

## BURGERS AND BLUE NEON

ANITA STUBBS

The first meal Jill remembers, not home cooked, came from an isolated bar and grill somewhere between Dallas and Phoenix. Traveling in the family car, a 1949 black Fleetwood Cadillac that her father may have won in a poker game, Jill and her sisters rode in the back seat, their parents in the front. Lady, the beloved German shepherd, lay on the floorboard, her head on Jill's feet. On that night, in the summer of 1951, that unforgettable hamburger supper changed her family forever.

Having driven all day, it had been dark awhile before her father finally stopped for their evening meal. Jill noticed the flashing beer sign above the door of the little place immediately. "You must have been looking for just such a sign, Jake," Jill's mother said. "How many diners have we passed already?"

"Okay, Edna," Jake said. "Don't start." Edna said nothing else, as they all watched him disappear into the place.

Waiting in hungry anticipation, nobody spoke. Jill and her sisters stared at the opening beneath the blue neon light for sight of their father to reappear, with supper. They waited, and waited. And waited. They listened to the music escaping through the open door while the parking lot filled up around them.

Jill would never forget the look on her mother's face each time a flash of blue illuminated the inside of the Cadillac. Edna's grim expression intensified with each pulse of light, and apprehension gripped Jill. Eventually, Edna drew a ragged breath and, exhaling like her old pressure cooker letting off steam, she left the car and entered the place.

The car's occupants waited, heavy dread replacing the hunger in the pit of Jill's stomach. Finally, their parents emerged from the doorway. Edna, a large paper sack in one hand, her purse in the other, headed for the driver's side of the car. Jake, gripping the neck of a beer bottle, followed several yards behind.

Lady lifted her head at the scent of greasy food. Inside the car, Edna locked its two doors, and calmly distributed the cold burgers. Jake's knocking on the passenger window, as he pleaded with Edna to open the door, ceased shortly, his efforts completely wasted. A powerful kick to the side of the car abruptly ended his tirade, and he headed again toward the only open door.

Jill never tasted another hamburger like that one. As her mother eased the Cadillac from the parking lot, picking up speed on the highway, Jill watched the little café until the night consumed it, her father inside. Soon, her sisters slept and Lady snored at their feet, as Edna drove on. Through the night, Jill searched the darkness for the first sign of Phoenix.

Her girlish recollection of that night—the sights, the sounds, the scents of the place—remain fresh, these forty years later, although the exact location of the café long ago eluded her. The aroma of the hamburgers, the smell of the cigarette smoke clinging to her mother's clothes, the music, her father peering through the window—the reflection of the neon light in his panicky eyes—cling annoyingly to Jill's memory like gauzy fabric, statically charged, against naked skin.

She never saw her father again.

