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Passing the Curse

I now consider myself dead to everybody I know, since the fifth day of July, 1996, when I decided to be 'sweet--quit talking--and now my younger daughter--twenty-six and a MOUTH herself--thinks I'm either dying or "mad" at her still, which I am, but I am not openly berating her for indulging in a divorce and a job and casting her four year old daughter--offspring of blabbermouths--into Daycare Hell (the child's father is about to be scissored out of the family pictures to keep from offending New Boyfriend), and my husband of thirty-three years just sits in his recliner and eyes me over his newspaper because now when he suggests sex, I smile and spread my legs though I am sick and tired of the missionary position, which I have told him, but which I could tolerate as long as I was drinking and smoking, habits I'd believed as impossible to quit as talking, even with a fresh cherry popsickle stain like a slapped cheek on my new green couch.

Today is Sunday--Funday for everybody else but me--and the whole family is coming, including New Boyfriend, a college professor with a minor in *philosophy* ~~biology~~ and a major in cynicism; and my older daughter, a nurse in Atlanta, who long ago quit forgiving me after I laid claim to her first child and called her husband a bum (actually, I never said that exactly--one of her friends asked if he'd found a job yet

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and was he still drinking imported beer and I said no, he hadn't found a job yet, but yes, I had seen some beer in their refrigerator, though I wouldn't know imported from the exported kind); and my son and his new wife, who I made into an enemy with my mouth a week before their wedding day when I all but called her a money-grubber and raked her over for ordering a \$200 bridal bouquet and expecting me to pay for it out of my monthly salary of \$167.50 working as a part-time librarian.

Standing before my old harvest gold stove, I feel words bubbling up and popping like dirty suds in my brain; all morning I have been mentally replaying Younger Daughter's Fourth of July prank when she invited her entire family of in-laws, along with assorted friends and secret New Boyfriend, to our Alapaha River fish fry and got pissed because nobody believed he was her best friend's date when she, Younger Daughter, got caught touching toes with him, lounge chair to lounge chair, and I ended up siding with the in-laws by agreeing that Younger Daughter had a slutty way of announcing her independence and subsequent departure from her husband, who just sat there dumb, eyeing her from the river bank the same way my husband has been eyeing me from his recliner here lately.

Well, I have been forgiven, let me put it that way, though I know one more wordspill will be my last--my last child left who will forgive me!--and now Younger Daughter is sidling up to me at the stove, dressed in faded blue jeans and an orange striped shirt that shows her sucked-in stomach, her long blonde hair yanked back in a ponytail--no makeup--and she is grinning, hugging me, crossing her long thin arms that make me feel she will surely starve on her own and gazing back at New Boyfriend sauntering through the kitchen door

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with a bristly black beard that extends over the top of his bowl head; so I turn, smile, nod, and stir my pot of speckled butterbeans, which I have cooked southern-style with hunks of smoked ham just for him because he's a Yankee and she had the gall to tell me on the phone last night--I guess to get some kind of reaction--that he had asked her if we'd be having chittlings for dinner the next day.

Now I want to talk, I really want to talk, not because of the chittling remark, but because my four-year-old granddaughter has grafted herself to my legs, hiding her precious Shirley Temple face to keep from seeing the strange man in my kitchen; I want to babytalk her and say, "Nanny's sugarbaby, it's all right, I won't let that old boogerman get you," and pick her up and let her wrap her chubby, tan legs around my waist while I rock her, and stop what I am doing to see her latest trick on the trampoline--she won't play by herself--but I just bend down and kiss her poufy brown bangs and study her busy green eyes and cheeky face, and she grins like you-know-who and I try to figure who else she reminds me of--maybe the Ceecee Bloom character in the movie BEACHES, who demanded so much attention that her mother finally ran away to Florida, leaving no forwarding address--or maybe she reminds me of my grandmother, who in her old age would start out to say something kind and twist it around to something so vehement and tactless that nobody would speak to her before she died if she had told them they'd just won the Florida lottery (once she told her Methodist preacher how much she enjoyed his sermon, adding "delivery isn't everything"), but must have been as cute and cloying a child as this granddaughter, who more than all the above is beginning to remind me of me.

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I didn't talk, I am safe, Ceecee Bloom has conned her cousin, the one I laid claim to five years ago and whose daddy I was rumored to have called a bum, into pushing her in the tree swing, and they are talking, talking, while Younger Daughter in the living room is busy trying to ingratiate New Boyfriend to her daddy and sister and brother, who shook New Boyfriend's hand, said "Hey," then dawdled out to the front porch where his bride is pouting in the porch swing and locking looks with me through the window every time I pass from the stove to the sink to flour chicken for frying, at which point I just smile and nod and stifle talking by concentrating on the word sparring going on between football commentators on the TV in the living room, an old trick of my husbands, turning on the TV, when he wants to put an end to a uncomfortable conversation, which so far has amounted to only stabs at remarks and Younger Daughter's put-on laughter and speeded-up, repetitive talking, as if talking faster and repeating herself will make them see how justified-in-general she is, and I know I have passed the talking curse down.

"Sally tells me you like to read," says New Boyfriend, slipping up behind me with his hands cradled over his crotch, rocking on the sides of his white tennis shoes. He speaks low and slick through thick white teeth. His skin is Jesus-wan. He looks sick.

I smile, nod, turn the chicken.

"Mostly novels, she says."

I turn, smile, nod, place the lid on the skillet.

"You read Grishom, I bet."

I can spot a TV watcher by who they read--only authors on the bestseller list and those interviewed on the TODAY SHOW.

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"I don't particularly care for him myself," he says.

Oh, well.

"I hear the third book of Cormac McCarthy's trilogy will be coming out soon."

I turn the chicken again, though the other side is pale as a rabbit's underbelly.

"Smells good," he says and leans closer. "You fry much?"

All the time, I want to say; I fry our toast and would fry our coffee if I could figure how; I would fry your tongue if I could get away with it, if not for Younger Daughter being my last child willing to forgive me, one last time.

"Thank you," I say, and it's as if those two little words open a valve in my brain and the banked dirty suds starts sliding down to my face and I have to puff my cheeks and squinch my eyes and New Boyfriend steps back and creeps to the screened door of the kitchen, stands a minute, as if taking in the view of weed fields and shedding liveoaks and Georgia dirt, then goes outside. He doesn't slam the door like everybody else, just eases it shut, which makes me long to say thank you again.