Lemon Pie

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By Ruth Swanton

"POPOVERS 450 degrees for 25 minutes and then 325-350 degrees for fifteen minutes; muffins 25 strokes; cook strong vegetables like cabbage with the cover off; lemon pie"—I dismissed it from my mind—I just couldn't draw it!

The walk leading into Home Economics Building was teeming with starched, white-uniformed girls, armed with long black tubes which held thermometers, and tiny little envelopes containing hair nets. The hour of doom was near—the dreaded practical examination. I climbed the steps to the building. As I could not go inside yet, I sat on the stone bench just outside the door. It was a beautiful fall day—the orange and the yellow of the leaves were alive with Indian summer sunshine. Fortunate Industrial Science girls passed by in civilian clothes, blissfully enjoying the last warm days of fall. Would we ever be doing that? I could not think that far ahead—no one could tell what the next three hours would bring. The campanile struck one—it sounded like a death knell. Slowly I arose to my feet and made my way to the locker room to put on my hair net and smooth my uniform.

The girls next to me were discussing the intricacies of mashed potatoes. "Whip them gently with a fork—be sure you don't get too much liquid into them!" I was sure about those—but lemon pie. "Pie crust—put in the ice water sparingly and be careful not to handle it too much; and be sure to watch the lemon juice—it could so easily hydrolyze the starch and—" If I should draw it I had visions of a lemon soup floating on a cemented shell of crust.

OUTSIDE the fatal laboratory door I stopped. "Oh, God—please not lemon pie. I'll take popovers or even salmon croquettes!" I had never uttered a more sincere prayer in my life.

We were lined up like so many unchained galley slaves to our desks. We stood rigid while the serious-faced instructor
came closer and closer with the pile of sheets. Each of us was
to draw one. I reached out a shaky hand, picked up the square
white paper, shut my eyes, and laid it upon the desk. Slowly
I opened my eyes and peeked at the two words at the top of the
page. I felt as though tiny pieces of ice were being dropped
one by one on my spine. "Lemon Pie" was all that it said.

The instructor was saying something about those with baked
products alone securing ovens as soon as possible in order that
they might be through in time for the others to use them. For
a moment everything was completely blank; then I regained a
bit of knowledge and had an insane desire to hurry through as
quickly as possible. I raced to the oven, signed for it, and went
to the supply table to gather materials for the pie crust. The
lard was slightly warm. When I succeeded in freeing it from
the spoon it stuck to the side of the cup. How was I going to
measure it if it persisted in doing that? I took the materials
back to the desk and started to work. I poured the ice water
very slowly on the fat and flour mixture, but the dough would
not form correctly. It was pasty and stuck to the sides of the
bowl. It was even worse on the bread board; when I started
to roll it the whole piece adhered to the rolling pin. I attempted
to pick it off, and it fell into pieces. In desperation I patched
it together in the pie tin and carried it to the oven.

The filling was easier; the cornstarch, water, sugar, and
lemon-rind mixture cooked to a perfect consistency. I set
the dish on the window sill to cool. Then I remembered the
crust. I looked into the oven—there, on the bottom of the pan
it was—a fluid, white mass. My throat contracted—the worst
had happened. I told the instructor I would leave. She was
stern. "You will not leave this room until four. There is still
time to make another crust."

Too frightened to resist, I went back to the supply table for
a fresh start. Then it was that I discovered my error; I had used
pastry flour in the crust failure—but I could not laugh.

The water, flour, and fat mixed a little easier this time. I
put the mixture on the floured board and proceeded to roll it.
The instructor was making the rounds—she stopped directly in
front of my desk and looked disapprovingly at my clumsy
attempts. I remembered, “Roll from the center outwards—use as few strokes as possible.” Why couldn’t the directions be applicable in all cases? The crust might have been a relief map of Florida if the shore line had not had so very many indentations. Why wouldn’t the instructor quit looking at it? Why couldn’t the pie tin be oblong instead of round? The time was passing too quickly—someone would need the oven. I patched this crust, too, and pinched the pieces together very carefully; then I put it in the oven.

NOW there was the lemon juice to add to the filling. I measured out one-fourth cup of the juice, but I would put it by spoonfuls into the mixture. It must go in very slowly so that the mixture would not thin. I poised my hand to let just the right amount flow from the cup to the spoon. Someone went by the desk—her arm hit my elbow. All the lemon juice went in at once! It made a liquid pool on top of the thickening. I thought of pouring off the juice. I looked around for the lemon to squeeze more juice. It was gone; someone else had used it. I could hear my heart thumping. There was no time for deliberation—with a quick, deep stroke I mixed in the juice.

It was time for the crust to be done. I set the filling back on the window sill and took the crust from the oven. It was very flaky, and it looked much too brown. If the filling were in it I could never remove it from the pie tin. I looked at the china plate to be used for finished products. No, it would be better to have the pie whole and in a tin than broken and on a flowered plate. I poured the filling on the shell. It was quite thick. If only the crust were not so jagged and flaky! One egg white was allotted for the meringue. If I used two they could not see the crust so easily.

It might have been humorous—stealing an egg like that—but I could not laugh this time either. The meringue piled very high—it looked almost top-heavy when I finished it. Would that automatically disqualify it? Frantically I wrote down what principles my aching head could remember and gave the product to the instructor. She carried it out the door and into the next room to the jury.
A EONS passed while I waited. In my haste I had used every dish in my desk, but now they seemed a very small number to wash. Cabbage, popovers, and croquettes came back; and beaming girls left the laboratory. One girl received a slip saying that her biscuits had failed. Tears were in her eyes as she walked slowly out the door.

The instructor came back and put the empty pie tin on my desk; then she walked to another desk with a cake which had passed. I tried to call her, but my throat was dry and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I must have failed or they would not have sent it back empty. I turned toward the window. With unseeing eyes I stared at the top of the Physics Building and wound and unwound the curtain cord from about my finger. The laboratory clock struck four. It was no use staying any longer. I picked up my thermometer and started towards the door. My head felt as though a million hammers were mashing it to a pulp.

“Miss Kelly, here is your product. Dr. Nelson said the crust was exceptionally good. She was extremely annoyed at the pie tin, however.”

BEWILDERED, I looked up at the instructor. There was the pie—on a china plate. I could do nothing but sink down on a chair nearby. I turned the plate slowly around and looked at the success. Everyone was gone from the laboratory. A graduate student came in to grind some crackers for his rats. I picked up the plate and carried it to the garbage can. Fervently I wished for some paraffin to cast my triumph eternally in wax.

“Don’t throw that away! May I have it? Lemon’s my favorite.” The grad student was looking hungrily at the delicacy.

“Sure—if you wash the plate,” and I placed it in front of him. My feet were unsteady as I walked towards the door.