

The Kountry Kitchen

By Michele Dutcher

“Artina Riggs looked around the Kountry Kitchen diner before sighing, “I wish this place was busier. I don’t know how I’ll pay the rent next month.” She patted the hand of her 9-year-old daughter who sat happily at the wooden table with her and Big George, the cook.

“It’s those idiot politicians in Washington,” replied George— who was also the owner. “They got the economy all screwed up with the National Debt being so high.” George and Artina looked at each other briefly, pausing their game of wild 8s.

A confirmation came from the corner table where two customers sat. “None of ‘em are worth the powder and lead to blow ‘em up with.” The man, Lou Bryant, returned to sipping on a mug of coffee he had bought two hours ago.

“I could help you mom,” said Chrissy hopefully, leaning forward. “I got a plan.”

The cook and the waitress chuckled good-heartedly, shaking their heads. “Well your heart’s in the right place sweetie,” said her mom.

The middle-aged man sitting across from Lou got up slowly, taking one last bite from his toast and gravy. “I guess I’ll be going. I’m taking a couple of city boys up to Judah Springs. I’m meeting them at Richmond’s Barn at 8:30.”

“Maybe they should have some breakfast before they go hunting,” said the Chrissy, flipping a spritz of her curly hair. “You could go get them and bring them back here where they’d be safe and sound.”

“Maybe another time sweetie. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” The man picked up his truck keys.

Little Chrissy became more adamant. “When the door’s open wide, you’re safe inside. But when the door closes – they’ll pinch your noses.”

The man began to laugh. “Artina, your kid watches too much television.” He walked out of the diner and into the sunlight.

It would be two days before the men’s bodies were found in the barn. “Can’t explain it,” the town sheriff would tell the small crowd at George’s Kountry Kitchen. “It looked like they suffocated, but the air inside the barn was okay.”

“Chrissy told Desmond not to go up there,” said George.

“That’s right,” said Chrissy finishing her pumpkin pie. “I told him to bring them back here where they’d be safe and sound – but he wouldn’t listen. Grown-ups never listen.”

But the grown-ups in the room, all seven of them, were listening now.

During good times news travels fast in a small town, but during bad times it travels even faster. George's business now was almost too busy as Artina practically ran from one table to the other. Strange lights had been observed by the locals, way back in the woods by the south fork of the White River. Many believed that whatever killed Desmond and those hunters might have been related to those odd spheres.

"They were like nothing I've ever seen," said Faye Henderson to the crowd of 30 customers. "My little dog, Daisy, went chasing something towards the creek and when I got to the banks there they were, half a dozen bubbles, as big as my dog, just floating over the water, like they were watching me."

"What color were they, Aunt Faye?" asked a teenager who should have been in school.

"They were red – in fact, it seemed to me there was blood swirling around inside of those balls. I picked up Daisy and came right back here when I saw them. I remembered what the child had said."

All eyes turned to Chrissy now who sat happily playing on her DSL. "I told Miss Faye – 'When red globes appear, the blackness is near. Best run and hide - where there's hot pumpkin pie.'"

"Yep, I remembered her saying that and came right back here in a hurry...and got a piece of Artina's delicious pumpkin pie."

Chrissy's mood darkened now. "I told Mr. Harold the same thing, but he wouldn't listen. Some adults never listen."

It only took 3 hours for Harold Carlton's body to wash up on a sandbar near Rita Langston's chicken coop, but no one was there to drag it away from the wild dogs that quickly devoured it. Everyone was at George and Artina's Kountry Kitchen, safe and sound.

Versailles's Sheriff sat at the McDonald's on South High Street, having a second cup of coffee, listening to Doug Trent ramble on and on about trouble in the next county over.

"I'm telling you there's something weird going on over there," said Doug obviously agitated. "Johnny always calls me for poker night – and I can't even get a signal when I try phoning him."

"Probably a line is down, Doug. Probably a tree took one out during that wind storm last week."

Doug balled his fingers into a fist. "Jeffrey Sanders told me he saw red glowing balls of light, all lined up over the White River – like some kind of sentries or something. You need to find out about it, Sheriff – that's what we pay you for."

Sheriff Douglas snorted a little, but shook it off. "Those people in Cross Plains don't like men in uniform sniffing around, if you know what I mean – but I'll take a drive over that direction after lunch."

Seeing all the people happily chatting away while eating lunch, Chrissy tilted her head to the side, raised her eyebrows, and nodded up and down. “Adults should stay in town, where they’re safe and sound.”

“The child is right,” said Johnny Phelps. “Something’s happening out there in the woods. I haven’t heard from my cousin in Versailles in a week. It’s good that we have someone to save us from whatever’s going on – till it all blows over.”

“It is good,” said Artina, hugging her little girl. “She’s my little hero.”

“She’s the whole town’s hero, Tina,” said Mrs. Stokes. Everyone cheered.

“Now, who else wants a little more sweet ice tea?” asked the waitress, happily grabbing an ice-chilled pitcher.

The End