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A Jam and Jelly Grandmother

I've always loved stories about ideal families. For years, I thought there was something wrong with mine. Even Gransallie, who came closest to my idea of that ideal. But not quite.

I wanted a mother who got dressed up each morning and served breakfast from the five basic food groups--remember those wheel charts in primary colors in the school text books of the fifties? Even sunny yellow sticks of butter that made fat look as healthful as the leafy greens, red apples and sliced white bread. My ideal mother would see her happy husband off to work and her agreeable children off to school, and spend the rest of her day baking cookies, visiting neighbors, and go to P.T.A. meetings at night. Instead, I got a mother who wore bluejeans and set out our three-hundred acres in pine saplings. She mowed the grass between the rows of saplings in front of our house; she grew collard, mustard and turnip greens in winter, prepared and cooked them in five-quart pots; in summer, it was peas, beans, squash, corn, potatoes and tomatoes, half for the table and the other half for the freezer; she sewed fashionable dresses for four daughters and shirts for three sons; on her knees, she waxed the hardwood floors of our four-bedroom ranch-style house. She washed, starched, ironed, scrubbed, and raked yards. Then she would put on her red lipstick and smile.

I wanted a daddy who would get up in the mornings and hum while he shaved, then go to work at either the school, or the courthouse, or one of the two grocery stores in Statenville (those were the male-work options in Echols County, in the late fifties and early sixties, other than logging, pulpwooding, turpentineing, stumping and farming). Any job was okay as long as it didn't require a screaming chainsaw that had to be worked on come weekends. My daddy cut, loaded and hauled pulpwood for a living. A one-man operation, much of the time. He raised and butchered our beef and pork; with his old blue farm tractor, he would turn under garden spots for neighbors. He quit school in the eighth grade to manage the farm after his daddy died. He received a Purple Heart for a combat injury in World War II. He never applied for a pension. He never owed a dime in his life.

My sisters and brothers didn't fit the ideal-sibling mold either. They were temperamental, tough, and passionate about their independence. My sisters would flap me with wet, greasy dishrags while we washed the supper dishes. I didn't fight back, but once I played dead to save my life. I ended up with a brother who was an artist, another who owns a thriving upholstery business, and another who has adopted a niece's two abandoned children. He already had four children of his own. I have a sister who's a nurse, one who works for the prison system of South Carolina, and another who owns and operates a thirty-apartment complex, single-handedly. Last summer, she decided that she and I would build my dad a house--I thought she meant that we would hire contractors, that the project would span over a couple of years. In one-hundred degree heat, we laid floors and raised rafters and sawdust; we wired for electricity, installed cabinets and appliances and hooked up the plumbing. During a

thunderstorm, she hammered shingles on the roof. I played dead to save my life.

I wanted a grandmother who would read stories to her grandchildren before a slow fire in winter, one who would make jams and jellies in summer.

Well, Gransallie's little mobile home didn't have a fireplace, and she read only to herself--Guidepost, Readers Digest, and the Methodist Daily Devotional.

But she did make jams and jellies jam in summer:

"Look out you don't get scalded; I got jelly cooking in that pot." *she would say,*

"Watch it, I spilled jam on the floor. Done slipped down myself and nearbout broke my neck."

Andy "Don't cut my jelly with that spoon, young lady."

In her doll-house sized kitchen, the white counters would twinkle with sugar, the sinks would brim with berry-stained pots and stirring spoons, the trash can would spill over with emptied Sure-gel cartons and wax packets, apple peels and grape pulp. Her dinette table would be covered with white dishtowels on which sat upside-down, scalded pint and half-pint jars, and on the stove, bobbling and jingling like castanets, was a sauce pan full of boiling water with gold jar lids and rings. Dribbles and spatters of red, blue and black jellies and jams were on the counters, floors, tablecloths, dishcloths, towels and even Gransallie's bleached rag mop. And especially on Gransallie's cotton print every-day frocks--all cut from the same pattern with prim bows at the rounded necks. Her blue-plastic framed glasses were flecked with grape juice .

Her trailer would steam from spring through autumn with sticky-sweet essence of sugar and blackberries, grapes, mayhaws, apples, peaches and plums. Blueberries if she could get them.

When the yellowflies started biting, she would go on daily forays to various blueberry patches throughout Echols County. Not for free--she didn't want the blueberries for free. She bartered for the berries with her valuable time: she told nurse stories and informed the blueberry growers of their family backgrounds, connecting them with long-lost kin they'd hoped to live down. On one such foray, she forgot that the family she was visiting was related to this other family and began mouthing off about how furious she was because this other family had buried "one of those sorry Williames" right in the road leading to her own family's burial plot. No berries that day.

Then the peaches: she would load up her grandchildren, nieces and nephews in her banged-up blue Chevy and drive fifty miles to Barney, Georgia, to pick peaches. We were fools for going, but there weren't that many excursions to the outer reaches of Echols County. And she would make it sound so enticing: "In Barney, younguns, they say the trees are loaded with plump, ripe peaches. Why, you can stand in one spot and pick a bushel basket, and right down the road they sell the best hamburgers... I wouldn't mind stopping by Kresses Ten-cent Store on the way back and picking up a few more jars." No hamburgers and no stopping by Kresses, but we did pick peaches--about a hundred-acres of trees would yield a bushel. Not to mention getting sprayed with poison by diving cropdusters, which will probably give us cancer.

In May, when the mayhaws came in, she would marshal us children out to the black-water slews and hammocks along the Alapaha River, behind our house, and help us pick the reddish haws from the thorny shrubs along the banks. Then she would command us to wade out into the syrupy water and skim up the rest of the fruit which had dropped from the shrubs and floated out. On the highground, she would seem to be saluting us, shading her eyes from the bright sun with her right hand; she would shout out orders like a general while we soldiered on around cypress knees with braiding moccasins, our feet sucking in the mud beneath the confusing black-water mirror of sky. Our nets casting

about for the mayhaws. She had rigged the nets herself from blue nylon net left over from the beauty-pageant dress she'd made me. I didn't win the contest so she considered sewing for me a waste of time.

Blackberries. Oh, the blackberries! Nubby, thorny, plump in nests of briars with diamondbacks shaking their rattles in warning. A hot dry rattle that made our nerve endings flare but never deterred Gransallie. Not if there was a single high-bush blackberry with more black than red berries in the thicket of briars. Wade on in there with a forked stick. For every berry we picked we got a thorn to tally them up with. Like brail for the blind. Our hands, arms and legs looked like we'd tangled with wild cats. We were sweaty, blistered, bleeding. Our fingertips and lips looked bruised. There had to be child-labor laws to protect us. There had to be some justice.

All summer Gransallie seemed to be preparing for winter and a jelly-jam shortage. Then she would give away most of precious jars of clear, sweet, set fruit and berries to the same people she had talked out of their blueberries and to the child laborers she'd abused.

As a daughter, sister, mother and grandmother now, I hope my family doesn't measure me by their ideas of the ideal, but by what makes me uniquely theirs. I hope I have enough character to be remembered by my grandchildren the way I remember Gransallie--a little on the strange side, but grandmotherly enough to shape into some semblance of the ideal.