

# My Mother's Convalescence

a short story by ERIC ANDERSON

I was riding in the back seat of my Aunt Belle's Cadillac when my cousin Joanie whispered, "You want some gum?" then leaned over to me and stuck her tongue in my mouth. When she sat back, smiling, I found that she'd left her gum behind. It was gnarled and cold and foreign-tasting, I suppose because it was wet with someone else's saliva.

Joanie was fourteen, three years older than me; we had known each other for all of two hours, most of which we'd spent riding silently in the back seat. Outside my window, the Ohio landscape was so odd and distant it might as well have been the surface of the moon: the plowed fields flat and suffocating, a place where there wasn't even oxygen to breathe.

Aunt Belle was my father's aunt, my great-aunt. She and her husband, Guy, were real holy rollers, the first I'd ever met. I'm not sure how my father decided I should stay with them, but I imagine he didn't have any other choice. My mother was in the hospital, and he didn't want to leave me alone while he worked long hours at the steel mill. He never asked me what I wanted.

My father wouldn't tell me much about my mother. Every time I tried to ask, he would change the subject. "You won't have to stay long," he kept telling me, as we drove to the family reunion where he was going to pass me off to my aunt and uncle. My black suitcase taunted me like a bully. My father gripped the wheel with one hand. "You'll just stay until."

"Until what?" I asked.

The reunion was in West Virginia, and on the way down, my father told me stories about my grandfather, who'd died when I was three. "He had his own molasses mill," my father told me, and, "He loved math. He charted how much the cows ate every day."

I didn't really remember my grandfather at all, except there was this picture someone had taken of the two of us together: he was zipping up my coat, and sometimes I thought I could

remember what his hands looked like, big and trembling as they fumbled to zip the teeth together. I wasn't sure if that was a real memory, though, or just something I had constructed from all those times my mother had shown me the photograph.

Now it seemed like my father was trying to tell me something. "Do you miss him?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, shrugging. "I guess. Sometimes."

"When you're dead, I'll miss you all the time," I said.

My father glanced over at me. I liked to say big, dramatic things like that. My mother was a huge Elton John fan, and I had memorized the lyrics to every song on *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, even though I wouldn't understand most of them until years later — songs about sex and suicide and how love lies bleeding. My mother played the album in the dark, late at night, and I could hear the music coming through my bedroom walls. I listened hard. Sometimes it seemed like the whole house was spinning on the turntable.

At the reunion, I spent the day thinking, *These can't be my relatives*. None of my relatives talked about "hollers" and "Jesus" and asked, "You-all have a safe trip?" We ate macaroni salad and potato salad, everything covered in mayonnaise, and when it was over, my father said, "I'll see you soon," and watched me climb in beside Joanie in the giant back seat of my aunt and uncle's Cadillac. Then he hugged Aunt Belle and shook Uncle Guy's hand, as though some sort of business deal had been done. I hung my head out the window and waved to my father as the car bumped down the dirt lane and dust rose up into the back seat and settled heavy and dry on my arms and drifted down the collar of the dress shirt my father had made me wear.

Joanie had brown hair and wore thick, plastic-framed glasses. Every time she looked at me, I felt like I was being examined. The Cadillac was such a big car that the front seat

seemed far away, as if I were looking down the wrong end of a telescope at it. Uncle Guy was listening to the Reds game. I was an Indians fan, even though the Indians never won anything.

"I'm an Indians fan," I said to Joanie, whose only reply was a silence so stony I would've thought her deaf had I not heard her offer noncommittal answers to Aunt Belle's occasional questions. Joanie had been staying with Belle and Guy for a month now. In the summer their farm served as a sort of repository for cousins who had nowhere else to go, children shipped off for reasons unknown or kept secret. Aunt Belle's kids had all grown up and moved away; Uncle Guy was her second husband. Joanie was Belle's granddaughter.

"I'm an Indians fan," I said again, louder.

"Good for the Indians," she said, and she gave me a coy look, as if she had just noticed me beside her. Her jaw moved slowly as she chewed her gum. Then she asked if I wanted some.

**For the rest** of the ride, I sat there chewing timidly, afraid of what might happen if I stopped. I was still sorting out the details, trying to decide what they meant: the way her lips had parted mine; the way her tongue had turned in my mouth, like some sort of secret handshake; then the soft withdrawal, the gum left behind. In my head, I replayed the event again and again.

It was getting dark. The Reds were winning. Guy turned the wheel, and the Cadillac heaved its way around a turn.

"We're almost there," Joanie whispered to me. In the front seat, the heads of my aunt and uncle were as still and steady as the headlights on the road. Joanie put her face so close to mine, I could feel her breath when she exhaled. She said, "I want my gum back."

**Our arrival** at Aunt Belle's farm made me think of the time my cat Yuckadoo had come home with his eye clawed out, the eyeball dangling from the empty socket. My mother screamed and ran away and spent the rest of the day in her room with the door closed. While I waited for my father to get home, I herded the poor, stumbling cat around, lamely offering him water and trying not to look directly at him, but it was too much, and I eventually went out to the driveway to watch for my father's car.

When he came home, he put Yuckadoo in a box and drove off. He returned later that night without the cat. I asked what had happened.

My father said, "I gave him to this farmer I know."

"What farmer do you know?" I asked.

Now I saw the big white barn looming behind Aunt Belle's house, and I thought, *Maybe I'll run into Yuckadoo.*

Inside the house, Aunt Belle showed me to the room where I would sleep. It was really a side entryway, but there was a couch and a dresser with a lamp.

"See you tomorrow," Joanie said, winking at me when Aunt Belle couldn't see.

Aunt Belle touched my hair as she left. The gesture seems kind as I recall now, but I remember thinking at the time that

there must have been something wrong with my hair. I opened the biggest drawer of the dresser and slid my whole suitcase inside.

**In the daylight**, the farm was flat and seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. I thought maybe the neighboring farms, which I could see on the horizon, were like those one-sided Hollywood buildings.

There was absolutely nothing to do. They got about one and a half channels on the television, and every time something good came on, I wasn't allowed to watch it. Aunt Belle thought most TV was either too violent or too racy, and the only thing she'd let me watch was this gospel show with four guys in blue suits singing about Jesus. One of them had a voice so deep that it made the little knickknacks on top of the television vibrate. The knickknacks were shepherds made from clear plastic, and you could see right through them, as if they were ghosts.

I was glad that Joanie had brought a lot of gum with her. We spent a whole day trading it back and forth. Every time her tongue brushed against my teeth, my skin tightened up between my shoulder blades and my insides went funny, like someone was rearranging them.

Joanie stayed at Aunt Belle's house so much she had her own room. It was all pink and pillowy, with stuffed animals piled in the corners. Meanwhile, I had my couch in the side entryway, where the farmworkers came in and out. Big guys in boots and overalls were always knocking on the door. When I answered, they would stare at me, trying to figure out what I was doing there.

On the second day, we were having breakfast when Joanie said to Aunt Belle, "Did I tell you about my boyfriend?"

Aunt Belle tensed up, as if she had bitten into something hard. Joanie was smiling at me. For a minute I thought she was going to tell Aunt Belle what we had been doing. "Why, no," Aunt Belle said. "You haven't mentioned any boyfriends."

"He's a chef," Joanie said, waving her triangle of toast theatrically. "He works at McDonald's."

Then she went on and on about all the things he did there, how important he was to the whole operation, how they couldn't get by without him. Even at age eleven, I knew that she was full of it. When I couldn't stand to listen anymore, I went to the living room to watch TV. But Aunt Belle was right behind me. The sound of the set coming on was like a fishing line, reeling her in.

"We have to get ready for church," she said. She had been talking about taking me to her church ever since I'd arrived, saying things like, "I want to show off my favorite nephew," and, "You're going to make all the ladies swoon," and, "Wait until you see how different our church is from that Catholic church of yours."

She said this as if Catholicism were a puppy that I'd brought home without permission.

*(end of excerpt)*