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REFLECTION

Memories of Miss Felicia

Donna St. Clair

She was always “Miss Felicia” to me, and in my growing up years, I spent part of my summers with her and her family in Bristol, Virginia. “BREE-uh-stuhl,” as she called it.

Miss Felicia’s daughter-in-law, Jo-Ann, was my mother’s sister, so that was the connection to me. She treated me, however, pretty much the same as she did her regular grandchildren. “Young-urns,” we were all called.

When I was a child, I was very much in awe of her. Even then, I appreciated how much she could do with absolutely nothing. She lived in a little cinderblock bungalow, sparsely decorated and supplied. Yet always there were delicious smells coming from her kitchen. Always, she would invite you to partake of something good.

No can of Crisco ever made its way in there. Only lard for Miss Felicia. The woman made the best darned lard biscuits (“BEE-uh-skits”) anyone ever tasted.

She owned just one car for all of her driving life, and she made sure she got her money’s worth from it. Miss Felicia, a combination of Scots-Irish and Native American stock, thought it was just plain wasteful for an expensive contraption like that to sit unused when it wasn’t transporting you somewhere. So, she used her parked car for other purposes?like drying apples in the back window, for example.

Her father, the man we all called “Gram-paw,” was tall and stately—part Cherokee—and he fascinated me as much as she did. Gram-paw made his living by selling ginseng root, and he would disappear into the mountains for weeks at a time digging for the stuff. No backpack. No tent. No food, that I knew of. Just Gram-paw and his own two feet—off on a ginseng hunt.

“Don’t you worry about him?” I asked Miss Felicia one day as I watched him walking out of the backyard, headed to Who-Knows-Where. Even then, as a grade-schooler, I realized Gram-paw was an old man, and that old men ought to be looked after.

“Why, gracious, Paw’s been up in them hills since ‘fore ye was born—since ‘fore I’s born, too. Why, if I’s to tell him not to go up ‘ar, he’t pay me no mind nohow,” she said with a chuckle.

Miss Felicia always saw the light side of everything. If she ever had a dark moment, I don't remember it. For the last thirty-five years of her life, she lived alone as a widow. Things must have been hard for her. Lonely, too. But I never heard her complain. Her sense of humor kept her company.

She loved jokes (only the clean ones, mind you; this is a devout Christian lady we're talking about!). One of her favorites:

QUESTION: "How's my hand like a pie?"

ANSWER: "Because it's got *muh-rang* on it!"

And she loved to make other people laugh, too. Miss Felicia knew that her Southwest Virginia-speak brought chuckles, and so she peddled her colorful expressions wherever she could. When her son-in-law went to serve funeral duty as part of a National Guard honor guard, she referred to Bob's "goin' out to shoot somebody straight up to Jesus." She got a lot of mileage out of that line.

Miss Felicia never missed church; that much everybody knew. But what most folks didn't know was that Miss Felicia also never missed a day without her snuff. Yep, just a pinch between her cheek and her gum. Fat chance on catching her doing it, though. Snuff—and her early evening "toddy"—was Miss Felicia's secret vices. She may even have kept them from God.

Somehow, we all knew Miss Felicia had a boatload of money somewhere. Her late husband had done well as a house painter. And goodness knows, she never spent a cent, so she must have had it all tucked away somewhere. Whenever she'd commission one of her children or grandchildren to grocery shop for her, she'd hand them her scribbled little list, always with the admonition, "Now, git the cheapest kind. The cheapest kind's fine fer me." Her daughter-in-law Jo-Ann, my aunt, always used to say that Miss Felicia could forgive you for murder—but if you short-changed her fifty cents, she'd hold the grudge for the rest of her life.

Yes, money was a pivotal subject for Miss Felicia. So were her teeth. While other mountain ladies might have suffered through with bad ones, or just let their bare gums shine, Miss Felicia was determined to spring for a good set. This was no small investment for someone who hated to spend money as much as she did. So, as in the case of her automobile, she was determined to get good mileage out of her teeth. She never, ever took them out—except when she slept. One of her night time rituals involved the cleaning and storing of her prized choppers in a little pink box that stood like a shrine on her nightside table.

All in all, you'd stand a better chance of seeing Miss Felicia *with* her snuff than *without* her teeth.

As the years wore on and Miss Felicia grew old, she stopped making her lard biscuits. Instead, her son Roy would get Hardee's biscuits for the two of them, and would bring them to her house where he'd find her puttering around in the little kitchen, brewing the coffee.

"These are raht good," she'd say every morning, chewing thoughtfully. "But I believe mine's better, weren't they Roy?"

And Roy would assure her that it was so. Then she would say something funny about one of the children or grandchildren and make note of something happening in the world. She liked to keep up with things and make sure everyone was okay. Worried about Jo-An, who'd recently had a mastectomy, she inquired of Roy: "And how's your Jo-anna Rose? Is her new titty still fittin' her okay?"

On that particular day, Roy knew something was wrong from the minute he turned the key in her door. Sure, she'd been taking to "sleeping in" some mornings and he had teasingly told her that she was acting like a teenager again.

"Why, Roy," she'd say with a grin, "you know full well I never got to act like a young-urn the first time 'round!" Just like Miss Felicia—making light of a hard life.

Roy walked through the little living room, into the little hallway that led to her little bedroom.

"Mama," he said. "You better rise and shine. I got your biscuit here and it's getting cold!"

Silence. He waited a moment—then shook the bag of biscuits hard, as though the sound of the food would roust her up from even the deepest slumber.

"You hear this, Mama? Now, don't you make me come in there and get you outta that bed!" he said, this time speaking with a voice that echoed off the cinderblock.

Still silence. Before he even made it to her room, his eyes began to fill with tears. Because he knew what he would find when he got there.

And there she was, all decked out in her very best nightdress, peaceful as could be, smiling just a little wisp of a smile like you'd imagine someone would in the final countdown of a blast-off straight up to Jesus.

With her teeth in, of course.