

A Slice of Heaven

Nellie dusted off the flour from her blue apron, pleased with the outcome of the day's baking. She had spent what seemed like half her life baking in this kitchen. There was not one square inch she couldn't describe. The bespoke lace curtains on the window, sun-bleached to buttery gold, now harmonised with the egg-yolk-coloured cupboards. The sturdy granite benchtop had stood the test of time in spite of the many physical challenges it had endured at the hands of Nellie's meat tenderiser and rolling pin. She was as ready as she was ever going to be for the Christmas lunch and group competition tomorrow. Nerves were no longer an issue. She had made far too many cakes, jams, slices and pickles for that. It had been a long time since she needed to follow a recipe. It was all up there "in her scone", as her late husband Jim used to joke, running the risk of a slap with her sticky wooden spoon.

Satisfied everything had been thoroughly cleaned, Nellie set about her final chore of feeding the hungry twittering birds. It was time to pop on the kettle for a brew, sink into the recliner with the crossword and rest her weary, puffy feet for the day. Now where is that red shirt? she wondered, considering her outfit for tomorrow.

At the crack of dawn, another beautiful day had come to light on the New South Wales North Coast as the faction of "Mullum" ladies set about adorning themselves for the Christmas lunch. "Where did that year go again?" was the prevailing reflection among the majority of the branch members of the Country Women's Association of Mullumbimby. With an average age of 80, it's no surprise the 25 members of this branch would question where the years had gone.

Red and a sprig of green for the Christmas season was the theme for the dress code, and rules and regulations as outlined in the Land Cookery schedule were the order of the day for the baking competition. Nellie took this into account when getting dressed that morning as she carefully put on the red shirt she had chosen and considered herself in the mirror. It just wouldn't do, she thought. Red was no longer flattering to her complexion. She had an idea – the metallic gold shirt. It complemented the blaze of copper streaks in her spiky silver hair. Nellie had never been one for conformity and she was not going to "rock a granny hairstyle", as her great-grandchildren had pointed out disparagingly.

Time to go: the toot of the horn in the driveway signalled that her daughter had arrived to collect her. The slice was packaged with care and the lemon curd secured tightly in the jar. "Morning, Mum, are you all ready?" Her daughter Gwen was a comfort to her, always popping in to make sure she hadn't had a fall or forgotten to eat. Nellie was

grateful for the concern, but – heavens to Betsy – had they forgotten how many generations of humans and animals she had raised? Gwen gathered up the goods while Nellie steadied herself on the walking frame and made her way to the car for the short journey to the hall.

The hall was in the centre of town nestled among the shade of the flame trees. The sign on the front of the old building read "Mullumbimby – the biggest little town in Australia". This is where Nellie had grown up; her family was established cattle and sugar farmers. She had spent many an outing here and was familiar with every board of the old building. Getting out of the car slowly, the humidity clobbered them, causing the mother and daughter to gasp for air. Tiny drops of sweat began to appear almost at once, threatening to melt away their foundation. The coolness of the hall which lay in wait mobilised the ladies to move quickly.

The cool air received them and the beads of sweat evaporating almost instantly, clearing their spectacles of condensation and presenting a vision of the fine-looking festive decorations in the hall, a triumph for the decorating committee. "Is that you, Nellie White?" yelled a voice from across the cake-laden table. It was Nola Pook, her oldest friend and her chief ally in the Mullumbimby branch. The women moved warmly to greet each other, their muffin tops colliding before their "bingo wings, Nana flaps, tuck shop arms or sugar gliders" had a chance to connect. These were more witty observations from her grandchildren, referring to the loose skin hanging from her arms.

Nellie handed over the slice and the jar of lemon curd for an official entry. She was given a receipt accompanied by a wink from Nola, who was an official competition steward. "Yours is the only entry we have received so far in the peanut slice competition and there are only 20 minutes until closing," she whispered craftily from the side of her mouth before turning away to log yet another fruit-cake entry. The table was filling fast with home-made baking. There were scones, pikelets, muffins, lamingtons, sultana cakes and the holy grail of them all: the sponge.

Nellie felt a shiver of anticipation pass through her old bones. This could be her year. There was a lot at stake; a first prize today at group level would give her an opportunity to represent the branch at the New South Wales state competition. It would be the icing on her cake. Perhaps the gamble to move away from sponges and fruit cakes and attempt the new category of the peanut slice would pay off. Her sponges hadn't been the same since she got rid of the chooks and their fresh-laid eggs. The beads of sweat began to surface. "Better sit down for a cool glass of home-made lime cordial," Nellie thought.

The room was jam-packed and the CWA choir was in full voice, entertaining the members and guests with their performance of a medley of Christmas carols. Lunch would be served after the performance, followed by the long-awaited judgments and an announcement of the prizes.

Leslie Mawson had a commanding presence – a big-boned woman with large hands, a result of years of milking cows and hurling bales of hay. Dressed in a comfy, matronly skirt and sensible shoes, she had worn the badge of chief judge for the CWA for many years.

Ms Mawson moved swiftly through the categories. She is a woman who doesn't mince her words. "First prize in the fruit cake competition – I have awarded this prize to Mrs Pam Murray. This cake was the standout among a disappointing lot of entries. The majority of these cakes – while adhering to the recipe – did not follow the advice in the schedule. I found uneven pieces of fruit through the majority of the entries and – dare I say it – wrinkles on some of the

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cakes. You ladies are well aware of the need to line the tin correctly so that the cake has a smooth top,” explained Ms Mawson. Naturally, this drew gasps of “ooh” and “oh dear” from the room. After Leslie's measured and brusque assessment of each category, and with winners holding proudly onto their embossed prize cards, it was time to judge the final category – the peanut slice. As this was a new category, protocol deemed it must be assessed last.

Ms Mawson made this clear as she introduced the category to the mutterings of, “What will they allow next year? Gluten-free cakes? Tosh!” Nellie looked across the room to Nola for acknowledgement of her chance and received the same wink she had earlier.

Ms Mawson cleared her throat. “The peanut slice competition... There was only one entry registered in this category – from Mrs Nellie White. While the slice tasted quite nice, Mrs White would be fully aware of the fact that she did not adhere to the exact measurements and ingredients in the schedule.

“If, at any time, members of the CWA chose to follow their own path and not that of the schedule, they must accept the judge's decision. I have therefore awarded Mrs White second prize for her slice.” The silence in the room was so real, you could hear the already loose jaws droop even further. Nellie glanced over in the direction of her daughter, pulled herself on two legs with head held high to receive her embossed silver second-prize card.

With defiance in her eyes, she thanked the judge and pronounced: “Well, Ms Mawson, I followed my own path because quite frankly your recipe was inferior. My daughter did not like it, my granddaughter did not like it nor did my great-granddaughter like it.” With that, she thanked the judge once again, manners always of importance to her, and turned, balancing on her walking frame and motioning to her daughter that she was ready to leave.

Gwen swiftly got up from her position at the back of the hall. She could not tell from where she was sitting if Nellie's defiance was a mask for the disappointment she knew her mum would be feeling. She quickly put aside the anger she was feeling towards Ms Mawson to focus her attention on the needs of her elderly mother. The last time her mum had made it to the state competition was the year before her dad, Jim, had passed away. He was so proud that day,

Gwen recalled. He would boast of Nellie's win at any opportunity to anyone willing to lend him their ear. Gwen fondly recalled her mum's response whenever she heard Jim tell the story.

“Self-praise is no recommendation, dear,” she would say.

“You know as well as I do, my dear wife, that nothing will stop me boasting when I have the most marvellous wife in town,” he would respond.

“Yes dear, there is no arguing with that,” Nellie would say, smiling.

Gwen recalled their excitement in the planning of the trip to Sydney. Nellie and Jim were going to catch the train down on Thursday and stay at the Castlereagh Hotel in the city where they had spent three wonderful days on their honeymoon 50 years earlier.

“Mum, it's okay,” Gwen said, snapping out of her reflective state. “Your slice is by far the best thing I have ever tasted.”

With that, Nola, Nellie's best friend of 30 years, chimed in. “Nellie, as it happens I think your slice should be renamed ‘a slice of heaven’. It's absolutely delicious.”

Nellie had trouble holding back the tears. She hadn't told anyone of her recent doctor's visit. The lump on her throat had gone unnoticed; it had been a while since she had felt through the skin around her double chin. Nellie used to joke with Jim that she didn't need the Oil of Olay moisturiser – or Oil of Bullshit as Jim would playfully call it – as she had too many layers.

“Thyroid cancer,” he said. “It's advanced, Mrs White, but with an aggressive and an immediate attack we may be able to defeat it.” Nellie didn't need any time to think about her decision. At 85, she had no fight left in the old bones.

Nellie advised Dr Rosnay of her decision not to carry on with any treatment then and there. She knew she should tell her family but the feeling of being reunited with Jim brought her so much happiness and she didn't want their solemn reactions to spoil it.

Nellie took her daughter's hand and waved farewell to the Mullum ladies she had spent many an afternoon with. Before walking through the door, she turned and gave Ms Mawson a wink and smirk before saluting and making her way down the hall steps one last time.

“One day, darling, they will allow for a bit more independence and let us trial our own recipes in the competition,” Nellie said to her daughter.

“Yes Mum, there is no arguing with that,” says Gwen, smiling.

The “oohs” and “aahs” and whispers of, “She's always been a rebel”, “How did she think she would get away with that?” and “Good on her, about time someone challenged the schedule” continued well into the time it took to whisk the cakes and slices away for wrapping. All of the cakes, both prize winners and non-prize winners, were to be displayed for sale. Nellie's peanut slice was certain to be a highly sought-after purchase that afternoon.

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Based in Kingscliff, Northern New South Wales, Jodie Bellchambers works as an electorate officer for a Federal MP. In her spare time, she writes for *Blank* magazine, focusing on the local Gold Coast and Tweed Heads music scene and studying writing at Southern Cross University. She has a 17-year-old son and loves people, life, food and the ocean.



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