

Dad's Roots

Danielle Barton

The house had been thrown on the side of the hill only twenty years ago, but the combination of careless contractors and not enough money caused it to age much quicker than it should have. Even the concrete steps leading to the concrete porch had been chiseled by the bouts of snow, rain, and 100 degree temperatures. Dad threw his cigarette out the half-opened car window, leaving it to burn itself out on the sidewalk, and twisted the block-sized, blue Lincoln into the closest parking spot. Then his big hands reached behind the steering wheel to shift the car into park and push the emergency brake to the car's floor—all the while saying nothing. Finally, he twisted the keys toward him and let loose of the brake. This release of force jolted the car forward, sending the upper half of my body toward the windshield. I knew this made the visit final.



Dad walked ahead silently, smoking again, and I trudged behind, smelling the leftovers of his Marlboro. He would need another one soon; he always did when we were here, and that meant we wouldn't have to stay long. He guided the way up the steps and around the bowls of salmon-smelling cat food and week-old water to the door. It was always open; even when closed, it was too flimsy to protect the family. Constant encounters with the sun had caused the veneer cover to splinter and peel, and I was tempted to pull off a chunk. But I knew better. Dad turned the hot, tarnished brass knob and pushed the door, and the stench of the three Chihuahuas—their smelly, nasty, biting, barking selves—flooded our nostrils.

Papaw Barton was sitting there, just like always. Crisp, white, v-neck t-shirt exposing Marine tattoos greened from age and sun, and light denim jeans that stopped mid-calf to expose skinny, pale white legs, white ankle socks, and black loafers. He offered us no greeting, rather directed his statements to the small screen in the corner, "Stupid nigger can't catch a ball." His words violated my ears much like the dogs' odors invaded my nostrils; both were equal reasons for hating this place. "Pearl—" he would bark, signifying we were there, and he didn't respond when she called back. Dad and I marched through the living room, making sure to pass the television set without pausing. Even a moment's hesitation there during game time initiated an immediate sigh of disgust and some lamentation, "You're a better door than a window." Even Dad was still

afraid, so we rushed into the protection of the kitchen and finally into the safety of the dining room.

Mamaw was stationed at the room-sized dining table, in her seat—to the right of the head seat—alone, quiet, waiting. She was always glad to see us, although she knew our visits were brief. I can't imagine what it's like to be her. Once, she told me, "I shoulda just left that night. I shoulda just took the boys and left." That's when I realized she didn't like him either. I'd always assumed she stayed because she loved him—maybe for who he had been or who she thought he could be. But for her, staying had nothing to do with him. She stayed because she was afraid. She was afraid of him, afraid of life without direction, afraid of life as a single mother, afraid of life without money, afraid of standing on her own. So, she stayed to fill his coffee cup, to water his tomato plants, to accompany him to church, and to wait beside him at the hospital. She stayed because she was afraid life without him would be worse than life with him.



Granny's Kitchen

Danielle Barton

A whirl of commotion and emotion—
Love stirs the chunky vegetable soup,
Pride flips the fried chicken,
Worry browns the cornbread,
Sorrow sweetens the tea,
Joy beats vanilla into the custard,
Everybody does anything.
Anybody does everything.

