

The Village Gaarden

A KELLY O'CONNELL
SHORT STORY

By Judy Alter

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Recipe courtesy Thorhild Griesbach



The Fairmount Neighborhood was once peppered with storefront businesses, many with residential quarters for the owners behind them. Today most of those picturesque buildings have been demolished, but one or two remain, now renovated into charming homes.

But one day, on a that short leg of Travis Avenue between Hawthorne and Lilac streets, a route I rarely frequent, I found a storefront new to me—and still open. The day showed North Central Texas winter at its worst—a freezing mix of ice and sleet, wind howling. As Mike told me that morning, “Only a fool would go out on a day like this. Stay home.” I didn’t, and now I was hungry for hot comfort food. The Village Gaarden was my answer.

A typical store-front with the door square between two large windows sat right up at the sidewalk, making room I suppose for whatever was behind it. Blue-and-white checkered curtains hung on rods three-quarters from the top of the windows, and the words “The Village Gaarden” were stenciled in black on the window. I wondered if I should point out the misspelling to the owners. A hand-lettered sign informed me that the small café would be serving from 12:00-1:00 p.m. Odd hours, I thought. If they aren’t open any longer than that, how do they make money?

Old-fashioned sleigh bells, hung on a thick leather strap, were looped over the inside door handle. They sang out as I entered. The restaurant held only six wooden tables, but those tables gleamed as if they had just been waxed. Small vases held flowers that looked like lilies of the valley to me. Blue-and-white china in a variety of patterns and serving dishes rested on a plate rack around the room. Steamy warm air, heavy with the

wonderful smell of beef cooking, seemed to envelop me. Stew?

Almost instantly a small woman welcomed me. Short and a little wide, she had white hair pulled into a bun at the back of her neck and curls escaping around her face, softening the severity of her hairdo. Her face was anything but severe. Brushing her hands on her apron, she held out both hands in welcome, and I took them gratefully.

“I am so glad to see you,” she bubbled. “I’ve been hoping you would come. I’m Annalise Nelsen, and this is my restaurant.” She gestured as proudly as though she were pointing out a large formal dining room. “I love to have visitors.”

There were no other customers, but how could she be expecting me? I managed to thank her and then asked, “You’re only open for an hour?”

She nodded. “It’s only me, so I only open when I feel like cooking. Today I made Norwegian hamburgers—*Kjøttkaker*, we call them. You would like? With mashed potatoes and green peas?”

Of course, I would like. She bustled off through a curtained doorway at the back, while I settled myself at a table. I tested the flowers—yes, as I thought fresh—but lilies of the valley were certainly not in season now. Within seconds Annalise, as she directed me to call her, appeared with a crockery mug full of fresh, strong black coffee.

I asked about the flowers. “Lillies of the valley aren’t in season now.”

“I grow,” she said. “We call them *liljekonwall*—means what you say.”

How, I wondered, could she grow them in winter? In

fact, how do you grow them in Texas at all? I'd never seen them here before, although I knew them as a child in Illinois.

Annalise did not erase the puzzled look on my face. Instead, she said, "Now, your dinner. Only one minute. Is all ready," and she was gone again, reappearing seconds later with a plate of food that looked and smelled way beyond good—did Peter at the Old Neighborhood Grill know he had this competition?

The meat cakes, served with caramelized onion and gravy, were soft and tender rather than chewy like a hamburger. The flavor was pure beef. I tasted the potatoes alone first—rich with butter, and I detected whole cream. Then I dabbed a bit of gravy on them—just as good that way. But the peas—they looked more like a thick green pea soup, with dried peas that hadn't completely lost their shape. But there was no ham taste. Instead, these were slightly sweet and somewhere, deep down, had a butter flavor. I savored a mouthful, while Annalise stood watching me, hands on hips as though demanding an answer.

"You like?"

"I love," I said.

"Good. I leave you to enjoy in peace."

And although I had a thousand questions for her, she disappeared behind the curtains again. I did eat in peace, savoring each mouthful of the hearty, soul-warming food. My feet thawed, and my disposition improved. I took out my cell phone to call Mike and tell him about the wonderful place I'd found. I could imagine bringing the girls here and seeing Annalise hover affectionately over them. But my cell phone said, "No service." I shrugged and dismissed it as due to the weather.

Annalise came back to ask about dessert. She had made rice pudding she told me, again supplying the Norwegian name—*risengryn*. I was beyond full but then again, no one else had come in, and I was afraid she'd be stuck with a whole lot of risen-whatever it was. I tried to indicate by my hands I wanted a small serving; what I got, of course, was a huge bowl that I could not finish. Rice pudding with hints of nutmeg and vanilla and liberal amounts of currants—another thing one almost never found in Texas, unless you bought them dried.

I ate as much as I could and waited tactfully for the bill. It was well past one o'clock, Annalise's closing hour, and I didn't want to detain her. Finally, calling her name softly, I headed toward those curtains. After all, she was elderly, and she might have gotten tired and nodded off. I didn't want to startle her.

When I got no answer I poked my head through the curtains and found a sparkling clean kitchen—cast-iron

stove, empty cast-iron skillet sitting on the top and newly oiled, blue-and-white dishes, like those in which my meal was served, draining in the dish rack. But no sign of Annalise and no answer to my continued calls.

I hadn't even seen a menu, so I had no idea what the lunch might have cost. I left a \$20 bill on the table and headed back out into the weather, but by now it didn't seem so bad. The sleet had stopped, the sun was out, and the ice was beginning to melt. No heart for going back to the office and so full I was almost but not quite uncomfortable, I called Keisha in my office and said I wasn't coming back, headed home, and took a nap before I got the girls from school.

At dinner that night, I picked at the hamburgers Mike had grilled. His burgers were always great, but I was still full, and I was bursting to tell my story. As my account of lunch spilled out, almost without a pause for breath, the girls sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed. When I finished, Maggie said, "Gosh, Mom, what an adventure," and Em piped up with "I want to go there!"

Mike was not so swayed. "Wait a minute, Kelly. I've never heard of this place and neither had you—and we both know every inch of this neighborhood pretty well." Of course we did—I'm a real estate agent, and Mike, now a detective, was for years the neighborhood patrol officer. "You found a place you'd never seen; it was only open for one hour; there were fresh lilies of the valley on the tables—hey, I'm from Texas. I wouldn't know them if I saw them. No menu, one dish. Your cell phone wouldn't work, and the owner disappeared. Are you feeling okay, sweetheart?"

"I know it sounds strange, Mike, but drive over there yourself tomorrow. You'll see it, and you should go for lunch."

"Yeah, sure," he said.

I didn't say any more about my adventure. Mike's skepticism put a damper on it, and the girls were clearly puzzled. We were a quiet family all evening.

Mike called before ten o'clock the next morning. "Kelly, I just drove the length of Travis Avenue, both branches of it, and I didn't see any storefront buildings, let alone The Alpine Village." His voice dropped. "I don't know what to tell you, except, sweetheart, have you thought maybe it was a dream when you had that good nap before the girls got out of school?"

"Did you tell any of your buddies at the police station about this?" My question was hostile, but I was angry. It wasn't fair to be angry at him, but he was the handiest target.

"Sweat," he said. "You tell Keisha?"

"No," and he knew it was serious, because I tell Keisha,

my office assistant, almost everything. Not telling her meant I was not sure of myself. Had I imagined that? *No, I most definitely had not! How would I have known about kjøttkaker and liljekonvall? No way. Annalise Nelsen was real.*

I muttered, "I'll be back" and slammed out of the office. No, it wasn't on Travis Avenue, not anywhere on that street that stopped and started at various points in the neighborhood. I drove nearby streets, weaving in and out of some that were only a block or two long. I saw two abandoned store fronts but no Alpine Village.

Back at the office, I sat in a slump until Keisha whirled around and demanded, "Okay. I've had enough. What's the problem?" Keisha is young, African American, colorful, and the most amazing person I've ever met—maybe beside Mike. Among other things, there's her sixth sense.

I told her the whole story and waited for the laughter, but it didn't come.

"Okay," she repeated. "We got to get to the bottom of this. I can't have you in this funk all the time. Worse than when you and Mike have an argument."

I let that pass. We didn't argue much. There had just been two really outstanding times, both my fault.

"Who's the oldest person you know in Fairmount?"

"Mrs. Workman," I answered without hesitation. "She's in her nineties, and she's lived here since she was a young bride. Still lives in the same house on Jessamine."

"Let's go see her."

"You going too?"

"Yep, I am. I gotta get to the bottom of this too. Your mama's cooking is pretty good, but I could eat some of that Norwegian stuff you're talking about." Keisha lived with my mom off and on when there seemed to be a reason.

I called Mrs. Workman and asked if Keisha and I could come for a visit.

"Of course, Kelly, dear. But you know I'm not going to sell my house." No quaver marked that elderly voice. It was as strong and forthright as mine.

"Oh, I know, Mrs. Workman. I just want to ask about, uh, some neighborhood history."

"Oh, my dear, I love to talk about that. You and your friend come right over. I'll put the tea kettle on."

Thelma Workman used a cane when she came to answer the front door, but her handshake was firm, and she welcomed Keisha as heartily as she did me. Clearly, she had worked quickly, for the tea tray sat on the coffee table complete with teapot, creamer and sugar, three cups, and a plate of sliced homemade banana bread.

Please, Lord, let me be like this when I'm ninety!

We chatted casually about the bad weather, the changing neighborhood, Mrs. Workman's Persian cat. All the while, Keisha fidgeted. She wanted to get to the business at hand.

"Mrs. Workman," I began hesitantly, "do you remember a small restaurant called The Alpine Village?"

Her eyes were bright, and she was instantly on the alert. "Over on Travis Avenue? I remember it well, because I enjoyed many good meals there. Annalise Nelsen could cook like no one else I ever met. She surely put me in the shadows."

I demurred that I was sure that was not true, but I also shot Keisha a look that said, "See? I didn't make this up."

Then Mrs. Workman continued. "That was years ago, though. In the '40s, if I remember correctly. I was a young bride, and I even went there for help with cooking. She was so generous and loving—like a second mother to me. But then Annalise's husband died, and she went back to Norway."

"She went back to Norway?" I echoed. "What happened to her restaurant?"

"Her children sold the building, and it was demolished. Isn't there a playground on the site now?"

I had seen a playground when I went back looking for the restaurant! I turned to Keisha, helplessly, but she didn't laugh nor did she frown. She just reached out for my hand and held it comfortingly.

Mrs. Workman persisted. "How did you even hear about that tiny restaurant, Kelly?"

"Oh, I was examining some old maps, and it was listed on one." I was surprised that I could lie so easily and quickly.

We chatted a bit more, thanked that lovely lady for tea and delicious banana bread, and left. In the car, Keisha sighed. "I sure wish that hadn't been a dream, Kelly. Those Norwegian hamburgers, whatever you call them, sound wonderful."

"They were," I said. "I have the recipe in my purse. Annalise gave it to me. Want to copy it?"

I wasn't telling Mike about that. Maybe someday I'd make *kjøttkaker* for him and claim I'd found the recipe on line, after that dream I'd had. But I knew Annalise was real.

Author's note: Kelly O'Connell has her own mystery series, with books all set in the Fairmount district of Fort Worth. The first two are *Skeleton in a Dead Space* and *No Neighborhood for Old Women*. A third, *Trouble in a Big Box*, will be published by Turquoise Morning Press in August. Kelly O'Connell mysteries are available in trade paper or for e-readers.