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Terrie Petree

eating the old thoughts

Though the sacrifice had been made a year before, Cora Chattering once cooked and consumed her own last supper. She prepared a dish representing each child, dead or living, and washed away each bite with cold water from the thermos her husband had carried with him to work. Back when he worked. Back when he breathed. Appropriately, the main dish was Tell, her oldest child. For Tell she ate roasted duck, meaty and tough. Chewing until the ache in her jaws spread to her temples and through her head. Next was Liv, just a year younger than Tell, but a child of life and light, wide awake to the world. Cora ate Liv in a bowl of brightly colored mixed vegetables. It could have been Lifesavers or fruitcake, but to digest Liv, Cora needed to eat a rainbow and mixed vegetables were in the freezer. A trembling yellow Jell-O was next. The tremulous transparent nature of Kade's dish angered Cora. She thrust each spoonful of the insipid blob into her mouth and tore the weak substance with her teeth even though it would go down easy with or without mastication. As she swallowed she thought of Kade and wondered if lemon Jell-O was still his favorite food. Finally, a white angel food cake with cumulonimbus qualities. The irony of an angel food cake for Faith, her youngest, almost choked her.

Faith had been the only apostle present at that meal, twenty years ago. At thirteen she was unaware of the symbolism of the bread she broke with her mother that night. But, as she grew up and Cora grew odd, Faith thought back

on the strange meal of Jell-O and mixed vegetables as the last night her mother was Mom and the first night the woman seated across from her was Cora. A mother and daughter ate at the long table that evening when Faith watched Cora break a piece of angel food cake, dip it into her water, and look solemnly, knowingly towards the ceiling as she ate the soggy offering. But, two unrelated females left the table, separated by one meal saturated with meaning.

Cora never explained the cannibalistic feast to her daughter. She had chewed, digested, and excreted her husband and family. For dinner that night years ago she had eaten skin, bones, and hair. And with a hint of ceremony she had eaten the old thoughts, the painful memories of the cross she was no longer willing to bear. A few days before the dinner, Cora had walked barefoot on the bank of her small mountain pond. The weather was cool, sharp as autumn became dead winter. She wanted to feel the sting of icy water until it became like needles in her feet. Cora had been numb for too long. She could not escape from the memories as the year anniversary drew closer. As each five-toed indentation formed in the cold mud and then slowly wore away, she thought of two things. First of the inked impression of her children's feet pressed flat into forever on the pages of baby books. Then, she thought with no little desire how good it would be if memories were footprints in mud and water could wash away the bad ones. Standing in black mud, Cora knew then that she had to free herself from the crippling grasp of remembering. That's when she decided to eat what had been eating away at her.

The purpose of the meal was to separate herself from the agony of memory, but the separation became all encompassing. Soon after her feast of forsaking, Cora began speaking with Dante, her golden retriever. She didn't tell him he was a good doggie or ask if he would like a treat. Cora conversed with Dante.

"My life would make a gripping movie," she repeatedly told him. Without expanding on events, Cora envisioned the big screen of pictures that brought hands to mouths and widened eyes as thirsty others drank in the acid flavor of her existence. She didn't smile at the conjured images of her silver-screened life and she didn't cry. Cora only thought of it matter of factly, the way she did about everything in the twenty years since the dinner.

Faith had married at seventeen and moved down the mountain into town. The four years between the dinner and Faith's marriage were surface years in which neither woman ever spoke of what lay lurking in covered wells of subconscious thought. Yet Cora was threatened by Faith's absence because

she knew emptiness would inevitably bring whispering memories like hot tar oozing into her mind and coating her thoughts. Ray came during the year after Faith moved to help Cora and to ease Dante's burden. Ray was Cora's Chevy pickup. Cora saw Ray's steel, bulky body as manly and secure. She spoke to Ray as if he were her father, her lover, or her husband depending on what figure of manhood she needed at the time. At night Ray sat close to the house so that Cora could see him from the living room.

Dante and Ray had been Cora's closest friends for twenty years. During the middle of her sixth decade Cora knew that she preferred the conversation of an inanimate object or slobbering canine to the tedious daily vernacular of mere acquaintances. These acquaintances were once her close friends, but years and events wore away the bonds. This group of strangers growing stranger included Faith.

Today, Faith stood in front of the grocery store watching others watch her mother as she had for twenty years now. None of the 913 people in the town ever grew used to the sight of old Cora bumping down the mountain in the truck. On this Autumn afternoon Faith watched the entourage of leaves and dust accompany Cora through the cluster of pointing pines that lined the road. As Cora pulled into the grocery store, Faith could see her long, gray ponytail and red plaid shirt. Faith could also see that Cora was lost in conversation, even though Dante was not in the truck.

"Afternoon Mom. How are you?"

Cora stood with one leg on the gravel road and the other still twisted behind her on Ray's floorboard. With her aged and purple-veined hands gripping the steering wheel, she stood staring at her child. Her child. As if Faith were used to such attention from her mother, she stood patiently, humbly waiting for a reply. Faith's cheeks were reddened by the sharp autumn weather and it was at these colored lumps of flesh that Cora stared with startling intensity.

"I'm red."

"I thought I'd come up tonight. I've got some good pie apples for you," Faith said.

Cora nodded and put the half of her body surrounded by the foreign world back into the security of Ray and drove away. Faith stood in the road, watching her mother grow more distant.

"Autumn is a bloodbath," she told Ray. Cora's eyes were large with horror and submission as she looked at red leaves, red sun, her red truck, her red shirt, and thought of her red daughter. With a deep sigh, the breath of

defeat, she felt the hidden, hated, but never forgotten suppression of twenty years rise from her stomach to her tongue.

“They say knowledge is a dangerous thing. All four of my children are full of blood. I saw it in Faith’s cheeks. Yes, they say knowledge is danger. I thought sending Tell to college was giving him life. Tell was the oldest, you know. And always watching. Looking for something, I think. Tom used to say that we should have named him See instead of Tell.” Cora laughed the laugh of inner anguish. An insidious chuckle that gave voice to the ache inside her. On the air that rushed from her lungs, the biting story came pouring out of her mouth with the force of two-decades worth of restraint.

“Tell came home that Christmas after his first bit of college. I saw it, Ray. I saw that Tell had stopped looking. My boy wasn’t searching anymore. I sent him off to that school to find something to fill his eyes. What did those people give him? On Christmas Eve night I heard two shots. One. Two. Run, oh run to the shed. Faith stood screaming. Kade stood staring. My husband standing in the middle of his four children. Two standing and two lying in blood between gardening tools and wiper fluid. Tell shot Liv first. My daughter had no nose anymore, just blood. Tell fell only a foot or two from her, the gun still touching his hand.” Cora and Ray now sat in the gravel drive facing her home. She could see the shed from behind the right side of the house. Cora was angry. Angry that thoughts she had once digested were pounding on her. Each hot red thought forcing its way into her mind. Each sharp taste of the past raping her tongue with the searing flavor of a life that wouldn’t be repressed.

“I buried Tom by Tell and Liv just four days after the kids’ tombstones were put in. He had a heart attack. But really it was the whispers that killed him. The whispers of them.” Cora pointed down the mountain towards the town. “And the whispers of the trees behind the shed. They kept telling each other what they had seen. Tom heard them say ‘Tell’ and ‘Liv’ over and over again. He must have known it was coming because he went to the shed and lay across the places where Tell and Liv had been. Faith found him, too. Kade set out that night to burn the shed. But I said no. I need it. It’s a memorial. ‘A memorial to what . . . to hell?’ Kade asked. A memorial to what I have survived. A piece of the pain I can kick, and touch, and hate, I said. So after the funeral Kade drove away. Far away. He lives in Nevada now. I think he has a son.”

And Cora let it begin. She looked in surprise at the clear liquid of her tear. She had expected to cry blood. When the few tears dried up, Cora walked from Ray directly into her kitchen to begin her final Last Supper. She left

ceremony behind and with a hunger born of hatred and fear she began to consume all the red she could. Cora's savage teeth devoured oozing tomatoes. She drank thick, cold spaghetti sauce. Her old woman hands shoved bits of raw ground beef into her mouth. From a can she forced pickled beets inside her. In a matter of ten minutes she ate every blood-colored food she could. Then, she methodically cleaned the kitchen and walked out to the shed. Although she could feel herself growing older each second, she found the ladder and heaved her way to the roof. Cora sat with folded arms on top of the shed.

It was dark when Faith pulled up, but she saw Dante staring up at the roof. The lights of Faith's Jeep shone on Cora as if she were finally the star of her life's movie. Without a word, Faith walked into the house, unable and unwilling to face that shed which seemed to wickedly wait for her in the darkness with its gruesome surprises. A few seconds later, she got in to her truck and drove away. The red pie apples sat waiting on the long table.