

Callaloo Stew by Sue Fairclough

Auntie Grace wasn't my real Auntie, she lived next door. When I think of Auntie Grace, I always feel warm: she warmed me with her smiles and her deep, throaty chuckles. She warmed me with her interest in what I was thinking and doing, and because she was so generous to everyone.

Her garden was just like ours in that it ran straight back from her house and ended with a hedge and a small gate. The gates led onto a path which ran along all the gardens on our side of the road, until it splayed into the main road. But that was where the similarity ended. Our garden had a garage which took up quite a lot of space on the opposite side to Auntie Grace. What was left was mostly lawn, with footballs lying around and homemade goalposts made out of bamboo canes – from Auntie Grace's garden. Mum had a few roses near the house, and in the summer, I helped her plant pots of geraniums. We put them on the concrete alongside the garage. There was a beech hedge between us and Auntie Grace. Auntie Grace didn't have a garage, or a car, and went everywhere by bus. One year, she even went to Scotland by bus. Dad took great pride in keeping the beech hedge trimmed and did the hedge on Auntie Grace's side too, although he always complained that he had to fight through her plants to get at it with his noisy hedge trimmer.

Auntie Grace's garden was a jungle. When I was really little, I used to hide my toy panda in the clump of bamboo. Auntie Grace said it was eating its tea there. There were so many plants, some with strange coloured leaves which Auntie Grace said I shouldn't touch because they had poison in them. I said they looked like dragon leaves, so we called them dragon food plants after that.

Auntie Grace was big on growing vegetables. In the summer, she would spend most of the day bent over her plants, wearing a big floppy straw hat. She would often gather up a box of veg and take it out of her little gate and come into our garden through our little gate: 'Jus passin' trou and I thought you might be needin' de greens, Mrs Carter. She grown in me garden.'

Truth was, if it didn't come in a tin or a packet, Mum didn't know what to do with most of it. One year, Dad bought Mum a cookery book for her birthday. We all gathered around the kitchen table, looking at the pictures. So now we knew what a corn on the cob looked like, and the big grey-green, wrinkled leaves were cavolo nero kale. That makes Mum sound like she was a complete ignoramus, but she wasn't really. As I got older, I realised that she didn't have the time to devote to lots of cooking or doing stuff in the garden, like Auntie Grace did, especially when my brother came along.

That was an amazingly cool day – and not for the reasons you might think. No bus to catch home that day, Dad called the school and collected me early. Everyone was whispering in the classroom – I felt embarrassed and proud at the same time. When we got home, I was sent round to Auntie Grace's house to tell her Dad was ready to take Mum to hospital. Poor Mum. She had been like a ship wallowing around for weeks, her legs puffy and all the time complaining that the baby was sitting on her bladder. I made a mental note to tell the baby off, once it arrived. That was a pretty mean trick. I know 'cos when we went

on the zoo trip with the school, I forgot to have a wee before we left, and I was bursting by the time we got there. If it hadn't been for Miss Davies rushing me through the turnstile, there would have been an accident. 'That's what it's like,' said Mum, 'makes you want to go all the time.'

Auntie Grace was cooking something when I knocked on her back door, the delicious smell wafting from the kitchen into the garden. 'Wah Gwaan, Boonoonoonoos!' She always called me that – she told me it means 'special one' in Jamaica. 'Ah, she cooked long enough! Ya mon. You get me bag and we go round to your house right now.' I thought she was talking about what she had on her stove, so was a little surprised when she wrapped the pot in a tea towel and carried it as we locked her house, pushed our way through the undergrowth to the gate, and made our way back to where Dad was waiting. Mum was already in the car. Auntie Grace went straight over, gave my Mum a big kiss, took the keys from Dad and we waved them off. 'God's blessings be with you,' she called as they whizzed down the road.

Once inside our house, Auntie Grace heaved the big pot onto our cooker and turned on the gas. 'Auntie Grace, I thought it had cooked long enough?' She gave her lovely, deep chuckle: 'Dat baby is the one that's cooked! Dis stew needs a bit longer on a very low heat. Now - , ' she looked kind of serious at me, 'I'm tinkin' there's homework in your satchel, huh?' I'd flung the satchel behind the sofa, so how did she know? After all, I had reasoned, no one would expect me to do homework when Mum might bring the baby home at any moment.

I discovered a few things about Auntie Grace that afternoon. For one, she could be firm – a bit like our head teacher – only much nicer, of course. As I got my books out, Auntie Grace looked around the living area. 'Is the yucca new?' She pointed at the big green plant with long leaves, sitting on the floor in a huge pot. My real Auntie, Dad's sister Rose, had given it to Mum when she visited us a month back. 'Yeah. Is that what it is? I don't like it – it's boring. Here are my books... I've got to choose a poem and then write a verse or two like the poem.'

My lack of enthusiasm must have been obvious. Auntie Grace sat down and together we started flipping through the pages of the poetry book, taking turns to read some of the poems aloud. They sounded much better that way. Once or twice Auntie Grace stopped mid-sentence: 'Did you hear dat? What was dat sound?' I didn't notice anything, so we carried on until Auntie Grace stabbed at one page: 'Dis is the one! Callaloo Stew by John Agar.' I started to try to read it until she put up her hand to stop me. 'No, you need to read it with riddim. Not la-di-da like English. Like dis –'. She began to read, the words tripping and rolling and dancing with her voice. 'Now, let's have a go - there did you hear dat again?' This time I heard the faint rustling: 'Oh, that's the yucca – it sometimes makes little noises. I think it might be when it's growing. Dad thought there might be a mouse in it, but we haven't seen one.' Auntie Grace eyed the plant suspiciously and then shrugged her big shoulders. We returned to our task, making lists of words that rhymed. Within half an hour, amid lots of giggling, we had put together a poem about 'Boonoonoonoos on the Beach'.

'I reckon we deserve some nice, warmin' stew after all that work. How spicy do you like your stew?' I wrinkled my nose as I tried to identify the unusual aromas from the kitchen area. 'I like the chicken curry takeaway we get at Spice Garden,' I said. 'Ah, good. Do you like coconut, butternut squash, okra?' I nodded, recognising all but the last item. 'I bet you can't guess what stew we're havin'?' I shook my head, not being very familiar with stews of any kind. 'Callaloo stew, of course!' Now I was puzzled and intrigued. 'You mean callaloo stew is real?' 'Sure is. I grow callaloo – it's like spinach.'

Auntie Grace found two bowls and began to ladle the stew into them. It was more like a thick soup with lots of vegetables added. Just then the telephone rang. 'That might be your Dad,' she said. 'Get on wit your meal while I answer it.' She disappeared into the hall, shutting the door behind her. I looked at the contents of the bowl and suddenly felt uneasy. There was something in it that looked suspiciously like the leaves of the dragon food plant. I didn't want to be poisoned – not when Dad might be bringing the baby home any minute. The more I looked at it, the more I was certain. Perhaps Auntie Grace had made a mistake and picked the wrong leaves. But, but well - she was an adult. So, she would expect me to eat it, and I loved her too much to disappoint her. I looked around, thinking that I might try to tip the contents of the bowl down the sink, or in the rubbish bin. Then I saw the yucca plant. Mum had said something about feeding it – perhaps it would like some callaloo stew, I thought. I ran over and tipped the contents of the bowl into its big pot. As I was about to sprint back to the kitchen table a weird sound came from the plant. A sort of hissing, rasping noise and the rustling began again, only louder.

I was standing, staring at the plant when Auntie Grace came back. Seeing my empty bowl, she exclaimed: 'My, you ate that quick! But why - ?' she stopped, listening with me to the sounds from the yucca. We looked at each other and then back at the plant. Something was moving. A hairy, jointed, striped leg appeared over the side of the pot, followed by several more legs and a big, hairy body. 'Oh, my Lordy!' We both backed away from the plant, Auntie Grace holding tight to my hand. 'What is it, Auntie Grace? It – it looks like the biggest spider ever!' I was both terrified and fascinated. Auntie Grace mopped her face with her hanky. 'I'm tinkin' dat is a tarantula or sometin' similar,' she said, 'an she's been asleep in your yucca plant. Only now, she's woken up.' I didn't say anything about my bowl of stew, especially as the spider was climbing slowly down the outside of the pot.

Second new thing I discovered about Auntie Grace that day: she could move pretty fast for a big lady. She went to the sink, grabbed the washing up bowl, and carefully approached the spider, which by now had reached the carpet. It was bigger than my hand and very hairy – which in a way made it look less menacing. But as Auntie Grace got closer it reared up on its back legs, waving its front legs at her. 'No good you trying dat wid me, fella,' she said, and she dropped the bowl over the spider. 'Now get me a couple of tins of beans or someting to put on top,' she commanded. I sped into action: two baked bean tins and a can of tomatoes, just in case.

Third new thing I found out - she was super cool in an emergency. While I was stationed on a kitchen chair keeping guard, Auntie Grace found the Yellow Pages and

'phoned the RSPCA who said they would be around within the hour, but told us not to go near the yucca, as there might be baby spiderlings inside.

We sat and waited at the kitchen table, watching the plant in the living room. 'Oh, I didn't tell you darlin', your Mum is doing well, but baby hasn't come yet.' Auntie Grace smiled at me, that lovely big, warm smile of hers. 'So, I tink I'll heat up the stew again. It don't taste so good cold, and I'm hungry.' 'Auntie Grace – er, did you put dragon leaves in the stew?' 'Certainly not! One ting you need to remember, little one: de olda de moon, de brighter it shines. Meanin', the older the person, the wiser she becomes.' 'Oh, then can I have some – er more – callaloo stew then?'

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