

## Always at Six

By Ross Liggett, First Place Winner, 2021 Writing Appalachia Contest

Granny nearly broke her back picking those wild onions. I'd watch her spine tighten as her fingers grabbed right where stem met soil.

"Give it a good pull, but be gentle," she said. "You don't wanna rip it."

With one tug, she exposed the root and shook off dirt that clung to its milky bulb. The smell crept up on us, strong enough to settle in our throats, let us have a little taste. Sometimes, it made my eyes water more than they ever had for Walmart onions.

We always went on mornings after it rained. The soil was more pliable, soft like the sighs Granny made when reaching down to pick. I went barefoot during spring forages. The only thing I worried about stepping on was a nasty bug. The earth was soft, it's grass pillowing between my toes like damp shag carpet. My growing feet left a trail of prints straight to the hedge apple tree. It almost always bore fruit, green and wrinkled softballs that smelled of citrus. Wild onions seemed to sprout up around there.

"They help each other out," Granny told me. "What one ain't got, the other gives."

We'd circle the tree, leaving pick marks in the mud until we had a bucket full.

Granny never complained about washing my feet after the picking was done. She'd rinse them under the outdoor spigot. Her hands kneaded my feet like biscuit dough until the murky water drippings turned clear.

"Now put some shoes on. I don't want none of that dirt in my house."

When she was done with me, her hands turned to the onions. Each one got cleaned with light finger strokes from root to stem. I'd fetch old grocery store sale papers to lay clean ones on

and soak up any moisture. The process continued in silence, Granny breaking it only to mutter a curse when she stood up to stretch her back.

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Granny said you can't have wild onions without white beans and cornbread. She submerged the dried beans in water as soon as she woke up, letting them soften by supper. There was a spare ham bone in the freezer ready to be used. I watched her drop it in the pot of beans, breaking the boiling water's surface. She'd reduce the heat and let them simmer, then move her skills somewhere else.

The cornbread wasn't anything special. Granny stocked up on boxes of Jiffy whenever they went on sale and hid them in the pantry. She measured the milk with her eyes, knowing exactly when to stop pouring it into the yellow mix. I got to crack the egg and didn't leave any pieces of shell behind. Her secret ingredient was sour cream.

"Makes it moist," she said, dropping a couple dollops into the bowl. "They'll think it's from scratch."

The wild onions were paired with cucumbers to make a salad. She made the dressing first, not mixing it in until right before supper so nothing got soggy. It was simple, nothing but Miracle Whip, vinegar, mustard, and table sugar. She held the spoon up to my mouth and let me taste it, asking if it needed anything. I liked it tangy and asked for more vinegar.

Granny cut the onions first. They smelled stronger in the kitchen than outside. There was less space for the biting scent to fill. If there were matches nearby, we'd hold them between our front teeth, the red end sticking out to prevent any tears. When she prepared the cucumbers, their smell refreshed the room and eased any stinging in our eyes.

Grandad came back from town while she was peeling off the prickled green skin.

“When’s supper gonna be ready?”

Granny waited for the door to close behind him before she provided an answer.

“Six,” she said, pausing her hands to look up at him.

When we heard him sit in the recliner, she resumed her work, pressing the knife into the cucumber hard enough to remove its skin but not hard enough to puncture her guiding thumb. She separated the last strip and stared at the pastel flesh in her hand.

“It’s always at six.”

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Mom joined us for dinner. She got off from her post office job and wanted to eat before taking me home. The four of us surrounded a square table. I faced Mom.

Granny made my plate first. She sat it down in front of me and hurried back with two more. Her chair was the last to be sat in.

They made me lead prayer. After joining hands, I recited what every kid was taught in Sunday school. It took no effort, and it made us feel safe, just in case.

Granny and I didn’t speak unless spoken to. The conversation carried between Mom and Grandad. He said something about seeing a mink on the way home. Mom followed that up by explaining how she almost hit Cousin Tonya’s dog. I got asked about school and if I had any girlfriends. I never did.

Granny spoke once. Mom asked if the cornbread was homemade.

Not all the wild onions were used in the cucumber salad. Some were saved and placed on the table to eat raw. While Mom and Grandad continued their talking, I watched Granny reach over and grab a couple. She ate slowly, careful to keep her mouth shut when chewing. Her face was stone as her teeth worked the onion.

I grabbed one from the plate and brought it to my mouth with as little motion as possible. Biting the root, my mouth contorted from the flavor's strength. Mom and Grandad laughed as water built in my eyes.

Granny broke her silence. "You don't wanna get used to it."



**About the Author:** Ross Liggett is a WVU English major from Upper Tract, West Virginia. This essay was inspired by the time he spent with his grandparents as a child. His essay portrays the role of his grandma (Granny) in his traditional Appalachian family.