

Angela Arthur

Granny's Making Chicken

Everyone overlooks you when you're a child; our presence can go unnoticed as long as we're still and silent. Grown-ups think we're not interested in what they're talking about. But I am. I know Granny hates it when I go to Nannie and Marge's house, but I go every chance I get. At their house, I can laugh and drink Pepsi-Colas and watch soap operas. And they like me. Not like at home where Granny's scrubbing something constantly. Her face sour from the smell of the Comet, or maybe having to put up with me and Mama. Now, you have to tiptoe around my mama most of the time. Usually, after her first beer it's safe to talk to her. That's how I got to be so good at being quiet. It's a useful skill. Teachers like you, animals let you pet them, and prissy girls leave you alone.

During the summer I don't get to go to the library, so I have to settle for listening. I love to read, but Mama makes fun of me and tells me I have to go outside. So, I ride my bike or roller skate through the neighborhood, always ending up at Nannie and Marge's. They welcome me and tell me stories of when they were children running around the countryside, their mean, old step-mother who tried to drown Nannie in the tub, and Mr. Nelson's drinking bouts. I sit there and take it all in, wondering how these two funny old women could be my granny's sisters. But then, their children had moved on. Married with kids of their own, they left our burg as soon as they could- which is what I'm gonna do as soon as I'm old enough.

Nannie and Marge are always laughing at my mama. They seem to think her being mean is funny somehow. They don't have to live with her. They are always laughing and making fun of people and most of the time I like it. They get to say things I could never get away with and it's like they forget I'm there or at least forget I'm only nine years old. Sometimes, we all sit on the porch and if they're drinking their 'little toddies' the best stories would come out. It seems my granny got saddled with the being "that side of the family" after marrying an alcoholic and having two kids who didn't fall far enough from his tree.

"Did I see your uncle Eddie walking down near Coffee's store the other day Katie?" Marge, cajoling me for a little dirt.

"I remember when he broke in the Anderson's house. Boy couldn't even walk straight he was so far gone; he fell right on top of Pinky in bed. Started laughing at Earnest's nightgown and apologized for breaking the window," Nannie chuckled.

"At least the boy's polite," Marge set them both off laughing again.

Sure, they made every story somehow funny and more interesting than it really was, but they didn't have to live with these crazy people. It seems my uncle, who had just gotten out of jail (for the third time) and moved in with us, liked to get baked and break into people's houses. But, that's not the worst part. He would actually break into people's houses that we know! Seems he was too high to care who's house it was or even if they were at home or not.

"Mama says he took it hard when their daddy died and got in with the wrong crowd," I tried defending my own; "he brought home a Bible the pastor at the jail gave him."

Because of course, to my Mama, drinking was not the same as doing drugs. She tipped her nose up just enough around her brother. Somehow, then my grades became important, as though it was a sign she was good. But, my uncle Eddie, for all his bad behavior, was actually nice. He'd help me count out fifty pennies to buy an ice-cream cone and play checkers with me. I liked him. He didn't tease me for being quiet and shy and told me "the meek shall inherit the earth."

"The meek may inherit the earth, but they sure as hell won't keep it for long," Mama mocked.

Uncle Eddie didn't seem to let Mama get to him -- I don't know how he did it. Mama had stopped bringing beer in the house because she didn't want him to "drink it up." I was just glad it was summer and I could escape. Dinner was a nightmare -- my mama working in as many snide comments as she could until Granny would curse, pound her fist on the table, and run into her bedroom. Somehow, my mama thought I should still be able to eat after that, like my stomach wasn't in a knot. Then, her and Eddie would stand in the kitchen washing and drying the dishes as if nothing had happened.

"He's found God! It's so damn easy finding religion when you're locked up and have nothing better to do," Mama's usual tirade if she saw Eddie reading his Bible, "you've been nothing but trouble since the day you were born and you'll never be anything else."

I knew Mama was wrong about Eddie; she was wrong about me. But, I think Nannie and Marge were waiting for my uncle to slip up too. They would question me about whether he had found a job yet and start tsalking, "shame that boy's still living off his mama." When I told them he'd moved in with a friend on the other side of town, they rolled their eyes.

"Won't be long now," they chided.

School was getting ready to start and we hadn't seen Eddie in two weeks. Beer was back in the fridge, mama threw some deodorant at me one day, and granny started scolding me for 'bothering' Nannie and Marge. Maybe they said something; maybe Granny was afraid I was saying something- I don't know. I started riding my bike down the grass alley between the houses, making Mr. Schmintow's Dobermans bark and jump behind the fence. I was scared of them and I would pedal as fast as I could to get past his house and into Mr. Lindsey's garden, where I would sneak and eat his cucumbers. I'd hide out there, talking to God, asking Him questions, begging for wishes. God was never real active in these conversations, but I didn't mind. It kept me from feeling alone.

I missed Nannie and Marge and I rode out there one day despite my granny's warning. There was a mini-van parked out front and kids running around and screaming in the backyard. They were my cousins. These strange, wild, over-fed beasts who had a greater claim on their grandmother's heart than I did. Marge's daughter had come to visit and I knew why I had been told to stay away. But they didn't deserve to be

there. They didn't listen to stories or sit still or stay quiet. They demanded money and soda and kept whining about being bored. I didn't stay long. I suddenly didn't belong in the one place where I always felt normal. Liked.

I had enough of my Mama in me that as I pedaled home, an anger started to fill me and I became reckless, pedaling harder and harder, my face growing hot and my feet slipping, sending me tumbling to the ground. Now, my knee was skinned and grass was clogging up my bike chain. I heard the dog before I saw it. My anger all the more greater at my own stupidity. One of Mr. Schmintow's Dobermans had gotten out and was baring its teeth, its weight resting on its back legs as if to pounce. I couldn't move, my mind suddenly blank, no fear, nothing. I started to cry. Not the blubbering, wail of an injured child, but the silent, muffled sobs I always had to keep people from knowing I was capable of being hurt. The dog backed down, stared at me, turned, and ran away.

The sound of a loud crack, like a mutant firework, went over my head and the dog dropped. My Uncle Eddie came walking up, with a pink duffel bag in one hand and a gun in the other. It looked like a toy in his hand.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah."

His hair was greasy and uncombed. His mouth open, his eyes glossy and wide. He sat down beside me, opened up the bag and started searching through it.

"Here. Here's a twenty. And here. Here. This isn't too big for you," he held out a small silver chain with a silver cross on it.

"Thanks. I'm okay. Granny's making chicken; are you gonna eat with us?"

"No. I gotta go. I'll see ya later."

I never saw my uncle again. Seems my Mama was right. You can't change a man when all you've done is locked him up. All he was doing was living up to everyone's expectations. High. They all said he was high. And "that Randy."

"It's all that Randy's fault Eddie had a gun. He never used one before".

School started and I stopped riding my bike. I stopped visiting the creek and buying candy at Coffee's store. Mrs. Makepeace, the school librarian, put *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* in my hand and then left me alone for the rest of the year to devour as many books as I could. I started to play four-square with the other kids, I started to use hairspray to tame my wavy hair, and I stopped trying to listen to the adults and their stories.