine week," George began. He looked at each of the faces around his table before finally bowing his head. "We're thankful for all your blessings today. A short sermon at church. The delicious meal Bones has rustled up for us. Jessie is pretty darn grateful for the raise she got at work this week. John and Donna are grateful for the vacation they'll be taking to Florida in a couple of weeks. Bebe is thankful the rhubarb is just about ready to pick and Floyd is grateful Bebe will have rhubarb pie ready for him next Sunday." A ripple of laughter rose from the table. "Mostly Lord, we thank you for another week together, safe and healthy. Amen"

"Amen," they said together. Serving spoons began to clink against bowls as the family helped themselves to the Sunday feast.

"Pass to the right, John," Bebe reminded and he paused in mid-pass, then with a chuckle at his father's outstretched hand sent the mashed potatoes the other way around.

"There better be some left when it gets back here," George warned with a particular emphasis at Floyd, long known for his ability to consume huge quantities of mashed potatoes. Accepting the bowl Floyd laughed and began serving up a generous portion of potatoes.

Bebe's mashed potatoes were made with lots of sour cream and butter, so rich Jessie liked to make an entire meal of the leftovers. She never touched the gravy, instead sprinkling them with salt and pepper and relishing each bite "bare-naked" as her father always described them. Most things Bebe cooked were like the mashed potatoes. Full of secrets. The peas had tiny pearl onions and bits of roasted red pepper. The roast beef was smothered in grilled mushrooms.
and onions, and most the dinner guests would miss the fact Bebe had sliced pockets into the roast that she packed full of herbs so they baked through the meat.

“How’s the garden coming, Donna?” Bebe asked after everyone was full of roast beef and potatoes; she liked to wait a bit before serving John and Donna had gotten permission from Jim Thornton to put in a vegetable garden behind the house this year. It wasn’t very large, but Donna wanted to learn how to can tomatoes and beans and Bebe had promised to teach her and Jessie at the same time. Jessie kept telling her mother she’d buy her canned goods, but Bebe was insistent Jessie would learn how to put up her own.

“The beans are clear up to the top of the string trestle and covered with blossoms so it shouldn’t be too long,” Donna answered. “The tomatoes are about a foot and a half tall now. I used Miracle Grow on them yesterday; it’s on sale at Wal-Mart if you want some.”

John leaned back in his chair with a nervous smile and looked at his parents ‘Donna is working on another crop for this fall,” he said. Something in the way he said it created an odd pause before anyone answered.

“What crop is that?” George finally asked. Donna blushed and looked toward John, waiting for him to explain. John cleared his throat while crimson crept into the curves of his ears. Floyd paused in mid-bite, suddenly aware of the silence around him.

“We’re expecting a baby in October,” John said, with all the confidence he could muster. “I’m hoping for a boy, but Donna says she wants a girl.”

The silence around the table was heavy. Outside Julius barked somewhere, probably chasing a squirrel, and the breeze continued to blow through the leaves of the big black walnut tree, making a soft rushing sound. Jessie watched her mothers whole body moved slowly forward, as if she were reaching to catch the meaning of her son’s words before she slowly leaned back against her chair, a worried expression creeping into her eyes.

“Why, what a surprise, John,” Bebe began, starting the perilous tightrope walk between her husband and
son. "The first grandchild; isn't that exciting George?"

"I guess that means we've got a wedding coming up here pretty quick," George said, his tone taking on an authoritarian edge Jessie winced at, knowing how John would react to it. Yet he seemed to leave room for John to prove everything was already planned, under control. Donna kept her eyes down; John put his arm around the back of her chair as he met George's gaze.

"Mother could put something nice together for next weekend and you two could make that vacation your honeymoon," George continued, disappointed his son hadn't already launched into an explanation of their plans. "We could the whole thing right here at the house, couldn't we Bones?" He looked across the table to Bebe with a tense smile and she nodded.

"Well, Donna and I have talked about it and decided we want a big wedding with all the trimmings and you can't get one of those together fast, Dad. So we're going to wait until after the baby is born. We thought maybe next spring would be a good time." John knew this wasn't going to please his parents. George had lectured him time and again about responsibility and how he disapproved of them living together.

The fact was John probably should have married Donna two years ago instead of just moving in together. Donna wanted to get married then. He had been the one dragging his feet. They were too young he told Donna, better to live together than to make a mistake by marrying. But even in the beginning he had always known he would marry her and really didn't know why it had taken him until now to commit to it.

Bebe looked first at John and Donna and then at George, finally down at her own hands, clasped tightly in her lap. Her thoughts lurched to the banana cream pie waiting in the kitchen and she wished for a comfortable way to steer the men through this.

"Spring is a good time for a wedding. Trouble is, the right spring for the two of you seems to have been this last spring," George said. "I believe you two should forget that big wedding and get this out of the way right now. You don't want this baby born without your name do you, John?" He pushed his chair back from
the table and rested his hands on the edge of the table like a wrestler, ready to spring at his opponent. Babies might be born every day to unwed parents, but never in George and Bebe's family and George didn't like it.

"Maybe you should listen to your Dad, John. It wouldn't look right waiting," Floyd intoned quietly. In his mind's eye he saw his own bride on their wedding day, wearing a pink summer dress and holding a bouquet of white roses out of her mother's garden. They'd gotten married right after Sunday service and the whole congregation had stayed for the ceremony. Then they had a big family dinner at the church hall, potluck. The men all shook Floyd's hand and slapped him on the shoulder. Afterwards they honeymooned at the motel outside Tyler for just one night. He didn't remember feeling at all shorted that it wasn't a fancy wedding, all he knew for certain was he missed his wife every minute. She still felt so close he thought maybe he could reach out and touch her pink dress, smell her roses.

"I know this isn't the best order to do things in, but it's what we've decided." What John didn't say was how Donna had cried for three days when she discovered she was pregnant. She'd dreamed of wearing a beautiful gown with a long train and whisper soft veil that trailed behind her since she was a little girl. It would have pearl buttons that ran from her neck all the way down her back. The skirt would be full and underneath it she would wear a white satin boned-bustier with a pink rosebud embroidered between the breasts. She would carry gardenias with English ivy trailing from the bouquet. Her bridesmaids would wear pale blue silk suits, the skirts cut just below their knees and she would give them each a gold locket to remember her special day. She had cried until her face was swollen and her nose too stuffed up to breathe and then apologized for being so foolish. He had wiped away her tears and held her, promising her they would still have that perfect wedding.

"It was spring, but not the spring day you like to think of. It was pouring down rain," Bebe began softly, almost to herself as her eyes surveyed the table with its fancy china. "I made my dress myself,
exactly like one I saw at a bridal salon. Mother and I did all the beading ourselves on the bodice and I even made the petticoats. Ballerina length. I never understood why they called it that; after all, tutus are usually short. George wore a new blue suit with a striped silk tie I had given him as a wedding present..."

"Bebe, that's all fine, but we weren't already expecting our first baby like these two are," George interrupted, his face mottled with red patches that hinted at his blood pressure. Bebe's voice faded away more than stopped. "If the two of you wanted a fancy wedding you should have done things in the right order," he blustered, rising from his chair to pace in front of the window, his round belly outlined in the bright sunlight; everything about him was tight and tense.

"Dad, lots of couples now put off their weddings until it's more convenient. There's no shame in it. At least we're getting married!" The anger flared between them so swiftly some people might have been surprised. Not Jessie. Not Bebe. They had witnessed it too many times. Neither one of them able to stay calm in the face of the others assault. John rose out of his chair, a slimmer, younger copy of George.

"Marriage isn't supposed to be convenient. A man takes responsibility for his family," George said, his voice booming and his gaze on his son steady. "A man doesn't let his family down!" He wasn't thinking of the insult to his son. He was focused on his obligations as a father to guide his children when they made the wrong decisions.

"You're dead wrong, Dad. I am taking responsibility for my family." The words bounced around the dining room, accentuating the silence. Grabbing Donna's hand John headed for the door. "Thanks for dinner, Mom."

Donna looked back over her shoulder, to Bebe, who raised her hand slightly off the table making a kind of panting motion, as if to say, "Don't worry," but she didn't speak.

The new spring on the screen door pulled it back
sharply so it slammed against the door frame. The breeze brought back the urgent tones of Donna's voice as she hurried after John, trying to calm him. It was wordless but none the less soothing when it reached them.

"Damn it!" swore George and stomped out to the porch. Floyd followed him and together they watched John's car pull away, Julius' head stuck out the back window barking his farewell. The two brothers didn't talk, but simply stood there long after the car was out of sight. The cat rubbed against their ankles, purring.

"I'll take an apple pie over tomorrow," Bebe said quietly. "It's his favorite." Rising she began to gather the dishes. Humming softly to herself she stacked the plates. It was "Blue Gardenia" Jessie thought and took the leftover fruit salad and mashed potatoes back to the kitchen.