

The Chain of Love

Never underestimate the gift of a grandmother's hand. The slap rang in my 6-year-old ears, my cheek reddened from the sting and I just gaped at my grandmother.

Her hands had never touched me with anything but gentleness in all my years; her voice had never been raised.

The kitchen, her sacred place, scrubbed clean as always, smelt of her – chocolate chip cookies, fried chicken, the rich gooey cakes only Southern Baptist women seem to get right, mingled with the bath powder and hair spray she used prodigiously each morning and evening, especially during the hot summer months.

I backed against the red and white enamel table, running my fingers over the ridged edge.

I had just returned from the store across the fence, having been sent to get Granddaddy's vanilla 'cream. He always called it 'cream and loved to eat it with Grandmama's fresh blackberry cobbler. So fresh, I still had the bramble scratches on my fingers from picking them that morning. I loved the two weeks each summer I spent with my grandparents; the hard-packed clay was just right for building little towns, their garden was cool and moist even on the hottest July day. I would crawl in among the pole beans and pretend I was in the jungle.

The store across the way was a symbol this summer. It was the first time Grandmama had let me walk the 50 feet by myself. I felt all grown up walking over there with the dollar clutched in my hand.

The store seemed full of men. Big men, some in overalls still grimy from the morning's field work and others in white T-shirts with red suspenders holding up their Dickey's. Loud, red-faced men, hardworking all of them. Around 11 or so each day, they came to the store, some to pick up a loaf of bread for lunch, others to get a tin of chewing tobacco. But, most importantly, they came to visit.

Mr. Setter, the store's owner, waved at me as I came in. The store was cramped and dark, the windows shuttered against the hot summer sun and shelves filled with groceries, sundries, Oshkosh-by-Gosh overalls and tan Dickey's. There was even a cooler full of worms and fishing tackle dangling from the walls. The Lake was just down the road and folks often stopped in to stock up for the weekend.

I pushed my way back to the freezer filled with Dreamsicles, Nutty Buddys, Push-Ups, ice cream sandwiches and cartons of ice cream. I really wanted the carton of Neapolitan, it sounded so elegant. But Granddaddy wanted only vanilla, nothing mixed with it but cobbler or pie, maybe some molasses dribbled over it once in awhile.

A black gentleman walked in. "Hey, Mr. Setter, Mr. Jones, Mr. Burley. Y'all doin' all right?"

“Well, hey Bill. What you need today?” Mr. Setter asked. Bill placed a loaf of bread and a Styrofoam cup full of worms on the counter. Mr. Setter totaled the purchases and Bill laboriously counted out the amount from an old, worn change purse. I noticed the other men had gotten quiet. I stood behind Bill, waiting to put the ice cream down because it was freezing my arms.

Mr. Setter bagged Bill’s purchases, told him to have a good day fishing and to come back soon. Bill thanked him, nodded to the others and seeing me, tipped his hat and grinned. I said, “You have a good day now, Mr. Bill, okay?” He told me to do the same and walked out.

As he left, one of the men hawked and spat after him. Nasty tobacco juice. I wondered if Mr. Setter made them clean up behind themselves like Mama and Grandmama made me do. Maybe he had to wash down that floor at the end of the day. My nose wrinkled in disgust at the thought of doing that job.

I think it was Mr. Burley that spat. As I put the ice cream on the counter, he leaned down and said, “You listen here, little girl. You don’t call a nigger ‘Mister,’ you hear? That’s nigger Bill, that’s all he is.”

Mr. Setter scowled at him and said, “You hush, Tom. She’s learning her manners.”

Hastily, he handed me a little bag of candy, put the ice cream in a sack and said, “You go on now. Tell your folks I said hey.” He didn’t even take the money. I guessed Granddaddy had already paid him.

I skipped back to the house, happy with my unexpected present. I could share it with Becky, Mr. Setter’s granddaughter. Maybe she would let me do the mixing when we played with her EasyBake Oven. I coveted that oven – the preacher had told me about coveting and I loved the word. After he told me about coveting my neighbor’s things, I happily repeated the word all the way home from church until Grandmama told me to hush on that. But it was a good word. Even if it was a sin, it described my feelings perfectly when it came to that EasyBake Oven.

Grandmama was at the stove carefully turning the frying chicken with a long, two-pronged fork when I ran in the door.

“Look Grandmama! Mr. Setter gave me a bag of candy just for buying the ice cream!” She smiled and asked, “Who all was over there?”

I reeled off the list of men and added, “Then that nigger Bill came in an’ he tipped his hat to me just like I was a grown lady!”

The fork hit the floor and Grandmama flew over to me like an avenging angel. The slap rang out. I looked at her hurt and confused.

Grandmama had no remorse in her face; her hands were on her hips and she leaned down to look right into my eyes.

“Ladies never say that word. It’s an ugly word! You say ‘Colored People’, you hear me?”

I nodded mutely, still not quite understanding the difference.

Her words rushed at me, "We are LADIES and Mr. Bill is a gentleman good as the others... better than some of those... Colored people are people, plain and simple..." The words just washed over me, the sting on my cheek telling me all I needed to know.

The lessons of tolerance bred in me from birth by my parents, largely unrealized until now, were hot-fire sealed in my mind and heart forever.

I have never been able to say the "N" word again, not even repeating another. Later on, in school, I learned words like segregation and integration, but I already knew what they meant. They are Colored People, people just like us, and I was a Lady who called them such and treated them just the same as us.

The sting has faded but the gift from her hand has never left me. That day, she gave me the gift to love and respect others, to say and do the right thing even with strangers or those not like us. As given to me, so shall it go to my children and, if I've done my job right, their children's children. A chain of love woven tight for years to come, started in a Southern kitchen.