

There's always a price to pay...

JAMES
DRIGGERS

LOVESICK

Outstanding praise for James Driggers and *Lovesick* !

“Jim Driggers’s *Lovesick* is a collection of novellas that are just as heartbreaking as they are wise, just as beautiful as they are devastating.

While spanning nearly the entire 20th century and tackling some of our nation’s greatest social and cultural issues, *Lovesick* anchors its heart to the fictional town of Morris, South Carolina, and its collection of seemingly eccentric citizens whose traumas, loves, and comedic turns simultaneously charm and repulse us, and that’s what good—dare I say great—fiction is supposed to do. *Lovesick* does this in spades. Like Allan Gurganus and Doris Betts, Jim Driggers gives us small-town life in a way that reveals big, heartfelt ideas and universal themes.”

—Wiley Cash, *New York Times* bestselling author of
A Land More Kind Than Home

“In *Lovesick*, Jim Driggers takes us behind polite surfaces across a century as old plantation land turns into subdivisions, unraveling the concealed tragedy next door, the romantic yearning behind a tabloid scandal, and the scheming and sacrifice hidden between the lines of a legendary Southern cookbook. Witty, compassionate, yet unrelenting, Driggers knows what ties a fatal love knot: the object of forbidden love may be indifferent, unworthy, or just plain poisonous, but what matters to the lovestruck is to give all and so find a way to be, however briefly, truly alive.”

—Lynne Barrett, author of *Magpies*

“We may think we know some of the personages that populate James Driggers’s tour de force, *Lovesick*. Here is the overweight insurance salesman, the sisters jealous of each other, the shiny-hair evangelist, and the faded Southern belle. But then we watch them think and do things we could never have imagined. There’s a hint of Erskine Caldwell here—with a strong dash of Grand Guignol. We may never understand, but we are *convinced*. Yes, he gets away with it.”

—Fred Chappell, author of *Look Back All the Green Valley*

“Like a swiftly moving train rolling through the deep South, *Lovesick* takes you on an incredible journey filled with history, lies and deceit. I couldn’t put it down.”

—Lisa Jackson, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

More advance praise for James Driggers and *Lovesick*

“*Lovesick* is aptly titled. These four interrelated novellas, each a bit more twisted than its predecessor, hinge on lovesickness of one kind or another. The characters live in a South where violence blooms like ditch lilies along an unpaved road. Not for the faint of heart, these stories will not quickly fade from the reader’s memory.”

—Wayne Caldwell, author of *Requiem by Fire*

“While James Driggers’s ensemble of unforgettable characters are unified by the blood-soaked daggers of lust, greed, and ungovernable passion, *Lovesick* is ultimately a gorgeous exploration of humanity—our sorrow and hope, loneliness and joy, and above all, love, how it lifts us, and how irrecoverably lost and shattered we are without it.”

—Patrick Michael Finn

LOVESICK

JAMES DRIGGERS



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We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going—North and South excursions making,
Power enjoying—elbows stretching—fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless—eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.

—Walt Whitman

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And my writing students, who continually teach me to encounter story, character, and the blank page in new, unexpected, and exciting ways.

The lovesick, the betrayed, and the jealous all smell alike.

—Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette

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Butcher, the Baker

smothered chicken . . .

The winter sky hugged the earth like a tight-fitting lid on a pot. Butcher felt trapped inside this bleak landscape, oppressed; standing alone on the back steps of the Residence, everywhere he looked the sky was only cold. In every direction, flat clouds pressed hard against the dull horizon, the trees bare and lifeless silhouettes against sheet-metal gray. Though it was early morning, there was no discernable sun, and as a result, the dim light leveled everything to a sadness.

It seemed to Butcher that he had spent the best part of his life inside this gray, that his life could be pieced together like scraps from a newspaper article:

- First, there was the boy struggling to plow the pitiable sandy soil he and his mam had 'cropped back in Morris, South Carolina.
- Then, when she had passed, there was the youth chasing freedom into the army at the first call to enlist, only to find himself buried deep inside the steel belly of a ship that bore him to France and the Great War.
- Then, there was the war itself, where death and misery floated like smoke over everything.
- And finally, when he returned home to find that the war had made no difference for him, that he was still just a nigger to all those he had fought to protect, there was the soldier whose anger had killed a man in an alley behind a clip joint only to find himself buried once more—this time locked in a prison for nearly ten years.

He had been barely eighteen when he had gone to war—it had been seventeen years since. A second lifetime. Both equally hard, though now he knew what to expect, and so it didn't wear on him as much. He knew everybody suffered—it was impossible to escape it. Sometimes you caught a lucky break. Sometimes you didn't, so you dealt with what you had. He'd been raised poor and was used to living hand to mouth. Nothing new in that. Besides, he was better off than many.

He'd been in Fayetteville now for over two years, first having wandered through the South after the war, drifting from one job to the next till he got hired to cook for the railroad. During the riots of '18 he'd thought himself fortunate to stay out of trouble. He'd been working for the Southern Railroad traveling between Charleston and Memphis; though the worst of the troubles had been in the North, there had been martial law for a time in Charleston. Black veterans, mainly navy men, had been killed by gangs of whites, some of them veterans as well. A great many others had ended up in jail. For him it was all in the timing. He understood the anger, the frustration, the resentment on both sides—the whites scared of the black migration taking over the jobs in the factories, the blacks tired of just taking the scraps of what was deemed to be their share. Butcher was glad to see his brothers standing up and fighting back. But when the rioting began over the summer, he was in the dining car kitchen riding from Charleston to Memphis, from Memphis to Charleston. Each leg took one day; he did three trips a week, so the only news he had came from the porters and brakemen. If he had a day off, he spent it drunk and then sleeping off the booze till it was time to get back on the train. Some men worked the train for the travel—the chance to see new things. Having traveled across the ocean and back again, Butcher figured he had seen as much as he ever wanted to see. Some men worked the train because it made them feel important, especially those who got to put on a starched jacket and hoist the baggage of the white passengers. Butcher had worn a uniform and knew there was no privilege to be found in that. He worked the train because it meant he had some money, and he knew that money was

all that counted for anything.

In '22, he had been in the wrong place—a honky-tonk on the outskirts of Wilmington. He was drinking, drunk again, and challenged by a man to a fight. Butcher didn't remember much—there was gambling, dice, and accusations of cheating. And there was a woman as well. All of this had been read back to him in the judge's papers at the trial. The woman, a tall, statuesque gal with skin as smooth and black as her silk dress, had testified that Butcher accused her man, whose name was Johnson Everetts, of cheating at craps. She said both men had pulled knives and there was a fight. Butcher couldn't argue with that. He always carried a weapon—had learned to have protection on him while walking the backstreets of Brest, back to the barracks after visiting the brothel. She said she had screamed when she saw Johnson stabbed, and when she said that Butcher had stabbed Johnson in the chest, there was a flash of memory—Butcher could feel the pressure as the knife punctured flesh, the blade pressed against bone, but only slightly so that it too gave way until the knife lodged in Johnson Everetts's heart. They'd sent him to Caledonia for ten years. Butcher knew it would have been longer if Johnson Everetts had had a family or had been a man of reputation. He was lucky in that regard. Lucky that the judge saw the case as just another two niggers cutting each other. Lucky that Johnson was not a white man.

When he arrived at Caledonia, he feared he might be put to work in one of the road camps, which was where they put most black men, transported every few days to a new stretch of road in a cage with five or six other men. There they would dig and scrape the hillsides to make way for the highway, only to be herded back into their cage for the night, covered over with large flaps of canvas to keep out the cold. He knew if he were forced to live like that for long, he would go crazy or die or be killed just trying to escape. So, when they were cataloging him into the system, he told the boss on duty he had been employed in both the army and on the rail as a cook. Told him he knew what it took to work in a kitchen, knew how to take orders, and knew how to give them as well. Told the boss he could cook anything. That he would make sure the boss's favorite dishes would be on the menu if given the opportunity. The boss said he had always been partial to corn fritters and smothered chicken and gravy.

It was as simple as that. Give the man what he wanted. Butcher worked in the kitchen for the whole ten years he was on the inside, and by the time he was released, he had made a name for himself—his cobbler, his country hash, his biscuits. There were fields and gardens around the prison, and Butcher cooked the harvest, preserving fruit and vegetables for the winters. Even the sorriest prisoner would tell you that the one thing Caledonia had going for it was the food.

He'd been back to his home, Morris, South Carolina, where he was born and lived as a boy, only once after he was released, back to visit his mam's grave, back to see if there was any work for him in the surroundings that were at least familiar. What he found was those who lived on a rented farm trying to make 'crop couldn't make a living that amounted to more than a chicken scratching in the dirt. Those who worked for wages didn't fare much better. After the cemetery, he sought out the four-room cabin where he had lived with his mam. He followed the dirt road, running near the railroad tracks past the Deegan farm. He was surprised to see the house deserted, a funeral wreath strung on the front gate. He tried to recall the Deegans, could picture the old man and his wife sitting up on the porch, a straw hat pulled down over Mr. Deegan's eyes while he slept in his rocking chair. They had a son only a year or two older than Butcher. Occasionally, he would shout out a "hello" as Butcher passed by. Butcher had walked this road as a boy, remembered the smoky cough from trains as they passed in the distance, freight trains and passenger trains. He had never thought about leaving then, had never imagined working on the train, but then he never imagined his mam dying so young either. As the Deegan farm disappeared behind him, he watched the house he had shared with his mam grow out of the horizon as he crested a small hill. It had never been painted, but nevertheless, it was respectable enough—like

dozen others just like it spread out over the plots of the families who rented them.

A gravel path outlined by stones set one against another led from the front steps about twenty feet and stopped. A small attempt at a yard. He noticed that there had been a small shed added to the rear. There were children in the yard, white children, playing a game with a stick and a ball. When they saw him walking toward the house, the girl ran inside. She reappeared almost immediately, followed by her father, a tall, lanky young man in overalls. His wife, the girl's mother, stayed on the porch by the door. They were all suspicious of him, but Butcher could also see relief. He posed no threat.

"Is there something I can help you with?" the man asked. The girl, who was older than the boy, stood close behind her father. He swatted her back toward the house. "Get up on the porch there with your mamma. Get. This ain't none of your bidness."

Butcher introduced himself. "I just come round to visit my mam's grave," he said. "Thought I would bring her some flowers. Thought I would walk out this way. We used to rent round here." Butcher stopped short of telling the man that this house had been his. Didn't want to say the man was raising his children in a place once belonged to blacks. Didn't want to shame him. But Butcher could see that the man knew this. Times were hard for everyone.

"Looks like some trouble had fallen on the Deegans," he said.

"Fewer troubles than most," said the man. "Old man and woman have been dead a while. The son changed hisself almost two years ago. Couldn't see how to make the farm work for him. They took his missus away—went still as a stone after he died. Just sat there on the porch day after day. Wouldn't speak. Finally, her kinfolk came and took her away. Left the farm to just rot. I heard tell that it had been sold."

"Well, I hope whoever bought it can make a go of it."

"I doubt anyone's ever made too much of anything off this land," the man said.

"You got that right," said Butcher. "The rich man gets it all. Always has."

The man pointed to the shed. "See them boards. I bought them myself. Nailed 'em up there just a little bit loose. If we move, I'll just pull 'em down and take 'em with me. What's mine belongs to me."

Butcher tipped his hat to the man and toward the porch, and left. He knew there was nothing left there for him. That it was just a place he had once lived. So, he went to Fayetteville because there was an army base there. There were CCC camps there. There was work there. People would need to eat. He would cook for them.

The whole country was out of work—white and black, one as poor as the next—but Butcher was determined to find a job. He had a letter of introduction from the head boss at Caledonia, and he focused on those places where they were serving large numbers of people. He visited the CCC camp and the director was impressed with his letter, but the camp reminded Butcher too much of the army. He had only found the Volunteers of America relief house by accident, looking for a place to stay for the night. They took him on in the kitchen, and because there was so much turnover not only with the men, but the staff as well, it only took him about six months to become the head cook. The position was answerable only to the director and because he was head cook, the VOA also provided him with lodging—a small room, but it was his alone. Butcher was a large man, a little over six feet tall, and the room was only slightly larger than the cell he had occupied in prison, so it was cramped, and since it was on the top floor of the Residence, as everyone who lived there called it, one wall sloped down to knee height and he had to bend down if he walked on that side of the room. But there was a window. And there were no bars. And he was free to come and go when he pleased. And it was separated from the dorms for the men who stayed in the Residence while looking for work in Fayetteville, or till they realized there was no work to be had and moved on in search of work in Wilmington or Charleston or some other town. Sometimes they were there for a week or more, sometimes only overnight. The VOA

also paid him a salary—six bucks a week. Which Butcher knew was good for these parts—especially for colored. One of the men staying at the Residence had gotten work at one of the mills inspecting hosiery, and he was tickled to have a salary of eight and a half a week.

Plus, Butcher ate for free. The Director of the Residence, a high-strung, thin, bespeckled professor who was employed by the VOA, and whom Butcher suspected was also a three-letter man because of his habit of standing with his hands cocked on his hips when he was trying to speak emphatically and with purpose, had made a point of telling him that meals were included. But Butcher had been around a kitchen long enough to know the cook always eats for free.

Still, he didn't mind if he thought the director was playing up to him. Butcher knew the VOA saw him as a valued commodity. Didn't want to lose him. They served three meals a day, seven days a week. Butcher could stretch the budget so that even though the soup was sometimes little more than broth or the gravy was little more than flavored drippings, he always managed to make it seem like more. He was a damn fine cook and when he put his hand to pastry, there was no one who could hold a candle to him. He could take the thinnest broth and fatten it up with enough soft pastry so that no one thought twice there was only a skerrick of meat. He would nestle a towering golden biscuit in a puddle of gravy so that by the time a hungry man had finished sopping his plate, the greasy film coating his lips held only the satisfying memory of breakfast. Sunday mornings, he always made sweet buns and fried fresh doughnuts with a warm cinnamon and powdered sugar glaze, and on those nights when there was only soup for dinner, any man could have as many helpings as he wanted.

He had been offered a job at one of the penny restaurants on Robeson Street and though the pay had been better, working there meant he would have had to find a room. Here, though he had his private space, he was never isolated. The Residence was alive with comings and goings, of people, challenges. True, the VOA was charity with a foundation in scripture, but it was still run like a business, and he merely lived over the store. It helped him to hang on to the dream that someday he would do just that. Live over the store, like the bakers and bistro owners he had seen in Brest. And since the VOA perceived itself as doing a "good work," living there also helped keep him on the straight and narrow. No drinking allowed. That was the rule. He had seen it enforced enough to know not to test it. Besides, as they say, he had a problem with the drink. He was smart enough to know it. It had fueled his courage when he joined the army. And it had caused the death of Johnson Everetts in a bar one night after the war. He was happy to stay where he was until he had his own store. His own shop. At night, after he had showered and gone to his room for the night, he would lie on top of his bed, his hands interlaced behind his head, his head resting on his pillow, and he would dream.

The VOA Residence was more than just a soup kitchen. They served three squares a day. He had gotten trained that way in the army. It was his routine for the ten years he had been on the inside as well. There was never enough money, but the director was dogged in his search for donations, and had created a board of "Miss Anns" culled from several local women's clubs and charitable organizations who had agreed to adopt the VOA as their own personal charitable mission, happy to assist those who had even less than they did. At least they were still able to hold to a pretense of prosperity even if the dresses were out of fashion and their hats were several years old, merely redressed with a new ribbon or a silk flower. Still, they were happy to help pass the plate or ask for contributions from the husbands and friends when there were too many men to feed and not enough money to feed them with.

They were exceedingly flattering. On his pies, his cake, his cobblers, his stews, his gravies. Some would even ask him for a pie to take home with them if company was coming. Lemon meringue, buttermilk custard, chocolate chess. They always made sure to bring their own pie pan. They told him they didn't want to put him out in case he needed it for the Residence. He knew, however, they just intended to pass his pie off as their own. That didn't bother him. They acted as if they were paying him a compliment, to take what he had made and claim it—that it somehow legitimized it, gave

worth. Butcher also recognized there was some truth in that idea. His value in this world was determined by someone other than himself. He had learned that in the war, on the rail, in prison. Get what you can get. Nothing's free. Over the two years, with his salary and his pies, he had managed to save almost \$500. When he had enough, he planned to take the money and buy himself a storefront and turn it into a bistro or a café like those he had seen in Brest. And he would sell baked goods to anyone who wanted them. Pies, cakes, bread. The ladies on the board from the VOA would shop at his store or they would send their maids to bring something home. He would even bake a pie in their tin if they wanted. As long as they paid. Set a value on it. Valued him.

Butcher looked out across the horizon. It was later, but only slightly brighter. In his hand he held a scrap of paper. He folded it up and tucked it back into his shirt pocket, which is where he kept it. "Fucking cold," he muttered as he threw the dregs of his coffee out across the back steps. Butcher knew he needed money. More money than he had. He wanted money. A great sum of money. And Butcher had a plan for how he was going to get it. All he needed now was a partner.

Sally Lunn bread . . .

The director had dedicated a small parlor off the main common area of the Residence for the board women to use for their meetings, which they did every other Thursday. The women had taken great pride in their meeting room, as he knew women were wont to do with such things, decorating it with bric-a-brac from their own homes to lessen the austerity of the straight-backed chairs and small mahogany pedestal table and breakfront that served as the only furniture in the room. Now there was a floor lamp with a fringed shade, a lace cloth for the table, odd mismatched pieces of china from the cupboards. One of the women had also donated a watercolor done by her niece titled *Hestia at the Hearth*.

The director would meet with them to go over the finances, discuss donations, plan meals for special events like Thanksgiving and Christmas. It had become the custom that Butcher would bake something for them: sticky bread or a tea cake if they met in the morning, perhaps a shortbread or burnt custard if they met in the afternoon. They had all gathered, their chairs arranged in a loose semicircle, when he brought in a freshly baked Sally Lunn, some sweet butter, and a pot of homemade peach jam. Mrs. Katherine Fisher, the unofficial leader of the board, poured tea and directed Butcher to leave the bread on the table. All the members of the board were there. In addition to Miss Katherine, there was Marie Wilkins, Margaret Adcock, Thelma Russell, Elizabeth Bookshire, Ruth Jennings, and Virginia Yeager. And next to her, the director. Butcher knew them all, had listened to the director complain about them collectively and individually, had heard about their husbands and their children, had studied them in the months he had worked at the VOA, knew the pecking order.

Miss Katherine was married to the President of the Piedmont Security and Trust, and as the wife of a banker, she commanded the respect of the other women. She was a broad, heavysset woman with a determined jawline and an unswerving eye. Butcher knew her to be no-nonsense. She was not prone to fashion as were most of the “Miss Anns”—she would often wear the same frock, a simple pleated chocolate shirtwaist with a squared bodice adorned only by a pearl brooch. She was practical in her shoes as well, Butcher had observed. Where the other ladies would have heels with straps or shiny patent leathers, Miss Katherine always wore a simple pair of rounded flat heels. She looked ready for business. Her only luxury was the heavy fur she brought with her at the first hint of cold and wore well into the spring. Butcher also watched how the other women reacted to, honored the wealth the company represented.

“Thank you, George,” she said, eyeing the tray with the bread. “Is that a Sally Lunn? What a treat! My mother-in-law makes one, but she does hers in an angel cake pan. I am sure yours will rival it to anyone’s can. Has it cooled? I don’t want to slice it too fresh. When bread is too hot, you can’t slice it. It will only press it down. And did you bring a serrated knife?”

“I took it out of the oven ’bout half an hour ago,” Butcher replied. “It should be fine to slice, but still warm enough to spread the butter. I brought you a knife—if you want, I can slice it for you.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” she said. “I think Mrs. Wilkins can do the honors.” Butcher placed the tray on the table as Miss Marie, round as a cookie jar with two brightly colored dots of rouge circled on her cheeks, jumped to Miss Katherine’s command. Butcher knew he could not leave until he was dismissed by the director, needed to be available should there be a question about the state of affairs in the kitchen. He showed Miss Marie where to cut.

“I think you should be able to get eight slices,” he said, “if nobody minds the heel.”

“If you make it in an angel cake pan, George, then no one has to get the heel end,” noted Miss Katherine.

“The heel will do for me,” said the director.

“And for me as well,” said Miss Virginia. Butcher recognized the concession. Miss Virginia was the newest member of the group, having been awarded admission only four months earlier. She was the widow of a war hero, her husband killed at the second battle for the Marne, the director had told him. What troubled Butcher was the awareness that while the rest of the women seemed cut of a whole cloth, he could not figure Miss Virginia. She didn’t act like the others. She didn’t look like the others. She was pale as a moonbeam, and even in the coldest weather, she fancied lighter tones—ice blue, eggshell, sage or sherbet green—unlike the drab browns and olives of the other women. Butcher felt she wished to stand apart from them somehow, wondered if it was simply that she did not want to be deemed matronly. However, there was something else to her, something hidden. Her dresses were tailored to showcase her slim waist, and whereas they all had their hair pulled back into a loose bun or topknot, her blond hair was cut short and curled in a deep-set finger wave. She plucked her eyebrows and smoothed them with a pencil into thin arches above her watery blue eyes. Butcher had the impression that if the sun caught her at the right angle she might be translucent. He could also see the relationship between her and these other women was one of mutual distrust. It was obvious—the other women did not like her, and she did not care for them. She moved among them, but was not one of them. She deferred to them in polite society, but would not be a guest in any of their homes unless she would be to fill a table as the escort for a single officer from the army base.

“This cuts like a dream,” said Miss Marie. “I don’t know how you do it, George. It is light as a cloud, but it has texture as well.” Then to the ladies, “Unless there is objection, I will put jam and butter on each plate.” There was a murmur of consent as she passed the plates. Miss Virginia and the director received theirs last. The women balanced the plates expertly on their laps, holding cups of hot tea in their hands.

“If I could bake like this, I know what I would be doing,” said Miss Thelma.

“Yes, and what is that?” asked Miss Katherine as she poured the final cup of tea for herself and lowered herself into her chair.

“Why, I would be entering my recipes in the Mystic White Flour contest. I would be applying to become *The Lady in the White Hat*.”

“There is only one problem with that,” said Miss Ruth. “I’ve tasted your biscuits.”

There was some good-natured laughter, to which Miss Thelma replied, “Yes, it is good I can still afford to have a cook. I think the judge would starve if Leena ever left us.”

Butcher stood to the side of the director, waiting for an opportunity to address any question. Sometimes, they would ask for his report first thing and he would be free of them; other days, he would be forced to stand, head bowed, hands folded in front while they ate and gossiped and sipped their tea. Today, they took little notice of him, the conversation having turned to the baking contest.

Miss Elizabeth, who also served on the WCTU, had no time for the contest since they specifically allowed the use of alcohol.

“But, Elizabeth, it isn’t like they are promoting drinking,” said Miss Ruth. “It is only a flavoring. I am as temperance as the next, but I have never had a fruit cake or a Lane cake that wasn’t made better with a drop of shinnny.”

Miss Elizabeth wasn’t moved. She merely humphed, “It is a line, Ruth. And either you cross it or you don’t. Get people used to the taste in a sweet cake, then they will be wanting more. Besides, my sister-in-law has met Colonel Clayton Claiborne II”—she paused to clarify for those not familiar with the name—“the President of the Mystic White Flour Company. She says he has strong associations

with the Klan. Not to mention that whoever does this would be like a common salesgirl. Imagine having your likeness on a sack of flour.”

Butcher was familiar with the contest, since a flyer came in every sack of Mystic White. It was the same flyer he had tucked into his pocket:

Are You The Lady in the White Hat?

Mystic White Flour is searching for the ideal Southern Woman to represent the best of Southern Womanhood—delicacy, purity, softness, and strength.

Qualities that also describe Mystic White Flour, milled from only the finest, soft white flour.



A Southern Tradition . . .

. . . Born from Our Southern Heritage

The winner will receive a cash prize of \$2500 and a one-year contract with Mystic White Flour as “The Lady in the White Hat.”

First runner-up will receive a *Brand-New! All Gas! Porcelain & Heavy Cast-Iron Metal!* Magic Chef Oven!

All finalists will receive a one-year supply of Mystic White baking products.

On the back of the flyer was the list of rules:

1. Each entrant should submit a short biography and a photograph, and her favorite “signature” recipe made with Mystic White Flour or Mystic White Self-Rising Flour. Recipes should be keeping with the tastes of women in the South and should not employ exotic or foreign ingredients. *Note: Alcohol is permitted only as a flavoring in limited amounts.*

2. Finalists should be available to appear in Atlanta during the third week of June 1935.

3. Finalists will be judged on the following:

- Interview, personality, and poise
- Menu planning
- Baking demonstration

4. Each finalist will be expected to pay her own travel expenses to Atlanta. Hotel room and board during the competition will be complimentary.

5. Contest open to any woman of true Southern descent.

6. All contestants should be of highest moral quality.

7. Recipes must be original (or adapted to a family tradition) and will be judged on criteria outlined below:

- Taste
- Appearance
- Creativity
- Consumer appeal

8. Decision of the judges is final in all matters relating to this contest.

What Butcher could do with that money! It would be more than enough to fund his bistro, his cafe. He would even be able to compete in a city where people knew about food, somewhere like Savannah or even New Orleans. How unfair to dress up one of these hollow “Miss Anns” who only pretended to know how to cook, when he . . . when he . . . was actually deserving. The system was rigged against him. Had always been, he knew. But if he was clever . . .

“George?”

The director’s voice shook him from his contemplation.

“Yessir.”

“Mrs. Fisher was asking about the hams she had donated for Christmas.”

“I’m down to the last two.”

“Already,” said Miss Katherine. “Why, I declare. You must be serving these men ham biscuits every day. I thought surely that they might at least last till Easter.” She dabbed crumbs and a spot of jam from her lips.

Butcher wanted to walk over to her, to grab her by her throat and shake her hard till her tight gray bun fell loose down her back and her teeth rattled in her head. He had scraped and scrimped with the four hams she had donated to the Residence, had served each man a mere sliver on Christmas Day, and then chopped just a small amount into his New Year’s Hoppin’ John. He wanted to scream at her about the hundreds of ways he worked to serve the men something that even resembled real food—how just last week he had been forced to press black-eyed peas into patties so they would at least look like meat.

“I can assure you, Mrs. Fisher, the men do not eat ham every morning,” said the director. “I eat with them every day, and though George does a good job of working with what we have, the meals are far from fancy.”

Butcher thought back to the brothel when he was in Brest, how Maude had taken him down one morning for breakfast with the whores. He remembered the smell of the freshly baked bread and the fried sausages and the coffee. The prism of bottled vinegars and oils lining the shelves, glinting in the morning light. Maude fed him cheese and bread. There was enough for all—barely, but enough. Outside there was war and death and hunger. But inside, each was happy, glad, eager to share. It made him want to cry—that these bitches had so much, that he had so little. That he wanted only his partner. That one of them, or one of a hundred or thousand just like them, would win a contest that he could win if only he was allowed to enter.

“I suppose,” said Miss Katherine. “But times are hard for us all—and hams don’t grow on trees now do they?” The ladies laughed at this.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll work to make them last. Till Easter. And I appreciate the kindness you all do for us here. All the men do.” He tried to hide the contempt in his face, was afraid to look around the room. “Now, I need to get back to the kitchen.”

“Of course,” said Miss Katherine.

“Thank you, George,” said the director.

George lifted his head and in turning, caught the eye of Miss Virginia. “If you don’t mind, I would like to speak to you when we are finished here,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be in the kitchen or the boss can come and get me if you want.” Butcher figured she had some baking for him—the first time she ever requested something. But there was more to it. He imagined, or maybe it was just wishing he told himself, that she knew what he was thinking. They seemed to be an instant when their eyes met and she understood.

He was right. She did understand. Virginia watched as the cook shuffled out toward the kitchen. How these women bored her. She had to take a small nip of brandy just to endure those mornings the board met to discuss their good deeds accomplished as a result of their good breeding and their well-made marriages. Some of them came from local church groups, some from the YWCA, or the WTCU. One common denominator was that they all belonged to the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Without that birthright, you need not apply.

Women like this perplexed Virginia. She did not understand how they could be satisfied with the profits of a bake sale. It baffled her how they gloated over a mediocre performance at a piano recital by one of their daughters or brooded over the slight if sufficient notice wasn’t paid to it in the society column of the paper. It wasn’t that she was a stranger to society, wasn’t that she hadn’t been born to a pedigreed background that even Katherine Fisher admired. No. If asked, she would tell you in great detail about her voice lessons as a girl, how she sang once for the Governor’s Ball. She would describe the fabric of the dress she wore to her debutante cotillion, and how she had a silk magnolia pinned to the waist. If pressed, she would tell you that she had been born into one of the better families in South Carolina. Her grandfather, Herbert Blankenship, had been a successful merchant with a large rice plantation near Charleston. He had served with distinction with Generals Gilmore and Beauregard during the War of Secession before being killed securing a victory in the defense of the Charleston Harbor in 1863. She still had in her possession the letter, written in General Gilmore’s own hand to her grandmother, describing the nobility and valor of her grandfather’s death.

Her father had been granted a full scholarship to the University of South Carolina, and was a prominent attorney until his untimely death. Bad investments and shiftless scallywags had driven her mother to her grave as well. It was a sad story, familiar enough to most of the women she had chosen to associate with. Virginia had crafted it well, perfected the telling of it, so that she grew misty-eyed when she recounted the loss of family, of property, of position. The women would hold her hand, dab at their eyes, and nod in sympathy.

The story was also a lie, a grand fabrication. She had been born Jenny Duff. She had married Henry “Harry” Yeager in 1918. She had taken the name of Blankenship when she read it on a memorial plaque when she had visited Charleston. She also knew Charleston was too difficult a town for her to break into—people knew about your past, could smell your breeding. These dumb clucks in Fayetteville hadn’t a clue about who she was, where she really came from. They only knew what she wanted them to know, what they wanted to hear, wanted to believe. So when she had arrived in Fayetteville, let it slip at the hairdressers one afternoon that she was the granddaughter of a Confederate martyr, a member in good standing of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the

were obliged to invite her to tea, to join their clubs, to serve as the escort to one of the endless stream of officers stationed at Fort Bragg.

It was easy enough to blend the lie into the fabric of truth, like a brightly colored thread. And she was experienced enough as an actress to pull off the part. She had run away from the South as a girl— from the poverty, from the drunken wretch of a father who wanted only to beat her until he found her good enough to mount. She briefly joined a circus passing through town, then later worked in a minstrel show. She could sing a little, was quick to learn a routine, and was willing to do whatever she needed. One man, after all, was pretty much just like the next. While working with a traveling vaudeville show, she and her friend Dorothea developed a comedy sketch “School Daze,” which was reported in a paper as being “a cracker!” and she had dreams of perhaps one day even working in New York.

She had been married briefly in the hullabaloo of the war, but that had been a marriage of necessity for her. Harry Yeager had been crazy in love for her, following her around like a sad puppy at the entrance to the hotel where the vaudeville company was quartered when playing his town. Poor Harry had believed all the claptrap they sang back in those days: “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” “Pack up Your Troubles,” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” even though she knew he didn’t have the slightest notion of where Tipperary could be found on a map. Harry Yeager had come around at a time when she needed him, and so she married him, and sent him off to war. She promised she would “keep the home fires burning,” and he was dippy enough to believe her. And he did her the greatest of all services. He got himself shot in the head on the riverbank of the Marne. He had provided her with a small income accorded to the widow of a war hero and a small degree of respectability that granted her admission to military bases. But there were thousands of women in her situation, and she was not content to just make do on what she had. Not willing to be a face in the crowd of war widows.

So when they were playing Charleston, and Dorothea told her that she was breaking up the act to go married to the colored ventriloquist, it came almost as a flash from the sky to her. She would reinvent herself. Take the parts that were respectable enough and add to them, like a potter making a bowl. A vessel. Yes, she would create a new self, and she would be the vessel for her. And so Jenny Yeager née Jenny Duff became Virginia Blankenship Yeager of the Charleston Blankenships.

When the meeting had ended and the women had said their good-byes, Virginia had the director lead her to the kitchen to see the cook. He was chopping vegetables for a stew or a soup, she couldn’t tell which.

He stopped chopping as they entered, wiped his large hands on a cloth tucked into the right side of his pants.

“George,” said the director. “Mrs. Yeager has a small matter to discuss with you.”

“A favor really,” said Virginia. “I am entertaining tomorrow evening. And I was hoping I could get you to make a pie for me. I will pay you for your time and materials of course.”

“Is there something special you want?” asked Butcher.

“As a matter of fact, there is.” Virginia paused to look at the director. “I don’t need to bore you with my baking requests. And I am sure you must have a thousand things that command your attention. But I do thank you for your assistance.” She extended an ivory-gloved hand to the director, who, understanding he was dismissed, excused himself. “Now, where was I?” she continued.

“You have a request,” said Butcher.

“Yes,” she said. “I have a small bag of pecans that I was hoping you might be able to turn into a pie for me. My friend Major Gleeson is a great fan of the Karo pie, and he will be joining me tomorrow night for supper. I wanted to have something special, and I know that sometimes you make things for the ladies.”

“Did you bring a plate to bake it in?”

“No. Did I need to?”

“Most times they bring their own dish.”

“No,” she said, understanding the implication of what he said. “I am happy to give you credit for the pie, George. Major Gleeson is not courting me for my baking expertise. I’m afraid I am really a terrible cook.” She smiled at him, and Butcher was impressed by this small confession. “About the best I can do in a pinch are salmon croquettes with mustard sauce. Fortunately, tomorrow is Friday, so I will be able to get by with fish for supper.”

Butcher thought of the rows of canned salmon in the pantry. It was abundant, cheap, and he served it for dinner every Friday night. “Did you bring the pecans?” Saying the word, Butcher noted the difference in the way they each pronounced it: She had said *puh-kahn* with the emphasis on the second half of the word; he had always called them *pea-cans*.

“No, I wanted to make sure you could do it for me first,” she said. “I can have my girl bring them around this evening if you need.”

“That’ll do,” he said. “I’ll pick the nut meat after supper tonight and roll out the crust in the morning. She can pick it up sometime after lunch. If she comes around three o’clock, it should still be warm for supper.”

“Thank you so much,” she said. “That is very generous of you. And how much will I owe you?”

“Six bits,” he said. “That should do.”

“And I’m sure it would be a bargain at twice that.”

That afternoon, he had just cut out the biscuits for dinner and had brushed them with buttermilk. There was a soft knocking at the door and he looked to see a young woman standing there—Miss Virginia’s maid, he assumed. He opened the door and held it to keep it from being blown back by the breeze. The woman had no hat or scarf, even though it was still cold, and she wore a cheap clove-asparagus-colored coat. When she looked up at him, he realized she was no more than a girl really—sixteen, maybe seventeen at best, so young to be in service. But working for a white woman of even moderate means would have to be better than what she had left behind. What surprised Butcher more than her age, however, was her beauty. She was a mulatto, possibly octoroon, and her skin held on to the slightest tint, like coffee with cream. Her features were delicate, refined, and she had soft greenish-brown eyes, which made him think of an unripe pear. She held a small, greasy paper sack in front of her like an offering.

“I’m from Mrs. Yeager’s,” she said. “I brought the pecans for the pie. Are you the baker?” Butcher could see that she wore no gloves, her legs were bare, and she shivered with the cold.

“Come in here where it’s warm,” Butcher said. He took the sack from her and looked inside. “I reckon there’s enough here,” he said. “But it’ll be more Karo than nut meat, that’s for sure.” Butcher nodded to the stove. “I have fresh coffee if you want.”

“No,” said the girl. “I have errands to run. She will be wanting to know where I am. She’s anxious as a cat today. She’s spent all afternoon laying out her clothes for tomorrow evening. I’ll have to be home in time to help her with her bath.” Butcher thought she looked too young to be so haggard.

“This must be an important dinner,” said Butcher.

“She thinks the major is going to propose to her. Take her away from here. He’s got a commission to take him to Missouri.” Panic flared in her green-brown eyes—it was obvious she had spoken too quickly.

Butcher smiled to let her know he was not a threat. He offered her a cruller that he had saved for himself from breakfast. She took it and began nibbling on the corner of the fried dough. “What’s your name, anyhow?” he asked.

“Mona,” she said.

“Mona what?”

“Just Mona.”

Butcher figured she thought he was trying to make a pass at her, probably had men of all races pitching her. “Well, Miss Mona, the way I see it, we’re all trying to get someplace else from here.”

“I hate it here,” she said. “Hate it. Wish we never had come here. Nothing here but rednecks and shit-kickers.”

“And where was you before you was here?”

“Around.”

“Well, that covers a lot of ground.”

“I’ve lived in the North,” she said. “That’s where I was born. I plan to go back there when I’m able. Or maybe West. Missouri is at least a step.”

“So, you reckon she will take you with her if she gets married?”

“She better.”

“Then I best make sure this is a pie that’ll do the trick. Sprinkle a little magic into it so the maj goes crazy in love. So crazy he will fall down and roll on the floor and beg Miss Virginia to marry him and go with him to Missouri.”

The girl flashed a slight smile at him. Butcher wanted her to know that she need not fear him. “There may be a scarf here I can loan you to help fight this wind. Folks is always leaving stuff behind.”

“Thank you, no,” she said. “I can bear it.”

Butcher could tell even this simple kindness was not lost on her. “You tell Miss Virginia I’ll have her pie ready for you to pick up by three o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. . . .”

“George Butcher,” he said, bowing down toward her. “But friends all just call me Butcher.”

“Three o’clock,” she said. “I will see you then, Mr. George Butcher.” As she opened the door to leave, she gave him another smile—this one fuller, which made him suddenly scared and excited and sad all at once. And as the door closed behind her, he could hear her call out, “And thank you for the doughnut, Mr. Butcher. Butcher, the baker.”

Karo pie . . .

It was after six the next evening when Butcher arrived at Miss Virginia's house. He had the pie ready by three, made a fresh pot of coffee, and even dished up a bit of the rice pudding he had made for the evening meal in anticipation of the girl's arrival. He had remembered the shy smile of the girl who he offered her the cruller and wanted to make her smile again. Nothing more. But she never came. Not at 3:30, not at 4:00, not at 4:30. Dinner for the men was from 5 to 6, so he busied himself with the final preparations, though his mind was only half on his job. He had been stood up. They had ordered the pie from him and then just sloughed him off. It made him mad. Though he was able to glean most of the ingredients from the pantry of the Residence, he had to use his own supply of Karo and vanilla. He had put so much into this pie—it *mattered* to him that she like it—this was more than just the money. He wanted to impress her with it. Show her what he was capable of. What he was worth.

When he could see the line for dinner beginning to dwindle, he handed over the finishing duties to the crew. It would be easy enough for them to finish up without him. He spoke to the director about the pie, telling him he wasn't sure if he had been supposed to deliver it. That maybe he had gotten the things confused.

"George, now, that is very careless of you. These women ask very little from us and give us a great deal in return."

Butcher apologized for his mistake and said if he could have the address, he would run it over to them. "It will be in time for dessert," he said. "And I have kept it warm on the rack."

"Yes, take it to her," he said, handing him the address on a paper torn from a yellow pad. "And you should not charge her for it. Tell her that is your way of making amends."

The route was familiar enough. To get to Haymount, he walked past the Old Market, which though not built for slavery, certainly witnessed the buying and selling of slaves on its steps. Now, farmers pulled wagons there to sell vegetables. Butcher walked there several times a week to see if there were any bargains; often, he was able to get a better price because of the quantity he could afford. It had taken him a while to find the house, though. She didn't live on one of the broader, more prominent streets like Hay or Green like most of the other "Miss Anns," but was back a couple of blocks off Arsenal. As he studied the numbers, looking for the correct one, he held the pie wrapped in a kitchen towel and could feel its warmth in the chill evening.

He thought it strange that though it was already getting dim, there were no lights on in the front parlor. He walked to the back door, expecting there to be lights. But there were not. He was sure he had the correct address, so he knocked on the door. He could hear a rumbling as a chair scraped against the linoleum. An orangish-colored lamp came on, and through the glass of the door Butcher could see Miss Virginia walking unsteadily toward him. She had on a garishly colored satin robe, like something out of a Charlie Chan. When she opened the door, Butcher couldn't believe it, but she was definitely blind drunk.

"Miss Virginia, it's me, George from the VOA. I brought you your pie."

It took a moment for the words to register with her, but then she realized who he was. "Shit. The pie," she said, smoothing her hair back from her face. "Well, might as well bring it in." She pushed the screen door open for him and then stepped back into the kitchen. He followed her inside. She turned on an overhead light and the sudden glare of the bulb overhead drew everything in sharp angles.

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