

Canned Ham

by Aaron Gindt

Aunt Millie had her fat cribbage friends over on Tuesday for tea and gambling, looking like they had just stepped out of a Hawaiian polyester clothing store and got hit by a busload of makeup. I imagined myself being fogged into the den by their battery of perfume where I would sit and watch T.V. I was repulsed by the thought that I could actually be related to Aunt Millie. That her blood had some common base with mine. That she had authority over me.

Before card night we had to go shopping.

"But why do I have to go with you?" I asked.

As if she was talking to some little kid, "Why, I might get lost in the produce aisle..." and other such nonsense. Off she went, bouncing into the bedroom to find a big faux pearl necklace, stopping to frown at one of her paintings hung in the hall. She blew some dust off and continued on her journey.

Everyone seemed to know Aunt Millie at the grocery store. We found a wobbly cart and swerved past the produce manager in his green apron. "Hi Millie!" he said, looking up from a crate of apples. "Just got some Granny Smiths in this morning, try a sample." The toothpickful that I had was so sour it made my mouth water. We walked to the melons and Aunt Millie made me help her knock on all of them to find "just the most perfect cantaloupe this store has to offer!" We sauntered through the store, taking our time finding the exact brand names needed to make the party complete. The cans of fruit salad could not be dented and the labels could not be torn. Expiration dates carefully inspected, and all produce had to be weighed. Exactly five bags of peanuts, no more. And I couldn't let her forget the ham. I'll always remember the time she sent a painting of a canned ham to my parents for their anniversary. Dad just shook his head and walked out of the room.

"She's *your* sister," he said.

"We'll only put it up when she comes over," Mom said, following him.

". . . hmph," I heard him utter, all disgusted. "Why can't we just tell her it doesn't fit on any of our walls? Why don't we mail it back and tell her to quit taking up space in our house?"

"Why do you make such a big issue of things?" Mom asked. I could hear them getting louder in the other room.

"Look at the damn thing! It's a canned ham! A damn impressionist post-modern-something-or-wother ham! Pre-processed, pre-salted, molded into a mountain lump of greasy hog meat! Look at it! And I suppose this is

your sister's compliment to us. She put our names on it like we own the damn meat packing plant! She's tacky, this ham is tacky, and it's insulting!"

"But she's *family*, and don't make an issue out of nothing. She's doing her best. She never really fit in with our family, and I think she is really making an effort. She probably understands it better than we do, so just. . . be. . . quiet!" She said the last part through her teeth like she was getting angry at him and at the same time trying to keep me from listening. I knew Dad refused to lose ground in an argument and I knew it would probably end up like it has before with these trivial matters, so I left.

"Let's go through two," I suggested. I shouldn't have said anything, because sure enough, Aunt Millie wobbled the cart into Tracy Ditman's register number one. What an appropriate register number for her, I thought. Why did Aunt Millie do this to me? She had to know she was embarrassing me like this. She is such a good painter, I couldn't understand why she made a fool out of herself in front of everyone, especially with me there. If she knew the proper light angles, shading techniques, and color diagrams, why didn't she know how to put makeup on? Why didn't she have any fashion? She *must* know. "I think we forgot the ham," I said. "I'll go back and get it."

"No," she replied. "I remembered we have some in the freezer at home." Tracy glanced at me through her puffy bangs while she rang up the person in front of us. I knew what she was thinking. She couldn't wait to get back and tell the girls what kind of goofball Aunt Millie was, and that she was somehow related to me. That I actually hang out with her. Tracy had on her boyfriend's class ring and it clacked every time she scanned something through. It was more annoying than the way she cracked her gum in school. I pretended to look through a T.V. Guide.

"Hiii Millie, oh, I didn't know Sara was your daughter!" crooned Tracy. Clack, clack. Before Aunt Millie could reply Tracy asked me, "are you going to the Homecoming dance? It should be a blast." I didn't have any plans, even though I could probably muster up a date. Clack, clack. I just didn't seem to fit in at dances and parties anymore. I can go to parties and talk to everyone and walk from group to group, clique to clique, but I just feel like I should be somewhere else. I feel like I don't fit in the picture. Everyone seems to notice this, like I have some sort of shield of gloom that makes others nervous around me. It doesn't have anything to do with ostracism, it is more like my own personal choice. For example, I was told by Tracy and her friends that I should try out for cheerleading, that I would be good at it. I just didn't feel like being in some group where the guys would refer to me as "that new cheerleader" to each other, instead of just plain Sara. I had asked Mom and Dad what they thought.

"Doesn't seem too logical spending all that time. . ."

"I think it would be fun for you, it would get you more involved, but

I do agree with your father, you should consider how much time this will take away from your studies.”

“You have to think of what *you* want to do, honey. It’s a big responsibility. . .” It sounded like the damn Brady Bunch. My parents were only playing roles of being parents. Always logical and pretending to be concerned. They had canned answers for everything. Alcohol, sex, fights, drugs. They always acted surprised when I told them about something that happened at school or at a party, but it wasn’t anything new to them. That’s how I could tell they were so fake. They weren’t real to me. Why didn’t they just say, “Sara, you know and we know that you would make a lousy cheerleader and turn into something that you don’t want to be. Let someone else put on the skirt.”

Clack Clack. I told Tracy I wasn’t sure about the dance. She looked at me like, “I’m sure you’ll find a date,” but she said, “that’s \$15.83 Millie.”

“Oh, thank you. . . *Terry*,” Millie winked, “We’ll carry this out ourselves.” I couldn’t help letting a real smile break through my talking-with-Tracy smile. “Looks like I didn’t get lost in the produce aisle after all! Thanks a bunch, Sara!” said Aunt Millie. We left Terry, or Tracy, in a pile of flowery perfume, reminding me of the evening to come.

The ham was set out to thaw, the fruit was chilled in the freezer, and Aunt Millie made the dip. I thought of things to do other than stay in Aunt Millie’s house. Nothing. Nothing I wanted to do. I didn’t want to go to the mall like some teenage high school mall girl. I didn’t want to hang out or be associated with anyone (including Aunt Millie), and there was nothing on T.V. I just wanted to be alone, but that is kind of hard to do when you’re in the same house as my aunt. Walking down the hall to my room I looked at the semi-dusty painting for the first time since I had been there. The painting was of Aunt Millie’s husband who died a few years ago. Unlike her other works, it was done in grays and dark blues. I never really knew him, but just from that image I could tell that he had lived a hard life, probably trying to keep up with Aunt Millie’s energy. He had angular cheekbones that cut high under his small and penetrating black eyes. He looked so young and despondent.

“What was your husband like?” I called into the kitchen.

Aunt Millie walked into the hallway and looked at the painting. She thought, pursing her lips. “I think that the image says about everything. At least that is what it is supposed to do. . . He was quite serious and stiff, always working at the factory, designing those Barbie accessories. Can you imagine that? Barbie doll accessories! Boy, he was serious about that though, such a crazy job for him. I guess the painting doesn’t really say that, but what am I supposed to do, put some sequins on him? Heeey. that’s not a bad idea. . . Thanks Sara! I’m gonna hop in the shower, would you mind making some sandwiches?” She was always bouncing and jumping, or at least acting like it, even though her two hundred-pound-plus

frame restricted her to sweating and laughing. I needed something to do. Aunt Millie's energy was starting to wear off on me.

When I was a little kid my parents and I would go up to Auntie Millie's house and eat after church. I always liked going there because all the sandwiches would be decorated with crazy faces if you pulled the bread apart. It was some sort of secret between me and Auntie, and we would giggle to each other while Mom and Dad would talk solemnly. Mom and Dad never seemed to notice what they were eating, or maybe they knew and didn't care. Pickles for teeth and lettuce for hair. Instead of using knives she would use paint brushes to spread the ketchup and mustard. I found the condiments and tried to create. It was a little slow going at first, but I got the hang of it. I imagined my mother, my father, Aunt Millie, Tracy, even myself in those sandwiches.

"You know," I called, "I think I would like to attend your little party."

Millie jumped out of the bathroom—and this time she actually did jump—"REALLY? Oh, it will be so much fun! But you can't go looking like THAT!" It sounded like something Tracy would say, only this was with a smile. She pulled me into the bathroom. I usually never wear makeup unless it is a very special occasion. I figured I had nothing to lose, after all, I would never look as clowny as her friends. I even wore one of Millie's less-than gaudy bracelets. I felt changed, silly like the sandwich faces. I could just imagine what my father would think, or even my mother. Both of them standing there, looking at me, Millie, the canned ham, shaking their heads, hmpf. I didn't care. Neither did Millie. It was going to be like playing tea with invisible friends, except these friends had enough stretch pants to make them quite visible.

The women arrived around seven and took their usual seats. A fold-up chair was found for me. What's amazing is that the girls treated me like I was at the party every week; they didn't seem to notice I was a newcomer wearing heavy makeup and gaudy jewelry.

The cards were dealt and the snacks were served. We played some game I had never heard of, but then again, I didn't know too many card games, but it was easy to catch on.

Needless to say, the girls absolutely *adored* the sandwiches with the faces. The ham was especially good, the way it was semi-frozen and crunchy. The dip could have used more dill weed, but the texture was *fabulous*. And, oh, Millie, dear, your latest painting is so, so *modern*. And did you see so-and-so's hat? If that wasn't a statement, I don't know what is. . . and so on.

We talked like this until late at night. I had become part of their group, even though it was a strange one, filled with spandex and fruit and sweaters with gold glitter. Helen, Maud, Vicki, Millie—they all played with their hair, poofing it up, talking about their hairdresser. They would hold

their teacups just so, and carefully sip, getting lipstick all over the white china. Millie made faces at me during the card games, like she was some sort of card shark. I made them back and we laughed, all of us realizing we were no sharks at all. We played for peanuts—actual peanuts. We each had one bag to use as gambling money. Helen went broke early because she kept “testing the money” as she put it. I guess she always does this, so I loaned her some of my “money.” When Maud and I were paired as a team we would use codes like saying, “I went to the *club* when I was *seven* and they wouldn’t let me in! Did you go to the *club* when you were *seven*, or didn’t you have a *heart*?” All the girls knew we were acting silly, which is better than not knowing it, I suppose.

I was down to my last peanut, trying to decide if I should gamble it or eat it. I rolled it into the pot.

“Millie, how did you know to buy five bags of peanuts at the grocery store?” I asked.

Millie winked. “Let’s just say I thought you might want to put on a little makeup and ‘hang out’ as you teenagers put it.”

Unfortunately, I lost my last peanut and so I decided to go to bed. I was getting tired after all that joking around. The pretending was wearing me out. Millie and her friends started to look like each other, and the voices blended together. Millie was like another painting, another abstraction of art that was harder to grasp the meaning of. Waiting for the girlfriends to leave, I stole to the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. It was fun while it lasted, but it was time I went to bed. Using makeup remover, I scrubbed and scrubbed at my face, trying to remove the greasy mess. The tea party had come to a close.

Early the next morning I went back home. On my way out I passed the painting in the hall, wondering what my uncle would be like if he was still alive. As I was leaving, I remembered that I still had her bracelet on. I thought it would be best if I didn’t wake her—she would understand. I walked through the porch that Millie had converted into a studio, and hung her bracelet on the easel, checking for no reason to see if the paint was dry.

At home I quietly walked to my room, brushing Dad’s foot hanging off the edge of the couch. Must have been a big fight, I thought. He looked ragged, worn, not suitable for the Brady Bunch. Instead of going to my room, I found myself in the basement searching for the canned ham painting. I carried it upstairs and hung it on an empty nail above the couch. It does fit after all, I thought.