

A Little Bit of Syrup

by Michelle McEwen

My favorite aunt lives in North Carolina with a man who isn't hers. He, Mose, belongs, is married to, a woman up here where I am, in Pittsburgh; he ran off with my favorite aunt, Aunt Wednesday (we say Winds-dee), when she pulled into the gas station where he worked. She was on her way back to North Carolina after visiting us— my ma is her older sister. As soon as she pulled up to the pump and Mose came running out and laid eyes on her, he wanted her. He pumped her gas and hopped right into the passenger seat and went to North Carolina with her— well, this is how Will tells it. Will used to work with Mose at the gas station. He said once Mose got to North Carolina and was all settled into my aunt's place, he wrote a letter explaining it all to Will. *Will*, the letter said, *I guess you know by now I ain't coming back to pump gas*. Will also said Mose asked him to tell his wife exactly what happened. *If Laverne*, the letter said, *woulda kept herself up, Wednesday wouldn't have even turned my head. Laverne used to be real fine back then, but her bottom got so wide and her titties...* that's all I heard of that letter 'cause my mother told me, at that part, to run into the gas-station-store to get some soda and gum. Will — bent down at the window while he waited for our gas tank to fill — told my mother most of what was in the letter. When I got back to the car, Will was saying to my mother how he wouldn't dare tell Laverne that Aunt Wednesday was kin to us. "She'd probably hunt you down," Will said and we drove off. Ma kept saying as she drove, "Keep your mouth shut about what you heard, okay." And I told her my mouth was shut for good 'cause I didn't want some woman hunting us down, or worse, hurting my favorite aunt. This all happened a year ago.

Aunt Wednesday is my favorite because of her red-brown hair which hardly even covers her head, but since it's curly and looks good in the sun men don't mind how short it is. I like her arms, too, they are thin and the bangles she wears always look as if they'll slip off. And you should see her legs— so long and always just a little bit

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hairy. My father says she must keep them hairy because that's a whole lot-a leg to shave. Ma gave him a nasty look when he said this. I wonder if ma wonders why she didn't get Aunt Wednesday's arms and legs. After all they *are* related; they're *more* than related—they're sisters with the same mother and father! I'm glad I'm an only child because I couldn't stand having a sister looking that much different from and better than me. I don't see how ma stands it. Maybe that's why she moved all the way up here, to get away from Aunt Wednesday— Aunt Wednesday with her birthmarks on her thigh and belly. She showed them to me once when I visited her down in North Carolina. "You got any birthmarks," she had said. When I said I didn't know what birthmarks were, she rolled up her tee shirt to her breasts and showed me a reddish bruise-like mark a-ways up from her navel. Then she rolled up the edge of her shorts and showed me a birthmark on the back of her left thigh. When I said that birthmarks look like hickeys, she laughed; she said, "You don't know what a birthmark is, but you know about hickeys!" And she tickled me then with her long, skinny aunt-fingers. That was four years ago. I was no more than nine then. I overheard my father say once that men are wrapped around Aunt Wednesday's fingers. How can that be, I asked him, when rings hardly even stay on her fingers? My father laughed long and hard at this. "No baby," he said, "that's not what I mean." I found out what he meant, though, later, when I went grocery shopping with my friend Ruby and her mother. When we got to the counter, the man in front of us looked at Ruby's mother's groceries (wasn't nothing but a box of Popsicles, a box of tampons, and some cheap grocery store lipstick the color of Ruby's name); the man told the cashier to ring up Ruby's mother's groceries with his own (and he didn't have that much— just some ground beef and foot powder). Ruby's mother let him. She thanked him and when the man had gone about his merry way and we were backing out of the parking lot, Ruby's mother turned to us in the backseat and said to her daughter: "I got these men wrapped around my finger." I knew what daddy had meant then. I made up my mind then, in the backseat, sucking on a cherry Popsicle, that I wanted to be like

Ruby's mother and Wednesday, too. Ruby said to me that day in the backseat: "What are you thinking about?" I told her I wasn't thinking at all. She rolled her eyes and said the Popsicle made my lips look like I was wearing lipstick. This made me smile. Ruby's a good friend, but we're as different from each other as she is from her own mother.

Once and a while I almost open my big mouth and almost tell Ruby about how it was my favorite aunt that ran off with Mose. Ruby is always talking about how Laverne looks so sad now that Mose is gone and I always say: "If she woulda kept herself up..." and Ruby always shouts, "The woman's not always to blame!" When she gets like this, her upper lip curls and her teeth show. Sometimes Ruby's mother hears her saying these things and she gives Ruby this nasty look; sometimes she says to Ruby, "I don't know what I'm gonna do with you." Once, when I was on the porch alone with Ruby's mother (Ruby had gone into the house for some water), Ruby's mother said to me, "Some days, I think that child of mine is a boy. I couldn't *pay* her to put on a skirt!" I said, sounding like my mother, "Ruby'll grow out of it." Her mother is always saying how Ruby didn't get the roundness that she got. "Ruby takes after her bony daddy," she had said that day on the porch and I said, "My Aunt Wednesday is bony, but she's still all woman like you." And thinking about my Aunt Wednesday made me say again with more sureness: "Ruby'll grow out of it." Ruby's mother patted my thigh then and smiled.

And I'm going to take it upon myself to make sure Ruby grows out of it! Aunt Wednesday wants me to come down this summer. I'm thinking of asking Ruby to come down with me. I know her mother will let her go. I want Ruby to see Aunt Wednesday's birthmarks. Aunt Wednesday says Mose got a dog, a big one, and she hopes I'm not afraid of them like my mother is. I don't know if I should call Mose, when I go down there, my uncle or not. Ma says I shouldn't. "If you *do* go down there this summer," my mother says, "Don't you even speak to Mose and if you have to, just call him 'Mose'— no Uncle, no nothing." My father laughed at this and called ma foolish. I don't know if ma is foolish, but I know she worries too much. I also

know that if she doesn't let me go see Aunt Wednesday this summer, I'm going to go anyway. I'm going to make my own way down there. There's something about Aunt Wednesday that I just got to be around— I think it's the way she smells. You ought to smell her— it's a little bit of syrup, a little bit of honey, and something else; I don't know what. It's gonna bug me until I find out. When she showed me her birthmarks that day, I told her that she smelled like syrup and honey and something else. She flung her hand at me and those long fingers almost caught me in the eye. She said, "That's just my natural scent, child."

