

The Tracks of my Youth

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Heading north through Virginia on interstate 81, you see a gap in the rolling hills just before exit 222. Small eyes can peek over the window ledge and catch sight of a restaurant just beyond a pair of rusty train tracks that make hungry plates rattle during supptime. Mrs. Rowe, an old lady with white curls and a wrinkled smile, looks down from a sign standing tall against the competing sign for “Cracker Barrel.” She is stirring batter with a spoon, holding the bowl close to her green apron that says “Rowe’s Restaurant and Baker” on the front. As you pull into the crowded parking lot, you take off your seat belt too fast, and your mother scolds you for doing so.

Once you are inside the large red building, which claims “1 of 7 top breakfasts all across the south, Southern Living Magazine,” the warm cinnamon buns catch your eye as you skip past the rocking chairs carrying the name of each college or university that Mrs. Rowe’s grandchildren ever attended. As usual, Tootie, a rounded woman bearing a deep, scratchy voice, lingers at the register beside the cinnamon buns, punching buttons to make the cash register go bing! into her stomach. In a glass case beside Tootie, pies melt your eyes in shades of sugary delight dripping from their warm crusts.

Before your eyes can water from the buttery smell inside the restaurant, it’s off to the back room with the hostess, past green stools that spin low at the off-white counter where the locals sip coffee and read the *Staunton News Leader*. On Friday afternoons, you can sit at the counter beside Fay, a daily customer, who heckles the waitresses with her conservative views. You drink Mr. Pibb and spin around and around as she quotes

Fox News anchors. In front of Fay, sitting in a little green chair with discolored wooden legs, sits Mrs. Rowe herself, making sure the waitresses stay on track despite the passing train. Trays wobble and mashed potatoes covered in thick, bubbling gravy shudder, but the waitresses maintain a firm grip. They are used to the mini-earthquakes; trains howl by every hour at ten past.

The restaurant's white walls are colored by the paintings of P. Buckley Moss and other local artists. The waitresses weave beneath them in quick, darting movements, which have painted the hardwood floors with scuff marks from black work shoes. From her chair, Mrs. Rowe, who was given the nickname Moo Moo by a local boy with a cleft palate, stands up to make her rounds. They all call her Moo Moo because she isn't a formal lady, and that is why the town embraces her like their own grandmother. She stops by every table and greets every customer.

I was always an observant child, and nothing has changed. My uncle often says I inherited all of Moo Moo's traits, from her work ethic to her charisma. He pointed to me at her memorial service and told the mass of people who came to wish her goodbye that I was the most like her. He claimed I had her eye for the good things in life. I don't cry often, but tears welled up when he said that; it was one of my proudest moments.

My grandmother's memorial service didn't fill the church pews because she was beautiful or because she had an angelic voice. She wasn't on the big screen or in the magazines. The people came because she fed them like family and treated them like family. Moo Moo gave a small Virginia town a place to gather on Sunday morning after church, and in her Sunday best she fed them, because she never took a day off.

As with every business, there were disgruntled and unsatisfied customers from time to time. There was one man in particular who walked to the register and asked her where he could complain. Moo Moo told him, “I would send you over to the complaint department, but it shut down for lack of business.” After a good laugh, he forgot his complaint and went home happy, just as most people did upon leaving Rowe’s.

The food may have been thick with butter and milk and cholesterol, but it was never preheated. It was always stirred right there from scratch, and that gave me a foundation for making my own way in the world. My grandmother never took shortcuts in the kitchen; she peeled the apples for every apple pie. I used to sit beneath her as she worked, catching the curled up apple peels as they fell. And when she made blackberry pies, we’d drive down back roads to the countryside to pick the berries, loading up the trunk of her car with the smell of fresh soil she later washed away from the berries in the kitchen sink.

The freshness of her pies didn’t wash away, and the customers dipping off exit 222 for a slice of the rolling Virginia countryside could taste the roots of a family that squeezed the juices from the dirt. They would lean back in their chairs, smiling, because everything began from the palm of my grandmother’s hands, and her hands could draw out the best in every ingredient. But she never picked more berries than she needed for baking, and when she passed away, this lesson became my philosophy on life.

Though the train tracks carried me north and then west, I still hold close everything I observed within the walls of my grandmother’s restaurant. Some of the greatest lessons are taught through watching, and Rowe’s was the classroom of my youth. It showed me that no matter how much this world shakes me and tries to break me, my

foundation is deep-rooted and strong, and nothing can stop me. My foundation was wrought by the hands of my grandmother; and though this world can be callous, I grew with a sense of place and a sense of purpose. Those are two ingredients that can never fail me.

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