

Guardians

by Teresa Cortez

It wasn't safe there, only no one ever tells you these things or suggests running away from home when you're seven. Besides, I'd gotten used to the morose quiet, the curtains drawn and her mashed potatoes from a box.

Granny had come to stay with me for the second time that summer. As always she brought a small brown suitcase and Feisty, her toothless arthritic Chihuahua. His toenails were so long they curled under and into the black leathery pads of his feet. They lightly clacked on our linoleum, tap shoes made of thick petrified roots. He didn't seem to mind.

Granny sat in Mom's chair every day. When she wasn't watching Oral Roberts or Billy Graham on TV she was staring out the front glass and aluminum door. Meanwhile I was learning how to cuss from the Spartan kids across the street. I also saw my first penis there.

John Spartan was thirteen and prone to erections when I was around. "Touch it," he said. I tentatively placed an index finger at the center of the purplish shaft and gave it a slight bounce. I wasn't curious beyond that point and not especially interested in letting him put it in me, so he put it in his seven year old sister, Katy. I watched her face go pale as he danced his pelvis on top of her. Then I heard Granny's strangled voice calling me home for dinner.

I never saw John's great finish or knew there was supposed to be one.

Granny and I were equals in that we were both missing front teeth and neither of us could drive. She was easy because she never said or did much, like living alone but with someone there. She just watched the neighborhood from Mom's chair and was good at it.

She knew Wayne and Wanda's schedule next door which included many children visitors during summer months because Wayne enjoyed their company. She knew when the Spartan parents would come home from work to their six feral children, and when the ancient Mr. Glossip would emerge each morning to get the paper and wave his wrinkled spotted hand. She knew the mailman's name and what cars were supposed to be parked where, down to the bent bumpers and license plates. This was her profession, the neighborhood watch, and she took it seriously.

The only thing we ever did together was eat TV dinners and play school, two activities she could participate in from her stationary job post. She was always tired and the oldest old I knew, her sixty-two more like ninety. She'd spent almost as much time in bed as Mom did in the hospital from feeling so "nervous tired". They both suffered from the weight of a giant invisible thumb pressing them into flat self-loathing zombies. It came and went, making Mom run off with men to drink herself into the hospital again and Granny to stay in bed, but Granny's thumb never seemed to lift entirely which caused her feet to shuffle and her thin silver hair to go unwashed for weeks. Their thumbdays drove me to the Spartan's more and more often where I tasted my first kiss and cigarette, but never to visit Wayne because he made me a worse kind of nervous than John, despite the offers of Tootsie Rolls.

When I asked Granny where Mom went this time she said she didn't know. Which was true. The drill was, wait three days for Mom to come home and when she didn't, call Granny.

Things got simpler when Mom left for good and Granny came to stay. She was there to report the body splayed on our street the next Halloween and Mr. Spartan holding a shotgun on the front porch. Someone else had to take us to the grocery store and laundromat since we had no car and Mr. Spartan was in jail, but other than that there was a reliable sameness, even as a former

cornerstone of my world crumbled with words like *psych ward* and *electroshock therapy*, none of which had any meaning for me. I just knew Mom was never coming back.

I did miss my mother and got bored with Granny's box potatoes. I was tired of sleeping on the floor so she could sleep in my bed where she lost the last of her brown rotting teeth, but I liked the certainty of her there. She was a solid physical landmark, a wooden stump or fence post to indicate I was in the right place, even if it was less than idyllic. I knew she wasn't going anywhere because she had no way to leave and no man to follow. Just a neighborhood to watch and a chair to keep warm.

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The last time I saw Granny I drove to see her in my own car. Mr. Glossip, Mom and Feisty were long dead. The Iran hostage crisis had finally ended, Wayne was a registered sex offender and John Spartan was in prison with his father; she told me these things in the same sentence, as if they were relative and of equal importance.

She was wearing pants after a lifetime spent in modest house dresses. She wore a winter hat. It was July. She sat on a stool facing me, legs open wide like a cowboy around a campfire, a swell of Skoal tucked behind her bottom lip. As she leaned forward with elbows propped on her knees and a broad gummy smile, she shocked me with her new words *shit*, *piss* and *damn*. She offered me a beer and a cigarette, this woman who never drank or smoked. It was senility or insanity, hard to say which, but it suited her. At least she was smiling. And she had the neighborhood under control.

