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Grandma Jones

Geneva Jones may not be my blood-grandmother but I have known her all of my life. Her youngest daughter, Terri, and my mom worked together for many years and were good friends. After my parents divorced, Geneva’s son, David, took a liking to my mom and they eventually married, bringing us all together as family. This could not have been more set in stone as when Grandpa “Buck” passed away; the pastor doing the service did not intend to include my brother and I in the list of grandchildren but Grandma Jones was adamant that we were just as much their grandchildren as any of the others.

When I called to “interview” her about her history, it was a beautiful, sunny morning. I sat on the futon on the patio, listening to her ever potent Arkansas drawl through my phone’s headset. It was easy to picture her at home in Southern California; leaning on the slumped arm of her tan cloth recliner, in her white pants and button down blouse, with her gray curls- always kept so short but possessing unnatural volume that makes me jealous- and intensely dark eyelashes that make a definitive half-moon behind her glasses when she smiles and laughs. It was just as easy to pretend she was sitting on the futon beside me. There’s always been too much distraction to spend time talking about her years as a girl but I loved every minute of it.

Grandma Jones was born Margarette Geneva Reynolds on November 7th, 1924 in the house her father built in the rural community of Eaglette, Dallas County, Arkansas. She went by Geneva (she hated her first name) and was the youngest of eight children; five boys (one of which was still born and another who died a year before she was born) and three girls. She described the house with the furniture her father had made for it, a large fireplace that was their only source of heat in the winter, and a wood burning stove her mother used to cook on. Most of their food was grown in their own garden. They had a well for water, kerosene lamps for light, and an outhouse she refers to as the “two hole-er” since there were two toilet holes cut into the bench. For brooms and rakes they would cut small dogwood bushes and tie the limbs together. She said they may not have had much but they never went hungry and never lacked for entertainment.

When I asked her to tell me some of her favorite memories or things from her life, she immediately began to tell me about things she did as a girl. I can’t say she talked with fondness for the hard work but there was definitely appreciation in her voice. The family kept busy working in the fields and harvesting cotton and potatoes in the fall. In preparation for winter, they dried peas and beans, corn sent to the mill to be turned into corn meal, and they would sell their cotton. School didn’t start until October to allow kids to help with fall harvests. Her parents would use money from their cotton sales to buy new school clothes; overalls for the boys, fabric for dresses that her mother made for the girls, and a pair of shoes for each child.

They may have had to create their own entertainment but they certainly never lacked for it. As a community, there was always something going on. “We didn’t have what they have now, not even a telephone, but word got around.” I could hear the smile in her voice when she described the community getting together for “ice cream socials” where the men would buy ice and salt, the women would bring a gallon of liquid that was ready to be turned into ice cream, and they would all take turns turning the crank until the ice cream was ready to share. Dancing was frowned on in a Baptist community but folks would get together, push furniture aside, and the men would play music for dancing anyway. In the summer, someone with a wagon and horses would come around to get everyone together for church revivals that they sometimes had to travel five miles to get to. Women would have “quilting-bees” where they got together to help each other assemble quilts for winter warmth. There was also a “home-demonstration lady” who would get together with the women and teach or show them new things. This lady gave Grandma Jones her first PB&J with pre-sliced white bread and apple jelly.

Back then, she said things were “certainly different 100 ways from what it is now.” One of her favorite memories was getting to graduate from high school, which wasn’t always possible for kids back then. When I asked if she was able to celebrate in any way, she told me about a wrist watch. To inspire her to finish school, her oldest brother had told her that he would buy her a wrist watch when she graduated. For a young girl this was a major fashion statement. However, when she was graduating, he was fighting in World War II and wrote to her to tell her he couldn’t get her a watch. The day after she read the letter, her middle brother, John, said he had some shopping to do in Fordyce. When he returned, he had a watch for her.

Another favorite time in her life was when her brothers came home safely from World War II, especially “Slim”. Her oldest brother, Alvin, was a mechanic in the Air Force and stationed in Saipan. He wrote to their mother saying that he was safe but the truth was in the letters he sent to their brother describing nightly bombings and constantly running for cover. John was drafted at 21 but was not allowed to go due to an abdominal hernia. After recovering from surgery to repair the hernia, he volunteered for the Navy and served on a supply ship in the South Pacific. Her youngest brother, Fern (fondly called “Slim”), was also drafted but as an Army Engineer. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was part of a crew that built bridges for troops to cross before blowing them up so the enemy couldn’t follow. At one point, his crew was surrounded and captured by German soldiers. Her family had been receiving letters from him fairly regularly before they received one that said he had been taken prisoner but was alright. She couldn’t remember for how long they went without more news. Eventually he was liberated and sent home. During this time, Grandma Jones went to work building rockets in a plant.

I asked her for one more favorite memory and I guessed that she would tell me about her life with Grandpa “Buck.” She did, but it was a very general account of their life together. He passed away in 2010 and it is still hard for her to talk about him. When she did talk about him, she only referred to him as “my husband.”

When she’d finished telling me about these things I was at a loss for words. She’s always been sweet little Grandma Jones who could wield a frying pan like no other, whether it was to threaten someone out of her kitchen or to make the best cornbread on the planet. She laughed at first when I finally told her I was a little bit jealous of her life. Nowadays, kids are glued to internet games and relationships are formed through texting. Who has ice cream socials anymore? The war in Iraq is horrible and there are some families who know the longing for loved ones to return home but, overall, our society is so removed from it that it’s foreign to think of building the rockets that your brothers may be using to do the fighting. Her laugh softened some as we talked about this and she understood why I meant it. It’s endearing and humbling to talk to a woman who grew up during the Great Depression and to be in somewhat jealous awe of her childhood. At 90 years old, she’s lived a hard but rich life and, though she’s tired, there is still so much life in this beautiful woman.