

A Visit to Grandmother

by William Melvin Kelley

Chig knew something was wrong the instant his father kissed her. He had always known his father to be the warmest of men, a man so kind that when people ventured timidly into his office, it took only a few words from him to make them relax, and even laugh. Doctor Charles Dunford cared about people.

But when he had bent to kiss the old lady's face, something new and almost ugly had come into his eyes: fear, uncertainty, sadness, and perhaps even hatred.

Ten days before in New York, Chig's father had decided suddenly he wanted to go to Nashville to attend his college class reunion, twenty years out. Both Chig's brother and sister, Peter and Connie, were packing for camp and besides they were too young for such an affair. But Chig was seventeen, had nothing to do that summer, and his father asked if he would like to go along. His father had given him additional reasons: "All my running buddies got their diplomas and were snapped up by them crafty young gals, and had kids within a year- now all those kids, some of them gals, are your age."

The reunion had lasted a week. As they packed for home, his father, in a far too offhand way, had suggested they visit Chig's grandmother. "We might as well drop in on her and my brother's."

So, instead of going north, they just had gone farther south, had just entered her house. And Chig had a suspicion now that the reunion had only been an excuse to drive south, that his father had been heading to this house all the time.

His father had never talked much about his family, with the exception of his brother, GL, who seemed part con man, part practical joker and part Don Juan; he had spoken of GL with the kind of indulgence he would have shown a cute, but ill-behaved and potentially dangerous, five-year-old.

Chig's father had left home when he was fifteen. When asked why, he would answer: "I wanted to go to school. They didn't have a Negro high school at home, so I went up to Knoxville and lived with a cousin and went to school."

They had been met at the door by Aunt Rose, GL's wife, and ushered in to the living room. The old lady had looked up from her seat by the window. Aunt Rose stood between the visitors.

The old lady eyed his father. "Rose, who that? Rose?" She squinted. She looked like a doll, made of black straw, the wrinkles in her face running in one direction like the head of a broom. Her hair was white and coarse and grew out straight from her head. Her eyes were

brown - the whites, too, seemed light brown - and were hidden behind thick glasses, which remained somehow on a tiny nose. "That Hiram?" She turned then to Chig. "Now that man, he look like Eleanor, Charles' wife, but Charles wouldn't never send my grandson to see me. I never hear from Charles." She stopped again.

"It Charles, Mama. That who it is." Aunt Rose, between them, led them closer. "It Charles come all the way from New York to see you, and bring little Charles with him."

The old lady stared up at them. "Charles? Rose, that really Charles?" She turned away, and reached for a handkerchief in the pocket of her clean, ironed, flowered housecoat, and wiped her eyes. "God have mercy. Charles." She spread her arms up to him, and he bent down and kissed her cheek. That was when Chig saw his face, grimacing. She hugged him; Chig watched the muscles in her arms as they tightened around his father's neck. She half rose out of her chair. "How are you, son?"

Chig could not hear his father's answer.

She let him go, and fell back into her chair, grabbing the arms. Her hands were as dark as the wood, and seemed to become part of it. "Now, who that standing there? Who that man??"

"That's one of your grandsons, Mama." His father voice cracked. "Charles Dunford, Junior. You saw him once, when he was a baby, in Chicago. He's grown now."

"I can see that, boy!" She looked at Chig squarely. "Come here son and kiss me once." He did. "What they call you? Charles, too?"

"No, ma'am, they call me Chig."

She smiled. She had all her teeth, but they were too perfect to be her own. "That's good. Can't have two boys answering to Charles in the same house. Won't nobody at all come. So you that little boy. You don't remember me, do you? I used to take you to church in Chicago, and you'd get up and hop in time to the music. You studying to be a preacher?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think so. I might be a lawyer."

"You'll be an honest one, wont you?"

"I'll try."

"Trying ain't enough! You be honest, you hear? Promise me. You be honest like your daddy."

"All right. I promise."

“Good. Rose, where’s GL at? Where that thief? He gone again?”

“I don’t know, Mama.” Aunt Rose looked embarrassed. “He say he was going by the store. He’ll be back.”

“Well, then where’s Hiram? You call up those boys, and get them over here- now! You got enough to eat? Let me go see.”

She started to get up. Chig reached out his hand. She shook him off. “What they tell you about me, Chig? They tell you I’m all laid up? Don’t believe it. They don’t know nothing about old ladies. When I want help, I’ll let you know. Only time I need help getting anywheres is when I dies and they lift me into the ground.”

She was standing now, her back and shoulders straight. She came only to Chig’s chest. She squinted up to him. “You eat much? Your daddy ate like two men.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s good. That means you ain’t nervous. Your mama, she ain’t nervous. I remember that. In Chicago, she’d sit down by a window all afternoon and never say nothing, just knit.” She smiled. “Let me see what we got to eat.”

“I’ll do that, mama.” Aunt Rose spoke softly. “You haven’t seen Charles in a long time. You sit and talk.”

The old lady squinted at her. “You can do the cooking if you promise it ain’t because you think I can’t.”

Aunt Rose chuckled. “I know you can do it, Mama.”

“All right. I’ll just sit and talk a spell.” She sat again and arranged her skirt around her short legs.

Chig did most of the talking, told all about himself before she asked. His father spoke only when spoken to, and then, only one word at a time, as if by coming back home, he had become a small boy again, sitting in the parlor while his mother spoke with her guests.

When Uncle Hiram and Mae, his wife, came they sat down to eat. Chig did not have to ask about Uncle GL’s absence; Aunt Rose volunteered an explanation: “Can’t ever tell where the man is at. One Thursday morning he left here and next thing we knew, he was calling from Chicago, saying he went to see Joe Louis fight. He’ll be here though; he ain’t as young and footloose as he used to be.” Chig’s father had mentioned driving down that GL was about five years older than he was, nearly fifty.

Uncle Hiram was somewhat smaller than Chig's father; his short-cropped kinky hair was half gray, half black. One spot, just off his forehead, was totally white. Later, Chig found out that it had been that way since he was twenty. Mae (Chig could not bring himself to call her Aunt) was a good deal younger than Hiram, pretty enough so that Chig would have looked at her twice on the street. She was a honey-colored woman, with long eyelashes. She was wearing a white sheathe.

At dinner, Chig and his father sat on one side, opposite Uncle Hiram and Mae; his grandmother and Aunt Rose sat at the ends. The food was good; there was a lot and Chig ate a lot. All through the meal, they talked about the family as it had been thirty years before, and particularly about the young GL. Mae and Chig asked questions; the old lady answered; Aunt Rose directed the discussion, steering the old lady onto the best stories; Chig's father laughed time to time; Uncle Hiram ate.

"Why don't you tell them about the horse, Mama?" Aunt Rose, over Chig's weak protest, was spooning mashed potatoes onto his plate. "There now, Chig."

"I'm trying to think." The old lady was holding her fork halfway to her mouth, looking at them over her glasses. "Oh, you talking about that crazy horse GL brung home that time?"

"That's right, Mama." Aunt Rose nodded and slid another slice of white meat on Chig's plate.

Mae started to giggle. "Oh, I've heard this. This is funny, Chig."

The old lady put down her fork and began: Well, GL went out of the house one day with an old, no-good chair I wanted him to take over to the church for a bazaar, and he met up with this man who's just brung in some horses from out West. Now, I reckon you can expect one swindler to be in every town, but you don't rightly think there'll be two, and God forbid they should ever meet- but they did, GL and his chair, this man and his horses. Well, I wished I'd-a been there; there must-a been some mighty high-powered talking going on. That man with his horses, he told GL them horses was half-Arab, half-Indian, and GL told that man the chair was an antique he'd stole from some rich white folks. So they swapped. We'll, I was a-looking out the window and seen GL dragging this animal to the house. It looked pretty gentle and its eyes were most closed and its feet was shuffling.

"GL, where'd you get that thing?" I says, "I swapped him for that old chair, Mama," he says. "And made myself a bargain. This is even better than Papa's horse."

Well, I'm a-looking at this horse and noticing how he be looking more and more wide awake every minute, sort of warming up like a teakettle until, I swears to you, that horse is blowing steam out its nose.

“Come on, Mama,” GL says, “come on and I’ll take you for a ride.” Now George, my husband, God rest his tired soul, he’d brung home this white folks’ which had a busted wheel and fixed it and was to take it back that day and GL says: “Come on, Mama, we’ll use this fine buggy and take us a ride.”

“GL,” I says, “no, we ain’t. Them white folks’ll burn us alive if we use their buggy. You just take that horse right on back.” You see, I was sure that boy’d come by that animal ungainly.

“Mama, I can’t take him back,” GL says, “Why not?” I says.

“Because I don’t know rightly where that man is at,” GL says.

“Oh,” I says. “Well, then I reckon we stuck with it.” And I turned around to go back into the house because it was getting late, near dinner time, and I was cooking for ten.

“Mama,” GL says to my back. “Mama, ain’t you coming for a ride with me?”

“Go on, boy. You ain’t getting me inside kicking range of that animal.” I was eyeing that beast and it was boiling hotter all the time. I reckon maybe that man had drugged it. “That horse is wild, GL,” I says.

“No, he ain’t. He ain’t. That man say he is buggy and saddle broke and as sweet as the inside of a apple.”

My oldest girl, Essie, had-a come out on the porch and she says: “Go on, Mama, I’ll cook. You ain’t been out the house in weeks.”

“Sure, come on, Mama,” GL says. “There ain’t nothing to be fidgety about. This horse is gentle as rose petal.” And just then that animal snorts so hard it sets up a little dust storm around its feet.

“Yes, Mama,” Essie says, “you can see he gentle.” Well, I looked at Essie and then at that horse because I didn’t think we could be looking at the same animal. I should-a figured how Essie’s eyes ain’t never been so good.

“Come on, Mama,” GL says.

“All right,” I says. So I stood on the porch and watched GL hitching that horse up to the white folks’ buggy. For a while there, the animal was pretty quiet, pawing a little, but not much. And I was feeling a little better about riding with GL behind that crazy-looking horse. I could see how GL was happy I was going with him. He was scurrying around that animal buckling buckles and strapping straps, all the time smiling, and that made me feel good.

Then when he was finished, and I must say, that horse looked mighty fine hitched to that buggy and I knew anybody that climbed up there would look pretty good too. GL came

around and stood at the bottom of the steps, and took off his hat and bowed and said: “Madam,” and reached out his hand to me and I was feeling real elegant like a fine lady. He helped me up to the seat and then got up beside me and we moved out down our alley. And I remember how black folks come out on their porches and shook their heads, saying: “Lord now, will you look at Eva Dunford, the fine lady! Don’t she look good sitting up there!” And I pretended not to hear and sat up straight and proud.

We rode on through the center of town, up Market Street, and all the way out where Hiram is living now, which in them days was all woods, there not being a farm in sight and that’s when that horse must-a first realized he weren’t at all broke or tame or maybe thought he was back out West again, and started to gallop.

“GL,” I says, “now you ain’t joking with your mama, is you? Because if you is, I’ll strap you purple if I live through this.”

Well, GL was pulling on the reins with all his meager strength, and yelling, “Whoa, you. Say now, whoa!” He turned to me just long enough to say, “I ain’t fooling with you, Mama. Honest!”

I reckon that animal weren’t too satisfied with the road, because it made a sharp right turn just then, down into a gulley and struck across a hilly meadow. “Mama,” GL yells. “Mama, do something!”

I didn’t know what to do, but I figured I had to do something so I stood up, hopped down onto the horse’s back and pulled it to a stop. Don’t ask me how I did that; I reckon it was that I was a mother and my baby asked me to do something, is all.

“Well, we walked that animal all the way home; sometimes I had to club it over the nose with my fist to make it come, but we made it, GL and me. You remember how tired we was, Charles?”

“I wasn’t here at the time.” Chig turned to his father and found his face completely blank, without even a trace of a smile or a laugh.

“Well, of course you was, son. That happened in... in... it was a hot summer that year and—“

“I left here in June of that year. You wrote me about it.”

The old lady stared past Chig at him. They all turned to him; Uncle Hiram looked up from his plate.

“Then you don’t remember how we all laughed?”

“No, I don’t, Mama. And I probably wouldn’t have laughed. I don’t think it was funny.” They were staring into each other’s eyes.

“Why not, Charles?”

“Because in the first place, the horse was gained by fraud. And in the second place, both of you might have been seriously injured or even killed.” He broke off their stare and spoke to himself more than to any of them: “And if I’d done it, you would’ve beaten me good for it.”

“Pardon?” The old lady had not heard him; only Chig had heard.

Chig’s Father sat up straight as if preparing to debate. “I said that if I had done just exactly what GL did, you would have beaten me good for it, Mama.” He was looking at her again.

“Why you say that, son?” She was leaning toward him.

“Don’t you know? Tell the truth. It can’t hurt me now.” His voice cracked, but only once. “If GL and I did something wrong, you’d beat me first and then be too tired to beat him. AT dinner, he’s always get seconds and I wouldn’t. You’d do things with him, like ride in that buggy, but if I wanted you to do something with me, you were always too busy.” He paused and considered whether to say what he finally did say: “I cried all the way up to Knoxville. That was the last time I ever cried in my life.”

“Oh, Charles.” She started to get up, to come around the table to him.

He stopped her. “It’s too late.”

“But you don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand? I understood then; I understand now.”

Tears now traveled down the lines in her face, but when she spoke, her voice was clear. “I thought you knew. I had ten children. I had to give all of them what they needed most.” She nodded. “I paid more mind to GL. I had to. GL could-a ended up swinging if I hadn’t. But you was smarter. You was more growed up than GL when you was five and he was ten, and I tried to show you that by letting you do what you wanted to do.”

“That’s not true, Mama. You know it. GL was light-skinned and had good hair and looked almost white and you loved him for that.”

“Charles, no. No, son. I didn’t love any one of you more than any other.”

“That can’t be true.” His father was standing now, his fists clenched tight. “Admit it, Mama... please!” Chig looked at him, shocked; the man was actually crying.

“It may not-a been right what I done, but I ain’t no liar.” Chig knew she did not really understand what had happened, what he wanted of her. “I’m not lying to you, Charles.”

Chig’s father had gone pale. He spoke very softly. “You’re about thirty years too late, Mama.” He bolted from the table. Silverware and dishes reang and jumped. Chis heard him hurrying up to their room.

They sat in silence for awhile and then heard a key in the front door. A man with a new, lacquered straw hat came in. He was wearing brown and white two-tone shoes with very pointed toes and a white summer suit. “Say now! I heard my brother was in town. Where he at? Where that rascal?”

He stood in the doorway, smiling broadly, an engaging, open, friendly smile, the innocent smile of a five-year-old.