

Stephanie Dickinson

Emily and the Cookstove

1929. The bright gardenia girl who liked wandering in the dark has been tamed and tied up in aprons. A warm summer day my father's all shiver and teeth chatter in his dementia winter. I like to explore his mind's mysterious warming oven and water well. His eyes, dark barn lofts, his talk like purple neck ring feathers floating down. I love him still. All day this man watches the road dust settle over the weedy ditches. He sits throned on the Queen Anne's chair in his overalls staring out the window. Then his chin thrusts out. He points to the naked women picking his raspberries that twine along the fence. They live in his trees, eating his cow's milk and drinking his eggs. They're sleeping in the chicken coop, he says, curled on the roosts. I witness his hard sitting in the high-backed chair with stitched orange flowers. The breeze is jeweled with blue bottle flies. I'll make his noon meal and try to please him. Food no longer tastes the same, he complains, and spits it out. I dabble. My cucumbers have more cream and less onion, the pickled beets more vinegar, my sauerkraut is boiled longer and comes out browner, the dumplings flat, not fluffy. My marzipan cookies—exotic almond paste islands salted. Meringue—bites of sweet clouds and dill. It is the oddball concoction I fill his plate with that he eats. He drinks from the pale green glass. Today it's hard for him to decide between that and the apricot-colored one. The cold water from the well better in the green glass. Like swallowing through a willow wand. He smells of dates and figs and hidden buffet drawers, the mustiness inside a sterling silver chest. He knows who has married, who has died, who is sick—all the missing people of his life. Only himself he has forgotten. His voice rises and falls, and then goes silent. I look out his window squinting. Hoping to see the pale-skinned women with doe eyes, lace at their neck and ankles and little else. Nothing but the sun, the raspberries and wild grape, the green cloaked under a shawl of dust.