

TUMBLEWEED AND GOOSEBERRY PIE

By Bob Liter, Edited by Martie Liter Ogborn

"What's ya doin' Mister Dump?" Johnny Andrews asked. Billy Gombeski grinned.

"Minding my own business," Ezra Dumpfeld said. "You kids get upstairs where you belong."

Ezra shook his head and leaned against the workbench in his space off the furnace room of Centrel City's Warren Harding Elementary School. He poured freshly-made coffee into a stained cup and avoided the chipped part of the rim as he sipped suspiciously. Tasted all right. Not like it did the other day when one of the kids put pepper in his coffee pot.

He turned to the pile of tumbleweeds he'd gathered that morning from the school yard before the kids arrived. He picked up one of the ball-shaped weeds after opening the door to the ancient iron coal-burning furnace. The weeds would probably burn hot; maybe stink up the place again. He should have left them outside and burned them there, but then he'd probably get chewed out because of the danger of starting a prairie fire. He slapped his forehead and started crushing the weeds in a bucket. Why hadn't he thought of this before? He put them in his reclaimed ancient food blender, turn them to powder.

He turned on the blender and chuckled as he thought of how he would trick Mrs. Murdock and how he'd get even with all the smartass kids that were always harassing him. And it would serve Mrs. Murdock right for complaining because he wasn't keeping her kitchen clean enough.

Just before lunch he carried a broom into the kitchen. Mrs. Murdock sat at the cutting table slicing carrots. Her bulk spilled over the edges of the stool. Ezra turned his back to her and pulled a plastic sandwich bag of tumbleweed powder from inside his bib overalls. He dumped the powder into a large aluminum pot filled with chicken and noodle soup. He stirred it with a wooden spoon until she said, "Take your dirty overalls and grimy hands out of my kitchen. You are always hanging around when I'm working. Spend more time in here cleaning after I'm gone for the day."

"Thought you might give me a little something to eat."

"Not likely, you old goat. Now git."

After lunch Ezra was disappointed when no one complained about the soup. Still he had put something over on the whole school. He tasted the leftover soup later and it tasted like always. He ground up more tumbleweed and smiled to himself as he sneaked some in Mrs. Murdock soup every day. Gradually she didn't seem to mind him being there. He felt

guilty a week later when Mrs. Murdock made him a gooseberry pie. While he was eating a piece on a plate Mrs. Murdock had provided, Mister Anders, the principal, came in before Ezra could jump up and pretend to be working.

“Ah, Mister Dumpfeld,” he said.

Here it comes, Ezra figured. He’s gonna chew me out for being here instead of working.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you what a good job you’ve been doing lately,” Mr. Anders said. Ezra choked and almost lost a mouthful of pie. Mister Anders got himself a plate, cut a piece and was eating it when Mrs. Murdock returned from the rest room.

“I was just gonna run him outta here,” Mrs. Murdock said.

“Oh, don’t do that. Let him enjoy this delicious pie. Your food has been extra good lately, excellent in fact,” Mr. Anders said.

Winter came as fast as usual on the prairie and snow buried the tumbleweeds and nearly everything else. Ezra hated shoveling snow. To his suspicious surprise some of the boys helped him. In the meantime he figured it was time he complimented Mrs. Murdock on her cooking. But before he got around to it she was harping at him again. And kids were calling him Mister Dump again and trashing the schoolrooms. No more help shoveling snow either.

At the first hint of Spring Ezra gathered a few tumbleweeds that had freed themselves from snowdrifts and blown into the school yard. He was about to burn them when he decided to make more powder and put it in the soup. It would be his secret again.

Two weeks later kids had stopped making fun of him, and Mrs. Murdock let him hang around her kitchen. She even smiled sometimes and made him another gooseberry pie. They were all so nice he stopped putting tumbleweed powder in their soup. Soon the kids were calling him Mister Dump, and Mrs. Murdock told him to stay out of her kitchen. He scratched his head as he crushed more tumbleweed and figured he’d get even by putting the powder in their soup.

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