

Over the Back Fence
For Friday December 12, 2008
Approx 620 words

Three-alarm dinner
By Alva Wood

Nellie Rinehart is having a family Christmas dinner again, in spite of what happened last year.

Everyone knows that relations were a little strained between Nellie and her sister Tanya, after Nellie's husband Jim Smith decided that he was growing older and needed a younger leaner body, which turned out to be Tanya's. But after six years of cold war, Nellie thought it was time to mend fences.

So she invited Tanya and Jim and their daughter Jasmine.

And her own three children, Julie, Jane, and young John. Julie brought along her spousal equivalent, Ronnie Burkholder, and their son Paul. Ronnie brought his dad, Sam Burkholder.

Jane invited Tom Brokenwind, who she'd been seeing a lot of lately. So Tom's parents, Chief Matthew and Martha Brokenwind, came too.

"Thirteen around the table?" says Tanya, as she helps Nellie set up. "That's unlucky."

"Don't be silly," Nellie retorts. "I'm not superstitious!"

Nellie gets Jim to screw some plywood sheets onto her dining table to make it bigger. When Jim sees all the food she piles onto the table, he wonders if he should have reinforced the legs too.

Nellie is just about to tell everyone to start when Matthew Brokenwind interrupts. "We need to bless this feast together," he says.

No one feels competent to say grace.

"I have some sweetgrass in my car," Matthew says. "It's not really our local cultural custom, but everyone thinks it is, so we might as well use it."

He lights a braid of sweetgrass over one of Nellie's candles. Then he walks around the table wafting sweetgrass smoke around everyone's head.

That's when the smoke alarm goes off the first time. Nellie has one of the alarm systems that automatically notifies the fire station.

"That was cool," says John, through a mouthful of mashed potato, after the firefighters have gone back to their own Christmas dinners.

"Gooomp awk wimooo maowwow," Nellie lectures him.

"What?" says everyone.

Nellie swallows. "I said," she says, "don't talk with your mouth full."

"But you did!" John chortles, waving with his fork. He flips a blob of cranberry sauce onto Sam Burkholder's clean white shirt.

Sam recoils. His chair tips over. His feet hit a table leg and knock it askew. Everything on the table slides towards one end. The candles in Nellie's centerpiece fall over and set the centerpiece on fire.

This time it only takes the fire department ten minutes to get there. They hadn't had time to put the fire engine away yet.

After things settled down, several family members stood around the kitchen, getting dessert ready. "That plum pudding needs more brandy," says Tanya, sniffing it. She pours on a bit more.

"It needs to soak right into the middle," says Jim. He pokes a soda straw into the pudding, and dribbles brandy through it.

"That thing looks like a bomb," says Ronnie, coming into the kitchen to refill his wine glass. Before anyone can stop him, he flips his Bic and holds it near the end of the straw.

The fumes inside ignite. The flame shoots down the straw to the brandy-soaked interior. The whole pudding explodes.

Nellie comes back into the kitchen just in time to see bits of her plum pudding sliding down her kitchen walls. "Cool," John says, licking it off.

"Would you like us just to stay here for the rest of the evening?" the fire crew ask.

Julie tells Ronnie he can use her eyebrow pencil to make it look like he has eyebrows, until they grow in again.

“I really like your family,” Tom Brokenwind tells Jane as he says good night. “Your Christmas traditions are a lot more exciting than ours.”

It takes considerable courage for Nellie to risk doing it again.