

### The Dictionary

No books in our house, except for the Holy Bible, and suddenly we were blessed with an unabridged Oxford Dictionary.

Gransallie had found it on the top floor of the Florida East Coast Hospital, in St. Augustine, where she lived while working as a practical nurse there. Having no education but a great respect for words, especially so many words, she brought the dictionary home to us.

My family used it as a booster seat for my next-to-the-youngest brother.

We were living in the little white fifties house in Statenville then, and when Gransallie came home for the next visit, the dictionary was on one of the slick-white kitchen chairs looking much used. The textured wheat cloth cover on the front was threadbare, the binding was coming unstitched, and the back had been worn off <sup>from</sup> the friction of my brother's diapered bottom. It was now doing service as a hand fan on the front porch swing.

While Gransallie was talking to my mother at the stove, I heaved the word part of the dictionary onto the kitchen table and bent over it, turning the tissue pages, as if I were studying it.

Usually my older sister Margaret, who had cozied up to Gransallie by saying she planned to be a nurse, was top dog when our grandmother came home. But not this time. When Gransallie saw me poring over the finely printed words, she waltzed over and began picking lint from my navy knit shirt that had been thrown in the wringer-washer with the towels as she oohed and ahed about how smart I was. She just couldn't get over how I'd grown. She bet I was making all A's in school. I told her I was, though I was barely passing geography and had an F in arithmetic on my last report card.

All was well until suppertime and my brother started looking for his booster seat. My mother, having witnessed the whole dictionary scenario, set my brother on a cook pot turned bottom-up on the chair. She was either helping me get in good with Gransallie or letting me hang myself with my lies.

Next thing I knew, Gransallie was carting me off to a family reunion, to show me off to our country kin. No problem there. They either accepted that I was smart, or accepted that Gransallie was of course proud of her granddaughter. My guess was, they were just letting her run off at the mouth until she ran down. Like the alarm on a clock.

Soon Gransallie would leave, and next time she came, the dictionary would be forgotten. I would have pulled up my grades by then, I would have read all ten pounds of words in that foot-high dictionary. Maybe the world would come to an end.

But when she came the next time, I was the one who had forgotten, and the dictionary was back in use as a booster seat, and one whole section of pages was missing. I hid them, set the dictionary on the table again, and turned the remaining pages as if

studying it, and lied about my grades in school again. I even told Gransallie I was thinking about becoming a writer. She kind of chuckled under her breath and patted me on the head and told me that was sweet but all the writers were dead. She'd never met one in person so they must be dead. Be realistic in your expectations, was what she meant, I guess. My face burned. Maybe I could be a school teacher, she said. Yeah, that's what I meant, I would be a writing school teacher--I would write lessons on the blackboard for my students to copy down.

That evening, we were off to my cousin Minnie's, who was my third grade teacher that year and therefore no longer seemed like kin. Minnie wasn't a teacher, to Gransallie, she was the teacher, because Gransallie had raised her after her mother had died and credited herself with Minnie making it through highschool during The Depression, then going on to college. She couldn't name another Staten who had done that. Now Gransallie was ecstatic that one of her own blood-grandchildren might do it again. I was terrified--my sins were about to be found out.

Gransallie marched me right on into Minnie-the-teacher's fine brick house and sat me down on the hard white brocade sofa in the long living room, facing sliding glass doors with a view of the sun burning behind the woods like the fires of hell. Then she announced my career plans to Minnie and her husband Roy. I could tell Minnie didn't think much of my prospects--she'd been letting me slide as much as ethically possible, either because we were kin or because she felt sorry for me. She was convinced from the first day of school that I just didn't have it between the ears. I daydreamed and doodled

a lot in class. I was too blonde, too chubby, and my feet pinched in the brown oxfords Gransallie had sent me after I had traced my feet on notebook paper and mailed it off to her.

Of course, Gransallie told Minnie about me studying the dictionary and somehow worked around to my all A's in school. I couldn't breathe. I felt shrunk. I prayed for the end of the world, as promised by our preacher. So long had I feared the Rapture, but now I wanted the Rapture to come, even if I got left behind on earth for lying about the dictionary and my grades. I told God, there and then, silently of course, that I would for sure read that entire dictionary if he would just turn Minnie into a block of salt like Lot's wife.

She didn't tell. I couldn't believe it--she didn't tell. We were on our way back home in Gransallie's car. Just in time for supper and to see my brother seated on the unabridged Oxford dictionary.