

The Fourth of July in 1864 Blaineton

Independence Day dawned expectant with meaning and hope. The war was going well for the Union. For the white members of Greybeal House, there was hope that hostilities soon would be over and thanks that an earlier generation had established an independent nation. For the black people among them, the holiday symbolized hope that all people of color at long last would attain equality. That hope, however, was tempered with a certain amount of skepticism.

Citizens in Blaineton who supported the war, like Maggie and her household, looked forward to the holiday. Those who did not were more reserved, some choosing to stay at home, begging that they would observe the holiday privately.

The Register's staff had worked hard all Saturday so they could take the holiday off. Mr. Larsen presented Eli with a proof late Saturday night, and Eli readily approved it. All the extra work meant the staff could have both Sunday and Monday free. They would be able to run Tuesday's paper early in morning as usual and have it distributed on time. The staff's organization and willingness to work on a flexible schedule did Eli proud, and he had written a letter to Tryphena Moore praising them.

Maggie and Eli had risen early as usual, courtesy of Faith. But Bob and Natey also were up with the sun, excited and itching to have breakfast and go outside. The Brennan sisters had been given the day off and were home visiting with their family. Dr. Lightner offered to oversee the hospital with several nurses and his apprentice, so Lydia had a free day, too. She, Rosa, and Frankie decided to make breakfast as a special treat for Maggie and Emily.

"Flapjacks," Eli exclaimed as he and Bob entered the kitchen. "And..." he sniffed heartily. "Sausages?"

Frankie placed a jug of molasses on the table. "And scrambled eggs, sliced strawberries, and -"

"Coffee!" Eli interrupted. "Good ol' coffee! Can it be?"

Lydia brought the steaming pot over. "Courtesy of Mama and Rosa, who discovered that it was back on the shelves at the general store."

"I pray that's a sign the war is nearing a close." Carson said as he approached the table.

Emily looked heavenward. "Thank you, Jesus, for that! And thank you for the coffee!"

Once they were all seated, Maggie asked Edward to say the blessing.

The young man's eyes grew wide, for Maggie never had asked him before. Then he smiled as he realized her offer meant that he officially was one of the men.

"I would be honored, Mrs. Smith." His eyes swept over the people at the table. "Let us bow our heads, shall we?" He prayed, "Holy and Gracious God, put thy blessing on this food and upon those who prepared it. May it give us energy to do thy will. And, Lord, make us grateful for the freedoms we have and help us work so that someday all may live together in freedom and respect. Amen."

When he lifted his head, he found Rosa smiling at him, and smiling proudly. Edward straightened his shoulders and met her eyes. He hoped to take a walk with her after breakfast so they could talk some more. He liked this young woman. She had the strength to find her way north after losing her brother. She was intelligent, witty, and determined. She would be a good match.

Shocked at the track his mind was taking, Edward quickly averted his eyes.

“He prays well,” Frankie whispered to Rosa. She was seated to other side of the young woman.

Rosa nodded.

“He’d make a fine beau.”

Rosa gave her friend a side-glance. “Don’t you go playing matchmaker on me. I can make up my own mind, thank you very much.”

“And have you? Made up your mind, that is?”

“I’ll let you know,” was the purposely vague response.

After breakfast, Eli met with Carson and Edward to discuss how they would handle reporting on the Independence Day festivities in the town. They decided to carry notebooks and pencils to jot down impressions as well as the responses town folks might have to their questions. They planned to write their stories the next day for the Friday edition.

No sooner had the women cleaned up after the morning meal than they began to work on the food for the town’s evening picnic on the Blaineton square. They decided on fried chicken, muffins, hardboiled eggs sliced on potato salad, beet salad, cabbage salad, radishes, and scallions. And finally strawberry tarts.

Decision made. They went to work quickly so everything would be ready to pack around five o’clock.

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When five o’clock rolled around, the buggy was hitched up to the newly acquired mule. Maggie, Eli, Lydia, and Frankie took the vehicle with Little Faith sitting on her mother’s lap and Bob sandwiched between his older sisters. The other vehicle, the buckboard fitted with passenger seats, was hitched up to the two horses and was driven by Nate. Natey and Emily (cradling Jarena) sat beside him on the driver’s bench. In the back Grandpa, Carson, Rosa, Edward, Addie, and Mary occupied the other benches.

Once the family arrived at the square and the horses had been tethered, they spread blankets on the ground and laid out the food. Abigail and Samuel Beatty, along with their staff, arrived shortly thereafter and settled beside them.

Tryphena Moore showed up later with James the butler, and the other staff. James placed a chair beside Maggie’s blanket, and Tryphena settled upon it, all the while politely instructing James and her cook to lay out the food that they had brought. It joined the feast from Greybeal House on the blanket.

It was a jolly evening. There were games: sack races, a horseshoe toss, footraces, hoop rolling, and three-legged races. Frankie and Rosa entered the three-legged race and came in second place. Noticing that Edward was watching from the sidelines, Rosa approached him with an invitation to sit on the quilt

that she, Lydia, and Frankie were sharing. Beaming, Edward followed Rosa to the picnic area – something that did not go unnoticed by Maggie and Emily, who exchanged knowing glances.

Not too far away, Eli had managed to trounce Nate at a game of horseshoes. The two men laughed, slapped each other on the back, and returned to the family.

Eli plopped onto the quilt, leaned toward Maggie, and murmured, “Have you noticed the rather wide gap between our party and the rest of the town?”

She picked up Faith, who was trying to execute a crawling escape, and plopped her in her lap. “I have.”

“They must be under the impression that dark skin is contagious.”

Maggie smiled wryly. “If that were true, my love, then you and I would be quite brown by now, wouldn’t we?”

Miss Moore overheard them. “Well, I will tell you this much: the first person who dares to complain to me about your family shall get a good tongue-lashing.” That said, she settled back in her chair. After a bit, she asked, “Are there any more of those lovely strawberry tarts, Mrs. Smith?”

“There are, indeed.” Maggie passed Faith to Eli and gave Tryphena a second serving.

“I’m afraid I have a terrible sweet tooth,” Tryphena confessed and tore into the tart with her fork. “Never used to. It must be the effects of old age.”

Maggie smiled lovingly at her. “Oh, surely not.”

“You are too kind.”

“And you are a good friend.”

Maggie thought she saw Tryphena blush as the older woman muttered, “Oh, pshaw,” and took another bite of strawberry tart.

Once the sun had gone down, the people in the square waited for the fireworks to commence. All was well until the popping and explosions began. Maggie knew what was coming. Eli’s eyes had gone wide and his breath was coming short. She needed to get him away from the noise as soon as she could.

Turning to Lydia, who was seated next to her, Maggie said, “Liddy... All this noise is discomfiting your stepfather. I’m afraid we must leave. Would you please watch Faith?”

“Of course.” Lydia gathered the baby up.

“If we’re not back home in time and she gets fussy, you may use that new baby bottle I bought. Faith will take a bit of cow’s milk and it should settle her until I get home.”

“Don’t worry. Faith will be fine.” Lydia craned her neck and observed her stepfather. “Yes, I’d say he needs to leave. I advise you do that now.”

“My plan exactly.” Maggie stood, stepped over to Eli, and tugged on his arm. “Come along, my love. You need a bit of peace.”

Eli’s dazed eyes met hers. “What?”

“Come along.” She gave his sleeve another tug. “Now, please.”

He struggled to his feet.

When Maggie slipped a free arm through his, she realized he was trembling.

“It’s just a short walk to the buggy,” she said encouragingly. “We’ll soon be free of this.”