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Aunt Effie

by Ken Robertson

“Clem took advantage of me,” Effie explained
the bulging taffeta folds of her wedding gown.
Conceived in the soft hollows of the haystack
behind Grandpa’s ramshackle barn,
that early child became the first
of nine born to their union.

At holiday family feasts,
after the men and youngsters were fed
and the women sat to eat and gab,
Effie complained to Clem’s sisters,
married with families of their own.
“Clem took advantage of me,” she said.

At forty-one, freed by early menopause
from her biennial birth cycle, and restless,
Effie bobbed her hair and took a job in Lawton,
working weekends while her girls kept house.
Clem, quietly nodding his agreement,
gave her his best team to travel to and fro.

In town, she met a twenty-year-old soldier boy,
trim and tanned from the Field Artillery,
whose hungry look and urgent needs
refired the passion of her lost youth
in short, intense liaisons after work
in a cut-rate room at the Hotel Geronimo.

“I love him, Clem, and I’m a-leaving you,” she said,
“and taking Annie with me”—the youngest, not yet four.
Clem glared at her like a caged eagle
with talon hands clenching and unclenching
on the worn top rung of the kitchen chair,
gulped down his fury and fled to stride the fields.



He returned at dusk, grim-faced with his decision.
"Take little Annie, the rest will stay with me.
Get your things together. I'm taking you
into town this very dad-blamed night.
Don't want no common slut a-sleeping here,
corrupting these fine younguns."

Harvest over, Clem hired a Frisco boxcar and
moved his possessions three counties north to the
red plains that split the Canadian River branches,
far from the reminding sight of Fort and soldiers.
He worked rented land until his offspring scattered
one by one like thistle seeds on sweeping prairie wind.

Trained, the soldier boy was shipped to fight,
to fire the French field guns in Meuse-Argonne.
"Effie, we'll marry when I get home," he wrote.
Back home in South Carolina, he forgot his promise
after bedding an eighteen year old virgin girl
impatient to leave home and start a family.

Around the corner from the Hotel Geronimo,
catching a break from the laundry's steamy heat,
a lined and painted Effie coughs lungs clear,
stamps out a cigarette, and huskily explains
to the gossipy young presser's curious ears.
"That soldier boy took advantage of me," she claims.

