

Cutter Street Cookout

By kamichi jackson

It was an event that brought together long-lost relatives, old friends and carloads of family from up North. No one ever asked if it was going to be held each year. It'd become tradition—a part of Cutter Street heritage. And no one ever asked when it was going to be held either. Rain or shine, wedding or funeral, good times or bad, every first Saturday of August would find the small neighborhood crowded with upwards of two hundred people, most of whom were related in some way to the six families that had lived on the street since the very first day they'd taken up residence some fifty-odd years ago. Years that had seen great amounts of both love and loss, the latter of which might have killed any other community were it not for the cookout that brought everyone— feuding families and friends included—together for at least the one day. One never knew exactly what was going to happen, but one could certainly expect more than a fair share of drama along with their heaping plate of soul food.

That was what Mama had loved most about the Cutter Street Cookout. She'd grown up visiting relatives there, and she and Daddy had taken me and my sister Mina down there every summer for as long as I can remember, right up to the very summer she died. We'd always arrive exactly two weeks beforehand and leave exactly three days afterward. Long enough so that the family wouldn't complain that we didn't love or visit them like we should, but short enough that we didn't wear out our welcome or get swept up into the inevitable neighborhood battles that were sure to follow too many hours of togetherness. I'm the only one who still goes down for the cookout now. Daddy stopped years ago because he said it was too painful to be there without Mama. And Mina—well, Mina left home right after Mama's funeral. No one has seen or heard from her since.

I think about Mina all the time. The way she talked when she got excited—too fast and too too loud, Mama would always say. The way she smelled when she walked by—sweet, of Freesia and Calyx, I think. The way she laughed—head thrown back,

mouth open wide and with so much heart and soul that you couldn't help but laugh too. That, I think, was what I missed the very most, especially after Mama died. The house seemed so empty and lifeless without Mina's laughter.

Which is why I looked forward to coming down to Pine Tops each summer for the cookout. It wasn't just about the food, though it was certainly worth traveling for. The kind of feast that legends were made of, created by women (and every now and then a man) with years and years of experience and that special gift that made folks' mouths water at just the thought of it.

No, it was more so about the people. Six families that had raised twenty-seven children between them, some of whom had fallen in love with each other and gotten married, and many of whom now had children of their own. They were a nation all their own, people would often joke. And yet anyone who'd ever dealt with any of them knew this to be true. Rarely did a month go by that a carload of Walkers, Jacksons, Bullocks, Scotts, Pittmans or Sharps didn't roll up on someone who'd disrespected a loved one. That was their way. Right or wrong, they fiercely looked out for their own.

Of course, they did that way within the family too, so it was not unusual to find one branch of the family at war with another. Knock-down, dragout fights between some of the younger members, and weeks or months of icy silence between some of the older, supposedly more mature members. That is, until Miss Coretta stepped in. One of the most respected women in Pine Tops, Miss Coretta was the unspoken matriarch of the Cutter Street clan. Her soft-spoken, reserved demeanour often belied her sharp tongue and quick wit. People who came to know her quickly recognized that this was a woman of great intelligence and ability. A woman who possessed invaluable pearls of wisdom and wore them well.

It was she who'd begun the tradition of the Cutter Street Cookout so many, many years ago...