

Growing Up

My family lived in the small village of Natchez, Louisiana, on Cane River. At the corner of Highway 1 and Main St, three white crosses sit next to the railroad track, marking the place where three of our cousins died. At the foot of the bridge, Morning Star Baptist Church guards the entrance to the Village. An old brick church where most of us were christened, Morning Star also guarded the cemetery where most of my ancestors were laid to rest. That is where I place the silk flowers for my mother and grandmother this Mother's Day.

Natchez is a place full of legends and old wives' tales. In my childhood, we played in the grass and red clay dirt in the hot sun all day. We walked barefooted from yard to yard, climbing trees for juicy plums and handfuls of sweet figs. Fences were for keeping the chickens and pigs in the yard, but the front yards were open expanses, save the flowerbeds. We were sent out at dawn after breakfast and not expected back until dusk, except for a brief stop at the backdoor for a lunch sandwich. We didn't have dinner, instead we all sat around the table for supper at night before we were sent off to bed. Yes, at summer time the living was easy. Until you got old enough to do chores.

My grandmother grew up near this small village in another one called Derry. If the village of Natchez was a city, then her place would be the real country. Farmland and dirt trails. She picked cotton for a living. She live on Simon Cohn's place and worked there too. She kept a small garden for her own family. Her mother's name was Viola but they called her Shang. My grandmother was called Minervy.

She was a tough, scrappy woman, who worked hard and loved harder. She raised one daughter. When her younger sister died, leaving 12 children, she raised them too. She was resourceful and crafty. She made clothes for her children, grew and preserved their food, and could make a meal out of anything. She was stern and just, wielding a switch with masterful strokes to fit the crime. She was

loving and playful, speaking broken French and dancing with a quick step. She had an easy smile and a steady look

. One did not cross her word.

My grandmother worked hard and worried about the kind of life her daughter and two young grandchildren would have in such a small place. She decided to move somewhere they would have a chance at a good education and job opportunities. She chose Shreveport. A few years after my grandmother, mother, brother, and sister had been living in Shreveport, I came along.

Suddenly the one bedroom house with the screened front porch and full kitchen was too cramped. Grandma already slept in the living room with the sofa and love seat, giving her only child and two grandkids the other room. So the landlord closed in the front porch, then added a bigger room behind the kitchen. This is where I slept with my mother in a full size bed and my sister slept in a twin bed. This freed up the front bedroom for our brother and grandma stayed in the living room.

The dining table sat at the foot of my mother's bed. The sewing machine cabinet formed a side table, the chair turned to face the little dresser on which the small TV sat. Between the beds was a recliner, my toy box hidden behind it, then a long dresser completed the back of the room between the beds.

The kitchen was L shaped and narrow, connecting all the rooms, its space formed by what was left after the tiny bathroom. This was my grandma's domain. She ruled the kitchen with a creative and stern, nurturing hand. This was where she taught me how to scald tomatoes for freezing, how to mix jello with fruit and nuts, and how to quickly mold rice krispy treats. This was where she let me peel the biscuits from the can and place them in the sugary mix for the peach or berry cobbler. This was where

she taught me to make sweet iced tea, adding a few ice cubes to melt and form those delightful pockets of hot and cold sensations. This was where she cooked Sunday Dinner, humming gospel songs and “Old 100’s” early in the morning.

I spent most of my leisure time reading and playing in the back yard or helping in our garden. The garden was where my grandma truly ruled and her talents were legendary. People would stop by just to visit and see her in the garden she created to feed her family. My job was to pick up the weeds piled on the turnrow, place them in a galvanized bucket, and carry that bucket to be dumped in the ‘pile’, a large compost pile in the corner of the yard. This was a constant task I repeated for several hours until the sun started to set, then my grandma would send me into the house to bathe and watch TV until supper was ready. I’d put on my jammies and sit on the foot of the bed, at the dinner table, re-enacting Wonder Woman’s moves.

When my grandma came in, she’d prepare a quick meal for all of us, and we’d gather at the table, say grace and eat. Afterward, I’d stand tiptoed at the front port window and wait for the last bus that would bring my mother home in the dark. When I got older, I was allowed to meet her halfway down the block.

I was worried about my mother. What if she missed the last bus? What if someone attacked her on the way home? These things never happened but in my childish, overprotective mind they could have. My mother was too kindhearted and nice to people. She never met a stranger. She had a ready smile for babies and adults alike. She made the world shine with laughter and smiles. I worried someone would take that for weakness. I didn’t know how handy she was with a cane or umbrella. She was a secret Wong Fei-hung.

As a child with an absent father, my greatest dilemma was making sure I didn't cross either my mother's or grandma's rules. My friends always talked about their parents so I talked about mine too, my mother and grandma. I came to realize how similar our problems were. And I was grateful to not have a man over me. My grandma was our disciplinarian, while my mother was the peace maker. That dichotomy sometimes caused conflict itself.

I was taught to always tell the truth no matter what. | That did not always cause peace. Being the youngest child, my playmate was often the dog. I loved playing in the yard, running figure 8's around the two green patches of grass that broke up the monotony of tan dirt. One day I was enjoying a riotous race around the yard chased by the dog, amidst containers of flowers grouped around the old tree stump and hanging from the swing frame. I'd run this route for years, every season, rain or shine. But this day, fate was against me. I ran a clean path but the dog, an aging German shepherd cut too close and over turned a square barbeque pit turned into a flower bed full of moss roses and petunias. I carefully righted the pit and restored as much soil as possible. Then I sadly walked the length of the yard, up the concrete stairs, through the back porch, into the kitchen and stood there bracing myself and praying for courage. My grandma turned and noticed me standing there, probably covered in telltale dirt. She put her hand on her hip and waited. I finally burst into tears and mumbled my confession. "The dog knocked over your plant, but I tried to fix it." She looked down at me a moment longer, before grabbing my shoulder to move me out of the way. She marched out to see the damage.

I came and stood on the top step, the screen door holding me up. I could see the pile of dirt on the ground at the foot of the tree stump, the BBQ pit sitting upright with lumps of soil and flowers arranged haphazardly in it. My grandma shook her head at the mess I'd made and tried to replace the flowers so the roots would survive.

Once she'd made it look a little more presentable until she could fully attend to it, she turned and walked back toward me. She told me to tell the truth. "You knocked over those flowers, didn't you? And tried to blame it on the dog." I stood there in shock; I hadn't thought of that. I reviewed the chain of events. "No ma'am. The dog knocked it over when I ran by it." She looked at me with disapproving eyes. She even tried to negotiate. "If you tell the truth, I won't whip you."

I contemplated this new offer. If I told her what she wanted to hear, then I wouldn't get a whippin'. But I would be lying to her. If I continued to tell the truth, then I'd still get a whippin'. That was a tough decision. Truth persevered. I denied this theory and reiterated the chain of events. If I was guilty it was for making the dog chase me in the first place. I held my head up and told the truth that the dog knocked the flower pit over. She looked at me and finally resigned herself that I was either a crazy kid or else I was telling the truth. She came back into the house, walked past me, went to the kitchen and resumed doing whatever she was doing before I interrupted her. I realized I had dodged a bullet that day.