

Bear Paws

by Karen McBride

“Pass me de salt, *noshis*.”

Edith took seven steps to get across the kitchen. She flung the cupboard open and reached her hand up, searching for the salt. It was a little bit too far back for her to grasp easily, so she took four steps back, grabbed a stool, and pushed it up against the counter. Her eyes scanned passed the butter, a jar of homemade jam, and finally rested on the salt. She grinned and wrapped her flour-covered fingers around the little shaker.

“Here, *gôkom*. I found it!”

“*Meegwetch, binoojish*,” said Grandma Memego. “Are you ever a good little kitchen helper!”

Edith blushed a little and hopped down from the stool. She pushed it back over to where her grandmother stood and then climbed back up to get a better view of the counter. Grandma Memego was pouring the salt into a big yellow bowl that was filled with flour and baking powder. Edith watched carefully, trying to keep track of how much of each thing her grandmother was tossing into that big bowl, but it was hard. Grandma Memego never measured. She said baking was, “Someting that you feel real close to your heart and your soul,” - she’d always pat her chest as she said it too.

“What about sugar? Should I go back to the cupboard and grab that too?” asked Edith, though she was already pushing her stool the seven steps back over to the cupboard where the sugar slept.

Grandma Memego just shook her head. “No, no, *noshis*. We don’t use dat kind of ting for our bear paws. Real Indians use tings dey get from de Eart.” She tapped the side of her nose as the lines of her face crinkled together into a warm and knowing smile. “So, little one, we use honey. Gwan and get me dat.”

Edith paused, her hands still on the sides of the stool, then nodded, a grin spread across her face like butter over warm bread. She hurried to where the honey was kept and brought it over to her grandmother, then climbed back up onto the stool to watch again. “Why do you call me that?”

“Little one? Because you are small.”

“No, *noshis*. What’s that mean?”

“It means ‘granddaughter’ and I call you dat because dat is what you are,” said Grandma Memego. “It’s an old word. Old like our language.”

“Like when I call you *gôkom*?”

“Yes, jus’ like that. And what does dat mean?”

“It means you!”

Grandma Memego chuckled and shook her head. “You’re close,” she said as she poured just the right amount of milk into the bowl. “It means ‘grandmother.’ Some places say *kokomis* and over passed that big ol’ lake the Indians dere say, *kitci mama*. But up here we say *gôkom*.”

Edith only half-listened, but she nodded quickly nonetheless. She watched her grandmother work for a while longer, wiggling her fingers in the same way that the old woman did when she worked the lard through the flour mixture.

“K, now I can use your little hands, *noshis*. Come closer.”

Edith stepped down off the stool and slid it closer to the bowl. She pushed the hair out of her eyes, leaving a trail of flour between her eyebrows, then readjusted on the stool so she was balanced on her knees. She reached her hands in and pulled out a chunk of dough. It was springy between her fingers. She rolled it up and then started to tug at it until it was shaped like a rectangle.

“Keep making dem paws and I’ll heat up de oil. When it’s hut, de paws won’t take long to fry up,” said Grandma Memego, wiping her hands on her apron. She moved slowly as she pulled the large cast iron pot from the bottom cupboard and placed it onto the stove.

“Did you have lots of bake sales when you were in school, *gôkom*?”

Grandma Memego paused and smiled a little. “No, not at all. My school didn’t have no fundraisers. No bake sales. Nutting.”

Edith looked over at her grandmother wearing a look of true shock that only children can muster. “No fundraisers? How did you pay for your field trips den?”

“We didn’t have dem,” replied Grandma Memego. “Tings were different back den.”

“What was it like?” Edith finally finished making one bear paw (which looked a little more like a lump of dough than a paw) and inspected it carefully in her hand. She lifted it to show her grandmother, who simply smiled and pointed with her lips at the bowl. Edith reached in and started on her second paw.

“School?” Grandma Memego drew in a deep breath before she continued. “It was like yours. Only instead of nice teachers like you have, we had nuns. And dey were *mean*.”

“How mean? Did they make you stay inside for recess if you were bad? Mr. Johnston makes me clean chalkboards when I get in trouble.”

“Oh no, *noshis*. Dey were much worse, dem nuns. Hoolay! If you were bad, dey’d come by wit a big ol’ ruler and dey’d say, ‘*Hold out your hands,*’ and WHAP! Dey’d bring dat big ol’ ruler down right on your knuckles.” Grandma Memego whistled through her teeth.

Edith looked at her grandmother’s hands and then down at her own and then back up at her grandmother, a look of pure horror on her face. “No! They’d *hit* you?”

Grandma Memego nodded. “*Ehn-heyn*. Your great uncle Poywey got it even worse den I ever did. But that’s because your great uncle Poywey was *animizie* to the core.”

“What’s that mean?”

“*Animizie*? It means ‘bothersome,’ but we use it for all kinds of tings. If you were being a scamp and were chrowin’ dat flour at me, I’d call you *animizie noshis*,” said Grandma Memego with a smile. “Hurry up wit dem bear paws, you! Our oil’s almost hut.”

Edith jumped a little and turned back to the bowl of dough. After a moment, Grandma Memego went and joined her. They worked in silence for a while, each of them taking great care to shape and form the dough into little paws.

“Did you have lots of friends at school?” asked Edith.

Her grandmother just shook her head. “Not many, no. We wasn’t really allowed to talk, us - least not in de way we knew how. And English was jus’ too hard when we were first learnin.”

“You didn’t know English?” Edith’s jaw dropped open, so you could see the missing tooth that earned her a shiny new dollar just last night.

“No, little one,” said Grandma Memego. “When I went away to school, all I knew was Algonquin. Just like you know a lot of English and only a little bit of Algonquin now. I was like

dat too - except I didn't know English and knew Algonquin. Do you want to make the last paw or do you want to sit and watch now?"

Edith carefully stepped down off of the stool and pushed it over to the table where she could watch her grandmother at work. "So you didn't make *any* friends?"

"I made one. Her name was Ishkode, but the nuns wanted to call her Elizabeth."

"What's that mean?"

"Ishkode means 'fire.' It was a perfeck name for her." Here, Grandma Memego laughed a little. "Dat girl was real *animizie* her too."

"What happened to her? Do you still talk to her?" Edith rested her head in her hands.

"Ishkode got sick with the King's Evil and died when were at school. Lots of kids died."

There was a loud *hiss* as the first of the bear paws hit the hot oil, filling the kitchen with the warm smell of sweet fry bread. Grandma Memego looked over at Edith. "But I still talk to her."

"How?"

"Dere's no special way to do it, I just do. She's up with de Great Spirit now and I know she's always around when I need her," said Grandma Memego.

Edith furrowed her brow. "How can she still hear you?"

"She was always a real good listener. And when you gwan to de Spirit World you just get even better at listenin."

"So is great uncle Poywey with Ishkode too?"

Grandma Memego nodded. "*Ehn-heyn*. Only he didn't get to de Spirit World as fast as Ishkode did."

“I hope he’s not as sad over there as he was here,” Edith said, as she busied herself with tracing patterns on the tabletop.

“Oh no, *noshis*. He’s real happy dere. Dere’s no beer or drugs dere to keep him sad, so he’s able to jus’ be happy now. None of dat bad stuff stays witchu when you go. It’s a real nice place, de Spirit World,” Grandma Memego said. She smiled to herself and carefully spooned the cooked bear paws onto a plate. “Come here, you. Time to put some more honey on dese.”

Edith pushed herself back from the table and walked over to her grandmother. “I’m glad I don’t go to the same school you did, *gôkom*. It doesn’t sound like that much fun. Especially since you didn’t have bake sales.”

Grandma Memego gently looked over at her grandchild. She leaned over and lightly kissed the top of Edith’s head. “Not havin’ bake sales was the worst part.”