

The New Girl at School Talks About Guns

Uncle always lived in the other house. By himself. When he was younger, before I was born, he used to be a truck driver. Then he was a drummer for a while with a band called Texas Red. Then he got married but his wife left him after three years. Then he got sick and had to stay in a looney bin for a while. When he got out, he moved into the other house on Mama's property. Ten miles outside of Glenburg, in southern Indiana. He stayed holed up in the other house. Most of the time, in his bedroom that smelled like a man's armpit.

Sometimes, at night, he'd put on his clodhopper boots and light a kerosene lantern and unchain Porter, Mama's hound dog, and take his gun and Porter up into the thirty-seven-acre woods that grew behind Mama's house and partly behind his. Sometimes in the morning, there'd be a raccoon, skinned and cleaned and floating headless, in a big pot of cold salt water on Mama's covered porch. Sometimes he left Porter behind and went up alone. On those times, I could hear him shooting in the woods so late at night that the moon was already to the other side of the sky.

Uncle drank Johnny Walker sometimes and when he was drunk, he didn't want nobody to come to his house. I'm the one who brought him his breakfast. I'd walk it over, set it on the kitchen counter and collect the dishes from the morning before, but when he was drinking, he called Mama on the phone and told her not to send no motherfucking eggs and bacon over because he's sick of her cooking and he's sick of being bothered by his half-sister know nothing bitch.

Mama took the breakfast over herself on those days and yelled at him to get out of bed and clean his stinky, drunk ass up. Mama took the bullets from the gun that sat catty-corner in his kitchen on those days too because she said she don't want to have to clean Uncle's brains off the greasy walls.

That way of living, that breakfast routine, that Coon hunting, went on for a while. From the time I was nine years old until I was thirteen.

One day, Uncle yelled down at me to bring the breakfast up to him and not leave it on the kitchen counter. I never did that before and was a little nervous of what I might find up there in the dark dust at the top of the stairs. I walked it up and left it at the door of his bedroom, then ran down. I feared Uncle because he always yelled cusswords and he had that gun that Mama said she wish he didn't have but if she took it from him, he'd just call a Glenburg cab to drive him to Junior's to buy another one. Uncle got a disability check and he didn't use it for nothing but to call a cab to town to buy whiskey and sometimes gave it to Mama for his groceries or when she needed to pay his phone bill or the property taxes.

Next morning, Uncle told me to bring the breakfast up to him again. I did, and I was fixing to leave it at the bedroom door when Uncle jerked open the bedroom door and stood there with no shirt on, wearing a pair of old jeans, cut off at the knee. Uncle was pale and skinny, and his chest was curved in a little. Uncle smelled terrible, like he just burped up whiskey and blew his breath into the air.

“Bring that tray on in here Stacy and set it down on the nightstand there.”

I wasn't sure if I should, but he was smiling a little and he seemed normal acting. I went on in and set the tray down. I tried not to crinkle up my nose at the stinky smell coming from the bed.

“Look what I did to that microwave, Stacy,” Uncle said. He pointed to his broken up dented microwave that was on top of his clothes dresser. I looked at it, nodded and fast-walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs. I picked up the tray of dishes from the morning before and high tailed it back to Mama’s house. I looked back at the house just once. Uncle was watching me from out the bedroom window.

Next day, when I brought over his breakfast, he didn’t say anything. Didn’t yell down the stairs, didn’t look out the window when I walked back to Mama’s.

The day after that was the same and then the same again. Uncle went hunting that second night and, in the morning, Mama found a raccoon floating in water on the covered porch.

On my thirteenth birthday, Mama called Uncle and asked if he wanted me to bring over a slice of birthday cake. Uncle must have said yes, because Mama cut a big slice of chocolate cake and put it on a paper plate and gave it to me to take to Uncle.

“Mama,” I said. “Go with me. You ain’t seen Uncle for a long time now.”

“Yeah, I know. He just makes me sad, though. When I go over there, he never looks good and he never has a kind word. Just put the cake in the kitchen and leave.”

This seemed wrong to me. It wasn’t usually what I did. I usually carried eggs and toast and bacon and coffee. Not something special as birthday cake.

I took the plate of cake and walked on to Uncle’s house. I saw a movement at the window, when I looked up directly, the curtains waved a little like Uncle had been looking and just dropped them back down.

When I got close to the house, Uncle came out naked, with his man stuff hanging out for me to see. He had his gun.

“Happy Birthday,” Uncle said, and he grabbed the cake from me. He handed me his rifle.

“Reckon you’re old enough now. I don’t have any presents for you so I’m giving you my rifle. Okay? And tell your Mama I’m tired of her using her microwave oven to read my thoughts. And... and I know what goes on in them microwaves. She’s just trying to get proof to send me back to the looney bin, so she can have all the land and my house. Tell her Stacy.”

I didn’t want his rifle, but I didn’t know how to say no to Uncle, so I took it.

“Thank you,” I said and left Uncle standing there naked, holding the birthday cake. I ran the rifle back to Mama’s house and showed it to her. I told Mama he came out naked and what he said about her and her microwave oven. I told Mama he didn’t seem to know he was showing his man stuff.

Mama took the gun from my hands, took out the bullets and put them in the kitchen drawer, then carried the gun down to the basement. Mama hid it behind a rolled-up carpet in the corner by the meat freezer.

Next thing I know, Mama is calling Uncle and cussing him out about coming outside with no clothes on and giving a loaded rifle to her daughter. Mama told him there is no way to use a microwave oven to get into his brain and that he needs to get back on his meds. Mama said if he ever does anything crazy like that again, she’ll call the sheriff to take him back to the psycho hospital, where he belongs.

The next morning, Mama made him pancakes and she took them over herself. Mama said she wanted to apologize for her angry conversation the night before and talk Uncle into letting her take him back to the doctor. Mama only stayed a short time and when she came back, her face was red, and her mouth was in a frown.

Uncle was gone from the house. And Porter was gone too. Mama walked up to the edge of the trees, hoping to see Uncle coming out from the woods. When evening came, Mama waited

inside her house, listening all night for a holler from Uncle or a Coon dog howl from Porter, and watching out the kitchen window for any sign of Uncle or Porter. When morning came, Mama called the sheriff.

After an hour or so, a brown and tan sheriff's car pulled into the driveway. Sheriff got out and walked around with Mama looking for clues, I guess, or something. Then Mama walked the sheriff up to Uncle's house. They went inside, and I heard Mama yelling then she screamed, and I heard two shots.

Next thing I know, Uncle runs outside naked and comes running toward Mama's house. I went quick down to the basement and got my birthday rifle. I ran back up to the kitchen and opened the drawer where Mama hid the bullets.

By that time, Uncle was on the front porch, with his hand on the door handle. When he opened the door, I raised the rifle. I pointed it straight at his face. Uncle just froze, stood there looking at the end of the rifle, then back at me.

"Might as well shoot me, Stacy, because I just killed your Mama and that fat ass sheriff with his own gun."

"Why'd you do that?"

"It's your birthday and I wanted to give you something to remember."

He cried then, tears running down his cheeks, face turning red. I was crying too but I held the rifle aimed steady at his face.

"That's a lie, Stacy. I didn't want to kill nobody, but I don't want to go back to the looney bin. Microwaves are puttin my thoughts out there so everybody can say I'm crazy. I'm not crazy."

Uncle backed away, ran out the front door. Ran back into his house and came out with a set of keys. Uncle got into the sheriff's brown and tan and backed out of the driveway, squealing tires and kicking up gravel. I called 911 and soon I see one state police car pull into mama's drive way and two other police cars speeding on. A helicopter passed above, and I knew they were chasing Uncle. I never did find Porter.