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Looking Backward

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Looking Backward

— by Betty Ann Nail Ramming

PHOTO BY BUD ELDER



Betty Ann Nail Ramming, OWFI "Creme de la Creme" winner

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ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN HILL

WESTVIEW

When I let my mind wander back into the past, I think of Grandma's house more than thirty years ago. I remember the hot summer nights when there was no air-conditioning. At least, no one that I knew then had air-conditioning, but I don't remember anyone complaining about the heat as we do now. I suppose we just didn't think it was important, or not knowing better, we thought in summer we should be hot. The people spent a good deal of time outside in the evenings, where it was cooler.

Grandma's house, like most others in the neighborhood, had a wide wooden porch. There was no plastic and aluminum folding furniture to blow away, but sturdy wooden rocking chairs and a porch swing. I can still hear the steady, hollow sound of the rockers rocking on the warped boards of the porch floor. Later, my uncles removed all the old wood and made a new smooth concrete floor, and it never sounded the same. The chains of the porch swing used to creak rhythmically as my grandmother sat, swinging slowly and waiting. I didn't wonder then what she could be waiting for; I believed that everyone's life was as simple and uncomplicated as mine was. In those days, nobody told us children about the unpleasant things, and we had no television with which to discover the real world for ourselves.

Grandma's yard was not a lawn of perfect Bermuda grass, clipped and neatly edged, but a great untidy space. There were vacant lots on both sides and a little creek ran along the back of the property where the alley should have been. There were areas of hard-packed earth where we played beneath the elms, catalpas, and mulberries that grew wherever they happened to sprout. The bottoms of our feet had a semi-permanent purple stain during mulberry season. My grandmother had a volunteer peach tree that struggled to survive out in back, where she had tossed some peelings and some peach pits. It was a puny thing that produced only a few stunted fruits, but my grandmother was proud of it still. I think, in much the same way as she was proud of us.

The flowers and shrubs were almost as haphazardly spaced as the trees, and since they received so little care, any blooms we found were a pleasant surprise. There was no money for nursery stock, and we thought landscaping was done only to the grounds of institutions and hospitals. We had not seen such places, of course, but we sometimes wondered what they were like when we thought of Aunt Rose. At least, I sometimes thought of Aunt Rose, but I don't know if my brothers and my cousins did. Surely, the older girls thought of her, but Pammy thought she was dead. We didn't talk about her, no matter how we wondered. We didn't understand what had happened, but we knew that we shouldn't ask.

The house was a perfect setting for my grandmother, and always seemed as capacious, yet disorganized as she herself was. It was not really large; it just seemed that way. There was always room for someone to come home. Everyone in the family knew that Grandma's was just the right place to go with a problem because she always defended us — whether we were right or wrong. In that respect, she was unfair. She was also opinionated, and at times, domineering, but she was consistently loyal, and it was a wonderful thing to know that no matter what mistakes we made, or what happened, we would always have her to go to.

Uncle Will had actually bought the house, and Grandma had come there to help out and take care of the two little girls, and the new baby, when Aunt Rose had to go to the hospital. The weeks and months had turned into years, and my grandmother had taken charge, while Uncle Will slowly faded. We never thought of the house as Uncle Will's; we always said, "Grandma's house."

One Fourth of July week-end, when I was about eight, the grownups were all sitting on the porch talking, while we raced around the yard playing Hide and Seek in the dark. I was tired, and also a little afraid, so I went to sit by Uncle Will for a rest. It was too hot inside the house to go to bed, so I sat and listened to the chirping of the crickets and the cicadas, and the croaking of the frogs out in the creek. The June bugs, little kamikaze pilots, were divebombing the window screens trying to get to the light. There was a slight breeze and I could smell the honeysuckle on Mrs. Clark's fence. We could see and hear fireworks going off all over town and Uncle Will had been telling my grandmother that it reminded him of the time he had spent in the islands of the South Pacific. I asked him if the islands were pretty, and he said, "No."

My brothers decided it would be fun to scare all the people sitting on the porch, so they found a Texas Twister, only then we innocently called them Nigger Chasers. They lit it and hid in the bushes to watch the uproar that they created. The whistling missile screeched straight onto the porch, hit the wall beside the screen door, and flew up to the ceiling of the porch roof, and there it spun around until it exploded. It was all over in a few seconds, and after scolding the boys, everyone ended up laughing. Even Uncle Will laughed, but I could never forget how he had yelled, "Hit it!" and fell full-length, face-down on the porch, with his arms protecting his head. Now, I realize that ten years is not long enough to forget a war that was over, or a wife that continued to exist, but did not live.

Aunt Rose never got any better. She never came home again, and they never told me why. Sometimes, I would hear people say things about Uncle Will. I didn't know why my mother and my aunts would say, "Poor Will" when they talked about him because he fell apart so slowly. It was almost as if he just dissolved, but it must have been painful. It took fourteen years for Uncle Will to die, but his death was as deliberate as if it were caused by a self-inflicted shotgun blast. The only difference was that the alcohol he chose to ease the pain of living brought so slow a death that none of us noticed that he was dying.

So many things happened in those years that I didn't notice because I was so sheltered from reality. At times, I was aware of a quiet uneasiness that I couldn't explain, but incredibly, I was usually happy as a child. I survived quite well without air-conditioning and television. Maybe it was because the adults in our world could not provide us with everything, and so they gave us what they could — the time we needed to grow up.

Editor's note:

Since the winner of the OWFI *Creme de la Creme* Award wasn't at the Awards Banquet to accept her \$525 in money, on Monday, May 3, 1982, the SWOSU Language Arts Department declared "Betty Ann Nail Ramming Day" beginning with a party in the 4013 Oklahoma Writers class and followed by a picture-taking session by the Public Relations Department.