

An excerpt from:

The Truthful Story

By Helen Stine

Chapter One

October 31, 1965

The lady in the flowery dress said they found Nannie in the oyster bed just around the first bend in the Toogoodoo River, not far from the wharf on Gibson Island. I strained to hear more of what they were saying out on the porch, holding my breath, flattening myself against the heavy, opened door so they wouldn't see me, its big crystal doorknob digging into my back. Swirls of their cigarette smoke crept through the tiny holes in the screen, like little ghosts trying to get in. The wispy spirits lingered in the sunrays that hit hard on the wooden floors this time of day.

Daduh said afternoons were best for cleaning the front of the house because that's when all the dust showed up good. "It's cheatin' to clean there in the mornin'," she'd say. The morning was for the kitchen, where she'd open all the windows first thing when she arrived every Saturday, which was cleaning day at Nannie's house. Daduh would peer out the window over the deep porcelain sink while she worked and make low chuckling noises as she watched Nannie out on the wharf. Up early in her fishing clothes and green-striped hat, Nannie would dart back and forth between the fishing rod sticking up in the air on one end of the wharf and the net full of chicken necks dangling off the other.

Nannie kept the chicken necks and other strange bait in a freezer that sat on a wooden plank in the little smokehouse next to the wharf. She said once upon a time the smokehouse used to be for hanging meat to cure, but now that it had electricity, it was used for other things like storing bait and fishing poles and different kinds of nets. It had a mostly dirt floor and giant hooks hanging from the ceiling, and it smelled like something was rotten. It was dark, too, despite the one grimy lightbulb sticking out of the wall by the door. Every time Nannie pulled the string, the light would flicker twice, and several mice who lived under the wooden planks would race out of sight. I was afraid of the smokehouse, but Nannie wasn't.

She'd get excited preparing for what she called her "dual expedition"—fishing and crabbing at the same time. She could do both, bragging, "Not everyone has the patience or the know-how." She showed me how to fix the fishing rod with her good-luck silver feather tied to the tip and how to arrange the chicken necks in the crabbing net so when you dropped it in the water, it would fan out perfect. She was right—you could catch a lot of crabs that way, and the silver feather all but guaranteed a full string of speckled sea trout. On those lucky mornings, she and Daduh could clean fish and cook and pick crabs faster than anybody, laughing the whole time. I never knew why they were laughing exactly, but I liked listening to them, absorbed in their secret, happy world.

Now at the screen door, I heard the funeral people shushing each other out on the porch. I jumped as Daduh touched me on the shoulder. "Genevieve! You come on with me to the kitchen right now and leave those grown-ups be." Daduh had a voice like a man, and when she whispered, it sounded like she was growling—but not in a mean way.

I sat on the kitchen stool, tucking my feet around the chrome legs and picking at a triangle-shaped tear in the green vinyl seat that had been there as long as I could remember. Daduh rolled out the dough for cheese biscuits and handed me the little drinking glass we used to cut out the biscuits. When Nannie made cheese biscuits for supper, my job was to tear out the circles carefully and lay them out for baking. Now it was Daduh making the biscuits.

“When will they leave?” I was hoping Daduh could answer my question because I didn’t like all these people here in Nannie’s house talking about her and whispering on the porch. I watched Daduh’s hands, brown on one side and white on the other, move through another ball of dough in the bowl. They reminded me of the doll I had that kind of looked like Daduh with her black hair tied in a checkered handkerchief, wearing her cleaning day dress and apron. When you turned her upside down, she was a white girl with blond hair tied up in satin ribbons and wearing a long, beautiful gown. Daduh wiped her hands on her apron, which was not her usual one. This one was purple and frilly and didn’t really suit her at all, but it was her favorite color and the one Nannie had given her for her birthday.

I was getting angrier by the minute. No one seemed to be in charge. Mama was upstairs with her two sisters. She couldn’t stop crying. Her mother was dead, and there was nothing I could do to help. Tipping the stool on its front legs, I leaned forward against the kitchen counter, raising myself up to the window that overlooked the driveway. My brothers were out by the tractor shed, shuffling their feet in the dirt with their heads down, trying to figure out what to do next and halfheartedly playing with Aunt Alicia’s four dogs. The dogs seemed confused, sensing this was not like our regular Sunday visit to Gibson Island. James, who was now eight, knelt down to nestle his face into the neck of the big, gentle German shepherd, Lady, who followed him everywhere. Markie and Dodi, the smart-as-a-whip poodles, danced around and

nipped at the hem of six-year-old Ryan's blue jeans as he ran in figure eights to taunt them; and Teddy, the black, skinny terrier with no hair and a long, tan nose, paced nervously on his tiny toenails, glancing back at the house every few seconds. Then, with a burst of energy, like they often got, James and Ryan and the four dogs took off running down the long island road together, probably remembering Aunt Alicia had asked James to check the mail that had been sitting in the mailbox for the last two days.

Behind me, the back door of the kitchen opened to the river. I heard the motor of a small boat fading and the plopping sound of waves as they slapped against the wharf's wooden stilts. I could see my father standing on the wharf, wearing his brown dress pants with the pleats down the front and a short-sleeved white shirt. He tucked his Winston cigarettes back into his shirt pocket and then lit one, holding it between two fingers while at the same time clamping his thumb and little finger together to pick the loose flecks of tobacco off his lips and tongue. He looked lonely out there by himself, staring out at that bend in the river. There was nothing he could do to help, either.

Aunt Alicia was in her office, the biggest room in the house, and which used to be the Gibson family dining room. From the kitchen, Daduh and I could see her through the wide screen door at the end of the hallway, sitting at the head of the long black walnut table. I always thought it was odd to have screen doors on the inside of the house. Nannie said it helped keep mosquitoes and gnats out but allowed the river breezes to move through the rooms. Aunt Alicia had left the gathering of funeral people out on the porch, retreating to her office to rummage through papers stacked on top of the table, the sideboard, and the floor. You could barely see the top of her gray head behind the piles. Nannie said it was a shame the dining room had been turned into Alicia's "office" because, once upon a time, that room had been where all the family

celebrations happened, and besides, Aunt Alicia wasn't a bookkeeper anymore and didn't even need an office. Aunt Alicia was Nannie's older sister, and they were as opposite as could be. Nannie would shake her head every time we walked past Aunt Alicia's bedroom. That's because there were hundreds of *Detective* and *National Geographic* magazines stacked in every corner of the room up to the windowsills. She'd whisper to me, "She's my sister, and maybe I shouldn't say this"—Nannie always said that part before she said what she needed to say—"but I can't, for the life of me, figure out how anyone in their right mind can collect such piles of papers and magazines for no good reason—taking up space meant for people. It's no wonder she forgets where she puts things all the time—everything's buried ten feet under!"

Although she called her sister a pack rat and acted like she was complaining, deep down, Nannie really didn't care one way or the other. She was too busy having a good time doing things like making cheese biscuits and fishing and crabbing and telling her "truthful stories." Truthful stories were special stories about things most people didn't believe in or weren't interested in, but Nannie worked them into lots of conversations, and I loved them.

Daduh stirred the okra soup simmering on the stove. It was strange to have Daduh there on a Sunday because that was a big church day for her and her family. We had driven by her house lots of times on Sunday mornings, and we'd see Daduh in her big white hat all dressed up, walking with her family trailing behind her to Hope Baptist Church in Meggett. That was a long walk for someone as old as Daduh, but they did it every Sunday, and if it got too hot, they'd sing "Down by the Riverside" to get their minds off themselves.

Daduh didn't have a husband, but that didn't stop her from bragging plenty about her big family. She had four children and two grandchildren who were all grown and lived close by.

Nannie said Daduh had her youngest daughter kind of late in life and was partial to her over the others. People called her Lumpy, and she stayed right there in the same house with Daduh.

Nannie said even though Lumpy was older than my mother, Lumpy couldn't live by herself because she had learning problems. Lumpy didn't make friends too easy, but Nannie said she must have made at least one or two friends because she managed to give Daduh her only two grandchildren, Gloria and Jackson.

There was big news for Daduh last year, when Gloria surprised everyone with her own baby, so now Daduh had a great-grandson, too. Even though he was a surprise, Daduh said that baby boy was sure a miracle because he was born in her house on the day her own mama died years ago. "And the best part of all," Daduh would say proudly, "it was the Lord's birthday!" Daduh loved the Lord's birthday. At Christmastime, she would always go around saying, "Happy birthday, Jesus. Thank you, Lord!" instead of "merry Christmas" like everyone else.

This was probably the first Sunday Daduh had missed church ever. But this wasn't an ordinary day. We both watched through the kitchen window as the old Griffin sisters and the other funeral people stood around in the driveway, still talking in low voices.

"Just relax. They're gettin' ready to go," Daduh assured me. Her dark skin was glistening from the heat of the stove, and she looked more tired than usual. She had black raccoon circles under her eyes, and her hair looked like a mess of little gray wires. She tilted her head down to meet my eyes. "Look here at me." Her finger lifted my chin. "It's proper for people to come and pay their respects to the family after a funeral."

"But the funeral was yesterday, and they keep comin'."

“Your Nannie had a lot of friends, and your mama and Miss Marjorie and Miss Vivian has friends out here still, ever since a long time ago when they was little girls.”

I wished they would hurry up and get in their cars and leave, but they kept running their mouths. I jumped down from the stool, startling Daduh. “Genevieve Donovan! Child, don’t you . . . you get back here!” Daduh demanded in her growly whisper, but I was too fast. I ran down the warped floorboards of the dark hallway past Aunt Alicia in the dining room office, heading toward the front of the house and the long porch. But right before I burst through that screen door, I felt a wall of cold air, and as it swept through me, I stopped at the foot of the stairs, resting my hand on the wide curve of the banister. I could smell the sweet oiliness of the wood Daduh had shined up so carefully. The sad, muffled female voices of my mother and her sisters from a bedroom upstairs suddenly fell away.

And then I heard her. “*Genevieve.*”

“Nannie?” I whispered, holding my breath tightly in my chest.

I turned to face the old hall tree leaning against the wall with its dull, brass hooks sticking out, waiting for a hat or a scarf, its oval mirror in the center, cloudy and dotted with age. Where was she? The air became heavy and wrapped around me like a soft blanket, and all I could hear was a whooshing, buzzing sound in my ears. I felt light-headed. I leaned close to the mirror and touched the tiny curlicue carvings in the wood. I studied the image and saw an almost ten-year-old girl with squinty, blue eyes and dark, curly hair, and even though I knew it was me in the mirror, I felt like something strange was happening to me and that I should look different. I touched the mirror with the palms of my hands, then brought them to my face. I could feel Nannie with me. I couldn’t see her, but I had heard her call my name. Yet, it was still just me there in the mirror.

Slamming car doors told me they were finally leaving. I went outside and down the porch steps that led to the circular driveway. I sat on the last step at the foot of the huge, grouchy oak tree that guarded the house. Its thick, twisted roots, famous for trying to trip almost everyone who walked by, climbed angrily out of the ground, and I dug my bare toes underneath them. The crunching of gravel grew faint in the distance, the funeral people leaving their dingy clouds of dust and their whispers about Nannie in the air behind them.

“They found her body tangled up in the oyster bed at low tide.”

“I heard there was nothing left of her face, and if it wasn’t for the bright-yellow blouse she’d been wearing . . .”

I closed my eyes and shook their voices out of my head. You don’t come to somebody’s house, to *her* house, and say things like that. You don’t *ever* say things like that.

I felt sick to my stomach and ran across the yard to the smokehouse. I shut the door and slammed the latch down. Long ribbons of light fought their way through the cracks in the walls. I bent over, wrapping my arms around my waist. I clamped one hand tightly over my mouth, muffling sounds I’d never made before—sounds that didn’t belong to me. I closed my eyes and cried quietly—for my Nannie, for my mother, for me. My heart pounded like a thunderstorm exploding in my chest, and I thought I might die right there at that moment. I walked around in tight little circles in the middle of the dark smokehouse. Her crab nets and fishing rods hung on the wall, but the lucky rod with the little silver feather was missing. As I slid down the side of the bait freezer to the dirt floor, I tried to breathe slowly and deeply. One time, I asked Nannie why she didn’t fish from the small green boat that always hung underneath the wharf.

“Is it because of those bumpy things growing all over the bottom? Or does it have a hole in it?” I asked.

“No,” Nannie said. “The truthful story is I don’t take much to being *in* the water itself, but that doesn’t stop me from fishing and crabbin’. I’m damn good at it, and it’s fun work.” Even though she was a little bit afraid, she loved the river almost as much as she loved people, she would say. I knew what she meant. That was just how it was with Nannie and me. We could tell each other things that didn’t make much sense to other people, but we understood it.

As I sat there in the smokehouse rocking back and forth, I wondered: How was it that I had heard her call my name so clearly in the hallway?

And then the grimy lightbulb by the door flickered twice.

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