

GROWING UP DELICIOUS



Marianne Banks

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Dedication

To Patricia Riggs for the loveliness of the day to day and
Bubbles for teaching me how precious the day to day is.

To my family who taught me the cadence of storytelling.

Acknowledgment

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About The Author

I grew up in a town so small that reading was the only thing to do because television reception was so poor. My first job was mowing around the grave stones at the cemetery which offered a valuable perspective on life...we all end up dead. *Growing Up Delicious*, my first novel, took 25 to 30 years to write with time off for bad behavior, coming out of the closet and self doubt. I am under-educated but could muddle through butchering a cow or stringing a barbed wire fence if I had to though I haven't found much use for that in the suburbs. I can't put any letters after my name except PO Box and that's only if I'm writing out my address. The truth is I like writing stories because I like making things up. When I was growing up there were few stories for girls like me about girls like me and I wanted to write some.

CHAPTER ONE

My mother hung herself. Surprised the hell out of everybody. Me included. She always seemed to me to be a prime candidate for a murder victim. I spent years fantasizing ways to do her in. Electric razor into the bathwater. Mighty push down the cellar stairs. House fire. Mysterious car accident. Sometimes the fantasies were so real I'd have to go look for her to make sure I hadn't done the deed.

My sister Dorothy found her Saturday morning. Our mother was a human pendulum swinging from the crossbeam in the barn. Ticktock goes the mama clock. Blue chenille bathrobe. Funky rubber mukluks she'd had for the last hundred years. Was she wearing underwear? Did the police have to lower their eyes from the holy box she kept under lock and key? (I know I should watch my tone.)

They were going tag sale-ing. Dorothy had gone up early for a coffee and a mother-daughter chat. She freaked out and had to be sedated within an inch of her life. Or so she said when she finally “came to” enough to call me on Sunday night, half-way through *Sixty Minutes*. Though I still haven’t figured out how she got my number. The wake’s been planned for Tuesday and funeral for Wednesday, providing the coroner gets to the autopsy today. Which is Monday.

Before I could swallow my words I said “Of Course I’ll Be There” in my best adult, mature woman voice. Grown-ups attend funerals. Grown-ups attend their mother’s funeral. Even when their mothers have hanged themselves. Especially when their mothers have hanged themselves. The problem was I looked grown up but felt twelve years old.

The road to Delicious wound up through the gorge like a corkscrew. I downshifted the Toyota hoping that would help. Going home was like an Everest, air so thin my heart sprinted between my cervical vertebrae and my coccyx. I couldn’t decide if it was a heart attack or diarrhea.

Just when the Toyota seemed to be clattering and wheezing its last, the road crested and evened out. Maple Street. The maples were gone, sacrificed for curbs and sidewalks. The clapboard houses looked basically the same, smaller maybe. The names on the mailboxes different from the ones I remembered. I passed the Delicious Public School. Its quaint little portico and front door were all that remained of the school I attended. It had grown several brick appendages, an unruly insect ready to devour the center of town. The village green. Picturesque New England. Public Library. Grange Hall that someone had turned into a day care center. Holy Roller Fry-Your-Ass-in-Hell Federated Church with a steeple high enough to skewer the heavens. The Delicious General Store. Max’s gas station. The phone booth.

The Toyota needed gas. I needed something too. Water? Soda? A cigarette after more than ten abstinent years? I wondered if Auntie Rosie Potts who used to own Max’s gas station was still alive.

She wasn't my aunt, wasn't anyone's as far as I knew. She was a character. The story went that she had been married, at one time, to a man named Max. Apparently, Max had resembled a barrel with legs, was very fond of sausages, sauerkraut and homemade root beer. Besides having breath as dank as a basement he was a genius with cars. Could fix anything and taught Auntie everything he knew, which proved to be prudent. Sometime in the late fifties or early sixties a Buick as big as an airplane rolled off its blocks and crushed him against the back wall of the garage. By the time Auntie found him he was flat enough to slide under the front door. Auntie never remarried but she did take to Max's business and began wearing his clothes. She had to gain a few pounds to fit into the chinos and T-shirts or flannel depending on the temperature. His large-faced Timex graced her muscular wrist. My father always said she became more Max than Max had been.

The screen door slapped shut behind me. A gray swirl of tobacco smoke greeted me before Auntie did.

"Hot enough for you?" Her voice was loud as though she'd grown hard of hearing.

"It'll do," I said, sliding my sunglasses down and peering over them at the old lady.

Auntie Potts sat in a rocker, which grew out of the floor like an old hickory tree between the counter and a picture window. Her position afforded Auntie a view of her gas pumps and the center of Delicious. She could see the comings and goings at the General Store, the literate among the townspeople who might be taking out or returning books to the library, and kids climbing the jungle gym at the day-care center. If Auntie hadn't been looking at me she would have been able to see the minister, the apparently immortal Pastor "The Antichrist" Jameson, crossing the common on his way to the Fry-Your-Ass Federated.

His was the one church in Delicious. It attracted Baptists and Congregationalists exclusively. Catholics, Jews and Methodists had to tuck their respective tails between their legs and go to

Equally Delicious (the name of the next and larger town to the west settled by a disgruntled Unitarian) to worship in their own peculiar manner.

I noticed the sign in the middle of the town green: “Welcome to Delicious. Home of The Biggest, Bestest Apples in Massachusetts.” Because of the recent Fourth of July holiday, the posts were festooned with red, white and blue crepe paper. I looked back at Auntie.

“Bad perm.” She caught me staring.

Auntie’s hair was almost as short as mine and stood off her head in dozens of white, frizzled exclamation points.

I nodded, unable to remember why I had stopped in.

“What can I get you?” Auntie plucked an unfiltered Lucky Strike from a severely depleted pack on the windowsill and lit up with a wooden kitchen match.

My brain kicked in. “Five dollars of unleaded and a pack of...” What had I used to smoke?

“Salem Lights wasn’t it?” Auntie said.

Time stopped just like my breathing. Why did I think I could skulk into town without being noticed? The only people who came to Delicious were the residents or the relatives of residents or the estranged daughters of mothers who ended up twisting in the wind. If there’d been any wind in that barn.

“Sooooo, you came back. I wondered if you would.” Smoke escaped from Auntie’s mouth.

“How did you know it was me?”

“Family resemblance.”

I nodded, wondering if it extended beyond big noses, near-sightedness and high foreheads.

“Second, Gert’s dead. Wasn’t an easy way she picked neither. I can’t help wondering why. Any clues?”

“You got me, Auntie. I haven’t spoken to her for twenty-odd years.”

“What do you suppose she’d think of your coming back?”

“If she was alive it would probably kill her. Maybe she’ll sit up and spit in my eye.” I opened my wallet.

“I’ll have to be sure to go to the funeral.” Auntie started to laugh.

At least it sounded like a laugh but could easily have been bronchitis.

“Keep your money, kiddo. It’s nice to see you. Sorry for the circumstances.”

“Thanks. You know I won’t be here long.”

“Of course not. There’s nothing for you here.” She flicked the Lucky Strike stub into a Maxwell House coffee can near her feet.

“There never was.” I picked up the Salems and headed for the door.

“Don’t be a stranger while you’re here.” Auntie followed me out the door. “You know your daddy used to stop by for a smoke once in a while.”

I stopped in my tracks. My father. I was suddenly running in the dark. Blind. Heart pounding.

“It’s been years since your daddy died but there ain’t a Saturday morning goes by I don’t think of him driving in here and...”

“Jenny?” My father shouts up the stairs. “You going to lay in bed all day?”

The brand-new AM-FM radio alarm clock I got last week on my twelfth birthday sits on my night table. Seven o’clock Saturday morning. Dump Day.

“I’ll be right there, Dad,” I yell, throwing back the covers and pulling on a pair of denim shorts and the T-shirt I’d gotten as a souvenir from the Catskill Game Farm. I raise the shade and see my father loading the trash barrels into the back of his pickup. No time for breakfast. Dad is in a hurry. Then I remember why. It is the second Saturday of the month. Dump burning day. I jerk open my underwear drawer for a pair of socks, pick up my sneakers and rush downstairs. I open the screen door and step out. The grass glitters with dew. My feet get wet. I hardly ever wear shoes in the summer but the dump is a dangerous place.

“Come on Jenny. I’ll buy you a doughnut at Auntie’s for breakfast on the way.” My father opens the truck door for me. “Your chariot awaits.” He always says the same thing.

The dump isn't much more than a hole filled with trash that always smolders and stinks a lot. I finish my doughnut before we get there. Any food left in my mouth tastes like the dump smells. There are other pickups already here, some empty and some waiting. My father backs up to the hole and sets the emergency brake.

"Don't want to fall in," he says. He hoists himself onto the back of the truck and empties the barrels. I kneel on the seat and look out the rear window and watch our trash join every other person's in Delicious.

Odie Burgess, the Dump Master, weaves up to the hole carrying two gallon jugs of gasoline.

"Had enough to drink, Odie?" one of the men yells.

He turns around to face the crowd and says, "Not yet."

Odie punctures the sides of the jugs and throws them into the rubbish. Nothing happens for a minute. No one looks anywhere else. With a great whoosh the smoldering gives way to fire. Leaping orange flames rise to the sky accompanied by roiling black clouds of smoke. The smell grows in the air until it is everything. My nose seems to get bigger, swelling like a tomato before it bursts in the sun. Suddenly the rats scatter out of the hole. It seems like hundreds rush from their flaming trash homes and run willy-nilly across the parking lot, scattering toward the men who are waiting to shoot them.

My father picks me up off the seat and boosts me into the back of the truck.

"Don't want to miss nothing, huh Jenny?" He reaches into the cab and takes his .22 out from behind the seat, loads it and climbs onto the back bumper.

He is a good shot, my father. One of the best. None of his rats suffer. They just explode like stepped-on grapes. Some of the other rats aren't so lucky.

Eventually the fire dies back. Odie meanders around the parking area pushing a wheelbarrow and shoveling rats into it. "Hell of a haul boys," Odie slurs as he shovels. "This here's a public service. Otherwise these sons-a-bitches would run over us in our sleep."

Someone offers my father a beer. I lie in the back of the

truck, my head on an old burlap grain sack, and watch the cloud of smoke drift away and disappear.

“You okay, kiddo? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Auntie screwed on my gas cap.

“I did. This place is crawling with them.” I started the Toyota and fastened my seat belt for the two-mile drive to my mother’s house.