

## Sunday Promise

(By: Lad Moore)

"There can't be two women in the same kitchen." Her poised index finger had just punctuated the Eleventh Commandment.

"It was Mom on the phone again," my brother announced. "She says nigh time to head over there." Every week was the same. Our families awaited the call from "MawMaw" that gave us two-hour notice of Sunday dinner. She didn't want us there too early---"too much fussing."

We knew mother was failing. There were subtle clues. At 90, she stayed visibly exhausted, yet refused all help. Family treasures once kept pristine now had layers of dust like growth rings on a tree. She had fallen twice. Even so, there was no precipitous event that said she must give up her home. It was a case of slowly wearing out---and everyone conceding that it was risky for her to be there alone. Gently we tried to move the celebratory meals to my house. We always met firm resistance.

Then, as if her own idea, she relented to our loving pressure. Appropriately, her decision was announced from her place at the old chrome-legged kitchen table---rickety but reliable to its end. Its yellow Formica was worn white in places where years of plates got shuffled about.

"One last meal," she said, "and it'll be a real special one."

It was special---but no more special than they all were. She prepared smothered fried chicken---soft and moist from sweating beneath flour-sack cup towels. Occupying a third of my plate were her prize-winning purple-hull peas---slow simmered with bacon, peppers, and a hint of sugar. In MawMaw's house we didn't buy shelled peas. We earned the right to eat peas by shelling them first. When I was a child we shelled them together in family ritual. I remember how she formed a bowl in her lap with her apron. The peas were cradled there and the hulls were tossed onto a spread newspaper. Guy Lombardo music paced the activity.

To sop up the "pot liquor," she made scalded cornbread. It deserved and received a cardio-forbidding double patty of butter. We crowned our overloaded plates with rice, gravy, and mayonnaise-dredged salad.

For desert, MawMaw had prepared a showcase coconut cake---with fresh coconut she grated herself. It was her custom---I never knew its origin---to hide a dime somewhere in the cake. Whoever found it would have good luck.

With the first bite of cake we all stopped chewing at once. Large chunks fell from open mouths onto the plates. It was the unmistakable taste of soap!

MawMaw first objected, then denied. She got up quietly and went over to the sink, where the coconut husks still lay. Missing was the big bar of Ivory soap from its place on the soap dish above the faucet.

We tried humor, but her devastation over the mistake was clear. She talked about the coconut cake the rest of the afternoon---attributing far more concern than the event deserved.

And, in some kind of cruel finality, nobody found the dime.

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