

A Few Pages from a New BalonaBook by Jon Riis
Working Title is “Becoming a Celebrity in a Very Short Time”
Tentative Date of Publication: September 2010

In this scene Zachary Burnross, 16, tries to find a way to witness a meeting of the secretive Daughters of the Delta, women who hold the dark secrets of the Town of Balona.

If you should happen to spy Aunt Bapsie in a good mood it might be while getting her hair cut out on her front porch by visiting beautician Ms. Birdie Swainsler. With her body hidden under Ms. Birdie Swainsler’s barber sheet, Aunt Bapsie appears sort of ordinary looking, except for the eyes and the way her chin sticks out, daring you to say something she won’t like. But when Ms. Birdie whisks away her barber sheet you can see that, under the usual muumuu, Aunt Bapsie is built like a pro wrestler with everything but the tattoos.

“I would have me a tattoo except that my Daddy Kon said he thought a tattoo would make me look less feminine,” said Aunt Bapsie to my mother who later, snorting and laughing, repeated the remark within my hearing to several members of the Daughters of the Delta. Daddy Kon Chaud is said to be the sole support of the Kenworth Kuhl family, so I guess Aunt Bapsie won’t get her tattoo as long as her Daddy Kon is around, even if he is barely hanging on at the Jolly Times Rest Home, a place that smells almost as bad as my father’s bathroom.

Joey had mentioned that he was thinking about finding a way to get into Who’s Who in Balona if his mother approved, as it is Aunt Bapsie who pays all the bills. I asked him about his progress.

Joey did not look happy and responded to my question in a low voice. “She says she is thinking about it herself, except that it is probably expensive. She also said I should be satisfied with staying out of jail instead of getting mentioned in a dumb book.”

I should include here the information that Aunt Bapsie is mean not only to Joey, but to her husband, Uncle Kenworth. (About that name: Kenworth. I need to report that in olden days, Balona fathers-to-be admired tractors, don’t ask me why. Anyway, they named their boys Cat or Pill or John or Deere after Caterpillar and John Deere tractors. Then big trucks came into Balona fashion and many dads named their kids Kenworth, Mack, and Peterbilt. Lots of those names around.)

The story that Aunt Bapsie repeats any time she has an audience will still bring Uncle Kenworth to actual tears if he is present to hear her. She tells the tale that when Uncle Kenworth was little, his mother ran off with the Valley Brew delivery man, never to return, leaving little Kenworth in the charge of his older brothers. Aunt Bapsie draws a vivid oral picture of four-year-old Kenworth, waving goodbye to his mother departing in the huge beer truck. “Her little kid is standing there in the middle of the street with no pants on and she leaves, never looking back. A woman after my own heart,” says Aunt Bapsie who expects laughter from her audience and usually gets some.

My mother says that Aunt Bapsie is a cruel person because she teases Uncle Kenworth with that story. “I would not treat my husband to such humiliation,” says my mother. Of course, she does chain her husband’s, my own father’s, ankle to the kitchen table, but I guess that behavior is justified. Everybody in Balona knows about that, and nobody complains.

But my mother has another story that features not only Aunt Bapsie, but also Mrs. Earwick, the ancient lady whose mission in life for all the time I have known of her seems to be to take care of Aunt Bapsie. This story takes place many years ago and has Aunt Bapsie’s mother, a mysterious and never-spoken-of person, running away from Daddy Kon and Balona with a tiny baby and riding the Greyhound down Highway 99 in the direction of Bakersfield, leaving little newborn Bapsie, a

babe in Mrs. Earwick's arms. My mother is convinced that Aunt Bapsie's mother had twins and that Aunt Bapsie is one of them. Mrs. Earwick is not talking.

"How do you know that is true," I asked my mother, since I did not want to check it out with Joey until I had the facts.

My mother said, "I got it straight from Mrs. Pezmyer who swore its truth on her *Daughters of the Delta Book of Distinction*." Mrs. Pezmyer is the wife of our Buick-Tesla dealer and still lives across the street from what Joey calls Kuhl Mansion which, in olden days, was Daddy Kon Chaud's house and known then as Chaud Mansion. Stroll down Kuhl Way any evening and you can see Mrs. Pezmyer on her stoop checking out the neighborhood for scandal. It is said that Mrs. Pezmyer knows Balona and Balonans better than anybody.

Harley and I wandered down the block to the Pezmyer residence where I mow the lawns weekly and occasionally wash the windows on the lower floor. I am polite to old ladies and officers of the law. "Hi, there, Mrs. Pezmyer," I said to the large blue-haired lady who was sitting in her rocking chair on her front porch. I intended to lubricate the social situation before suggesting that I might be invited to a Daughters meeting, despite my gender. "You are looking particularly well-informed this evening," I added.

"You are a perceptive child, Zachary," she said. She quivered a snorty giggle. "I know you young men do not like to consider yourselves children, but we older women have to be careful that we don't confuse handsome young men, you know." Mrs. Pezmyer lashed her eyes at me, so I smirked and shuffled my feet, the way you are supposed to do when you are being flirted with by an old dame. She squinted at Harley who was sniffing in her begonias. "Tell your dog to be decent, Zachary."

"Be decent, Harley," I said obediently. Harley raised his head, nodded agreeably, and sat on the grass watching Mrs. Pezmyer and me. Harley is a very bright dog.

I threw out a conversational bone to Mrs. Pezmyer. "I heard somewhere that Aunt Bapsie's mother was a witch."

Mrs. Pezmyer's eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips. "You heard right. And I think Bapsie Kuhl inherited that curse along with her evil nature. She herself is indeed a witch, untrained by competent professionals probably, but genuine." Mrs. Pezmyer smoothed her apron over her thighs. "Don't say I said so," she added.

"How do you tell if a person is a witch?"

Mrs. Pezmyer bosoms rose and jiggled as she chuckled. "You just watch the way she behaves. If she never goes to Tabernacle and if she does bad things, then you can figure she's got witch blood in her. Also, Bapsie's got a black stone she won't let go of." Mrs. Pezmyer nodded her head and slapped her thigh authoritatively. "That pretty much settles your question right there."

"I heard that Aunt Bapsie lost her stone," I said. Aunt Bapsie's stone is part of the Balona Legend, and mention of it always gets a discussion going, or at least a response.

Mrs. Pezmyer threw back her head and went, "Hah! Not likely." Then she leaned forward and looked closely at me. "Who told you?"

"Like I said, I just sort of heard it, maybe from Joey."

"Oh, don't believe a word Joseph says, that boy." Mrs. Pezmyer does not like Joey since Joey's graduation night when he allegedly borrowed the newest Pezmyer Buick for a joyride and trashed it. "Bapsie never lets that stone out from under her arm." Mrs. Pezmyer snickered. "I bet she bathes with it under her arm." Mrs. Pezmyer snorted. "If she bathes at all." Then she gave me a hard look. "Don't you dare quote me, Zachary."

I sat myself on the top step and engaged in intelligence-gathering behavior. "Where did that

stone come from in the first place, do you think?"

Mrs. Pezmyer made a mouth. "I asked her that very question once a long time ago. She said it was a gift from somebody important and she had to keep it warm. That's all. What nonsense. Witch talk. All I know is that a long time ago she had Mrs. Earwick sew a little pocket under the arm of each of her muumuus so she can keep that stone warm in her armpit." Mrs. Pezmyer wagged her head. "No. Bapsie Kuhl isn't going to lose her stone. It's like my husband's Swiss Army knife. He sleeps with it tucked into one of his socks. For self-protection purposes he says."

I visualized the scene and spoke up without thinking. "Your husband sleeps with his socks on?"

"Well, one sock only. Stranger things happen in Balona, Zachary. Just keep your eyes and ears open." She gave me another hard look. "You do not need to pass on that information about Pezmyer's Swiss Army knife."

"Of course not," I said. I changed the subject. "By the way, what does Aunt Bapsie's stone actually look like?"

Mrs. Pezmyer held her index fingers about three inches apart. "About like so, and sort of, how to say, oblong, and shiny black and thicker than a korndog. She used to show it off to us ladies once in a while."

"Oh, the ladies of the Daughters of the Delta."

"Certainly not the Daughters. We wouldn't have Bapsie Kuhl as a member of our order. She's a terrible gossip, you know."

"Oh, right. Of course. But, wow, I didn't realize the stone was that thick. No wonder she can deck a heavyweight with that tucked in her fist."

"I didn't mean the whole korndog, Zachary. I meant the korndog sausage itself inside the korndog bun." She wagged her head and made three *tsks* at my ignorance.

"I was thinking, Mrs. Pezmyer," I said. Saying it in that way and then pausing will always get a person to wait for you to tell what you were thinking. I waited a bit, but Mrs. Pezmyer waited longer, so I said, "I would like to exercise my skills in written English."

"Oh? You writing your biography already?" She tossed her head back and snorted.

"I was thinking about writing about some of your experiences as a Daughter of the Delta."

"Well," she said, almost gasping with surprise or maybe delight. "About me?"

"I think you are estimably write-aboutable," I said. Then I pushed the envelope. "Of course, I would need to see you in action at a Daughters meeting."

"Of course, of course," she said. "My goodness, how thoughtful of you, Zachary."

"I consider myself a good citizen, Mrs. Pezmyer, like you."

"My goodness," she replied. She pondered a moment. "We are having a special meeting pretty soon to meet Professor Xantac, you know. You could slip in there and watch me at work."

"Oh, I could indeed. I'll be there with bells on."

"No bells, Zachary. You would have to be very discreet."

"Okay, Mrs. Pezmyer. I will be discreet as Malcolm Mus."

"Who?" Obviously she did not know of Malcolm. Silly me.

I rose to leave. "Well, Thanks and good night, Mrs. Pezmyer. Come on Harley."

She raised her voice as we were almost at the sidewalk. "Forget about the Swiss Army knife, hear?"

I waved, nodded, and looked at Harley. I swear, he was smiling.