

# Secrets, Shadows, and the Threshermen Show



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Red Oak's annual Threshermen Show was birthed in the early 1930s after The Great Depression struck. The farmers in our town needed some place where they could swap their thresher machines with the neighboring counties without having to travel into those boondocks of Kentucky. The town council called together a meeting and -- after many fierce arguments -- declared Red Oak's town square the perfect spot.

Over the past seventy-some years, though, the show has gone from a way of making ends meet to a way of making those ends split farther and farther apart as good ol' country food, hand-whittled toys, and farming tools are purchased rather than exchanged. Still, no one complains. The show lasts for only three days, but for weeks in advance the Gypsy-like vendors in their rusty VW vans and Winnebagos and the Yankees in their snazzy RVs hem in the outer limits of our town square, just to wait. To show us rowdy rednecks where their privacy lines are drawn, those out-of-towners set up awnings outside their make-shift homes and loop yards of Chinese lanterns along their boundaries so that, at night, Red Oak looks lit with mutant fireflies.

The Threshermen Show officially begins at noon on Friday, after the annual parade, when Mayor Gentry opens the gates to the town square. When those rusty gates creak open, herds of people stampede through like deranged buffalo. In front of the tents and the clubhouse kitchen (where our restaurant is temporarily located for this year's show) people wait in lines for hours on end to purchase the blooming onion with its accompanying tub of cheese dip, pork barbeque sandwiches with meat freshly shredded from the spit, curls of funnel cake dusted with sugar, fresh squeezed lemonade, shaved, deep fried potatoes, deep fried Oreos, deep fried Snickers, and just about anything else voted Most Likely to Kill You on the Second Nibble.

Once their arteries are sufficiently clogged, the parents then cluck to their children like hens gathering their chicks, and together they meander over the grounds, observing the various booths displaying mini John Deere tractors and Allis

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Chalmer thresher machines, saws painted with beach scenes, colonial parasols and bloomers, pirate swords and compasses, and all the tobacco-pride, farmer-pride, and redneck-pride paraphernalia you might imagine.

As the sun bobs out of sight of Red Oak, square dances, clogging, and bluegrass competitions get fired up under the tin-roof pavilion. Down near the baseball diamond, the farmers straddle straw bales while arguing over who's going to pull the most weight in the tractor and mule pulls. Surrounding this all like sentries guarding the town are those now retired thresher machines. They gleam in the moonlight with their fresh coating of oil and chug away like they've got to thresh enough wheat to sustain the whole state of Tennessee.

But this year's different. I've got to work, and I'd give just about anything not nailed down or baptized to be out there enjoying the show rather than holed up in this sweltering kitchen. Plus, since every Red Oak citizen is so consumed with the weight Mr. Charles' Clydesdales are going to pull, they can't find time to consume anything else, like our good home cooking. I pout while pouring Thornton's Sweet-Tang barbecue sauce into red squeeze bottles, thinking how simple everything used to be before Meemaw arranged my waitressing job at Red Oak's Schoolhouse Cafeteria with her group of one-quarter crazy, three-quarters menopausal friends.

Jerking me from my bitter recollection, a male voice softly says, "Hey, there, dumpling." I glance through the netting to find Mr. Billy Bottoms leering at me like a Bluetick that's just treed a coon.

Ignoring this, I ask, "What can I get for ya?"

Snapping his suspenders with his thumbs, he whistles low between gnarled teeth. "Now, lil' girl, you know what I be a needing--don't you be teasing me." His beer belly bulges against his pit stained wife beater. Matted chest hair clings against his throat like vines, but thankfully his eyes are scanning the menu posted on the plywood wall before him, and not on me. I breathe a sigh of relief as he reads off his order and reply with all the cheerfulness I can muster, "Coming right up!"

Waddling his way to the last screen, Mr. Billy Bottoms waits for Miss Sharon to pass him his tray of food through the slot at the bottom. I scribble his order down on the pad, rip it off, and holler over my shoulder at the other women--trying to be heard over the sizzling skillet, burbling deep fryers, and clanging pots. Wrenching my body around, I look for some sign that they've heard or seen me. Miss Polly, Miss Sharon's selectively deaf sister-in-law, is scooping out a puddle of white beans on to a Styrofoam bowl for Mr. Emerson. Her lips are puckered as she whistles that tune she swears she remembers from her Girl Scout days, but which we all know comes off the Wal-Mart commercials. Miss Lucille is planted in front of the electric fan--why, I'll never know: those fan blades have the power of an old grandma carefully blowing on hot soup so as not to lose her dentures.

"Miss Lucille," I ask, "you all right?"

Dabbing at her face with the hem of her apron, she says, "I'll be fine, Maggie May. I'm just feeling a lil' frazzled thinking 'bout having to square dance tonight after being on my feet all day. My ankles are holding so much water they'd make the Badlands as fertile as the Garden of Eden."

"Why don't you just tell Mr. Jim you're too tired?"

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"Lorda mercy, chil', Jim and I been dancing at the Threshermen Show since we--" Miss Lucille pauses to fix me with her powder blue eyes "--yeah, I'd say we were 'bout your age. What are you, sixteen?"

"In August," I reply, puffing out my flat-as-cardboard chest.

"See, honey, when you're together as long as Jim and I been, it's the little things that make your marriage worthwhile." Lowering her voice, she then says, "Plus, I been so busy preparing for this here Threshermen Show, he's kinda been lost in the shuffle."

"Girls, get to it!" Miss Sharon suddenly yelps, spearing us clean through with her knifing tone.

"Yes, ma'am," I whimper.

"We've got all Auberson County waiting on my vittles--" I sneak a peek behind her; there's no one else in line "--and all ya'll can do is lounge 'round like Scarlet O'Hara, jabbering away like everything's gonna get taken care of tomorra." Miss Sharon pauses to stab us again, but with her eyes this time. "Ya'll betta get with it," she adds. "That's all I be saying."

Glancing down at my wristwatch, I see that it is already 4:30. I only have to put up with that thorny Rose of Sharon for another hour and a half. I quickly mutter a prayer of thanks for Miss Lucille's threat to picket the clubhouse lawn if we remained open during the traditional Southern Belle Brothers' bluegrass hoe down. Oh, I can't wait until those hands on my watch are at the six and the twelve! Slipping around the dance floor, I'm going to kick off my sneakers and weave my toes into the uncut grasses surrounding the thresher machines. From there I'll wait for a glimpse of Finian Braxton Green--that slow talking country boy who rattles my cage. Clenching shut an eye, I watch the longer hand on my watch trail around slower than a snail. *Oh, Lord, I pray, do come quickly.*

"Hel-lo, I'd like a blooming onion and some lemonade." At the sound of that deep, familiar voice I look up through the screen as if I've been zapped with a cattle prod, and my eyes lock with the deep brown ones of none other than Finian Braxton Green. Maybe the Lord has heard my prayer and sent an angel instead.

"Could I have some extra cheese with that?" he asks.

Shoot, he could ask for Miss Lucille on rye, and I'd slather her up with some mayo and gladly hand her over.

"Yes...yes, I think we can...can arrange that." I stumble over my words, which causes my cheeks to blaze; I am suddenly so glad for the netted screen that shields my embarrassment. Finian smiles at me with only a side of his mouth and ambles over to Miss Sharon's window. I watch him as he waits, leaning with his broad back against the window, his hands sunk into the pockets of his faded Levis. All too soon, Miss Sharon slides him a basket filled with a battered onion, two containers dripping with cheese, and his gallon-sized jug of lemonade. I finally gulp a breath as he saunters off to a picnic table and begins to chow down.

"Are you going to the square dance tonight?" Miss Lucille asks, flipping breaded okra in grease. I shrug my right shoulder while raising an eyebrow. "Well, I think ya should. I know of a certain young man who's gonna be there listening to all that picking and a grinning those Southern Belle Brothers are gonna do."

"Who?" I ask, like I haven't a care in the world.

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Patting my back with oily fingers, Miss Lucille whispers, "Why Finian Green, of course. You've been eyeballing that boy ever since he started working in Mr. Riley's tobacco patch behind your house. Everybody in town knows how you feel 'bout him." She deepens her voice while nodding in the direction of the distant picnic table, "And I mean *everybody*."

I follow my eyes where Miss Lucille's are looking and nearly lose the cornbread I'd swiped from the fryer. That girl from my Home Economics class -- the one I like to call Kimberly Peacock -- is perched on the bench beside Finian. She's preening and fluttering her hands through her long, golden feathers. Her gaudy rings flash even from where I'm watching. She tosses her head back, those feathers flying, and giggles like some helium-sucking hyena. Finian solemnly pushes the basket of onion toward Kimberly as if it's an offering of endless love and devotion. She delicately plucks off a petal with her manicured fingers and dabs it into that extra tub of cheese dip--the cheese dip that filthy mongrel just ordered from me! My jaw throbbing, I realize I'd like nothing better than to scalp that prissy peacock and make a headdress out of her.

I look back at Miss Lucille and sputter, "How...how does everyone know about the tobacco field?"

"Your meemaw."

Lifting my face to the clubhouse's ceiling, I cry, "Why me?"

Miss Lucille whips around and places both pudgy palms on my shoulders. Pressing down, she says from between clenched teeth, "Now, you listen hear, it's not over 'til the fat lady sings."

"What!" I exclaim.

Her eyes singeing me in their fire, Miss Lucille says, "It's not over 'til it's over. Sometimes, you gotta fight for what you want even if it looks like there's no hope's left." She juts her chin beyond the separating screen, toward the couple at the picnic table. "If you truly like that boy as much as I think you do, then you need to do something 'bout it. You need to show him you care, or you'll lose him forever." Sighing, she says, "You just gotta dance, my girl; you just gotta dance."

At six on the dot, Miss Lucille takes her own advice. She whips off her ruffled apron, drapes it over a peg, runs her flour-speckled hands over her ample frame, and declares, "Tonight, I'm getting out on that dance floor and reminding my hubby what a treasure he's got!"

Pointedly ignoring her outburst, Miss Sharon continues wrapping the leftovers in foil and plastic. Miss Polly just whistles her little tune as she piddles around doing a whole bunch of nothing. But, despite their lack of enthusiasm, Miss Lucille's will not be deterred. "Come on, lil' bit," she says, wrapping a soft arm around my waist, "you're coming with me!"

"Wait...wait!" I protest while flailing about, but it's really no use. She outweighs me by a good eighty pounds. I don't have to be a wrestler to know that's not a fair fight.

"Now, now, there'll be no more pining over that Finian creature. It's time you took charge and did something 'bout it!" Out of the corner of my right eye I watch Miss Lucille stare into the distance. "You see, if I hadn't told Jim straight up he had to choose between Ernestine and me, well, he'd have done nothing 'bout it 'cept waiting 'round 'til we were all shriveled up like

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a prune and nobody'd take us."

All of Red Oak knows about Miss Ernestine. Even our preachers rant and rave about her manipulating ways. Many a time I can remember being told not to grow up like Miss Ernestine as if she were in the same category with Delilah, Bathsheba, and Jezebel. I think, in the beginning, most of the town people just needed something to band them together, and going against Miss Ernestine was just the ticket. They could go against her, and by doing so they'd be protecting Miss Lucille, our town's loveable landmark for her hips and hugs, pies and pestering against anyone who dared split a hair with one of her babies--which was pretty much everyone in our community.

Although I know all this, I still feel my eyelashes prick into my eyelids as I stare up at Miss Lucille in fright. She chooses not to notice but instead spins me around. With my back to her, she unwinds my apron and hangs it on the peg next to her own. She unravels the rubber band securing my braid and ruffles her hands through my hair until it trails over my shoulders in loose waves. Touching her thumb to her tongue, she starts toward the corners of my lips to gather the cornbread crumbs. I hurriedly clamp a hand over my mouth and shake my head. Miss Lucille shrugs her shoulders and sighs, "Don't tell the boy I didn't try."

Slinging her girdle and gingham dress over her shoulder, Miss Lucille then grasps my hand in hers -- like I am six rather than almost sixteen -- and draws me away from the clubhouse kitchen. I have to give her credit, though. Despite her swollen legs and considerable bulk, she scampers over the trampled grasses and pot-holed road of the show grounds like an overgrown Tinkerbelle; and, before long, we can hear the nasally croon of the Southern Belle Brothers resounding from the open pavilion along with the tinny tappity-tap of the cloggers' shoes.

We slip in the back as the Southern Belle Brothers begin picking something fierce to "Boil That Cabbage Down." Everywhere I look I can see my meemaw's clan of Red Hat Ladies wearing gingham dresses--their skirts fluffed out by frothy layers of petticoats. Their prancing feet are encased in black Mary Janes with raised little heels that clack each time they take a step. Most of the women's hair is cropped into a close nest of bluish, permed curls. Their Pepsodent smiles glint in the fluorescent lighting, and their lively eyes are dancing as much as their feet. The women's partners then swoop in from their flanking positions. As the men's freshly shined cowboy boots shuffle toward the women, their bolo ties reflect like mirrors angled toward the sun. Their spindly elbows poke out from their white collared shirts, reminding me of runt roosters conducting an odd mating dance. As the partners move in toward one another, old Josiah Wiltcom belts into the mike, "Swing your partner 'round and 'round!"

Miss Lucille's warm breath suddenly tickles my ear, "I'll be right back, honey. I'm going to find Jim and wiggle into that dress while I'm at it."

I nod, hypnotized as I watch the square dancers' swirling bodies.

And then everything seems to halt mid dance step. I can still perceive the swish and twirl of the skirts and the rhythmic sway of the dancers as they move, but that is no longer my focus. To my right, leaning against a stout wooden post, is Finian. His mother has starched his Sunday-best shirt so much it appears to be leaning against the post by itself. He wears

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slick black dress pants and slightly dusty cowboy boots. Finian stares hard into the crowd, his arms folded, his jaw throbbing. He looks so uncomfortable and nervous I find that most of my nervousness disappears.

With shaking fingers, I comb my hair and wipe away the cornbread crumbs. I wish I was not wearing cutoffs and my brother's little league t-shirt. I wish my sneakers were not splattered with grease. I wish the stench of fried food did not ooze from my pores and waft from my hair. But sometimes, like Miss Lucille said, you just gotta dance.

As timidly as a fawn, I slip around the mass of dancers. I feel as if everything has ceased except for the movement of my feet. My head is lowered as I shuffle forward, my hair brushing the sides of my flaming cheeks. My eyes move up from the scuffed toes of Finian's boots, to the planted stance of his legs, to his folded, tanned arms, and then to his face. A face that is smiling at me with both surprise and puzzlement.

Swallowing, I ask, "Will you dance with me?"

Finian does not laugh, he does not heave a sigh, he does not say that he has another girl waiting in the wings. He simply holds out his rough, tobacco-stained hand and waits patiently until I work up enough courage to place mine in his own.

On the dance floor the Southern Belle Brothers begin strumming out the soothing chords to "Tennessee Waltz." Finian gently eases his arms around me. I dip my head and stare at my sneakers, then at the slick black buttons parading up his shirtfront. He smells a lot like Pine-Sol. But it isn't bad really, just clean. I wince as my sneaker crunches down on his boot.

Lifting my chin with a finger, he says, "Just look at me."

"I can't," I say, "I won't be able to concentrate."

He touches my cheek and smiles. He then trails a hand down the length of my hair and tucks my head against his chest. I rest there, feeling and hearing his heartbeat; it is racing with my own. *I wish Miss Lucille were here*, I think, wondering if this was how she felt the first time Mr. Jim put his arms around her. Did she just *know* he was the one? Did she just *know* Miss Ernestine never had a chance, just as I know Kimberly Peacock will never have a chance? I smile against the crisp expanse of Finian's shirt and glance over his shoulder, searching for Miss Lucille.

It is then that I see them.

In the shadowed distance, near the thresher machines, two figures are locked in a passionate embrace. They would be barely perceivable except for the sodium tint of a far streetlamp and for my knowledge that the hiding place is there. The man is tall and lanky, with a shock of white springy hair that seems to glow in the muted lamplight. The woman appears angular, almost stringy. It is hard to tell from a distance exactly who she is. But I know for a fact that it is Mr. Jim -- Miss Lucille's Mr. Jim -- and I know for a fact that woman is not my Miss Lucille.

Knowing that this will look like rejection to him; knowing how it will feel because I've felt it so often, I say, "I'm sorry, Finian, but I really have to go."

"Maggie. Please," he says as I loosen my grip from the security of his own. Having waited in the wings all along, Kimberly Peacock takes her cue and begins flouncing toward us, golden hair cascading over her sculpted shoulders.

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"You don't understand. I have no choice."

And with those simple words I flee.

"Mr. Jim! Mr. Jim!" I cry as I sprint across the uncut grasses and into the shadows once again. My eyes adjust to the darkness, and I watch the couple break apart. Miss Ernestine is the one who runs a bejeweled hand through her mop of ruddy curls. It is Miss Ernestine who giggles and sidles rapidly away.

Looking up at Mr. Jim's sad, tired eyes, I take his papery hand into my own -- a hand so different from the hand I've just held -- and ask him a question, "Will you dance with me?"

Mr. Jim looks at me with both surprise and puzzlement.

"Come, Mr. Jim," I plead, "come dance with me." He walks as if in a trance, his hand secured in mine. But hand-in-hand we go, away from the shadows and back into the light.

Waiting expectantly for her husband's return in her cinching girdle and full, gingham skirt, Miss Lucille claps her hands as the melody to another sad love song wafts like perfume on the summer breeze.