

# CutBank

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## Whip

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## WHIP

Tommy had never made a pie, but today, for Clementine, he would. He'd scour the pantry for ingredients and bake the perfect pie for Clem. Flavor was first, so he combed through the dog-eared pages of his mother's recipe book, flimsy and sticky with love.

Blueberry, strawberry, raspberry. How many times had he and Clem foraged the wild pickings from her backyard vines, the bright red juices dripping down the chin of her seedy smile? But it wasn't quite season. He considered a pie in her name. Was there such a thing as a Clementine pie? If so, surely he'd tasted it and couldn't remember. But how bitter it would be, and peeling the skins would take an hour, at least. He needed to work faster.

He knew Clem's secrets—the fights at home, that scar from the old hickory grove, that she still took her pills mashed in applesauce—and yearned for the ones he knew he could never know—the touch of her polished fingertips, the delicate curves of her back. But Tommy couldn't, for the life of him, remember Clem's favorite pie, and in his excitement, had forgotten to ask. He'd always loved Ma's Thanksgiving pecan, but it was June and this wasn't about what *he* wanted. Key lime, sugar, blackberry, chocolate? Shoofly would make a mess; cream seemed too obvious.

He settled on lemon meringue—the picture in the recipe book an echo of Clem's yellow-white hair—then set out for the parts: flour, white sugar, cornstarch, eggs, butter, and lemons. Of course lemons—tart and bright, juiced and zested, boiled and whipped into foam. He'd use one of Ma's frozen crusts, the ones she'd been saving for the church bake sale, because the crust, the crust didn't matter. Only the soft whisked billows of tangy meringue.

He laid the pieces on the counter while his parents slept, and saw the sun come into the small room where he and Clem watched *I Love Lucy* after school. Sometimes his dad's old Magnavox scrambled the picture or the wicker chairs scratched their

backs; that's when they'd sit in the grass and tell stories or flick lizards from the patio screen.

The pie was taking shape now before him, and each new step, each ingredient, he handled with care. Because a pie is a tricky thing, fragile and sweet; because you never know if you're doing it right until it's done. But when it was done, the peaks pricked up in perfect curls, and Tommy felt proud. He wrapped the pie in cardboard and tied it with a bow. Outside, he rolled out his bicycle, same as every day, and headed for school, the pie perched on his fingertips like an offering.

The hallways were empty for homeroom and Tommy was late. The ride had taken longer than he thought, always stopping to resettle the pie. Ma would scold him for sure, but he felt too happy to care. He made his way to Clem's locker where he stood and waited. He waited by Clem's locker where he knew she would appear in a moment—knowing her every move or sensing it.

When the bell sounded, the hallway filled, and Tommy dragged the thin bow between his fingers—prolonging the gift. He lifted the pie from its home and held it before him, taking in the last whiff of lemon, the zip of rind, the final picture of success.

Then he saw her, rounding the corner in the crowd, her books stacked neatly under her bare, scarred arm. She was giggling and gossiping.

It took her a moment to notice him there—the boy with the pie at her locker—and in that moment, he launched his attack. The pie slapped Clem's face with a THWACK.

Lemon. Meringue. Fear.

Curd covered her shoulders and speckled her hair (the exact color of her hair), crust stuck in clumps to her shirt. For a second he considered running, but only for a second. Instead, he stood frozen, all eyes but Clem's on him.

When the tin slid down the base of her chin, Tommy saw

the shock in Clem's eyes, wide with cream, dripping with confusion.

Clem scowled. Clem glared. They all scowled. They all glared.

The bell rang again and the crowds thinned, full enough on gossip for first period. Clementine gathered her books, leaned into Tommy, and whispered *thank you*, licking the thick whip from her parted lips.