

MAD DOG NANA
by
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Just outside of town

Across the railroad track

There lives a crazy lady

In a dirty old shack

The old, unpainted, decaying three-room shack rests a few yards from a forgotten railroad track just outside an equally forgotten southern town.

Inside the shack the furnishings are scarce. New drapes hang over the windows, but their presence only

highly contrasts the overall drabness. There is a third hand sofa in the front room, two metal folding chairs, an oil lamp, and a worn throw rug. Hanging on the wall is an out of date calendar picturing Martin Luther King and President Kennedy. The kitchen contains an ancient wood burning stove, short-legged wooden table, and two rickety wooden chairs. On the table is a cardboard box filled with a few plates, knives, forks, and spoons.

A chest-like cooler is on the floor next to the stove. There is a practically new bed in the bedroom. Two empty oil drums are on opposite sides of it. A small mirror and a comb rest on one, jars of cosmetics are on the other.

Women's clothes hang on a wire strung across the width of the room.

The shack is inhabited by Nana Williams-Fillmore, aka. Mad Dog Nana.

Everybody says she is crazy.

Life was fun for Nana at the age of ten, especially in the summer. She and her younger brother would get together with neighboring kids and romp for most of the day, sometimes playing Us vs. the Japs and Germans. Although the war has been over a couple years the memory was still fresh in their imaginations.

They lived in a back woods Alabama town. Nana's mother did day work in white folk's kitchens. Her grandmother took in laundry and took care of working mother's children.

When she was five Nana's father was killed. His best friend slit his throat with a knife in a drunken argument over a card game. Her most vivid memories of him was his baritone voice he boomed out while singing in church, the time her laughed and played with her, and the strange times when he would go weeks without hardly speaking to anyone.

One thing Nana and her brother thoroughly enjoyed was the Grimm's Fairy Tales their mother read to them at night before they went to sleep. She had a way of telling a story that kept them enthralled even though they had heard it a thousand times.

Nana attended a segregated one-room school in which all grades were taught by one teacher. She was better than average in most classes, outstanding in others. She took some ribbing from her classmates because of hand-me-down and remade clothes she wore. During the war years some black families were able to raise their standard of living a notch or two and could afford to clothe their children decently.

On a few occasions Nana had heard the older people talk about lynchings. Then it happened to someone she knew. Larry Yancy was a young man the grown ups in the town didn't care for because he acted so uppity. But kids like Nana loved him because he always bought them candy and handed out pennies.

They found Larry swinging from a tree early one Sunday morning. No one ever really found out who did it and why. Some said it was the Klan who did it for no special motive. Others say it was a mob headed by Elmer Mayfield, a farmer who had hired Larry to work for him, and who had a wife with the reputation of being a tramp.

Anyway, Nana was one of the persons that cried at Larry's funeral.

When Nana walks into town

All the ladies turn around

And whisper there she goes

Ha ha, the children laugh

The men turn their backs

Cause she wears those old dirty clothes

She is of medium height for a woman, but seems taller because she is so thin. Even though it is summer her light brown skin has an ashiness about it.

The print dress she is wearing has tears under the arms. Her hair is uncombed. A sun hat with a torn brim covers her head. Across one arm she carries a large sack. A worn purse is in the other hand.

Nana is walking toward the heart of town. She approaches two women gazing into a store window. The women eye her with disgust and turn their backs. One is Miss Lloyd, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher, who is having a secret affair that everybody knows about, with a sixteen-year-old student.

The other woman is Mrs. Kingston, the wife of one of Nana's visitors. He

comes to see her because his wife has taken a strong liking to the impotent minister's wife.

A group of children surround Nana and call her names such as: "crazy lady" and "mad dog." Some even throw rocks at her. From the conversations of older folks they know she is the one adult in town they can ridicule and get away with it. Nana simply ignores them.

She turns into a hardware store owned by Mr. Baxter. He is another of her visitors. He will pretend not to know her.

Nana has become an important part of the town. People can lift themselves up by putting her down.

At fourteen, change was a very important word in Nana's life. Change in her family, her body, and her way of thinking. Her grandmother fell sick and was in and out of the doctor's office. Her mother attempted to take up the slack in their already slim income. As a result she was always tired and frustrated. Something she took out on Nana in the form of verbal outbursts.

Nana all but gave up on the idea of growing into a beautiful woman. Her breasts weren't very large, and no matter how much she ate she stayed thin. Her features weren't bad, but they weren't fantastic either. She always had trouble keeping the naps out of her hair.

Her first experience with sex came from a slick-talking cousin from up North who convinced her it would be something beautiful. It turned out to be anything but. So much so that she resisted any advances boys made toward her no matter how innocent. She was branded a square.

All this changed when a new boy came to school. His name was Theodore Brown. He was very dark, and all the girls thought he was cute. No one expected him to direct any attention toward skinny little Nana. She didn't even believe it at first. All the better looking girls were jealous of their relationship, and would frequently throw snide remarks their way. Nana would counter by flaunting Theodore wherever they went. Soon this passed. Everyone accepted them as a tight couple. And Nana realized what a beautiful guy Theodore was.

Nana received good grades throughout her high school years. She, and especially her mother, had hoped she would win a scholarship to a Negro college. It would never come to be. In November of her senior year Nana was discovered to be pregnant. Her mother threw a lamp at her and chased her out the house waving a fireplace poker. Her grandmother's screaming saved her from a terrible beating.

Theodore was willing to quit school and go to work, but his parents wouldn't let him. Nana was expelled. She stayed at home and bounced between her mother's insults and her grandmother's comforting words.

When Nana was in her sixth month Theodore ran off and joined the army. She received a letter from him telling of his plans to send for her so they could get married after the baby was born.

Again fate dealt Nana a losing hand. She had a miscarriage in the middle of her eighth month. Three weeks later Theodore was killed in a rifle range accident.

Nana was so hurt by her losses she absolutely refused to return to school. Her mother got her a job doing day work for the Jensen's, a fairly well off white family. It was her first entrance into the great white world. She was treated with all the kindness and warmth given to a hound dog.

Her chief employer was Mrs. Jensen. She asked Nana's opinion on subjects Nana didn't really want to discuss. Her most consistent answers were; "yes m'am, I believe so," and "no m'am, I don't think so."

Mrs. Jensen thought it was a shame how that King person was causing all that trouble boycotting buses. She believed things would naturally get better with time. Long live time.

The Jensen's only child was a son named Alonzo. He was about Nana's age. He had bright red hair, freckles, and wore thick glasses. He was the only member of the family that treated her as an equal. But Alonzo seemed intimidated by his parents, especially his mother. He always looked at the floor when she talked to him. And he answered in mumbles, which caused her to ball him out.

But when he and Nana were alone he was a different person. He could be funny as well as serious. Alonzo talked about racism, something Nana knew about instinctively. Yet he talked about it from a philosophical standpoint that fascinated Nana.

One day while they were alone Alonzo came to her and said he would consider making love to her an honor. Nana wasn't sure why she accepted. Maybe it was because Alonzo had some of Theodore's qualities, or that they both seemed to be the outcast type.

Two months later the inevitable happened. Mrs. Jensen caught them together. Alonzo went into a state of shock. Nana wasn't too worried. Whites thought all colored women were loose. And white men were never lynched for fooling with colored women. What she didn't count on was Mrs. Jensen ordering her mother to the house and giving her one of the worst tongue-lashings she had ever heard. She threatened to make sure she would

never find any work if Nana wasn't out of town in two days. Mrs. Williams had no choice in the matter.

Nana's grandmother couldn't save her from a beating this time. It was with a yard long hickory stick. Nana made no attempt at dodging the swift air-splitting licks. She stood erect as a board and let the tears flow down her face. At the end, her mother was weeping more than she was.

Nana was sent up North to live with her cousin Eunice. The city was an entirely new experience for her. The hustling, movement, the noise, and the coldness of the people. It was suppose to be freer there, but it only made her afraid.

She started out doing maid work for a rich Jewish family. However, the pay was so low, and it was such a hassle getting to work that she quit and took a job in the kitchen of a restaurant.

Nana got her own place. It became her prison. She only ventured out to work and to run the necessary errands. She spent her free time watching her first television, sewing, reading, and keeping her apartment spotlessly clean.

The beginning of a change in her came one Sunday as she was coming home from a meat market. By chance she took a new route and happened

upon a church. The music escaping from it reminded her of home and she couldn't resist going in.

As she had gotten older, Nana's singing voice had become better and better. She could hit high soprano notes with relative ease.

The congregation was singing What a Friend We Have in Jesus. Nana joined in, and before she knew it she was caught up in the song. She rose to her feet, her voice booming as she hit the aisle. When the song ended Nana continued to sing until she realized that everything was quiet around her. A lot of "amens" and "praise the Lords" were directed her way.

At the end of the service she got up and told everyone how much she had enjoyed herself. It was the first time she had spoken in public since she left school.

In a month of Sundays, Nana had joined the church. All her new friends were church members. She had something to look forward to during the week. And her singing attracted people to the church's choir recitals. The Lord had become Nana's salvation.

Rich businessmen

Pillars of the community

Respected by everybody in town

But guess whose house they run to

When the evening sun goes down

A drifted through town was the first person to learn of Nana's special talent. He happened onto the old shack late one night, figuring it was abandoned, and decided he would spend the night there.

The man was dark, big and burly. He dressed in work clothes made of khaki. There was a diagonal scar under his left eye.

He entered the shack slowly, using a cigarette lighter as a torch. He picked up the signs of an inhabitant. Then he heard someone grunt. The big man followed the sound into the bedroom, where he found Nana sleeping on a cluster of old blankets. She was totally naked. At first he grinned, which quickly turned into a laugh.

Nana was startled at the sight of the big man initially. Then she accepted his presence like he was a piece of familiar furniture. She saw what he wanted in his eyes and told him she wouldn't resist. In fact, Nana was more like the attacker than the strange big man. The deep hurts in her life caused Nana to strip away the mental and social hang-ups she had about sex. She was totally free. Compared to most other women she was wild and untamed, a tigress.

The following morning the drifter spread stories about the mad dog of a woman who lived just outside of town across the railroad track in a dirty old shack. Soon Nana's "friends" began to drop by. They included Roland Collins, a teacher, civil rights activist, husband, and father of four. He couldn't achieve an erection without first sucking the toes of the woman involved, something his new wife found disgusting. Nana didn't give a damn one way or the other.

There was well off, ugly and white Mr. Baxter, who owned several businesses, and always said he could do "it" better with colored gals. And jet black middle-aged Reverend Phelps. His thing was to lick Nana's ass for several minutes, and then take off all his clothes, and deliver a sermon about the evils of sin.

Also, there were school kids who scraped up some money and took turns screwing Nana. And even a lesbian. Out of conscience or guilt, they all left Nana various sums of money. She neither thanked them for what they gave her, nor demanded more. She simply didn't care.

Nana's mother died of a heart attack in the fall of 1965. Nana went home for the funeral. She started singing "I'm on my Way Lord" just before the eulogy, but she broke down and cried halfway through the song.

Her younger brother, a career soldier in the army, wanted her to join him and their grandmother in the town where he was stationed. She declined the offer. Not because she didn't like the South anymore, but because she was afraid to leave a life style she was reasonably comfortable with for an unknown one.

Nine months later Nana married Joe Fillmore. They met after one of the church's afternoon singing programs. He was among the people who congratulated her on her fine singing performance. Only he stayed to make advances toward her, which she promptly rejected.

Nana had had three steady boy friend since she moved to the city. Two had asked her to marry them. She had turned them both down. The risk of a change in her life was too great.

A man of medium height with rugged handsome features, Joe Fillmore's major character asset was persistence. Persistence got him his first date with Nana. Persistence got him a wife.

To Nana her husband had several other appealing qualities. He was warm, witty, intelligent, (he had went to college a year and a half), and a hard worker. But most of all he made her feel safe. As safe as she felt when she was a child.

Their marriage was a happy one. Not that they didn't have troubles. Nana lost their first child. The doctors said she wouldn't be able to have others. They talked about adoption, though they never got around to it. Nana always had the feeling Joe's mother never really cared for her. Sometimes their schedules conflicted and they hardly saw one another because Nana was attending night school and Joe had to cover the late shift at the factory where he worked. There was a period when Joe was laid off from work and they were together too often, getting on one another's nerves.

For awhile Nana had the feeling Joe was having an affair with someone at work. Her suspicions were confirmed when a beautiful brownskinned woman showed up at their house and asked her to nice and give Joe a divorce. Nana kicked her out, and refused to talk to Joe until he convinced her that the woman had left town. Through it all, their love prevailed.

One incident brought back Nana's old fears. It was after Martin Luther King's assassination. Everybody went crazy one night. From the front window she saw flames of burning buildings, heard the crying sirens, shouts of anger, and occasional gunfire. Joe was away at work and she was scared to death. Part of her wanted to dash out of the house and run to safety, and the rest of her longed to ball up in a corner. Instead she sat down at her piano and played and sang as loud as she could.

When Joe finally made it home he found Nana sitting at the piano singing Jesus Will Protect Me. She ran to him and held him like there was nothing in the world better to do.

Nana and Joe's marriage lasted seven years. Then it suddenly ended. It was a typical rainy spring night. Nana was at home waiting for Joe to return from work. He never did. In his place came a call. There had been a terrible accident on the road. Joe Fillmore was dead. That was it. Nana's final hurt. She asked herself why she always lost the people she loved most. She had always done her best to serve the Lord. Was he testing her strength, her faith? Or was he punishing her for some sin she had committed? In the end, Nana just simply stopped caring.

Nana didn't bother to attend Joe's funeral. In fact, she left town the morning after she got the news. After packing a small bag, she took all the money that was in the house and took a cab directly to the bus station. She purchased a ticket for as far South as the money would take her. During the course of the bus ride she was oblivious to anything that happened around her. When the ticket ran out Nana walked, walked, and walked until she couldn't walk anymore.

Her journey had taken her to the old dirty shack located near the railroad track. There, she sought to separate herself from the world of reality she had come to know all too well.

Leroy Hope sat in the back of an unofficial cab looking out the window, a happy expression on his face. He was a round-faced brownskinned man with a thin mustache. He was dressed in a brand new conservative dark blue suit. In his lap was a box of chocolates with a birthday card attached. His happiness was due to the fact he was traveling to pick up his new woman so they could get away together. Her name was Nana Williams-Fillmore.

Leroy thought back to the night he stumbled upon the shack. A few miles back, for no particular reason, he had decided to follow the unused railroad track wherever it led him. When he reached the shack his feet told him that this was the place to stop and rest. After approaching the shack, Leroy tried the door and found it unlocked. It was so dark inside he could hardly see where he was going. He made out the old couch and started for it, but tripped over something in the middle of the room and fell to the floor with a thud. As he was standing he saw a light come on.

“Is anybody here?” Leroy asked, moving toward the light.

What he found in the next room was something he didn't believe he was seeing. It was a woman carrying a kerosene lamp. Her body was naked. Her face was blank. After snapping out of the surprise, Leroy turned his back and said:

“Oh, I'm sorry m'am. I didn't know. That you wasn't decent.”

Several seconds passed, and the woman hadn't replied, so he faced her again. She had placed the lamp on the oil drum and climbed into bed on top of the covers.

“Don't you want to undress?” she asked.

Leroy was stunned again. “No m'am. I-I-I.” He moved to the bed and covered her nakedness with the spread. “No m'am. You see, I was just passing by, and I didn't know anybody was in here, so I was gonna spent the night, but since you're here I best be moving on.”

“You may stay,” Nana said flatly.

“Oh, all right. I'll bed down on the sofa. And uh, thank you ma'm.”

“My name is Nana.”

“I'm Leroy,” he smiled. “Leroy Hope.” There was along pause. “Well. Good night Nana.”

To say the least, Leroy found Nana to be a strange woman. If he hadn't been so tired he would have left the shack in a flash. Instead he stretched out on the couch. In a few seconds he was asleep.

Nana was cooking pancakes by the time Leroy woke the next morning. They ate together in the kitchen.

"You know, ma'm, I hate to pry, but last night you acted kind of--"

"Crazy," Nana suggested.

"Well."

"They call me Mad Dog Nana."

Leroy ate a whole pancake before he spoke again. "I think you're a nice lady. Underneath it all."

"Maybe you're a bad judge of character."

"Maybe I am. But then again, maybe I ain't."

Leroy was able to scrape up some work picking cotton for a farmer. For some reason he couldn't shake Nana from his mind. At the end of the day he returned to the shack.

Late that night the sound of voices woke Leroy. He opened the door and saw three teenage boys leaving a car.

"What's your business here?" Leroy shouted.

"We looking for pussy just like you."

“What?”

“You heard me. How long you gonna be there?”

“None of your damn business. Now git your asses out of here. Now!”

“Okay man. Damn. Go ahead if you wanna be greedy. We’ll be back tomorrow.”

Nana was in the center of the room when he went back inside.

“The nerve of those punks,” he cursed. “They think they can just walk in and take you.”

“They can,” Nana confessed flatly.

“What?”

“They come. All ages. All colors. I never turn them away.” She backed up and sat on the sofa. “I guess you say I’m crazy and trashy too.” There was a hint of shame in Nana’s tone. It had been a long time since she expressed any emotion at all.

Leroy sat next to her. “Look Nana, it ain’t for me to judge you. I done some things in my time too. I ran me some moonshine. And I lived off a couple women. So I ain’t no saint. Nobody in this world is.”

Tears slowly trickled down Nana’s cheeks. “My Joe! My Joe! Oh, sleep with me tonight, Leroy. I need somebody. Somebody to hold onto.”

They slept together the second night. By the third night they had fallen in love.

Leroy and Nana made plans. He knew a place where he could get construction work for a week. With that money they could journey to his cousin's town. He would work for him at a gas station he owned.

Just before he left, Leroy said: "I feel I have to tell you this, Nana. I'm a drop out too. You see, I used to have my own construction company. I had to work long hours to keep it going, but I loved it. My wife didn't like me coming home late all the time. But she went along with it." He took a deep breath and continued. "I. Ier came home late one night. And. And. I found my wife and daughter. They had robbed the house, and shot. And shot and killed them. I keep thinking. If I had just came home early. If I had just been there."

Nana couldn't think of anything to say at first. She touched Leroy's hand lightly. "It's good that we found each other."

Leroy grinned. "I'll be back in a week."

"Good. It'll be a new beginning."

He kissed her goodbye.

Leaving the car, Leroy ran across the track. He clicked his heels in the air, and sped to the shack.

“Tadaaaaaa! I’m here,” he exclaimed happily as he went inside. “Nana, are you here? Nana.”

He ventured into the kitchen. Nana was there. She had fallen out of the chair onto the floor, looking like a regal brown queen in her new scarlet dress. A yellow carnation had been pinned into her hair.

Cause of death, a heart attack. An attack of life.

She was 37 when she met her death

Ants ate her birthday cake

They buried her in back

Of the railroad track shack

And for three weeks it rained

Let it rain

Let it rain

Let it rain

And for three weeks it rained

