The Train

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DIRTY blue Ford pick-up rattled into the gravel parking lot, carrying a new carload of relatives to the V.F.W. ball. Kneeling on a wooden bench inside the building, elbows resting on the windowsill, I watched Uncle Martin slide out of the front seat, ducking his head to keep from knocking off his Pioneer cap. Aunt Ellen balanced a casserole dish in one arm and, with the other, beckoned their three children (what were their names?) from their seats on the hay-littered spare tires in the back. They rustled up the steps of the building, brand new pants swishing as the legs climbed the steps, and full-skirted pinafores billowing in the wind.

>Hello, there! How ya doin'?" My dad slapped his brother's broad back and leaned over to hug his sister-in-law, casserole dish and all.

>Well, it's good to see y'all again," Uncle Martin drawled. "How was the trip down?"

It was a familiar scene. I perched on the bench, hands folded in my skirt, and swung my legs, white knee-highs and black patent leather Poll Parrots bobbing up and down. I was nine years old and I hated family reunions. There were too many aunts in purple flowered dresses suffocating me with hugs that smelled of dust and toilet water, and oozing, "Well, I declare! You look more like your mother every time I see you," and inviting me to sit on their laps, widened by bouncing innumerable children on their knees. I didn't have cousin Diane's long auburn hair and almond-shaped eyes, and I couldn't forget the reunion three years before when she'd wound up my Baby Tenderlove too far and it never moved or cried or wet again. And I didn't like wandering among the legs of all those uncles with crew cuts who rolled toothpicks between their lips and talked of droughts and John Deere plows and fertilizer.
My parents, five brothers and sisters and I were the only members of this baby-boomed mob from out of state. And every year we traveled down to stay with my grandmother in preparation for the Big Event—the annual get-together. For years the two-hundred-plus family members had been gathering to take a look at Betty and Tom’s new baby or giggle about who the next would be to get married or retell the story about how Uncle Fred fell into the outhouse when he was three years old. But this reunion had been arranged when my aunts and uncles realized that Grandma’s eightieth birthday had just passed, and that her eighty-first might never come.

Being a child of the city, I dreaded this annual incarceration in Gerald, Missouri, a lazy living-in-the-past place of 641 people. On sultry summer evenings, my sisters and I walked uptown and back in ten minutes, with time enough in between to scorn the posters of last month’s municipal band “Salute to America” concert still taped to the windows of Jane’s Beauty Nook and Friederich’s Hardware. And to wonder what people did in this place besides sway on their porch swings, faintly fanning flies and heat and mosquitoes. No matter where you were in town, you couldn’t escape the gray water tower that loomed above the train tracks and lumber yard like a giant cannonball. And even Nelson’s Homemade Ice Cream Store, nestled among a miniature forest of pines, lost its charm when, instead of my usual double-dip chocolate ice cream cone, I bought two Nestles Crunch bars and found them stale and faded with age.

Aunt Carol’s house was haunted with the “olly-olly-oxen-frees” of long-ago hide-and-seek games, played before my brothers decided they were too old to crouch behind chairs and under staircases. And so, instead we sat on the plastic-slip-covered sofa and stared at gray-headed couples sliding across the T.V. screen in time to Lawrence Welk’s champagne music. Grandma’s house was surrounded by pines which, even on sun-drenched summer days, made the house seem cool and old. The house smelled
moldy, of cedar chests and mothballs, and there were cloudy jars of homemade strawberry preserves, canned peaches, and blackberry jam stored among the cobwebs in the cellar. A real hand-pump in the backyard bored me when I found out the well had long since gone dry.

The day-dawning aroma of fried bacon and scrambled eggs always lured me to the top of the stairs, where I squatted on the hard wood floor and peered down through the bars of the banister and listened to my dad shout questions about the Cremshaw brothers and the old property into Grandma’s hearing aid. Her raspy, rambling answers echoed off the linoleum tile and made me wonder how come she could remember the recipe for the blackberry pie that had won her a ribbon at the 1924 Rosebud County Fair, but she could never remember my name. I was bored by her stories because they had no porridge-eating bears or monkies named George who belonged to a man in a pith helmet. And as much as I enjoyed scuffling through the pine needles in her front yard and spooking myself with thoughts of Civil War skeletons in her attic, I wished I were home, where there was no wrinkled old woman in a hairnet who went to bed at 8:00 and dozed off with her mouth open while watching ‘‘Green Acres.’’

But there we were at the V.F.W. again, my dad and uncles arranging the tables in two rows the length of the hall, while I grudgingly unfolded a few slatted wooden chairs, trying to avoid catching my lacy-edged pockets on the splinters, and dodging any uncle who looked like he might be plotting a head-patting. With each incoming family and each new casserole, or cake, a Betty Crocker Cookbook came to life before our eyes. There were Corningware bowls heaped with sour cream potato salad, Sunshine Salad Jello, and green-bean-and-onion-ring casseroles. Five platters of down-home fried, baked, and roasted chicken. Kitty Clover and Lay’s potato chips in ripped-open bags. Three-layered Devil’s Food cake, pecan pie, frosted brownies, and oatmeal cookies with raisins. Warmed formula bottles for the newborns and Sanka for the middle-aged and older.
When each, "But, Mommy, I don't like green beans" child was served and all that remained were a few servings of raspberry Jello melting in their molds and broken potato chips scattered among the cake crumbs and crumpled napkins, it was recreation time for the Kool-Aid set. While the men smoked and spat, the women bustled in and out of the kitchen, stopping momentarily to pat Grandma on the shoulder and tell her how nice she looked, before clattering more silverware and tossing more grease-spattered paper plates into a trash can. The toddlers to twelve-year olds cried and cajoled and taunted and teased over which game to play. Red Light-Green Light was too complicated for those who had yet to learn what "color" meant, and Captain, May I? always made the little ones whimper because their giant steps were only half as giant as ours.

So instead, we lined up around the tables, hands grasping the waist of the cousin in front, and chugged around the room in a human choo-choo train. We snaked between bassinets and slatted chairs, our breathy chug-a-chugs drowning out the Missouri drawls of the men slouching around the room. We "choo-chooed" as we hopped, and helped a blubbering four-year old, Danny, who'd tripped and skinned his knees. Joggling and jostling, we jeered at each other about who was the engine and who the caboose. The kitchen door became the railroad crossing, the benches were barns and farmhouses, and the tables in the middle were the towns, where we occasionally stopped to refuel.

As we rounded a corner, I spotted some Fritos spilling out of a bag on the table, and derailed myself in order to grab them before Diane beat me to it. Then, munching while I rested in the corner, I watched the train bob by my grandmother, who sat alone across the room. Dusky shadows drifted across her face. She was haloed by a flattened mass of gray ringlets, and years of walking beans and raising nine children still lived in her gnarled hands.
From behind her glasses, her eyes gazed around the room, as if trying to take in the hair color of every new great-grandchild and the brand of every bottle of "sodi." While greasy crumbs fell on the kitten applique of my dress, I wondered if she had had to wear a petticoat when she was little, too, or if she had ever pumped her legs back and forth on a backyard swingset and taken off to share some blubber with an Eskimo in an Alaskan igloo.

I remembered her husband, my grandfather, and how he used to cuddle me in his lap and give me chocolate peanut clusters and tell me about the baby chicks in his hatchery. And I wondered who Grandma talked to now that he was gone. Even the "'Polly want a cracker'" parrot who used to perch in their living room had died.

I remembered the quilting table that once crowded her living room, and I couldn't figure out why it had been so long since the Christmas mail had brought a big, soft quilt with designs of butterflies and bluebells and boats.

And I remembered her humming "'Long, Long Ago'" while she kneaded baking powder biscuit dough and the chicken spattered on the stove, and I wondered why I never heard her hum anymore.

And while the train of cousins jogged around the room in one giggling, boisterous ring, not noticing Grandma and the wrinkles framing her empty smiles, I hurried to rejoin the circle, for I wished my choo-choo train would never end.