

Katherine Ammon

Sunshine Harvest

“Well, Mom,” said my daughter, “you just about tore through every crossword book in Barnes & Noble, so I had to get a little creative this year. Happy birthday.”

It was my 52nd birthday, and my tumor’s 0.25th birthday. I took the parcel, secretly thankful to be done with crosswords. It seemed like there were only so many words those companies knew, and I was tired of writing in the three-letter word for viper (“asp”) while poison trickled into my arm every Monday. I tucked my finger under the wrapping paper and pulled.

“I know it’s a weird choice, but I figured it might be more entertaining than Candy Crush.”

Inside was a portable gaming system, which looked like two phones glued together. I flipped open the screen. “You got me a video game?” I asked, despite hearing her reasoning.

“I already bought a game and loaded it all up for you,” she said, trying to piece together an encouraging smile. “It’s called ‘Sunshine Harvest.’ You have a farm; it’s very peaceful. I think you might like it.”

Next Monday, my husband had packed my game, like I was a kid going off to day camp. I plugged my little system into the wall after the doctor had plugged the IV into my forearm, and I loaded it up.

Sunshine Harvest prompted me to make a character, an “avatar.” I named

her Mimi, because my name, Michelle, was too long for the game to handle. I made Mimi's hair bright red, which was unfashionable when I was young but is very in these days. The mayor of the town, Herb, gave Mimi a sack of tomato seeds and told her the town was in need of crops for trading. This is not peaceful, I thought. Sunshine Glen is in economic straits.

Mimi was off to buy a hoe for tilling and a can for watering when I was interrupted. My appointment was done already. The doctor unplugged me, and I unplugged my game, and my husband was there to take me home.

In the '05 Camry, my husband asked, "How was it? The game." By this point, he knew better than to ask about the chemo. I fake happiness for the daughter, but not for him.

"Ronald, I'm tired. What's for dinner?"

"Rice and lemon water."

I swished the lemon water in my mouth after dinner, hands clasping the edges of the kitchen sink, eyes squeezed shut, fatigue spinning my head how my daughter would vindictively spin Ronald and I in those tea-cup rides at the fair when she was young. In a pitiful spit, the granules of white rice dripped down my chin, now flavored with a hint of lemon.

As I trudged back to my bedroom past my husband on the couch, I started slipping off my clothes, not in an act of seduction as I had done before we had Charlotte, but in an act of self-preservation. You hear a lot about chemo and a lot about menopause, but not about chemo during menopause. You cannot eat, you cannot sleep, you cannot make love, you cannot defecate, you cannot be

beautiful, you cannot live in your own skin. You are too wet and too dry, too hot and too cold. And no man wants to hear about it after the first complaint. You get that one complaint for sympathy, and after that they are just reminders of your discomfort.

I think my first complaint was, “It’s a little stuffy.”

Because of the double-hit of chemo and menopause, I crawled onto my bed early, laying on top of the sheets, the fan turned on high. I blinked aridly into the whir of the blades and tugged my aching neck up to stare at the empty TV. Ronald had left the remote up there, by the television, despite my reminders that that location for the remote was in fact redundant, given that the TV already had its own buttons to change the channel and volume.

With a heavy grunt, I flopped my body to the right, questing for the purse I had set there when we returned from the hospital. My fingers scrabbled at the straps and hoisted up the bag, like how those shipyards lift boats out of the sloppy brine. Past the wallet and the compact and the scattered receipts was that little gaming system. Face pressed into my pillows, body still jumbled on the sheets, I started the thing up. Sunshine Harvest jingled at me, and I was welcomed back to the Glen.

Mimi picked up the hoe and watering can in the local store, the only store, Linda’s Trading Goods. The cashier was a young boy named Lucas, who ran the shop for his sickly mother, Linda. Awfully nice boy, with bangs the color of toasted pecans scattered across his face.

As Mimi rummaged through her scantily filled wallet for some gold, you

Lucas stopped her. “You’re new here, right? Your first set of tools is free. But if you lose them, you have to come back here!” Video game characters have that funny way of talking, where they spill out everything they need to say at once before they let you respond with a small prechosen snippet of dialogue. Mimi didn’t mind.

“Thank you so much, Lucas,” said Mimi, though she worried about how Linda’s medical bills would be paid. Mimi dropped a modest five-gold tip on the counter.

“No, thank you! You’re doing this town some good.” Lucas returned to tidying up the store, turning the labels out on all the cans and such. As Mimi left the store, he stopped her. “By the way,” Lucas said, “call me Luke.”

“What’s on the TV?” asked Ronald, lumbering into the bedroom.

I kept my eyes on the small screens in front of me. “I don’t know, the remote was left by the TV.”

“You back on that game? I’ll have to tell Charlotte you like her gift.”

I grumbled and returned to my game. Herb was teaching Mimi how to tend her fields. He told her that the tomatoes should take two days to grow. Two days! I chuckled.

Ronald glanced over at me. “So, what do you want to watch? HGTV? The news?”

“Whatever you want is fine.”

“Okay, wrestling it is!”

Pause.

I looked up. Ronald had apparently made a joke and was waiting for my reaction. I pricked up the corners of my lips. My husband smiled back and switched the television to HGTV, on which a young couple was shopping for houses in St. Thomas.

“Where do these kids get this kind of money?” asked Ronald. “Let me guess, she’s a ballet instructor, and he weaves baskets at home. We oughta call Charlotte and tell her that whole accounting business is a waste!”

“Ronald, I’m tired.”

“Okay.”

A lot had happened to Mimi by the time next Monday rolled around. She had already shipped three bountiful harvests of tomatoes, and Mayor Herb personally thanked her for pushing Sunshine Glen a little closer to greatness. To celebrate, the Glen was holding a tomato-throwing festival, like La Tomatina in Spain.

The IV needle tugged at my arm as I dressed Mimi in the appropriate gear. START, R, R, down, down, right, A to select a white sundress; left, left, B to take off her shoes; and up, up, left to add a cute pair of neon pink goggles that she had bought from Linda’s, per Luke’s suggestion. B to exit the menu.

Before the festival, Mimi chatted with her girl-friends on the grounds. They all wore white versions of their day-to-day outfits, and they loved Mimi’s goggles. None of the other girls had thought to get goggles! Mimi giggled.

When the boys arrived, Mimi’s best girl-friend, Daisy, nudged her. Luke

wasn't wearing a shirt! Mimi blushed and cast her eyes to the ground. Daisy had to hold back her laughter as Luke walked up to the two of them.

"Have fun at today's festival, Mimi! Remember, press L to equip the tomatoes and press A to throw," said Luke. He left to help Mayor Herb unload the boxes of tomatoes.

"Wowee, Mimi," said Daisy. "I think he really likes you! Didja see his chest? I guess all the lifting he does at the shop really paid off!"

"Oh, Daisy!" scolded Mimi, though she liked how Daisy said what she was thinking.

Unfortunately, Luke's mother wouldn't be at the festival today. She was at the doctor's again. Mimi had only met Linda once, but she was a nice woman. Quiet, but kind.

I winced as the IV needle was pulled out. The doctor was speaking to Ronald and me. "So this is the last treatment for this cycle, meaning we won't be seeing you two for five weeks. Are Mondays still good for you?"

Ronald nodded.

"Great, you can get everything sorted out with the secretary."

The First Annual Great Tomato Throw of Sunshine Glen had begun! Right from the start, Mimi pegged Daisy with a squashed tomato. Unfortunately for Mimi, Daisy can hold a grudge. Daisy tore through the town after Mimi, whose raucous giggles were punctuated with the wet splats of tomatoes. Their chase took them past Mayor Herb, who hit Daisy right in the face.

As Daisy was distracted wiping the tomato out of her eyes, Mimi cut off the main road to run behind the houses. She dove into a pile of barrels behind Linda's Trading Goods, leaning her back against the store, chest heaving from the excitement. She unequipped her tomatoes with L and ran her hands through her red hair, dripping with matching red tomato juice. When her breath had slowed enough, she could hear another person hiding in the barrels as well. Luke.

"Since you're now officially halfway through your treatment, I thought I'd get you a little surprise." Ronald guided me into the kitchen where my post-chemo meal was already sitting. "For dinner, there's half a peanut butter sandwich, but the real surprise is dessert."

My ears pricked at the sound of this, and I looked up from Sunshine Harvest. "I can't eat dessert," I said, wistfully recalling the strawberry cake from my 51st birthday.

"I talked with one of the nurses, and she said this dessert would be fine. It's nothing big."

"Okay." I sipped from the towering glass of lemon water at the table, game clutched in my other hand.

Ronald added, "But you only get it if you finish dinner." Gotta keep my calorie count up, appetite or no.

"Okay." I settled into my chair and munched idly at the sandwich, eyes on my game.

Luke and Mimi stared at each other, each considering reequipping their

tomatoes. After a tense second, Luke beamed, and Mimi smiled back. He sidled over so he was sitting right next to her. The barrels walled them off from the rest of the festival.

I sipped at my lemon water.

Luke looked at Mimi's tomato-splattered outfit and laughed. "You're a mess!"

"You are too," said Mimi, though she kept her eyes off his chest.

"Hey, Michelle, put the game down for a sec," said Ronald. "I wanna show you the dessert."

"Just a moment," I said.

After their laughter settled down, so that the only noises were the two of them breathing and the distant shouts of the festival, Luke said, "When my mom got sick, I was so lonely. I was so busy taking care of her and the shop that I didn't have time to talk to my friends anymore. I went from Luke the jokester to Lucas the cashier. Then you came to town."

"Michelle, look," said Ronald.

"Hold on," I said.

"You've been such a good person to me, Mimi, and I really like you," said Luke, leaning in.

Mimi blushed. "I really like you too."

"Mimi, please," said Ronald, my old nickname sounding strange on his lips. I slammed my gaming system shut and set it on the table. From behind his back, he took out a dish of strawberry halves circling a pile of Reddi Whip.

“Oh,” I said. “Ronald, thank you.”

He passed the plate to me. But he jostled the lemon water as he did so. With his other hand, he tried to steady the glass, but like an ape grasping at a banana he was all strength, no delicacy. Ronald knocked the glass over onto the game he made me set down. Slivers of lemon spread across its surface and water soaked into its insides.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said, but I wasn’t listening. I opened up my game and stared as Luke with his toasted pecan hair shuddered out of existence, dying out halfway on his journey to a lover’s kiss. Luke was gone.

I pushed away from the table.

“I’m sorry, Michelle. Have a strawberry.”

Daisy was gone.

“I’m tired. I’m going to my room.”

Mayor Herb, the town of Sunshine Glen, its fields, its flowers, all gone.

“Okay.”

I pushed into the bedroom, flipped on the fan, and pulled off my clothes that were now soaked with the damned water. I fell onto my bed and lay there, face buried in my pillows.

Most importantly, Mimi was gone.