

### The First Nudist

It was the summer after the spring that my younger sister and I went to visit Gransallie in Florida and almost starved to death on one of her low-calorie diets, which I prefer to remember as a kind of pre-Easter fasting, rather than admit that my grandmother had once again failed. To me, she was proudly stout and old-seeming in her fifties, corseted and caustic, a state grandly lending to authority that today would earn a woman the title of loud-mouthed slob. And it was several summers after the summer when Gransallie hauled us off to Florida on a hunt for kin and happened up at the house of strangers and, out of stubbornness, pretended for three days straight they were our cousins.

July, 1960, to be exact, though when remembering Gransallie, what marks time in my mind is usually some disaster--car wrecks and getting stomach-aching lost and tactless remarks made to people who wouldn't speak to her again if she told them she was from the TV show, The Millionaire.

Family-reunion time. Southeast Georgia. Wrights Chapel. Better times ahead but enough good times behind to warrant sweating out one whole, hot, gnat-swarmy day trying to out-talk and out-eat all the Walkers and relations to Walkers in the screened dining



shelter overlooking the Walker graveyard (graveyard: humbler than a cemetery).

Gransallie, in one of her flower-sprigged dresses and silver set hair, was always more congenial, less apt to hurt feelings, before she ate and while she ate. I watched her gaily parading the aisle between two lunch-room style tables, scooping cake and pie slices that would end up puddled on her plate in the gelatinous gravy of chicken and dumplings, a dish now having been thoroughly tasted and tested--dumplings overcooked--and wondered how long it would take her to find out that her favorite niece, Ophelia, from Miami, Florida, who she'd long held up as an example of clean living and industriousness, had been caught swimming naked with her boyfriend in the baptism hole of the Alapaha River, located a short Sunday walk down a woods path east of the little country church.

News of the scandal was spreading like spilled Jello, and my cousin Mary Grace and my sister Maggie were helping it melt. I should go ahead and tell Gransallie, before she got full and cross, that her favorite niece also was living at a nudist camp. But to tell Gransallie now, I would have to speak too loud over the chiming of metal, glass and ice, and jabbering like hail on a brush arbor tent. Besides, I didn't want to be in the line of spit when Gransallie found out. And, have no doubts about it, she would find out.

Soppy paper plate bowed with sugary desserts, she picked her way among the plague of Walkers--pious men in starched shirts and plump women with babies on their hips--headed for the bench on the north end of the dining hall where Ophelia sat with a plate on her lap and



her long auburn hair over her eyes. Fork raised to her mouth with a nervous sliver of chocolate cream pie, Gransallie wedged between one of her sisters and famished Ophelia in a sheer green puckered shift and gold earrings peeping from that screen of hair. Between bites, Gransallie would pleat Ophelia's skirt on her knee or pat her hand or tuck her hair behind one ear. You could figure when Gransallie was getting on to Ophelia for being too skinny, because she would lean left and gaze down at Ophelia's snake waist and shake her head--I guess Gransallie couldn't tell Ophelia wasn't wearing a bra. Then she was up and off to get some more banana pudding for Ophelia.

Like Christ bestowing blessings on the multitudes, Gransallie would wave her fork over the heavenly throng of Walkers, sometimes singling out and signaling one over to kneel before Ophelia--former Christmas angel in coathanger wings for the church play--while behind her, Ophelia's boyfriend, in hacked off denim shorts and Jesus sandals, picnicked alone under sacred shade of the great liveoak.

If Gransallie should turn, if she should look through the screen, she would behold the boyfriend with hair a little longer, a little stronger than Ophelia's, but with the same oxblood ruff and brownish roots. Centered on his hairless, muscle-bunched chest, like a surgeon's target, was a vein-blue heart. He looked eyeless behind the lens of his silver sunshades that bounced off warped images of sunned tombstones and pines, Uncle Bud in bib overalls and Aunt Hilda in her church dress.

I was used to seeing men at reunions, or any other gathering, go out and stand around their trucks, kicking tires to check for air leaks, or cleaning their nails with their pocketknives, while the



women inside gabbed and worried with babies. But Ophelia's fellow wasn't doing any of that; he was propped proudly on the trunk of his red Corvette with his long baked legs turned out and his hook nose turned under, eyeing us all as if we were the freaks.

Knowing Ophelia and her boyfriend were nudists, which could bear up under just about any definition, I seemed to see more skin folds than were showing, to smell ripe musk rinsed with sweat, and hear alien whispers I couldn't give source to. Ophelia had covered her nudism pretty well, I supposed, but her boyfriend reminded me of one of the circus people who stopped off in Cornerville each summer and set up on the vacant lot in front of the Baptist church. People we ogled while standing in line before marching in for Bible School. People we prayed for but didn't mean it.

Why had Ophelia brought him? (It was obvious why she hadn't introduced him.) What would Gransallie say when she saw him? Why, on one hand, did Gransallie seem to see everything, then on the other hand seem to miss what was right before her eyes?

No matter. I could rest now. Glass bowls of field peas and butterbeans were filming over with pot liquor; rose crescents on bone platters were peeking through eyes of roast beef fat. Fried chicken wings and necks were scattered on dishes of crust bark. The women were boxing up leftovers to take home for supper. Babies fussing, fisting gnats from their eyes; boy cousins wearing wood buttons of watermelon seeds on their bare bellies. And Gransallie and her sisters were strolling toward the graveyard for their annual cry-in over the graves of their mama and daddy, strolling right past the nudists folding into their sloped red Corvette and circling the sin-christened oak.



Gransallie didn't know. She would never know. I would never know. The nudists were gone. We were going. While Gransallie was kissing her sisters, Mary Grace, Maggie and I carted cardboard boxes of empty dishes from the ~~living~~ <sup>dinner table</sup> hall to Gransallie's bunged-up green Belair.

Waking that morning, I'd seen my daddy out checking Gransallie's car for signs of her latest wreck. An odd lift to the lip of her front bumper, a new ding like an eye in the left door, a curious dip in the roof that didn't figure unless she had rolled the car. Did he plan someday to confront her with all the evidence, maybe take away the car that symbolized her independence, her striking out from the farm to work as a practical nurse at the Florida East Coast hospital in St. Augustine? Maybe he intended to present the tally sheet of accumulating dips and dings the next time she started loading us up for one of her "educational trips" to Florida. We could be half-dead from some wreck, walking dazed and bleeding through the streets of Orlando or Tampa, but we wouldn't tell. Long as we could catch a ride past the city limits of Cornerville, Georgia, long as we were going, we didn't care where or what shape we would be in when we got there.

Hot wind batting through the windows of the Belair, Gransallie with her beauty-parlor set hair, <sup>drove</sup> up the wooded lane to the fork of the next dirt road, turning right along fields of heat-wrung green corn, and augering east into the flatwoods of Swanochee County. Talking, talking, as if she'd been left switched on: Reunion Station. Rehashing the day--whole conversations replayed between her



and Ophelia, complete with sign language--the fodder she would feed on till next July. Aunt Wannie Mae could rest in peace knowing she'd raised such a fine daughter: first-grade school teacher for Dade County public schools, choir member at the First Methodist Church, engaged to an anthropologist. B

"You girls," Gransallie said, especially addressing Maggie and Mary Grace in the rear view mirror, "let Ophelia be an example of how you could turn out. Hear?"

"Yes ma'am," they said.

Her brown eyes turned on me. "Yes ma'am," I said.

Then she told us why again, letting the Belair turn where it would. Just keeping it between the ditches, you might say. Why my daddy didn't come to the reunion was a "mys'try" to her. I could tell her. I could tell her he would have liked to, he said. Nothing he'd have liked better than spending his only day off in Walker hell! Then she would say he hated her for leaving the farm, then she would cry, then she would start in on how he should have made something out of himself, gone to college--any degree would do, any title other than "farmer"--which would lead back into talk of the reunion and who among the Walker clan had gone away and made good since last year. Ophelia, of course.

Gransallie was also big on "firsts": first man on the moon, first woman to fly; Florence Nightingale was the first nurse. Historical tidbits garnered from Readers Digest and TV. She'd just bought us a TV, our first.



Winding down now, though the Belair was winding up on the same dusty lonesome roads, Gransallie began eyeballing the sun wallowing low over the pine tops. Should we be heading south? Shouldn't we have reached the highway by now? Twenty minutes coming this morning, and an hour going this evening? I could almost hear her mind clicking off questions, questions that would reveal her main weakness--confusion--questions never to be asked out loud.

I looked back at the powdery roll of pinkish dust, at Mary Grace, on the left side, dozing with her sheer lips parted. Maggie with her fawn hair blowing--childish ringlets now relaxed into spiral waves--was snapping gum and gazing out the other window. Cardboard boxes crammed between them. They were wearing identical navy print dresses with gathered skirts and frothing white crinolines. Long as they were going, they didn't care where or what shape <sup>they</sup> would be in when we got there.

Gransallie was silent now, thinking, and after a couple of miles, braked and backed into the right ditch, spun out and pointed the Belair north, plowing through her own dust.

At the next fork, she turned west, backtracking over the Belair's tracks and meeting the sun now slanting lazily through the pine needles. A low white house with a hog pen on one end of the front yard. A fat man in a white t-shirt watching the lone car as if it were a flying saucer.

"I think we oughta stop, Gransallie," I said. "Ask that man..."

"Huh!" she said, driving. "What would he know?"



We had already juddered past him anyway, beating up the road rough as a railroad track, toward a deadend wall of blackgums draped in vines. Right or left? Right. Shooting straight east through stripes of sun.

"Uh huh!" she said, sitting high behind the wheel of the Belair. "I got it now. This is where I oughta turned in the first place."

Ahead, another dust ribbon unraveled from a side road and whorled behind another automobile, indistinguishable in the dust cloud making up and parting and powdering the palmettoes and myrtle bushes where katydids stashed their shrieks. Gransallie stepped on the gas with her square-toed bone shoe. (She owned three pairs of the same style of shoes: black, for winter; white for spring and summer; and bone for autumn--a true sign that summer was turning to autumn when she began wearing the bone shoes on linking weekend visits to Georgia.) She was either trying to overtake the automobile ahead or follow it out of the woods. Getting closer, close, dust furling like smoke over the hood of the Belair, sifting inside and coating the lens of Gransallie's blue-plastic framed glasses.

"Move over, Buddy," she said, peering into the dust. So, she was trying to pass. Out to show "Buddy" that she knew her way around, that this woman behind him was no stranger to these woods, that this woman-driver was no average woman-driver. Daddy's fault.

Suddenly, with one swift inward-driving whoomp and a series of rattles, like Coke bottles dumped from a crate, all motion ceased except for the dust and bodies shot forward like dummies from cannons and cardboard boxes pitching dishes while remaining right side up. Gransallie's glasses rocked to the tip of her nose, and Mary Grace



sprawled across my lap, like a dog cooling its belly in the dirt. Gransallie's important triangular bone pocketbook, on the hump of the front floor, was spitting up change and pens and receipts and letters. The back of my head throbbed from being cracked like an egg against Maggie's forehead; my tongue stung, tasted of orange Kool-aid. A white platter, sheeny with chicken grease, was shelved neatly between my seat and the right door.

In the dust scrim through the windshield, I spied a man materializing behind a red Corvette, like the devil wading through the sulfur fires of hell: long broomed hair and raisin skin, the shade of which carried seamlessly down to a flare of dark hair. That bruise-blue heart tattoo, center chest, like a Swastika.

"Hey, lady!" he yelled, heading for Gransallie's side of the car. "Anybody hurt?"

"I...uh...," said Gransallie, dazedly gazing down at her pocketbook, then at us. "You younguns hurt?" she asked.

Mary Grace, with her hand capped over her nose to catch the blood, shook her head no. We all said no, and when the dust cleared, Gransallie said "No!" and threw up her hands as if the man had a gun.

"Duck, younguns! It's a <sup>rip</sup>rust!" she screamed, and began scrambling toward me and Mary Grace with her left arm over her eyes, yanking on the door handle and shoving us out.

I tumbled into the ditch, sandwiched between the chicken platter beneath me and Mary Grace on top of me, and lay waiting while Gransallie snatched Maggie with her hand on her forehead from the back seat and Mary Grace with her hand over her nose from on top of me, all of them trooping over me like a ditch ramp to get to the woods. Gransallie sent them running with slaps on their hindside,



then reached down and yanked me to my feet and sent me trotting after them into cat-claw briars and gallberry bushes and rustling palmettoes that reminded me to look out for snakes. Mary Grace and Maggie were loping zigzag down rows of tall yellow pines and starveling scruboaks. Mute faces shadow-stippled by pine fronds, and full skirts whipping at their quick white legs.

Behind us, the man kept yelling, "Wait! Hey, where are you going?"

I looked back and saw Cousin Ophelia step out of the Corvette on the other side: boyish breasts and legs, legs, legs, green dress fanning out the door.

"Don't look," said Gransallie, behind me, "run."

Now and then I'd hear her stumble and grunt, up-grunts and down-grunts, but she was keeping pace with me, though I must admit at times I was lagging--I had to tell her, I had to stop her. What if she had a heart attack? She was running faster than I'd ever believed possible. How many times had we ambled behind her along some Florida beach, down the streets of St. Augustine, gaining a seaward surfer or a city block every hour or so?

"Lord, younguns, he's subject to...kill us," she shouted now, breathing hard with briars tearing at her blue-sprigged dress and thick stockings rolled at the knees.

I had to tell her, I had to tell her that the man was almost her own kin by marriage. But I kept galloping ahead, listening to the her panting behind, to the man yelling for us to wait. "Gransallie, wait," I said, licking sweat.



"Don't say nothing," she said, shoving me over a gopher hole with a mound of excavated raw sand in mysterious contrast with the rich loamy woods floor. "Just run, honey. I been out in the world; I know his kind."

I started to tell her again, but what came out instead was, "Gransallie, there's a woman with him." I'd delay tainting the blessed Walker name as long as I could.

✓ "You don't know, sugar...the things that go on. I seen it all since I been ~~out~~ in the <sup>Florida</sup> world. Women too, all kinds. Crazy people everywhere."

She hazed me on toward a cypress slew where my sister and cousin were hoofing through roky black water, feet sucking in the rooty-smelling mud and knees jacking high around cypress knees and tussocks. Skirts and crinolines trailing over felty green duck weed, level as a pasture.

"Get up there!" said Gransallie, as if she were driving a team of mules. She'd done that too.

"But, Gransallie," I said, turning to gaze at her strange raddled face, "we gone get lost out here. We already are lost."

"Keep moving." She moved me.

"Gransallie," I said, hanging back to jog alongside. "Wait. I gotta tell you something."

She trotted ahead, lifted her skirt and waded into the slew, mud swelling up to her fat white knee caps. Above the black water, tiny sulphur butterflies tangled like kites on strings. "Tell it while we're running," she said.



"That's your own kin, Gransallie," I shouted from the banks.

"That's Cousin Ophelia and her boyfriend."

Shortened by the mud bog, she stopped with her back to me, wheeled and held out both hands. "Hush your mouth!"

The mud stopped burbling, water blisters popped. A lone cricket chirred. Maggie and Mary Grace posed as if for pictures before a palisade of likewise flare-skirted cypresses. I had loaned Mary Grace my dress from the set Maggie and I had bought at the Smart & Thrifty, in Valdosta, when we had gone through a stage of wanting to look alike. Now it was ruined: muddy, ripped, bedraggled.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "I'm telling you the truth. I seen him at the reunion today. Her and him together." I kept adding on because Gransallie kept standing there with her mouth open. I had to make her speak. I had to make her see that a Walker could sin and be saved like anybody else. I didn't dare say the word "nudist", which now seemed maybe a condition they couldn't help, or a form of religion. No need telling about them practicing their particular persuasion in the baptismal waters of the Alapaha.

But Maggie did, with relish and mud on her batting lashes.

"They was swimming nekkid ~~in~~ the river, Gransallie," she said.

"Everybody at the reunion was talking about it. Said they live at a Miami nudist camp." Enough of Ophelia the saint!

Gransallie dropped her skirt over her muddy knees, and I figured she was getting set to run again.



"Come on, younguns," she said, slogging from the slew, up the banks, tramping back the way we had come with us tracking behind with wide innocent eyes. Mary Grace's bleeding nose had left a Hansel and Gretel trail on briars and dog fennels and myrtles.

"Wait till I get my hands on that girl," Gransallie said, mumbling her mad way toward the continuous yells of the couple. She stopped once and broke a dog fennel and began stripping its ferny dill leaves while she walked.

She yelled through a megaphone of hands toward the orange van shining through the pines. "You better get ready, Ophelia; I'm coming."

They were standing on the edge of the ditch, dressed in their reunion outfits, wide-eyed as we were.

"Don't think I don't know about you, young lady," Gransallie said, stretching one muddy stout leg across the ditch.

Ophelia offered her hand. Gransallie refused it, placed both hands on her lead thigh and heaved across with a caterpillar like a fancy barrette in her hair.

The anthropologist stuck out his hand too. She refused it. Didn't even look his way, just set her brown eyes on Ophelia and kept her brown eyes on Ophelia. She hied the switch, shaking it under Ophelia's hard doll nose. That rapt face.

"How come you showing your privates all over Florida and Georgia? How come you hanging around with that trash?"

"This is Rob, Gransallie, my fiancee."

We hopped over the ditch, closing in for the switching. We'd earned it.



"And what's he doing with his hair growed out like a woman?"

"He likes it that way, Gransallie."

"How come?"

"It's the in-thing. In Miami."

"Miami, my hind leg. I reckon running around nekkid's the in-thing too, huh?" She backed Ophelia to the right side of the red car, while the strong-eyed anthropologist walked to the rear ~~of his~~ car and bent down to straighten his folded license plate, then strided to the driver's side and got in, shaking his head. His eyes, without the sunglasses, were the same lead shade as the lens.

"We were just swimming in the river, Gransallie. You know, like me and you and Mama used to do behind Grandpa Walkers' place. I swear..."

"Don't you dare swear. Your mama'll roll over in her grave."

"Yes ma'am."

"How come you to hide him from me at the reunion?" Gransallie sucked in to get her wind.

"I remembered how you are...how Mama said you were."

"And how was that?"

"Well"--Ophelia leaned <sup>against</sup> the car--"she said you were sort of...set in your ways."

The anthropologist sat rubbing the steering wheel. "Get in, Ophelia," he said, "let's go."

She opened her door and sat with her feet still on the ground and Gransallie standing before her. "I kind of thought you'd be more open-minded since you moved to Florida," Ophelia said.



"Open-minded? I'm plenty open-minded, just not about swimming nekkid and running with trash..."

"Rob. You'd like Rob if you'd get to know him. I was hoping you'd get to know him."

"Let's go, Ophelia," said the anthropologist.

Gransallie glanced at us, then shoosed us toward the Belair.

One thing Gransallie hated more than sin was being made a fool of. She'd missed some cue in her silver head. She'd been duped. Still she withheld her eyes from the man; it was Cousin Ophelia who had shamed the Walkers, dead and alive.

"I been hearing about such but I never expected I'd live to see

*the day* of my own kin... *"I just want to know..."*

We wanted to know too. Hoped *the anthropologist* wouldn't drive off till

Ophelia answered. Hoped he wouldn't leave till Gransallie had her say, because she might chase after *the car* if he did, leaving Maggie, who'd been getting driving lessons from Gransallie, to drive us home.

We listened, we didn't breathe. We watched, we couldn't hear. Gransallie would shake her head, then nod, then look at us, I guess on the good parts, to see if we'd heard.

Daddy would love this.

"What you reckon she's telling Gransallie?" said Maggie to Mary Grace, all three of us in the front seat with Gransallie's sick pocketbook and the reunion refuse.

"I bet she's telling all about what fun it is to swim nekkid, don't you?"

"I think Gransallie's getting to know him," I said, and they shrunk me with correcting looks.



"I bet it's all about living at a nudist camp," said Maggie.

"What if they were just bathing?" I pressed my head back on the seat, watching the sun through the windshield ooze off the edge of the world.

I would find out about nudist camps at the library in the courthouse in Cornerville. From encyclopedias or National Geographic. I would look it up first thing in the morning. Same as I'd looked up "queer" after overhearing Gransallie tell Aunt Elsie that she believed she'd seen her first queer--a man wearing an orange scarf around his neck. But a Walker queer would be another thing altogether. Just as a Walker nudist was another thing altogether. And we would find out from Gransallie where Ophelia now fit in the family soon enough--not all of it but enough of it. We'd be warned. We might have to overhear her talking to one of the grownups about Ophelia. But one thing I knew was that since Ophelia was a Walker, she would somehow be redeemed. Rob wouldn't. Rob would be the one who got her hooked (a Gransallie word for everything from smoking to drinking to sex). Eden revised.

When Gransallie got to the car later, we drove behind the ~~woods~~ *cornerville* out of the woods, eating dust textured of the violet twilight. She was quiet all the way to Highway 94, and even waved at them when we got to the Cornerville crossing, the ~~orange~~ *red car* striking out south into Florida, and Gransallie heading west toward the block of houses behind the courthouse square to take Mary Grace home first.

"You girls let Ophelia be an example of how you could turn out." Sitting high in the green Belair, watching them go, she added, "You know, I bet you Ophelia's the first nudist ever come from these parts."