

# Pumpkin pie with whipped cream

By Charles Pinning

Mr. Terrence Noble lived down the street in a house that was half brick and half wood. He made cologne from rose hip petals and spices and sold it only in Newport under the label Trance.

Many people did not like him because he could be prickly and sarcastic, but I liked him because he was really smart and ... prickly and sarcastic. The mysteries of attraction are, indeed, mysterious.

Mr. Noble could fix anything. Television set, broken window, storm door ... his car. He didn't have a lot of things, but what he did have he took care of himself.

"What's a mechanic?" he asked me.

"A crook," I replied.

"Good man," he smiled.

"And a plumber?"

"Crook," I burped.

"Excellent."

I liked to climb up on his garage roof and pick apples from the overhanging tree in his backyard. The first time he saw me up there, he told me to get down.

"Why?" I asked him.

"Because—" he stopped and then said, "Never mind. Toss me an apple."

I think I was his only friend, except for Mrs. Crosby, who was divorced, which was rare and whispered, like cancer, in Newport back then. Only movie stars and rich people got divorced. Mrs. Crosby was rich. Had to be. She drove a white Thunderbird.

"Clarice," I heard Mr. Noble say fondly to nobody. Clarice

was Mrs. Crosby's name.

"Divorced," I said dramatically, the way Mr. Noble might.

"So what?" he snapped.

"I've been divorced twice!"

"Wow," I said. "I didn't know that."

"Why would you? You weren't even born when I got rid of the last one. How old are you anyway?"

"Twelve," I said. "How did Mrs. Crosby get rich?"

"Father owned a widget factory."

"What's a widget?"

"Some little peculiar thing that fits just so."

"Is this one?" I asked, picking up a round piece of metal from his toolbox.

"No. It's a socket."

"Why don't you cut your lawn?"

"Bugs like it," he said.

"Butterflies and bees like it. Neighbors don't!" he cackled.

At our Thanksgiving table I said, "Wonder what Mr. Noble is doing for Thanksgiving?" As far as I knew, he didn't have any family.

"Probably sipping a cup of bile," said my father. "And growing weeds in his basement."

My older brother looked at me devilishly: "Clarice," he mouthed her name silently.

Getting dessert ready, my mother put two big slices of pumpkin pie on a plate. "Why don't you run this over to your friend. Wait—" and she plopped a big dollop of whipped cream on top of both.

Coming up the front steps, I could see Mr. Noble in his living room playing the piano.

"My mother wanted me to

bring this over," I said. He ushered me inside. A football game was on the TV.

"I thought you hated football," I said.

"I don't hate football," he said. "I can watch a few minutes of a game, if it's not a blow-out. What's going on at your maison? Don't you usually have Thanksgiving at your grandparents' farm?"

I shrugged. "They came over to our house this year. Where's Mrs. Crosby?"

"California. She has kids out there."

"Oh," I said. "Do you miss her? Don't you mind spending Thanksgiving alone?"

Mr. Noble turned from me, sat at the piano and resumed playing.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Chopin."

"Sounds sad."

"Is sad. I'm devastated!"

he shrieked crazily, the way he did sometimes. "Brokenhearted! There's nothing worse than being alone on Thanksgiving — except being alone on Christmas!" Mr. Noble spun around on the piano stool. "Don't let it happen to you!"

He looked at the plate of pumpkin pie in my hands.

"What makes that?" he asked.

"My mother made it."

"No. Lovely, of course. But what sets it apart?"

"The whipped cream?"

"Bravo! That she thought of it. It's everything."

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