

# A Tired Arrangement

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All the wear, tear, dust and dirt it took over the years concealed its whiteness. Un-kept and still standing because someone has to live in it. . The windows were coated with grime while the only screen left was on the front door, hanging by a few loose hinges with rips by the base where strays would come and go. The trim, broken shingles extended over the porch just enough to leave the floorboards dry. The heavy rains poured that year in 1967 and Cookie thought she would never see the end of it. The curling paint provoked a chance of a new day for this tired arrangement. An aged rocking chair faced the river where the willows hid the past. The chair is said to have been a part of the house since the first nail was driven in. Cookie wished her Mama would give it to the church, along with the other bits and pieces the house came with. Each time the good folks from the church would stop by and pick up items to sell at their yard sales, the chair never went with them.

Cookie was on the front steps, sundress pulled down over her knees, with only her bare toes catching the late afternoon sun. She peeled back the faded white paint. Starting with a loose piece between her thumb and forefinger she carefully pulled back the long strip, exposing the pale wood underneath. Careful not to catch a splinter the sweet smell of cornbread fixed her attention just as her Mama rattled through the screen door.

“If you’re gonna peel somethin, peel this.” Handing her fresh ears of corn her Mama turned as quickly as she came out and disappeared into the kitchen where cornbread was browning and pots boiling. Cookie took the cool green layers off the corn one by one and set them to the side, making sure to get every silk hair off the corn before she rested the ear in her lap. The last one in her hand as Ned Parker turned his green F-150 onto the dirt driveway, inching slowly towards the house. He was the only one to ever park in the yard. Mama never drove and on better days they would dress in their best and walk into town. The good folks from the church would see them and offer them rides. Some people would see them and keep on driving, “Not wanting to get involved” Mama would say. If the weather was warm they would take the long way down by the river, through the willows letting the sun warm their dark skin.

Ned parked the truck and leaned over to the passenger side, picking up a grocery bag. Sometimes he would bring Mama flowers hidden in a paper bag. Other times he would come through the house with something a recipe called for. Cookie would hear her Mama break through the static on the rotary describing an herb or spice she needed, a few hours later Ned would appear with the missing ingredient. He walked up to Cookie and extended his free hand helping her up. She carefully picked up what she could and left the remains on the porch. Following him into the kitchen where Mama was just pulling out the cornbread, she dropped the ears in the boiling water waiting on the stove. Ned dropped the bag on the counter next to the sink, taking a few steps towards the humming ice-box and pulled out an A&W.

“There was talk in town today, about removing the old signs on all public property. They even want the signs taken down on private property. It’s only a matter of time.”

Mama was putting all the fixings on the sturdy table that was pushed up against the kitchen wall. A clean white table cloth fresh from the clothesline hung over the table concealing the beats and bruises the table had collected over time.

“Mmm-Hmmm. They say it but is they gonna do it?”

Mama was the last to sit at the table bringing the corn with her. Ned helped himself to two crisp, golden pork chops with his fingers, licking the grease off each one before setting his napkin in his lap. Waiting for Mama to serve her, Cookie picked up her spoon and examined her reflection, dark, blending perfectly with the tarnished silver. She looked over at Ned; wisps of blond hair framed his face that reminded her of the stray golden hair on the corn she just prepared. She wondered what his reflection would look like in the spoon and how he didn’t seem to notice her and Mama’s color didn’t reflect with the town.

The first time Cookie saw Ned, he was knee deep in rusty old tools, crouched under Mama’s kitchen sink, taking him for a plumber or some kind of handy man. It wasn’t until she noticed her Mama never wore her purple terry cloth robe or her hair in curlers around him. The ponds cold cream she would have smeared across her face like frosting on a cake would come off just before he would step foot on the property. It was then that she thought he must be something else. Her Mama didn’t

like to talk about other people much but when Cookie kept asking she finally gave in.

“Old money, Cookie, he’s from old money” Mama replied after Cookie asked what he did for a living. Cookie imagined piles of money stacked away in an attic somewhere gathering dust over the years. Bills and coins abandoned and left alone but how her Mama must have found these and told Ned that he ought to do something about the money now; it wouldn’t be worth anything to anyone, just sitting down there.

Cookie watched Ned devour his food as Mama took care while cleaning off her plate. She watched as they covered the golden flakey pieces of cornbread with soft butter watching it melt and blend wondering why people didn’t melt and blend as smoothly.

“We can’t hide this forever Mary. It ain’t right.” Ned said between bites. “If we don’t go to the town meeting, the signs stay up; we gotta go in there together, you and me. We gotta give em a reason to take em down.”

“Oh now they need a reason?” Mama’s voice pitched three octaves higher as her eyes grew big and stubborn.

“No, no, but we need to show them we’re not backing out of this.”

“Cookie, excuse yourself from the table get your mess up from the porch and wash up.”

Cookie left the table and headed towards the porch making sure to keep her steps light and slow. She knew the signs they were talking about kept her from having certain friends in school. Kept her from being in certain places and kept her in this house. She knew why Mama and Ned didn’t like those signs. She didn’t like them either. Out on the porch the sun was sinking below the willows, she looked down at the paint chips and corn husks she gathered. Like her Mama, she would have to reveal her place in this town, in this world. For the first time the old rocking chair looked inviting. Cookie approached the chair, examining its fractured edges. A small carved gash gave the initials. N.P. It was then she remembered her Mama telling her why they moved there. Her Mama was retracing their roots and those roots ended at this house, a house owned by Ned Parker, a house that was once a depot for people

like her and Mama. Cookie sat in the chair and swayed into the night. Out in the darkness where so many people hid, and so many people lived she heard the soft buzz of singing just beyond the willows.