

The Price of Slaw in Georgia (An excerpt from Tuck Your Skirt in Your Panties and Run)

On the wall next to the place-your-order-here window, the edges of a paper menu fluttered in the afternoon breeze. “Side items. Potato salad, chips, baked beans, slaw, Mama’s Brunswick stew . . .” read my mother, aloud. “I wonder what they mean by Brunswick stew? Some places confuse hash with stew.”

Deeply engrossed in our philosophical conversation teasing out the nuances of stew and hash, we startled when the glass window slid open and two hands reached through, dispensing tester cups. We cautiously accepted them.

Like professional tasters we held the substance against the sunlight to ascertain thickness and consistency. We passed the samples under our noses to gauge spice and seasoning. Finding everything, thus far, agreeable, we opened our mouths and tossed back the contents like bar flies on nickel shooter night at Papa Joe’s.

Brunswick stew, we both agreed.

Someone pushed the window ajar again.

“Y’all like Mama’s Brunswick stew,” a husky voice from within half-asked, half-stated.

“Yes,” replied my mother, “but who’s Mama?”

The gravelly voice put its face in the communication gap. “Who do you think? You’ll have my stew,” she ordered, writing on her pad.

Watching the way her pudgy fingers gripped a pen under the strain of her bosoms resting heavily on her forearms, we naturally mumbled, “Yes ma’am.”

Mama’s aura caught our attention like the bearded fat lady in a red string bikini at the county fair. Her biceps bulged as much as her upper-arm under-skin sagged and swayed. Mousy hair curling from under her hairnet glistened with sweat beads. The mustache on her upper lip mesmerized us.

“What else?”

We ordered sandwich baskets. “Can I get slaw on my sandwich,” my mother requested.

“Cost ya’ extra,” growled Mama.

“Oh, I’m from Tennessee,” offered my mother.

“What’s that got to do with the price of slaw in Georgia,” cursed Mama.

I pondered the same thing myself, suspecting my mother of pulling a Mama T. I feared for the unsanitary handling of my food, as well.

Mama T, my maternal grandmother, now passed on to other audiences, often, at odd times, to total strangers, established her identity by enunciating, in her formal southern drawl, “I’m Fredda Beaton, here visiting from Memphis. I’m a member of the UDC and the DAR. My family’s ancestral men fought valiantly wearing full regalia in both wars for independence. This is my daughter. She married an attorney. They live in a lovely home and drive a fine automobile . . .”

My mother faced me, rattled. “I only meant to explain that in Tennessee folks eat Bar-B-Que with slaw.”

“Oh,” I said. “I expected you to elucidate on how you and your Cousin Jimmy took that flogging rooster on the bus to Aint Carrie’s farm in Mississippi. And how she sent y’all home with it two days later, so your daddy let it go in an alley off Beale street. And how afterwards you all went to the Rendezvous for slaw on Bar-B-Que sandwiches.”

She gave me *the look*, and countered, “What’s that got to do with the price of slaw in Georgia?”

Exactly.