**The Sunday Evening Toast**

**By Lisa Evans**

*“And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.” Joshua 4:7*

Mom was finishing up dinner while Dad was at the kitchen window peeping through the venetian blind at Ben and Francine sitting on the front porch.

“Russell,” Mom said warning, “will you leave those two alone?”

“I heard a car door. I thought Greg might drop by.”

“You told me Greg was out of town visiting his mother.”

Dad felt like a trapped animal with his foot caught in a snare. Mom just stood there staring at him while he tried to wiggle his way free.

“Oh, just admit it Russell. You’re gonna miss her as much as I am.”

Papa Joe’s timing to come into the kitchen could not have been more perfect.

“Hm, dinner smells ready. How long before we eat?” Papa Joe said rubbing his pot belly stomach and eying the chicken.

“I’m finishing up the gravy now.”

“What’s Russell over there doing?” Papa Joe asked, tasting a piece of the chicken leg.

“Crying the blues; I think he’s gonna have a harder time letting go of Francine than I am.”

“I heard that, and I am not crying,” Russell replied defensively.

“It’s hard to believe that in six days, Franny will be Mrs. Benjamin Abraham.” Mom watched from the corner of her eye as Papa Joe pulled another piece of the chicken off and ate it.

“They grow up so fast,” Mom said. She pretended as though the chicken platter was in her way so she moved it to another counter space away from Papa Joe. “Now, where did I put that gravy bowl?” she pondered. Then she opened the cabinet door and pushed some things from one side to the other searching for it.

While Dad was peeping through the blinds, and Mom was busy looking for the gravy dish, Papa Joe eased his way over to the chicken platter. He tugged at another piece of the chicken until it broke lose then shoved it into his mouth and savored the well seasoned morsel. As soon as Mom turned back around, Papa Joe swallowed fast and looked at her innocently. She, knowing he was guilty, gave him a suspicious glance with one eyebrow raised, and then went back to stirring the gravy. He knew he would be pressing his luck if he tried to steal another taste, so he redirected his attention elsewhere.

“Russell, she’s only getting married for crying out loud! She’s leaving the country. Try not to let it worry you.”

“Who’s worried? Me worried? I’m not worried,” Dad assured Papa Joe with much apprehension. “Claire’s the one running around the house crying about her baby is getting married. Not me, I’m as cool as they come.” Dad turned back around and pried the blinds open so he could get look at Francine. He didn’t expect her to be standing at the window looking in. “Oh, Lord!” he screamed, staggering backwards nearly knocking the basket of rolls on the floor.

“Watch out!” Mom yelled barely catching the basket from toppling over.

Francine rushed inside with Ben following closely behind. “Dad, are you all right? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. I was peeking to see if dinner was done,” she explained.

Mom shook her head and breathed a trio if “hmphs” under her breath. She wasn’t sure if Russell would make it six more days let alone down the aisle without passing out. Papa Joe thought the whole spectacle was hilarious. He had a hearty laugh but tried to cover it up with a bogus cough when Dad looked over at him.

“Dinner is ready,” Mom announced.

“Francine, would you do me the honor of letting your dad escort you into the dining room? I can practice how I’m going to walk you down the aisle.”

“Here honey,” mom said handing Francine a bowl of vegetables, “just pretend it’s your wedding bouquet. Ben, bring the chicken before Papa Joe eats it all up.”

“Now Claire, I only had a small pinch.

“A small pinch? Papa Joe, that chicken had two legs when I took it out of the oven, now look at it.”

“I thought love kept no record of wrong.”

“Are you admitting that you wronged that bird?”

“Isn’t there something I can do to help with dinner?” Papa Joe asked changing the subject.

“Bring the salad out of the refrigerator, and don’t forget the dressing.”

Papa Joe absolutely adored Claire and Russell; he moved in a short while after his wife, Pearl, passed away. Even though he was unrelated to the Lankers, he had been a part of their lives for over twenty-five years.

After dinner, Francine’s dad took his knife and gently clanged the side of his water glass. “Huh-hum, I have a very important announcement to make.” He held his glass up as though making a toast. “Claire,” he said to his wife of more than thirty years, “this was the best meal you have ever cooked. Thank you.”

Francine giggled leaning over to rest her head on Ben’s shoulder. Dad made that same announcement after every Sunday meal, even if they ate at a restaurant.

“Ben, since you’re practically part of the family, why don’t you make the evening toast.”

Francine sat up so Ben could stand. The Sunday evening toast was a Lanker family tradition.

Ben stood. “Thanks dad,” he said proudly. “Tonight, I would like my beautiful bride-to-be to join me in the toast.”

Francine tossed her dinner napkin onto her plate and slid out of her chair to join Ben at his side.

Mom gently squeezed dad’s arm while whispering, “That’s nice.”

“It’s ironic that you would have me to give the evening toast. Francine and I have a few things we would like to say to say.” Ben looked at Francine for her to continue where he left off.

“Ben and I have talked in great detail about our wedding how we wanted a traditional wedding. However, when it came to the something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue tradition for the bride, Ben and I thought we would do something untraditional. Let’s start with something old.” Francine handed her mother a ring box. On the inside were the three promise rings Claire and Russell had given her as she grew in age from a teenager to a young adult. “Mom, these rings are priceless to me. They always reminded me that I was a promised daughter of the King. I’m not giving these rings back to you because I don’t want them; I’m giving them back so you can one day give them to your granddaughter. I pray that you tell her as you told me how special she is to God. I think they would mean so much coming from you.”

Claire could hardly hold back the tears. She and Russell had given Francine her first ring at age twelve, then sixteen, and her last ring when she was twenty-one. Each ring was a reminder of the covenant she had made with God. Tonight was the first night her parents heard her express what the rings meant to her.

“Now for something new,” Francine continued. As you all know I’ve wanted to open my own bakery long before attending culinary school. What you don’t know is that yesterday, Ben and I finalized the lease agreement for a vacant bakery shop. We will open in less than two months. In honor of Nana Pearl, our new business will be called Pearl’s Pastries.”

Papa Joe’s head hung down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He wiped across his eyes hard and quick. If only his beloved Pearl could see Franny now; she would be so proud. Pearl taught Franny everything she knew about baking and was the inspiration behind her becoming a pastry chef.

“That brings us to something borrowed. Dad, uh, I huh,” Ben stammered. His nerves were unraveling. He took a deep breath and continued. “Every Sunday you lead this family into an evening toast where you all give God thanks. I had never seen anything so wonderful; I knew that I wanted that tradition established in my family. If it is all right with you, I would like to borrow the Lanker family tradition and make it a part of our family tradition after we’re married.”

Dad was touched that this young man saw something in him, an older man, that he wanted to imitate. Dad thought those days were long since passed. He was wrong. He lifted his water glass signifying his consent to Ben’s request.

“And lastly, something blue.” Francine was eager to make this presentation. She stepped away briefly to get a small gift bag from the other room. “Papa Joe, this is for you.”

Papa Joe opened the bag and pulled out a soft, blue baby blanket.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

Papa Joe, I do not know why God didn’t give you and Nana Pearl children of your own. Ben and I both think the world of you, and I know Mom and Dad feel the same way. This family would not have stood as tall as it has if it had not been for your shoulders. This blue blanket is our gift to you. If we are blessed with a son, we want him to carry on your legacy. We want to name our son Joseph Benjamin Abraham, after you.”

That day with teary eyes and warm embraces, both families lifted their water glasses and gave thanks to God during the Sunday evening toast.