

Love, Life, and Bacon

The bright hustle and bustle of the little kitchen were deafening. The clang of pots and pans, the sizzle of meat hitting hot metal and the endless rhythmic chopping sounds that spread across the room filled it with a strange buzz. These chopped, diced, and sliced pieces would then be distributed to various dishes around the kitchen as garnish, ingredients, or even for some, it would make up the bulk of the dish. Then there was the bubbling and brewing. From all corners, something was churning in some mad way. Boiling noodles, green beans, eggs, and so on. All this was in preparation for the dinner rush which was growing ever closer. To an outsider, the madness would be blindingly confusing but for one man in this kitchen, all these sounds had gone silent. That man was Albert McMillan.

If you were to ask Albert, in that moment, he would say that there wasn't even a room around him. He was just floating in space. Just a vessel adrift in a sea of black. It wasn't because he couldn't see these things around him but because there was simply no room for anything else when he saw her. The "her" in this instance was Jenny Ward, or as she was known in the kitchen, Chef Ward. Jenny was the Sous Chef of this kitchen and, at least in Albert's opinion, the most beautiful woman to have ever graced any kitchen. She had dark brown hair that was almost black, which she most often kept in a bun that she tucked under a toque. Her skin, Albert thought, was a light brown color that gave it the look that it had been lightly kissed by the sun but once she was in her Chef's whites, it made her brown skin look as if it glowed golden. Then there were her eyes; a bright shade of brown that glistened with golden streaks.

To Albert, she seemed like some far-off thing. Always out of reach but always in sight. He was sure she would never notice him. Albert didn't find himself to be an ugly man understand. He was tall, which wasn't bad, though he also had a thin frame, which made him look a bit gangly. His hair was a dirty blonde, which he didn't mind but once it grew a bit too long it would curl up on one side which was a common trait in his family. It was so common he was sure that the term cow lick must have been invented by his family. His skin had been a genetic pass along from his Nordic ancestors. It had two colors. Red or white, depending on how much time he spent outside. Then there were his eyes. This by far was his favorite part of his body. They were a deep blueish gray that he always liked to think of as a sea after a storm kind of color.

A subtle but sweet smile flashed on Jenny's face and Albert's heart seemed to twirl in his chest. Then the smile on his face dropped and he felt a sad sorrow fill his stomach. He was just a lowly assistant Potager Chef. Not that you would hear him complain about it. In fact, Albert loved his job but felt it was nothing that would impress anyone. As he stared at her his surrounds began to swim back in around him. A muffled echoing voice reached out grabbing at Albert's consciousness.

"Hey, Al! Wake up kid!" The voice called out breaking through Albert's haze. An old man stood in-front of Albert. This was William Southard. William had worked for the Jardin de Delight Café, or Garden of Delight Cafe, which Albert felt was a bit pompous when you really got down to it, since before Albert had been out of diapers. William looked as if he stepped out of an old 80's TV show. His hair was a shocked white color that seemed even brighter against his dark brown skin. It puffed out only slightly in tight natural curls. His upper lip held the white slightly gray 70's mustache that would make any hip cat or groovy kitten jealous, and if Albert was honest even he had been a bit jealous of its glory. Beneath that tended to be a warm smile that was comforting and understand all at once. He was a man who had lived a life well beyond his years. You couldn't tell it by his looks. He had aged with that gracefulness that seems to be reserved for people of African descent. It was his eyes that showed his real age. Those old brown spheres shone with a knowledge that Albert was sure he would never have, even if he lived twice as long as William. He guessed it was one of the

reasons he liked William. He was not just some old guy. He made you feel welcome. It was like he knew who you were and where you came from without ever talking with you.

Albert's eyes snapped open and closed a few times as he turned to William.

"Sorry, William. I didn't mean to ah... Sorry." Albert said feeling a hot blush fill his cheeks. William chuckled under his breath and shook his head.

"It's fine kid. I spent plenty of time giving my Isabell that same look." William smiled distantly.

"I ... Well..." Albert stumbled over his words as he tried to recover. To Albert's relief, William nodded towards a spice rack next to him.

"Grab the bay leaf off there for me, please. Oh, and the nut meg." Albert quickly gathered the spices and shuffled back over to William.

William moved quickly and surely with old gnarled hands that were well rehearsed in the fine tuning of soups. Albert had been assistant Potager for the past two years training to eventually replace William, thought Albert was in no rush and it seemed William wasn't either. Even with his advanced age, William hadn't seemed to lose a bit of skill. He threw some of this then that into the pot before absently stirring the seasoning into the mixture. He then lifted the spoon and took a sip. William thought for a moment then handed the spoon to Albert.

"Take a taste." William said.

Albert obeyed quickly dipping the spoon in the lightly simmering soup. Albert took a deep sip of the broth and paused much as William had. He turned to the spice rack and grabbed a few of the bottles and a small bottle of Tabasco. Albert's arms flew out and dashed a little of this and that into the pot. He finished his flourish with a shot of the Tabasco which caused a small eruption on the surface of the soup as it struck. He spun the spoon in the pot before taking another sip. Satisfied with his concoction he handed the spoon back to William. Albert nervously watched as William dipped the spoon into the new mixture. He could feel his heart pick up its pace in his chest as the spoon seemed to lift in slow motion to William's mouth. After he blew on the surface he slurped up the broth and judged it for a minute.

"Well dear me!" William said exaggeratedly. "I am going to make a Potager Chef out of you after all Al!" He said laughing and patting Albert on the shoulder. William walked to the sink nearby and ran his hands under its water.

Albert joined him. "So, you think I'm getting better?" Albert asked coyly.

"I think," William said before pausing. "I have a great replacement." William smiled. Albert let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding and laughed.

"Thanks, William, but don't go getting any ideas." Albert said with a grin. Just then Jenny came up to the pair, causing Albert to suck in half a laugh and choke.

"Are you ok Albert?" Jenny asked looking at him with a light smirk pulling up the corner of her mouth.

"Oh... Me... Sure... Just sucked in air wrong." His cheeks once again blazed red.

"Ok. Well, I need you to start on the White Bean and Bacon soup if you could. We will need it ready for the special tonight?" She said to Albert.

Her eyes connected with Albert's eyes and his heart beat against his rib cage in panicked sputters. For a fleeting moment Albert was sure that he saw Jenny's eyes flashed with something but before he could fully register the reaction she turned to head back to the other side of the kitchen. Albert turned to William with his face turned up in an awkward goofy smirk. William stared back at him with a sly look on his face and his eyebrows raised.

Albert's cheeks heated up and he turned to the spice rack replacing the spices they had been using. Behind him, William let out a gruff laugh.

"What?" Albert asked turning to William.

"You two." He said shaking his head.

"What about us?" Albert asked, unable to see the humor.

"She likes you, Al. Can't you see that?" William shrugged disbelievingly.

"No. There's no way! She is so... I mean, and I'm so..." Albert looked over his shoulder at Jenny and dropped a bottle of Thyme that spilled across the stainless-steel table top. His head snapped down and he quickly picked up the bottle then brushed the rest into his hand before dumping them into the near by trash can. William chuckled and shook his head again.

"Since you got a little Thyme on your hands why don't you go grab the bacon." William laughed.

Albert rolled his eyes laughing at the dad joke and walked off towards the freezer. He weaved his way through the work stations peeking into the different pots and pans as he passed. Albert's eyes glanced over the work stations and up to Jenny who was now working at one of the stoves. She tipped a bottle of wine towards the pan she was cooking in and let a splash of it sizzle in the pan. After a second of steaming the wine caught fire. It created only a small flash in the pan, nothing like a heavy booze would do. But, Albert couldn't help but notice how the flash lit up her face with an almost heavenly glow. The flash reflected off her eyes and made him think of her wrapped in his arms sitting in front of a fireplace on a cool winters night. A sigh escaped him and he shook his head. He turned back to the freezer. The burst of flame was nothing more than a little pop that quickly died away as the alcohol fumes burnt up, just like the image in his mind. When he reached the freezer, he pulled open the door and shivered from a chill running down his spine. Albert shifted the contents of the shelves before finding a small stack of thick cut bacon strips. He grabbed a package and tucked it into the crutch of his arm. On his way, back he stopped at the pantry to pick up chives and some raw onions. He hadn't been asked to grab these items but instinct told him it was something they needed. Back at the soup station. William was mixing a pot of beans that he had begun prepping early that morning.

When Albert reached the table, he dumped the chives, onion, and bacon on to the stainless-steel table top then pulled a cutting board and pan from underneath the table. William scanned his additions to the recipe and gave a small smile.

"Good choice Al." William said.

"What?" Albert scanned the items before him then blushed. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry. I just thought that they would help with the flavor."

"Don't be sorry. Cooking is all about following those feelings." William said with a bright smile. "Isabell always had that kind of instinct."

"Hey, William." Albert said.

"Yeah kid?" he replied.

"How did you meet your wife?" Albert asked as his hand worked at cutting the onions.

"Hmm." William said settling up next to Albert producing a second cutting board and pulling the chives over to himself. As William cut his eyes faded into the distance.

"Well. I was just a young man. About your age. I worked as a line cook in a greasy spoon kind of place. I say line cook but I was more of a burger flipper than a cook. Anyway, I had been working there for about a year when I started noticing a beautiful young woman coming in every Thursday afternoon. She would come in and order the special, which changed every Thursday of course." He said pushing away the little rings of chives. "I watched her

through the window, I don't know if she had always known that. I tried to be slick about it. But what does a kid know about being slick anyway." He laughed. "Every Thursday morning, I told myself. I said listen here, you dummy. You are going to go into work and you are going to ask that beautiful little lady on a date and every Thursday I would go to work ready to do it. I would puff out my chest and do all that crap young men do. Then she would come in and it would all fall away." He laughed. "It went on like that for a few months then one day it was getting late and she hadn't shown up. I figured she must have decided that she had better options somewhere else. I spent most of that evening calling myself every down right dirty word I could think of. I would have made a sailor blush if he had heard me then." This time Albert laughed. "I was finishing off with some cleaning in the back when she came strolling through the door and then like every Thursday she pulled up a seat at the counter and ordered a special. So, I cooked up another special, which was nothing more than a burger and fries with some special sauce that I came up with that week, It was about the only cook worthy thing I did in that place." He grunted. "When I finished it I delivered it to her myself. She had a beautiful smile." William said. "It looked like a row of polished pearls set between soft pink silk. She ate and I, of course, watched her from my little window and when she finished I asked if I could walk her home. On account of it being as dark as it was and a young lady like herself shouldn't face that kind of darkness alone." William suddenly broke out in laughter.

"What?" Albert said fighting back a few infectious laughs.

"I was thinking it was probably good that it was dark and I was so dark skinned. If she would have seen me when we got to her door she probably would have thought I was having a fit or something. It was full-fledged butterflies and shakin knees. But, I did it. I asked her on a date and in a few short years we were married. Simple as that." To this Albert stared confused looking.

"So, you're saying I should ask her on a date, then marry her?" Albert asked. William paused for a long moment then chuckled.

"Yeah." William said. Albert rolled his eyes then turned to dump his onion pieces into the pan that was set between the two of them.

"I think I'm going to have to try some different options." Albert said laughing.

"There were other things of course." William said. "Being in a relationship isn't just you're in love or you're not. It takes work. It takes time. It takes dealing with the will be in laws." Albert laughed brightly at this.

"Did they not like you or something?" Albert asked. William thought for a moment then answered.

"Well, it's hard to say. They didn't kick me out or anything. But a young man working as a line cook with little to no guarantee for a future is a hard thing to like."

"But you were working? What did they have to be upset about?" Albert said sadly.

"I was a young black boy working at a burger joint. If that wasn't bad enough I wanted to be a chef. When they looked at me they saw a dead end. Just another black kid living in the slums."

"But you were going to be a chef. That isn't a bad job. You can make a living off that. It's maybe not the best living but still." Albert added.

"It was a different time. Chefs weren't black. At best I was a cook and at the time that's all they thought I'd ever be." William sighed. "They thought she wasn't thinking things all the way through ya see. To be honest. I wasn't sure I should date her either. At the time my life looked like it would be headed down that very path." William sighed.

"So, what happened? I mean how did you convince them to like you?"

"I didn't. Well, I mean I didn't convince them to like me. In fact, I think I made things worse really." William said.

"How did you manage that?" Albert asked.

"I dumped her." Albert gasped at Williams confession.

"No! You didn't!" Albert said his mouth hanging open. William simply nodded.

"Yep. Her parents had been so down on me that in the end, I came to believe them. I believed I wasn't good enough for her. She was something special. Something I couldn't explain, but most of all she was someone that deserved better than I could hope to give her, at that time especially. I was a lump on a toad's ass by comparison." William said. Albert felt a strange understanding that caused him to glance over to Jenny. William seemed to ignore this reaction and instead dumped his chives into the pan and laid it on another burner. He poured chicken broth into it letting the flames lick its underside. He absently stirred the broth and shifted the pan.

"You know what the worst part was?" William asked.

"What?" Albert asked eagerly

"I left her crying on her front porch." William's face turned up with a look of disgust with himself. "Stupid kid." He whispered in a hushed voice. "I dumped her then I left. I left the whole damn state even."

"Wow." Albert said. "You took the break up pretty badly I guess."

"Yeah. But that's not why I left. I knew that I was never going to be good enough for her if I stayed in Augden at the Dine In Dinner, which was the name of the greasy spoon. Old Charly Anderson thought he was pretty clever coming up with that." William laughed. "So, I left. I moved to New York. I got in at this little place called Murphy's. After that I left for Illinois, then Florida and California with some stops in between of course." William stopped here and stirred what he had been heating up in the pan. "Hell, I even ended up in Colorado for a while. Learned to make Rocky mountain oysters." He shuttered. "Still not a big fan of that."

"What happened then?" Albert asked.

"Then I left the U.S for a while." William said.

"So, you were doing the chef thing. Leave the country find new cooking techniques and all that. You still were working on being a chef." Albert said with a smile.

"Well, I was still working to be a chef but that isn't really why I left. I left because I got drafted." He said with a shrug. Even with all my traveling Uncle Sam found me."

"Oh, wow..." Albert said in hushed wonder.

"Yeah. It wasn't exactly what I had planned, but I couldn't avoid it either. When the draft calls your number that's it. So, I went." William said.

"Did you see a lot of fighting?" Albert asked.

"More than enough, but less than others. Mostly, what I remember is a lot of dark damp forests. That and oddly enough, cooking." William said.

"Cooking?" Albert asked

"Yep. A lot of the U.S. bases then were set along the coast and we were free to fish the waters, and such like that, as much as we would like. I made friends with some of the locals and they taught me some stuff. A lot of ways they cooked and the spices they used. I even taught a few of them some tricks I knew. Then I was moved closer to the front. Once we got to the front we ate stews most nights. I'd use some dried meat rations water from canteens and some of the local spices that grew in the area. Stuff the locals pointed out to

me as safe to eat. We ate pretty damn good too if I do say so myself.” William gave Albert a wink then dumped the pans content into the larger pot.

“Well, what happened?” Albert asked. He found himself longing to hear more.

“Start cutting and cooking that bacon, Al.” William said adding heavy cream to the pot. Albert quickly opened the bacon and started slicing it into small bites.

“Ok. So, what happened?” Albert asked anxiously. William chuckled then continued talking.

“Well, I spent another year and a half moving around Korea with my platoon before everything kind of ended. At least that’s what it felt like on the ground. The war was just over and we were going home.” William said stirring the pot in front of him.

“So, you went home to Isabell?” Albert asked.

“No Al, no I didn’t. As I said before I was a stupid kid. Instead, I went traveling. Traveling for real this time. I went all around the world. Anywhere I could find a place to learn a different style of cooking. France, England, Cuba, and Spain. I even ended up back in Korea for a little while, but I didn’t stay long. I felt I had gotten everything I was going to get out of that country.” He chuckled.

“Yeah. I’d imagine so. How long did you do that?” Albert asked.

“Oh, that was about... two years or so.” William said.

“Two years! So, you were gone for four years?” Albert asked, shocked.

“Yeah. Somewhere in there.” William said. “That wasn’t the end of it either. On my way through Canada, I met another chef. Donald Langston. He was a Little round fella with thinning gray hair and a pot belly. White as sour cream but more than a little kind to me, which was a rarity in that day and age. He was touring some French restaurants in the area and ended up spotting me training in this little French bistro. He liked what he saw and told me that if I wanted, he would be happy to have me at his culinary college back in the states.” William was now working his magic with the spices over the pot. “Drain those beans for me kid.” He said nodding towards the pot that held the beans.

“Oh, yeah. So you went to his school?” Albert asked.

“Hell, yeah I did. He was offering me a free ride to be a chef. I attended for two years and got my certifications. By the time all was said and done. I had been gone for six years.” William said. Albert looked to him over his shoulder while he shook the strainer full of beans to clear the water.

“Wow. Six years... Did you go back to Augden then?” Albert asked.

“Yep. I had returned feeling like a hero. I was black and I was a chef. So, one day when I was feeling particularly good I went out on a walk and ended up in front of Isabell’s parent’s house. I remember standing there just staring at the front door. I mean it had been six years but it felt like a blink of an eye when I left her there crying. But in my mind, I had been just a stupid kid who didn’t know anything about the world around me. But now. Now I was a big man with a big degree... Dummy.” William once again trailed off in thought. “I couldn’t tell you what made me do it.” He started. “I was sure she had moved out. Probably off somewhere living with another man maybe even a few kids to bounce on her knee... I was so sure. But, I still went up to the door and knocked on it. Something told me I had to, it was strange” William smiled and went silent.

“AND!” Albert said sharply.

“I was set to turn around when the door suddenly opened and there she was. The angel herself. She wore her hair different but that smile and those beautiful brown eyes. They sparkled.” William said, his face softening with pleasant memories.

“So, she was happy to see you?” Albert said.

“Well, no. She was happy, then she saw me...” For the first time, William seemed to retract embarrassed.

“What did she do?” Albert asked.

“Well... she punched me square in my nose.” William said plainly.

Albert dropped the knife he was cleaning in the sink, which caused a loud clang to echo out into the kitchen. The sound shocked him out of his stupor and he glanced around apologetically.

“Wow... I can’t believe she punched you. I mean... Wow.” Albert said. A smile creeping along his lips now. William simply laughed and shook his head thinking back to the past. William twitched his nose as if re-living the impact of the punch in his mind.

“It hurt too. She wasn’t messing around. Laid me right out...” He sighed. To this Albert burst out laughing. William laughed along with him and they stayed that way for a few minutes before it finally died away and was replaced with light chuckles that would escape them every so often.

“What a woman.” Albert laughed.

“Yeah. She was something.” William reminisced. “At the time, I was so angry. I had done all this for her. Worked in kitchens that paid me almost nothing just to build up experiences. I scraped together pennies just to afford a loaf of bread for the week and then this happens.” William sighed. “I was just a stupid kid though.” William gave the soup a quick stir then sipped from the spoon. He paused for a moment then added another few dashes of salt.

“So, what did you do? I mean obviously, that wasn’t the end of it for you two.” Albert asked.

“Nothing.” William said. “I stormed off that night. Went back to my parent’s house. I got my nose to stop bleeding then changed my shirt and went to bed. I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep of course. I was angry and heartbroken. I hadn’t expected her to be there but seeing her brought up so many strong memories. I mean, I loved her and she didn’t seem to want anything to do with me. So, I just went to bed angry. The next day I got up and spent the day running from restaurant to restaurant meeting with managers, the majority of which ended up laughing me out of their shops.” While William had been telling his story, Albert had cooked the sliced bacon to a dark reddish brown. “Add the bacon, kid.” Albert lifted the pan up and scooped out the small pieces of bacon dumping them into the pot. Once he had emptied the pan of everything except the melted fat that came off the bacon, William took a step to the side and gestured for Albert to step up to the pot.

“Give that a stir Al.” Albert took the spoon and started stirring the mixture until the bacon disappeared under the surface.

“So how did you end up as a chef?” Albert said.

“Well, I was rounding on the last restaurant I could find in town. It was a little shop that had been open for years. The owner was Edward Blankenship. He was a nice man. At the time, he was probably about my age now.” William laughed. “He was the only one who was willing to give some young upstart black kid a chance. So, I took the job. He made me his assistant head chef. And that was it. I was a chef. A professional chef.” William paused and Albert shifted anxiously.

“What about Isabell?” Albert said.

“I’m getting there kid, don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten. I couldn’t forget her if I wanted to.” He smiled. “It started with her showing up one day while I was working the grill.

By this time, it had been about a month since the night on her porch.” Once again William sniffed, twitching his nose at the memory. “She still looked beautiful, but I couldn’t talk to her. I wanted to but everything in me went still. I felt as if my insides had turned to ice. Before I knew it, she had grabbed her food and left.” William shook his head again, a move that had become almost instinct at this point it seemed. “I began seeing her twice a week. She would show up at my work. She would place her order and I would fill it but still, I couldn’t work up the nerve to talk to her. In the end, it was too much. I couldn’t stand by and do nothing anymore. After work, I went to the corner grocery store got a bouquet and went to her home. I was determined to talk to her. I marched right up to the door and knocked on it. I won’t lie. I did duck back a little when it opened.” Albert laughed at this. “I didn’t know if she was coming out fists ready again or not. Not to mention when she opened the door her eyes fell on my nose again and I quickly gave the flowers to her. I figured if her hands were full she wouldn’t be able to hit me.” William chuckled. “Then we took a seat at the corner of the porch on an old swing and talked. She told me that she wanted to hate me forever and when I asked her why it finally made sense to me. It was only me who thought I wasn’t good enough for her. She loved me and as far as she was concerned that’s all that mattered.” He shrugged once again and sighed. “That night I took her on a date and then it was just like the fairy tales kid. We lived happily ever after.” William fell silent and stirred the warm bubbling soup. Albert stood in awe of William’s story. His mind racing with thoughts. Then one pushed its way forward. One that rang more true to him than any of the other thought.

“I wish I could have met her.” Albert said. William smiled wide and nodded.

“Yeah. I think she would have really liked you, Al.” William said patting him on the shoulder. “You’re really a good kid.” He laughed. After that, the dinner rush had kicked up to full gear and the kitchen was a furious blur of shifting chefs and flying plates.

For those who don’t know what a kitchen is like during a dinner rush, it is hard to explain. It is kind of like a many headed many armed monster thrashing around, always attempting to get something done but not seeming to get very far. The Jardin de Delight Café was no different than any other kitchen and the monster certainly came out in force during the dinner rush that night. A thousand plates all flying through the swinging double doors like saucers off to a distant planet. And, it stayed that way until the last customer finished their meal and headed for the door. By the end of it all, the kitchen was quiet again. While Albert polished the stainless-steel table, William was clearing off his work station. Albert had been buffing a particularly stubborn spot when a sudden presence made him jump. Jenny had appeared at his elbow.

“Oh! Sorry. You snuck up on me.” Albert said his cheeks growing red.

“Sorry.” Jenny laughed. “I didn’t mean to. I uh... Well, I just wanted to know if you wanted to go out for drinks? It’s still a bit early and I thought, I mean if you don’t have anything going on, you might be interested.” Jenny said with a smile and a little blush of her own.

Albert stared in silence for a long period until William nudged his back faking a cough.

“Yes! Yeah... Yeah, I’d like to go get drinks... with you. It sounds fun.” Albert sputtered.

“Good. I’m going to go get changed. I’ll see you when you’re done. Ok?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah. That sounds great. Yeah.” Albert said.

Jenny turned on the spot and walked away. Albert turned to William who was sporting a wide grin. Apparently watching Albert squirm had been fun for him.

“I... She just...” Albert said dumbly.

“I know kid. I watched it happen. Poor girl got tired of waiting for you to ask her out I guess.” William laughed.

“Yeah. I guess.” Albert chuckled. Albert turned back to the table and began buffing at the spot again.

“Uh... kid. What are you doing?” William said.

“What?” Albert said looking up from the table.

“You have a beautiful young woman who asked you out on a date and your polishing an old dinged up steel table?” William said exasperatedly.

“Oh... Well, I.” Albert stammered.

“Go, Go! I’ll take care of the rest of this. Don’t keep her waiting.” William patted Albert on the shoulder. Albert nodded still seemingly lost in his stupor.

“Thank you. I... Thanks, William.” Albert started unbuttoning his coat and weaving through the tables, a goofy grin painted on his face. William smiled and turned back to the pot of soup he had been dumping. After a few minutes, Albert reappeared with Jenny strolling alongside him. Albert looked over to William and gave him a bright warm smile than a wave, which Jenny seemed to mimic. William returned it and watched as the pair walked out of the kitchen through the back door and into the cool night air.

“And they lived happily ever after.” William whispered. “Good choice kid. Good choice.”

The End