

Nature's Way

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The iced tea felt cool to my tongue and inside cheeks and helped wash the bites of fried liver and onions down my throat. The tea also helped cover the metallic flavor of the liver. I imagined it tasted like blood the times I'd pulled teeth. The tea also helped cover my belief the onions might be worms because they were slippery and felt wiggly going down my throat. I couldn't bring myself to chew them anymore than I could eat the catfish my grandmother had caught using red wiggler worms down at the pond. Worms were inside the fish, just like they were inside the bird that was rotting in the woods on the path to the pond. I'd almost vomited, but Granny said, "Stop that silliness. It's nature's way."

Granny was old, crooked from arthritis, and had onion paper skin stretched over bones, but I didn't think she had worms. She moved quickly and demonstrated strength because when the chunk of liver got stuck in my throat, she leaped out of her chair, stood behind me, put her arms under mine and gave me a jolt. The chunk of liver flew out of mouth and landed on the table. I imagined the onion slithered on the liver.

"I've told you a thousand times you've got to chew your food at least thirty-two times."

"Yes ma'am," I said. I went to my room and lied down and wondered how close I had come to death. Granny hadn't been able to save my mom when she choked to death on that chicken bone at the church picnic, but I don't hold that against her because she was inside singing shape note hymns with the rest of the choir while I was at the creek catching tadpoles in a jar to grow frogs. Granny hasn't sung since and stopped teaching me the Do-re-mi-fa-so or however it goes.

I continued to have problems swallowing, getting choked, and Granny rubbed my head, scratched my back, and gave me milkshakes with protein to build up my throat. I figured when she got through, my throat would be a regular Tower of Babel reaching toward Heaven, and maybe I'd be able to communicate with my mom.

The chocolate milkshakes were better than the vanilla, but they tasted like that pink, chalky Pepto medicine she gave me the time I had that virus and vomited. I told her maybe I should go to the doctor, but she said "You just need to rest and heal. A doctor can't do that for you. You have to do it yourself. It's nature's way."