

Fool's Cravings

Mamma has always had a love for other people's possessions. This was a rather embarrassing fact. And it was a year after I started the sixth grade that mamma killed Aunt Junie.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my mamma no matter what she might have ever done, but it was a few long years before I could even try to understand just what drove her dark passion. Such a little person she was, it was hard thinking how she could cause so much damage with hardly any mind to it. Some of the time she had her good senses, but other times she let herself go just a little bit far and once you've crossed a line sometimes it's too hard to ever go back. I at least understood that much about my mamma and her sinister cravings. After looking back on it, I had what some people would call an epiphany, that sometimes people can be pushed to situations where they just lose control; it happens to the best of 'em.

You see, mamma grew up rather poor, poorer than we ever were. And so, she always craved every chance to have nice things, but daddy told her we couldn't have everything like everybody else. I guess it didn't matter much to her that we didn't have a lot of money 'cause mamma always found a way to get something expensive every now and then. Daddy noticed them but kept quiet about it. At least, besides herself, mamma did some worrying about us too, making sure my little brother and I got our education and we made ourselves a promise that we'd never let nothing lead us astray. We went to church regular. Little church on the edge of town and we'd watch folks jumpin' and dancin' and prayin' to the lord for mercy asking for forgiveness of sins. Mamma smiled and she sung her songs and nodded with the preacher clapping her hands to the syncopated beat. She always did look pretty with her Sunday best on and her hair done up and she put on that dark red lipstick she loved so much (too much). Sitting down in the pew, if my little brother or I didn't pay attention, she'd give us one look with her sharp eyes and we'd be sure to sit up and take notice then.

She *loved* Preacher Jones, a short heavy man who would always be sweating while he danced up at the pulpit, and it looked as if he might just keel over backwards when he yelled through that church. His voice echoed large and bounced off the ceiling and the walls and my little brother would cover his ears and hunker down low. I'd laugh at him and see if mamma noticed, but she was always fixated on Preacher Jones, her green eyes squinting and her face frozen. She wouldn't move a single muscle. She'd fall into some kind of trance or something and her mouth would kind of go limp and her eyes

grow wide, a bit scary looking; she wouldn't move until Preacher Jones stopped shouting out Bible verses. Then after church was over she would stand up without shaking nobody's hand for blessings and walk us straight from church down to Bob's ice cream shop at the other edge of town, round the bend before the hill to our house. Even as we would sit there eating cold, frozen ice cream, mamma would watch us stuffing our bellies good and then she'd spot somebody from church walking by that would get her attention. That trance would come back and I'd stop eating and my little brother and I'd exchange looks knowing mamma was thinking again. Like this, every Sunday morning, ever since my little brother and I was younger.

Sunday afternoons were long with free time and we'd play soldier outside in between the weeds down near the river chasing each other until it got dark. No one ever really did win, but I always declared myself the winner 'cause I was oldest. Benny, my little brother, sometimes threw a fit but usually he just let it be that way. At night, daddy would come back from the office (I never understood why he needed to work on Sundays – the Lord's day) and we'd all four sit in silence chewing our food and listen to the knives and forks clink against the good china. Daddy would look at us and grin every now and then. He'd only look at mamma for a very brief second and continue eating. Mamma ate hardly anything and she'd sit so still at the supper table smoking her cigarette it was eerie. She looked like her mind was over in another world. When it got too quiet, Benny and I played out a pretend catapult war of food at each other with our forks. I'd peer at Benny through the fork and I could almost imagine him a soldier prisoner of war looking back at me through the little tiny bars.

Daddy left us after a while. Last thing I remembered was him talking to me about some shiny new cufflinks that he said were special and to treasure them forever. I just looked at them in the palm of my hand and figured I'd wear 'em next time I went to church. He left us the next week and we never saw him again. Mamma was in a strange daze for a long time after that muttering every so often to herself what sound like 'damn' and 'fool' and some other words that weren't so Christian-like. Mornings were the roughest when she'd sleepwalk into the kitchen with no particular care for anything and she'd let out a sigh when she see me and Benny and then make some dark roasted coffee. She didn't really pay much attention to us then except when we'd be late for school and she'd practically throw us out the door to catch the bus, screaming at us in that high pitch voice that just muffled up her words. I didn't know which was worse, being upset that we'd be late to school (and punished by old Teacher Dagger) or mamma's sudden outburst of high pitch screaming what made her sound like a crazy person. We knew it

was hard on mamma and we stayed out of her way as much as possible, but we still wanted things to be the way it was when daddy was with us.

Grandma (daddy's mamma) never liked our mamma. She was an ugly woman who wore too much purple eye shadow and pink blush on her real thick cheeks. She'd always make comments to mamma that was pretty mean. She always accused mamma of stealing

things from her and daddy's family, something about wanting other people's lives. That burned me the most. I didn't understand what the fuss was all about, but as much as it was hurtful towards mamma, she never fought back. She just took the abuse. It was like she was made of steel. Yet, when daddy came home from work Grandma turned into a different person, sweet as can be and she'd give daddy hugs and kisses and then joined us for supper. Mamma never said a word.

On Saturday that week before daddy left, Benny and I came in dripping wet from the quick thunder and downpour of summer rain that sent us scurrying back to the house, and there was Grandma sitting in the den with Aunt Junie and Aunt Betsie, both of daddy's sisters. They all stopped talking so fast and glowered hard at us. Benny stood next to me with his arms dangling and his mouth hanging open, the water dripping from his black hair. All I could do was glare back at them, especially Grandma. My breath got hot every time she was inside our house. I hated her just as much as she hated my mamma. We heard daddy yelling in the other room but we couldn't really make out what he was saying. Grandma shook her large grey head and with her slithering tongue she hissed: See what your mamma's done now?

I didn't understand what Grandma meant or why exactly daddy left us. But I learned that mamma wasn't so innocent in all of this either and no sooner than daddy was gone was mamma going around with strange men from town. I watched from my bedroom window at night out at the front lawn where she'd steal away from the house half-dressed and some man would be coming up the walkway. She would hug him and the strange man would grope her and rub his hands all up and down her backside and then her breast. I could feel the heat boiling in my lungs just looking at that strange man touching mamma like that. What was worse, it was never the same man each night it happened.

Some of those men came with wrapped presents for mamma fitted with bows, glitter and all. And when mamma started wearing some rather nice jewelry or new dresses or some fancy shoes what look like would make her fall down hard should one of the heels ever break, a few angry women began calling the house at different hours asking to speak to mamma. I'd give the phone to mamma and she'd put it to her ear, holding it with three fingers and in her other hand a cigarette in two fingers, and she'd just listen. After a few minutes, her eyes would sort of glaze over and she'd just hang up the phone. I asked her why all them women were so angry with her. Mamma frowned at me with a disgusted look on her face and said: Never you mind about those women. After church one Sunday, Mrs. Banner (who loved to talk) crossed paths with us on our way to Ben's ice cream shop. She talked to mamma about coming over to her house one night for dinner. Mr. Banner looked mighty nervous and he kept looking down at the sidewalk as if a flower might sprout there any minute. His shoes and suit looked familiar to me. Mrs. Banner was running her mouth on and on when she stopped so suddenly I looked up to see if maybe she was having a heart attack or something and caught her staring at the butterfly brooch mamma was wearing. She looked puzzled and stared at it for a minute, darted her eyes over to Mr. Banner right quick and then said to mamma real

quietly: Why, that's a lovely brooch you have. Funny, it even looks like one I got from my husband.

Mamma stared at Mrs. Banner hard. Her hand squeezed tight around mine, but she said nothing and stepped right past Mr. and Mrs. Banner, who didn't know what to do with herself, I guess on account of shock from the way mamma just brushed her off like dust in the wind. I looked at that brooch closely as it moved this way and that across mamma's breast. Strange, I'd never seen her wear it before.

Benny found a pearl necklace on top of mamma's night table one afternoon. We just wanted to make our soldier game a little more fun so we took it and hid it in the grassy ditches near the edge of the woods and declared a man-hunt for the missing necklace. Charlotte, Aunt Junie's daughter (by marriage) was coming down the dirt path out of the woods and suggested to us that she play too. So, we made her prisoner of war and the prize for her return was the missing necklace. But Benny forgot where he hid it and Charlotte looked at us like we were dumb. I shrugged looking at the sun setting like a giant orange and told her we had to go inside before it got dark. I remember looking behind me and seeing Charlotte standing there in her blue overalls as we ran away. She sneered at me.

Mama went mad that night. She ran through the hallways crying about the missing pearl necklace. She was all dressed up to go somewhere (which she never got to because of what we did) and Benny and I hugged the wall watching her as she stormed in and out of rooms searching for it. She slammed the doors so hard it rattled the windows. We didn't know what to do or say 'cause we were so scared that we'd get quite a whipping if she knew we'd taken it. So, we kept our lips sealed.

Later on, after Benny went to sleep on the couch and mamma had gone upstairs, I crept up to her bedroom and opened the door careful not to make a sound. The little black and white television in her room played her favorite game show, the one she always fell asleep to with dreams of good fortune. I walked into the room and saw a bunch of strange objects and little trinkets on the shelves and her dresser, objects that I'd never seen before. Where they came from, I'd never know. Mamma was lying in full-length pose on the bed, her dress ruffled around her legs and her wild hair flattened down on the pillow. I would have taken her for dead what with her hands folded atop her belly like a corpse except her chest moved up and down as she breathed. For some reason, I imagined that might be how she would look resting in her coffin. With a shudder I swung the door shut.

Aunt Junie came round to the house a few days later and asked to speak to mamma. I studied Charlotte from the back of the hallway, where it was dark. I could see her standing there beside Aunt Junie in pigtails with her hands stuffed deep into her pockets. She looked like a big boy were it not for the pigtails and the emerging breast lining her sweatshirt. She looked so damn serious. I tried not to grin. But, listening, I heard mamma and Aunt Junie arguing about the pearl necklace. My eyes grew big and I squinted angrily at Charlotte for saying anything. She moved her face slightly to the right to get a good look at me and I could see she was smirking. I was too busy wondering why

it would upset Aunt Junie so much about the necklace to mind Charlotte's smug face until I heard her say to mamma: It's mine and you took it, you filthy whore!

Was it Aunt Junie's necklace that Benny and I hid? If so, how did mamma get it? She never went to Aunt Junie's house, ever. Seemed strange to me but I witnessed something one night I never expected when I heard some rustling noises and looked out my window to see mamma with Uncle John (Aunt Junie's husband) near the bushes. I was shocked at how they were holding each other, kissing and pressing their bodies close together. I heard mamma moaning and saw Uncle John whispering into her ear. That boiling feeling bubbled so fast in my stomach.

The next morning, I watched mamma from the table as I ate breakfast. I wanted to know so bad what she got herself into with Uncle John, messing around with daddy's sister's husband. I tried not to remember all those other men. I started to say something, but I saw mamma was busy fixing something what looked like a batch of cookies, so I made my way to the living room in silence. I didn't even notice the small bottle she had sitting on the counter.

We didn't know anything bad had happened until the police officers came to the door. They were real serious like, dressed in black police uniforms with shiny silver police badges. They talked to mamma in low voices while she sat very proper on the pink love sofa, staring out the bay window. Benny and I watched them from the hallway to see what was happening and mamma's head turned and she saw us. What seemed like an eternity she stared at us and we stared back. I saw a look on mamma's face I'd never seen before – it was a look of sadness. I cut my eyes to Benny and he glanced at me and we both knew, just knew, mamma was in big trouble.

Sometime after mamma had delivered a fresh batch of baked apple and cinnamon cookies to Aunt Junie as a peace offering, Aunt Junie choked and turned purple. At least, that's what Charlotte says. She found Aunt Junie, when she came home from school that afternoon, lying spread out on the kitchen floor with the cookies and broken plate smashed all around her. It must've been quiet a fright for Charlotte to see something like that and I wondered just how or if she'd ever get over it. Poisoned. The word whistled through her mouth with such menace. What got to me even more was that before she called the police, as she spat into my face: I knew it was your mamma done this.

My little brother cried but I just watched as a whole bunch of people went in and out of our little house fussing over mamma. We didn't know what to be thinking about at that point and we watched mamma as she sat on the pink love sofa and she still said nothing to anyone. What would happen to her next, I wouldn't know. I realized I was gonna have to take care of us now, Benny and I. As he stood next to me sobbing like an obnoxious baby, I put my arm around his shoulders and we stood in the hallway alone, really alone, for the very first time.