

HARTS

& Minds

“K. DeAnn Bell’s wonderful short story proves that in the hands of a good writer, food can be a complex character. Relationships, in this story, are pulled and torn like kneaded bread.”

~ Bethany W. Pope

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In My Kitchen

K. DeAnn Bell

I am five years old. I am sitting at my Grandma's kitchen table on a Saturday morning holding a glass of cranberry juice. I don't like the stuff but I am drinking it because I have asked for it. It is one of the many rules at Grandma's house that doesn't apply to me at home. The radio is blaring "Up from the Grave He Arose" a hymn which I will believe is "Up from the Gravy, a Rose" until about the age of 7. In my mind, then and now, God and gravy are very much a part of one another. My Grandma is humming along and rolling out biscuits on the floured table top which she allows me to help her shape with the mouth of a floured coffee cup. The scratchy sound of the flour against the wood of the rolling pin and the ceramic cup makes goose bumps stand up on my arms and sends a shiver down my spine. I watch as she pours a bit of old bacon fat from a Folgers coffee can on the end of an oven warmed baking sheet. As I shake the biscuits from the mouth of the cup, she scoops them up and rubs them in the warm grease, in long smooth strokes, like an artist with a paint brush, top and bottom, before pushing them to the end of the pan. We work together until the dough is only fragments stuck to the fruit-patterned vinyl tablecloth. The table is a cacophony of different dishes. Some of it stuff my mother used when she was my age, some of it was part of my Grandma's Hope Chest put together for when she got married, but most of it was bought for ten cents in a yard sale. When we are finished, the biscuits stand like huge white, shiny, marshmallows on the pan. She puts them in the oven as soon as the tray is full and cleans the flour up in such a way that it never gets onto the floor. She is everywhere at once, pouring, opening, closing, arranging, and tasting. When the biscuits come out of the oven she lets me have the first one. I pull it open and the hot, steamy, breath burns my fingers. I put butter on it and watch happily as it stains the white fluffy centres with the colour of sunshine. It is crispy on the top and bottom but soft as white Wonder Bread in the middle. Covered in thick, white, sausage gravy, these biscuits become a food that will hold me until the lightning bugs fill the sky and I can indulge myself in the tastes of fried catfish and sun warmed watermelon. Because it is summer and Saturday, no one is in a hurry. We are yard sailing today and I am dreaming of the unloved and unwanted My Little Pony that I will save from the bottom of a shoe box somewhere. In the cocoon of the Kitchen, I know two things absolutely, that I will have to remember to thank God for this biscuit I am eating when my Grandfather comes into the kitchen, and that I am loved.

"Oh, cat hair!"

I look up from turning bacon in a large iron skillet to see what it is that has angered my Grandma. She has never, in my lifetime, owned a cat but I have noticed that they are a source of frustration and awe for her. If it isn't "cat's hair to make kitten britches", then it is "the cat's pyjamas" or the "cat that stole the cream." Cat hair, in the world of my Grandma, and especially mentioned in the kitchen, is a curse word, one of two that she will allow herself to say or hear. She is looking into her mixing bowl with pinched lips. When she sees me peeking, she winks and smiles. I have never been sure why I bring her so much pleasure.

"What's the matter?"

She tilts the bowl towards me and gives it a stir. She looks at me with a pained expression that I don't quite understand. When I continue to just stare, she stirs it again. This is her way of telling me that I should know what's wrong. I look again. What is in the bowl is part of

the problem but not all of it. The kitchen is immaculate and every surface is covered with things that she has bought for us to eat and drink. The table is laid out with a feast's worth of dishes waiting to be filled. There is a place for grits, eggs, hash browns, and my Grandmother's speciality, biscuits with gravy. Already on the table is butter in its covered dish shaped like a chicken, sorghum, strawberry jelly that she made last year, and a pitcher of milk. I see the wooden spoon slide through the mixture like cake batter rather than dough. The bag of flour sitting next to it has enough to properly stiffen the mixture, but not enough to make the roux for the gravy, or for rolling the biscuits out. If I continue to cook bacon, and then go and get flour, the fat will be solid when I come back and the bacon cold by the time we put everything on the table. She has organized each step of breakfast making so that everything will be hot when it gets to the table. Her plan did not include abandoning her guest for supplies. She is trying to make my husband feel welcome in the family by making sure that he is so well fed that he can't move. My husband is in the back room still sleeping. Waking him to go get flour is not an option. He is in the privileged position of "Guest" right now, which in my Grandma's world is just under the position of God.

I nod and push the half cooked bacon off the stove. "I'll go get it."

"Are ya'll gonna need more eggs?"

"I'll pick them up."

She winks at me again and gives me a soft pat like a good dog before she sets the mixture aside. She picks up her black coffee and takes a long drink. I glance at my own pale mixture but know better than to pick it up. Although posed as a question, what I am being asked to do is buy eggs while I am at the store. This, and the fact that she has not offered to pay for the ingredients, is her acknowledgement that I am still a part of this household but that now I am an adult. When I stayed the summers here she used to tell me to go get her pocketbook and go get her whatever she needed. In those days, though, I would not have been turning bacon. I would have been setting the table or cutting up fruit. I have earned the right to turn bacon as long as my Mom isn't here, but not the right to make biscuits. There was a time when only my Great Grandmother, MeeMee, got to make them, but I don't remember that. I only remember her sitting at the table with me while both of us watched Grandma and Mom cook. The difference being that MeeMee could eat the fruit that I was cutting or the bacon that was being cooked before the meal and I could not. In my own kitchen this hierarchy is not as clear and whether it is because of this, the hardness of my water, or the aged bacon grease, my biscuits never quite come out with the right taste. I don't make them when I am at home.

It is already hot when I walk outside. Whipples is only a couple of blocks away but in the interest of keeping breakfast peace, I drive. When I walk into the store, it's cold enough to cause goose bumps. I breathe in deep waiting for the scent of rotisserie chicken to make my mouth water. It's part of how I shop here, how I locate myself in the hundred memories of coming through this door for odds and ends that my Grandma needs. In my whole life, we have never bought one of those chickens but I can't imagine the store without the smell. My wedding ring catches the sun and I smile. For a moment I am both a child and a woman.

I pick up a hand basket and start towards where I think flour will be. The white polished floor is so slick under my sandals that I feel a little like I am skating. I walk past the large layered candy rack that used to be my main reason for volunteering to shop when I spent my summers here. My fingers find the square shape of a large Tootsie Roll bar almost of their

own accord. For a moment I don't think of calories or dress sizes, I just anticipate the almost chocolate taste. I glance around to see what other goodies I can get my hands on. As I plop it into the basket I see the woman at the till frown at me a moment. I am trying to remember if we went to high school together but my mind refuses to do any more than acknowledge that she is familiar. By the time I have arrived to pay for what I have collected, she is fully squinting at me.

"Are you adding this stuff to your Grandma's tab?"

I blink, "I didn't know that she had a tab."

I don't add that I am surprised that she would have one. A tab at the grocery store was for people who couldn't afford their groceries when they got them. I knew of people who had them, older folks who were depending on pensions, and some of the small farm families who had to wait for crop sales, but never my Grandma.

"We let her start one awhile back."

The woman, Martha Whipple, hasn't gone to high school with me and isn't actually asking me to put groceries on my Grandma's tab; she is letting me know that my Grandma is running one. That is the way it is. If pride goes before the fall, then this whole place is in for a tumble. Preserving the pride of an individual is the second commandment in the South, the first being to treat guests as holy. This is a family run store and they take care of those they consider family. My Grandma has been shopping here for the better part of forty years, longer than I've been alive. To Martha, the third generation of Whipples to run this store, that makes her, and by extension, me, family. Martha is telling me that money is tight for my Grandma, but she is saying more than that. She and I both know that my Grandma doesn't like to owe money but that she would also rather not eat than to ask for it. I shake my head, "No, don't add it to her tab. I'll pay for them and settle her bill. I'll leave you my phone number, if the tab gets over \$30, just give me a call and I will take care of it. We can keep it between us."

The smile I get tells me that I've responded correctly. When I look at the tab I see why Martha is talking to me about it, the tab has been running unpaid for over two months. Martha asks where I am living now, how my husband is treating me, and if we have any plans to come home. I am responding and I am smiling, but I am not listening. I am wondering what else my Grandma isn't able to afford and how on earth I am going to ask her about it without getting Martha into trouble.

"You're a good girl," she says as she closes the cash drawer, "Tell your Grandma that I am still waiting for that biscuit recipe."

I laugh. Everyone is waiting for that recipe.

"Do you need some more coffee?"

I am looking at my Grandma, and she is looking at the bottom of her empty cup. The coffee pot gives a cranky watery huff as it produces a thick, black, brew. You can tell my mom has made the coffee rather than my Grandma because you could stand a spoon in it. When this happens, my Grandma adds water to it and gives my Mother pained looks. The Kitchen is clean, but unlike previous times that I have been here, it is not tidy. The objects on

the table are all set at a slightly wonky slant and there are pieces of paper, pens, and the remains of food packages tucked between the breakfast dishes. The stereo tunes in first one station and then another, but no one is listening. Between my Grandma and I there is a selection of cereals and toast, glasses of orange juice, the chicken butter dish is there but the jelly on the table is store bought. There are also some canned peaches, and a box of doughnuts she has had someone bring to her from Walmart. My Mom is making bacon to go with our breakfast but not eggs, and not biscuits. I am disappointed but I don't say anything. Mom's declaration to my Grandma that we are having a light breakfast so that we can save room for a big Bluegrass dinner has silenced both me and my Grandma on the matter. My husband is already outside. Partly to try and decide if the tree close to the back of the house will have to come down while we are here, and partly to give me some kitchen time. The clock above the sink has North American birds on it that chirp when the hour hand points to them. My Grandma looks a little insulted every time it chirps. There is an opened mouth frog on the back of the sink that holds the kitchen scrubber, and the Folgers can full of bacon grease that my Grandma uses for cooking has been replaced by olive oil. I can't imagine my Grandma eating an olive, much less using olive oil. My Mother's influence is everywhere.

My Grandma leans over and hands me her cup, her brows pinched together, she casts a wistful look towards my Mom. "We can make us a real breakfast tomorrow."

I catch a peak of my Mom's sadness out of the corner of my eyes as I pour the coffee. It isn't anywhere on her face, but exists somewhere in the space between her eyes and the bacon. She tilts the skillet back and forth allowing the bacon fat to run over the thirsty black surface and over the tops of the sizzling bacon. My Grandma has her back turned towards the stove. She is angry about her car, and about her driver's licence. My Mom has taken it before the state could. In the driveway, my Grandma's car has a deep gorge up the side. She says that she can't remember where it came from, but a neighbour says that he saw her hit a bridge-guard and drive off without even pausing. In the place in my Grandma's pocketbook where the license should be my Mom has put a note that says, "Because I love you." Neither one of them are talking about it.

My Grandma is eating the fruit almost faster than my Mom can cut it. She smiles and winks at me when she sees my Mom purse her lips. I wink back trying to take as much of this moment in as I can. Today there are no little hands shaking biscuits from the mouths of coffee cups, no vinyl table cloth, but something about my Mom's table is unmistakably Grandma's. The dishes are newer, and the chicken butter dish has been replaced by a miniature tub of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter. My Grandma insists that she can believe it. The radio announcer is talking about the heat index and humidity, but under the rhythm of his words I can hear my Gravy Rose. I stir the roux quickly, feeling like a mad scientist more than a cook as I mix first fat and flour, then milk and salt, then flour and sausage bits, then pepper, to get the gravy to just the right consistency. I know that even if it turns out like paste, everyone in this room will smile and eat it. My Mom's biscuits are just out of the oven and my Grandma is opening one of them up with the expertise of a surgeon. She puts a bite into her mouth carefully, the crust crunches like snow. We are all saddened and proud at the same time.

Biography

K. DeAnn Bell has a BA Hons in English Literature with Creative Writing from Bangor University. She is a member of Bangor Pontio Writing Group and an Assistant Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She is an advocate and admirer of popular fiction. She is completing a short story collection for her PhD in Creative Writing at Bangor University which seeks to explain the process of marginal identity acceptance in the English literary canon through the creation of superhero stories. Her sister, Jennifer DuBerry, was volunteered to make and photograph biscuits and gravy for this project.

