

Melrose

by Allen Youngwood

Jennie had been forewarned of the changes by the time they drove over the Douglas Creek bridge into town. A lot can happen in fifteen years. The massive oak trees that lined the highway were taken down by a widening project. The beloved old movie theatre was now a restaurant. The mill pond was drained, leaving a weedy depression. But, as she gazed out the back-seat window, somehow none of this detracted from her memory of the place. Mostly it looked and felt the same, only smaller. A lot smaller.

Her father, Harold, turned left onto Bristol Street past the town's only park. The Sherman tank was still stationed on its concrete slab in the center of the park, along with a plaque, listing the names of the sons of Melrose, Wisconsin lost in Europe and the Pacific, those killed in Korea and those from Viet Nam. Jennie briefly wondered if there were more names now? Her mother, Millie, turned in the passenger seat to give her a smile as they pulled into Ruby Ginther's driveway.

What was left of the young children of Melrose and their spouses encircled Aunt Ruby's long walnut dining-room table, all talking at once. Only Millie and her three older sisters remain now. Vilas, long gone to cancer, and Merle, Pearl's twin, lost to heart disease almost a year ago. Jennie sat at one end of the table, the only 'child' there. She had fond memories of these family get-togethers while growing up. But it was different today. She was seeing her relatives with adult eyes really, for the first time.

Aunt Ruby spoke from the head of the table opposite Jennie. She was the oldest, and the only one to still live in the old hometown. Ruby had her stories, and she was having a grand time telling them; the old gent across town who accidentally killed himself cleaning a shot gun, the December romance between a 78-year old neighbor and her 93-year old beau and the fist fight at the Legion hall. The mention of old Melrose family names prompted random comments and a flurry of earnest side-bar discussions.

Jennie noticed familiar items from her grandparents' house, prominently displayed around the room: the old cuckoo-clock brought from Germany generations ago, a faded painting of Coon Hollow—the family farm outside of town—and a music box that played 'Greensleeves'. Jennie loved to wind the key and open the lid of that magical box as a kid. It looked tiny to her now, up on that shelf.

Aunt Ruby had the floor again, "Harry and me was coming back from the cities on the old highway; this was years ago and we come up on a long line of cars going real slow. Well, Harry was in a god-awful hurry to get back to town for some damn reason. Got cussin' mad at the delay. He swore if the guy holding up traffic ever pulled off, he was going to stop and kick the hell out of him. He meant it too. So, some time goes by and finally the cars pick up speed, and I see Pa's old green Chevy along side the road. So, I says to Harry, 'Look! It was Pa going so slow, we should have known.' All he said was 'Shit!' and on we went."

An explosion of laughter filled the room. The old faces became children's faces again, remembering their father and his life-long belief that, to go over 25-miles an hour in an automobile, was an act of lunacy.

The food was placed on the table, looking every bit as bountiful and delicious as a holiday feast from long ago; huge pot roast, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, peas and corn on the cob. No arugula salad here, thought Jennie. On cue, the food was passed in both directions, she noted. This was serious business. Uncle Marvin picked up a slice of home-made bread, cut a slab of 'real' butter—from the local creamery no doubt—and carefully placed it in a corner, he folded the bread once over, and then over again to a quarter-size with the butter slab in the middle. It was the farm-hand way; the way the men did it when he was a boy. The same way Jennie saw men eat their bread when she was young.

The feasting was nearly done when Aunt Ruby spoke up, "Well is it true that you never get any rain out there in California?"

They all turned to look at Jennie. What the heck? she thought, surveying the smiling faces, the sly looks and the eager eyes. Absent any hint from Mom or Dad, Jennie concluded a silly question deserved a silly response.

"Ah, yes, Aunt Ruby, it never rains, never has and never will."

Ruby was delighted, "Oh, you! Just like your Ma. She was always pulling my leg."

"Now, come on, I'm not that bad," said Mom. "Certainly not as goofy as Stella."

"I do believe I did read something about rain in California," said Aunt Stella. "They passed a law or something. Fred, dear, do you remember that?"

Uncle Fred jumped in, "Yep, Seems they stop you at the state line and warn you not to bring in any fruit, vegetables or rain. Happened to your cousins from St. Paul, didn't it Howard?"

They were off and running. Uncle Howard and all the others taking their turn batting it back and forth across the table. Suddenly, Jennie realized what she was witnessing; something that had escaped her as a child. Some longstanding family game, started who knows when, each taking it one step further; changing the subject sometimes, but always cueing the next. Jennie felt honored and proud. She had been asked to set the game in motion and had unwittingly done so. And quite well at that.

Jennie smiled as she thought back at her Grandmother Lulu, in one of her shapeless flower-print dresses, sitting in her usual spot at the head of the table. A large tumbler of Mogen David wine glued to her hand, trying to decide which of her children to start with. Jennie, and all her other grandchildren, eating at card tables, set up out on the porch, their feet swinging free. Babies napping in the attic bedroom.

The game continued for some time, with Jennie getting her share of turns, ending when Aunt Ruby rose and went into the kitchen; her sisters followed her lead.

The pie was cut and served on the red-pattern china, and cups of coffee sat steaming in front of each place. Things were beginning to wind down; there were lulls in the conversation and an occasional yawn.

Presently, the table was cleared; the men wandered into the front room to talk sports and politics, the women into the kitchen to put away the food and do the dishes. As for Jennie, she continued to sit alone in the dining room thinking, in a completely new way, about those oh-so-gentle-men in the front room and those forever beautiful women in the kitchen. Before joining the ladies, Jennie stayed put until she had quietly blinked the tears away.