



SWEET AS HONEY

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

When the wintry days are short and cold, dreams of warmer, sunnier times invade my thoughts. Like a starving sailor envisioning heaped platters of food, I'm sustained by sweet childhood memories; days spent rambling the fields of the back acre and discovering the many growing things that surrounded us.

IN SEARCH OF SUPPER

It's one of those hot, humid days that sometimes comes in the spring just before a big storm. Gina, Neanie and I are in the cool, dark cellar at the corner of Mama's flower garden, sorting through rows of dusty jars for tomatoes and green beans for supper. It smells of earth and last season's apples. Papaw has been gone just over a year, but a few bottles of his homemade ketchup still dot the shelves. My 9-year-old heart momentarily aches at the sight of them. Suddenly, Gina squeals, "spider!" Neanie pretends to catch and eat it. I laugh, our loss temporarily forgotten.

With only the dim light from the cellar's open door to see by, it's hard to tell what each jar holds. Eventually, we find what we're looking for and clumsily make our way out of the cellar, arms loaded with jars. Daddy is plowing in the garden, and I hear the faint burr of the rototiller in the distance.

SHADY MOVES

When we get back to the house we're already sweating from hauling jars. Mama has started cooking, and even with the window open, the kitchen is hot and stuffy. We set our bounty on the counter before Mama shoos us out to the front yard where it's shady. Out on the porch, I drape myself over the curved brick support that borders the front steps. Resting one cheek against the red-clay bricks, I let my long, skinny arms dangle down the sides. I close my eyes, momentarily enjoying the cooling sensation of the bricks. When I open them the first thing my sideways glance focuses on is Mama's balsam roses. Their soft, pink blooms have just opened and smell sweet as honey. I pluck off one of the blossoms with cellar-dirty fingers and pop it into my mouth, savoring the sweet nectar.

Before long, Neanie has climbed a tree. She wraps herself around a sturdy branch and hangs upside down, wildly shaking her hair and singing, "Baby, baby, don't get hooked on me." Our neighbor, Terry, crosses from her yard, and Gina meets her part way. Together they head out to the driveway to look for sharp edged stones to use as chalk so they can draw pictures on the cement walkway that leads to the porch.

Lying belly down on my improvised lounge, I close my eyes again and listen to the springtime sounds. I hear both the birds and Neanie singing. I hear the softer voices of Gina and Terry and the sound of their stones scraping on the sidewalk as they draw. Through the screen door I hear my little brother babbling and Lizzie, who is on the phone with her boyfriend. I hear whatever



Sweetly scented balsam roses bloom from late spring through summer.

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Guests will gather around like bees when you place an eight-layered honey cake on your table.

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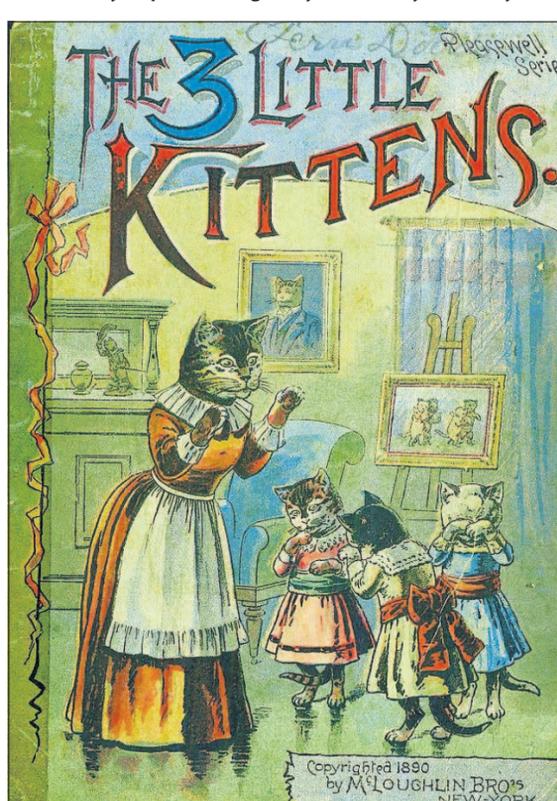
is frying on the stove and metallic, clinking noises from the kitchen.

SPRING ARRIVALS

My fingers droop low and something soft brushes against the tips. When I open my eyes and look down I discover a tiny orange-and-white kitten. Our cat, Theodora (whom I named after the powerful Greek empress I learned about at school), had a litter of kittens a few weeks ago. Until now they hadn't been out on their own.

I scoop up the little bundle and her miniscule, needle sharp claws cling to my shirt. Neanie hops out of the tree and together we run into the house to show Mama. She patiently agrees that "Yes, it's a cute little cat," but we can tell that she really does not want it in her kitchen. We head back outside, and with Gina and Terry's help we start hunting for the rest of the kittens. We find four of them clumped together, mewling for their mother near the hole that leads under the house to the kitchen pipes.

The other girls stay back with the five kittens, but I slowly make my way around the rest of the house looking for the last one. It's hiding under Mama's black current bushes near the back door. I carry it back to where the girls are. After playing with the kittens for a few minutes, Terry's Mama calls her in for supper. My sisters and I are hungry, too, so we place the six tiny siblings back by the hole that goes



Few things in life are sweeter than spring kittens.

under the house and head inside, following our noses.

SWEETEST OF ALL

As we come through the back door, we almost stumble over Daddy, who is squatted down on the kitchen floor with something that looks like a dirty yellow ball in his hands. Mama is draining water from a pot of potatoes into the sink. A cloud of steam puffs up from the pot, and from somewhere in the vapor she says supper will be ready in a few minutes. The girls run off to wash

up, but I want to see what Daddy is doing.

While crossing the kitchen floor, I absently spit the remains of my well-chewed flower blossom into my palm, its sweetness spent, and toss it into the trash.

"Look over there on the counter, and you'll find something sweeter than an old flower," Daddy says. Mama is at the stove with her back turned to me, but I don't need to see her face to know that she is paying attention. I can feel Mama's thoughts as clear as if she

is speaking to me. She is waiting for me to see what is on the counter. It's a full, quart jar of honey, the first harvest of the season.

The yellowed globe in Daddy's hands is a big ball of beeswax. He's working it back and forth to make it smooth. Daddy uses beeswax to waterproof his boots and coats the tips of the bootlaces with it, too. The beeswax also helps his hands, which get so rough and cracked over the winter that sometimes they bleed. He lets me taste a small chunk of the wax. It smells good but doesn't have much flavor.

After supper, the girls and I go back to the front porch to make flower necklaces. Thunder rumbles in the distance as the storm finally approaches. We work on our necklaces until the wind picks up and the first burst of raindrops chase us back into the house, our wet hair dripping onto the parquet floor.

RUSSIAN HONEY CAKE

Though this cake is sometimes referred to as English honey cake it's actually Russian in origin. There is so much sour cream in the frosting that it could be called sour cream cake instead of honey cake. Either way, it's delicious and looks quite festive on a springtime table. You'll need to start this cake at least a day ahead of serving because the "cake" part starts as homemade cookie dough. This recipe is from Smitten Kitchen.

½ cup honey
½ cup sugar
½ cup unsalted butter
1 teaspoon baking soda
3 eggs
¼ teaspoon sea salt
1 teaspoon vanilla
3 ½ cups flour

Before starting the recipe have six sheets of parchment ready and two large baking sheets. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine the honey, sugar and butter. Simmer the mixture for 3-4 minutes or until it begins to darken a bit. Whisk in the baking soda. Remove from heat and let it sit for 3-4 minutes. Beat the eggs well and pour them into a measuring cup or other container with a spouted side. Whisk the honey mixture continuously while pouring the eggs into it in a very thin stream. With a wooden or other sturdy spoon, stir in the salt, vanilla and 3 cups of the flour. Stir in the remaining flour ¼ cup at a time; the dough will be like bread dough.

Place a sheet of parchment on flat work surface; divide the still warm dough into eight pieces. Place one piece of dough on the parchment and top it with another sheet. Roll the dough into a 9" circle. Poke the dough round with a fork, carefully slide it onto a baking sheet and bake it for 6-7 minutes or until it's firm and the edge begins to brown. Repeat the process with all eight pieces of dough. Save all the dough scraps and bake them last for about 4 minutes or until browned. Let all the cake layers and scraps cool. Prepare the frosting, below.

SOUR CREAM FILLING AND FROSTING

4 cups sour cream
1 14-oz can sweetened condensed milk

Whip together the sour cream and sweetened condensed milk until smooth. Tear a large piece of parchment into strips and use them to line the edges of a cake plate. Place one of the round cake layers on the plate and spread about ¾ cup of the frosting on top. Place another layer on the cake and repeat with frosting until all the layers are used. The frosting will spill down the sides of the cake — this is supposed to happen. Refrigerate the cake overnight so that the frosting can thicken and soak into the cake a little bit.

Remove the cake from the refrigerator and use a knife and tidy up the cake a bit, as the frosting will have seeped out and slid down the cake overnight.

Place the reserved baked dough scraps in a blender or food processor and grind them into crumbs. With a small spoon, sprinkle the cookie crumbs over the frosting. Use your hands if necessary and lightly press crumbs on the sides of the cake as well. Serve the cake immediately or refrigerate it for up to five days. 12 servings.