

## The Trouble with Variety

The hot Oklahoma summer is drawing to a close. Tomorrow the doors to Moore Elementary will swing open, and at recess the dusty playground across the street from Ruby's house will thunder with the sounds of running feet.

Ruby's got her first-day-of-school clothes all ready. Her mama bought her a brand new pair of chocolate leather loafers. There's a small slit on the top that reminds Ruby of a pair of lips, and she tucks a good luck penny inside it. "I want to wear the white cotton anklets without any lace," Ruby tells her mama. "Karen can wear the lace ones, lace is for babies."

When Karen hears Ruby call her a baby, she jumps up off the floor, and throws a puny arm around her sister's neck. "I'm not a baby. I'm goin' into first grade." Karen is sixteen months younger than Ruby, and half Ruby's size; but Karen's stubborn spirit far outweighs her physical mass, and she squeezes Ruby's neck so tight that Ruby can scarcely breathe.

Their mama pulls them apart. "Girls, girls. I've got enough on my mind without worrying about the two of you. Go play outside."

Ruby's first-day-of-school dress is homemade. Karen's got one in the same pattern in a bright orange gingham. Ruby's dress is the color of winter wheat growing in the O'Neil's half-acre out by the railroad tracks. White rick-rack around the neckline and at the bottom of the set-in sleeves reminds Ruby of icing on a birthday cake. On the right side of the full skirt there's a small pocket – the perfect size for carrying a clean, pressed hankie.

Ruby wants to eat in the school cafeteria, but her mama says no. "The lunch I pack for you is just fine," she says. What Ruby's mama doesn't say is that there's no money for that sort of thing, never mind that school lunches cost a quarter.

"Looky here, Ruby. You got your peanut butter sandwich with my homemade peach jam. You got some raisins and carrot sticks. What more could you want?"

Ruby's seven and a half. She's in second grade. She knows the ropes. She wants to stand in line with a shiny, metal tray. She wants each perfect compartment filled with hot,

sloppy, mystery food. She wants to eat at tables with town kids who buy their lunches, instead of with farm kids who bring lunch wrapped in wax paper.

Ruby's words slither out through clenched lips. "Ma, I want to buy the hot lunch at school."

"Ruby, honey, quit your whining. With this heat you should be thankful you bring your lunch. But I got fifteen cents here. You can get yourself a carton of chocolate milk every day this week to have at recess. Let's tie it up in your hankie."

Ruby's heard it said many times that there are a lot of mouths to feed. Besides Karen, she's got two other sisters and her mama's tummy grows big with a new baby coming in March. Ruby's Daddy is overseas again; this time the Air Force has sent him to Liberia, on the continent of Africa. Her mama and grandma take in laundry to help make ends meet.

"It's all right, Ma. Thanks for finding the milk money."

"You're a good girl, Ruby. You just gotta learn to get your head out of the clouds. Now go get your sisters ready for bed."

Ruby walks down the short hallway to the room she shares with her three younger sisters.

"All right, who's ready for a bath?"

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Ruby wakes in the dark to stifling heat. The air is thick and heavy like the maple syrup Ruby likes to drip on cornbread. After a breakfast of cold cereal, Ruby's mama walks her and Karen out onto the front porch. Four-year old Carol clutches their mama's apron; the toddler, Janie, is in her arms and balanced against her right hip. Ruby hears a rustling in the juniper bushes behind the house, and her collie, Jed, bounds up the stairs to join them. Jed rushes to lick Ruby's face like they've been separated for a thousand years.

"Ma, don't let him paw me. He'll get my dress all dirty."

Ruby's mama sets Janie down in one of the two rockers on the front porch. "Jed, get down," she says, and Jed drops to his haunches, content to nuzzle on Carol's ankle.

"Ruby, make sure you help Karen find her classroom."

She leans down and kisses Ruby and Karen on the cheek.

“I will, Mama. Don’t you worry.”

Ruby walks down the wooden steps, careful not to slip in the slick leather shoes. In sweaty palms, Ruby and Karen clutch the paper bags holding their lunches. Tucked under Ruby’s left arm is a thick, red writing tablet with a drawing of an American Indian on the cover. Ruby takes Karen’s hand to cross the street, and once they’ve reached the other side, Ruby turns to wave at her mother, but she’s already stepped back inside the house. Ruby crosses the playground with Karen, presses through the throng of milling kids, and enters the school doors on the south side. On the bulletin board next to the office Ruby looks for their names. Karen is in Mrs. Hoyt’s class.

“Karen, you got Mrs. Hoyt for first grade – just like me. You’re going to like her. She’s wonderful.”

There are two second-grade classrooms, and Ruby is in Mrs. Luker’s class. She’s happy to see that her best friend, Pam, is also on Mrs. Luker’s list.

Mrs. Luker assigns seats and collects milk and lunch money. Pam sits up front, and Ruby begs to be moved to the front of the aisle.

“Mrs. Luker, I get headaches if I sit too far back.”

First and second graders eat at eleven. Ruby sees her sister, Karen, surrounded by a gaggle of gigglers. Karen seems in complete command of the table, and not the least bit embarrassed about pulling out a peanut butter and jam sandwich. Good, she’s made friends, Ruby thinks. Karen waves at Ruby, but Ruby looks the other way and pretends that she doesn’t see her. Karen knows she is being ignored and she calls Ruby’s name over and over until Ruby glances over. Karen sticks out her peanut butter coated tongue. Ruby feels a wave of nausea and she rolls her eyes. Why can’t she eat with her mouth closed, Ruby wonders.

Ruby stands in line with Pam and Linda and waits while the cafeteria ladies fill their trays with Sloppy Joes, green beans and applesauce. Ruby grabs a glass of water, and makes her way to join them at a table. Unlike Karen, Ruby can’t stand the idea of pulling out the wax paper wrapped sandwich in front of her friends. Before she reaches the table she drops

the entire bag into a garbage can that is already half-full of discarded milk cartons and scraped off food. Pam and Linda look up, hands dripping Sloppy Joe red.

“What did you do with your lunch,” they ask.

“I find I just lose my appetite in this heat,” Ruby replies.

When it’s time for the first and second graders to go out on the playground for recess, Ruby walks up to the lunch lady sitting at small desk in the front of the cafeteria. She wears the same white uniform and crepe-soled shoes as the cafeteria ladies who cook and serve the food, but the lunch lady only collects meal tickets. Since she has the easiest job, Ruby assumes she must be in charge. Ruby hesitates a moment before speaking.

“Ma’am, is there any way I can earn a hot lunch every day?”

“Lordy, child, don’t your mama pack you a lunch?”

“Yes’m, she does. She packs a nice lunch for me. But, you see, it’s the same thing every day, and I like a little variety in my lunches. I’m willing to work for it.”

The lunch lady looks Ruby over. Her lips are pursed together in a hard, thin line; but her eyes are smiling.

“We’ll see what we can do. Let me talk with your teacher.”

Later in the afternoon before the final bell, Mrs. Luker calls Ruby to her desk.

“Ruby, Mrs. Holcolm over at the cafeteria says you want to work for a hot lunch. Is that right?”

“Yes’m. Like I told her, I would like a little variety in my lunches. It might help my mother out a bit, too, if she doesn’t have to pack one for me every day.”

Mrs. Luker smiles.

“You can start getting the school lunch tomorrow. Then you can help with washing up the trays after you get finished eating. But you might miss a bit of recess. Do you understand?”

The balls of Ruby’s feet feel prickly, and she bounces up and down.

“Yes’m. That’s all right. I’m always chasing after my little sisters. I get plenty of running around.”

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When the final bell of the day rings at 3 PM, Ruby collects Karen from Mrs. Hoyt’s class and they head for home. Karen bubbles over with news of the day – the new friends she made, learning to write out her name, a macaroni art project in the afternoon, her delicious lunch. Ruby listens with half an ear. In her mind she rehearses telling her mama about earning the hot school lunch.

The screen door creaks. Jed scrambles over Ruby’s feet and tries to nose his way into the house.

“Keep that dog out of here,” Ruby’s mama yells. “He’ll get hair all over the clean laundry.”

Two ironing boards are set up in the cramped living room, and Ruby’s mama and her grandma are bent over men’s dress shirts. Wet shirts in gallon buckets cover the floor; from the front window to the kitchen doorframe a makeshift clothesline bends from the weight of pressed shirts on hangars. All Ruby can smell is laundry starch. She can hear Carol and Janie laughing in the back bedroom.

Ruby’s mama looks up and sets the hot iron up on its end.

“How was your first day of school?”

Ruby shrugs. “Fine.”

Karen starts jabbering a blue streak.

“And, ma, thanks for the treat,” she says. “It sure was special.”

“That was from your grandma,” Ruby’s mama replies; “You can thank her. Didn’t you like your fried pie, Ruby?”

A small shadow passes over Ruby’s face. Fried pie? Ruby loves fried pie – the small crescent shapes that fit neatly in her hand; the buttery crust that crumbles with each bite leaving small flakes on her chin; the sticky, sweetness of the fruit; the lingering scent of

cinnamon. What a fool I was to throw my lunch away, Ruby thinks. Was it peach or was it apple?

“Yes’m, I liked the pie. Thanks, grandma. Can I go now? I got some homework to do.”

“Sure, honey, but first would you take the girls outside to play? They’ve been cooped up most of the day.”

Ruby’s sigh is audible. “OK,” she says, and then she plunges into her prepared speech.

“Ma, I fixed it so I can earn a free hot lunch at school every day. I’m going to help out in the cafeteria washing the trays. I’ll only miss a little recess, and you know I don’t really care about recess all that much. And this way you don’t have to worry about making my lunch and it will save you a little time in the morning.”

Her mama’s sigh is audible.

“Ruby, you’re never satisfied with what you got. It sure seems like a lot of effort to go to for some silly lunch. But if you’re so determined, I guess I can’t stop you.”

“Thanks, ma. Let me change out of this dress, and I’ll go play with the girls.”

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The next day Mrs. Luker hands Ruby a lunch ticket, and at eleven she stands in line with Pam and Linda and proudly hands it over to the lunch lady. Ruby looks into Mrs. Holcolm’s face and expects a look of recognition, but receives none. A bit flummoxed, Ruby picks up her metal tray and pushes it down the serving line. She watches Pam and Linda carefully and follows their lead. Hold the tray up in front of the cafeteria lady. “Yes, mashed potatoes, please,” Ruby says, “with a little brown gravy.” Meat loaf, broccoli, a small bowl of lime Jell-O. As Ruby makes her way to a table, she sees Karen surrounded by friends, but today Karen doesn’t try and catch Ruby’s eye.

At the end of the meal, Pam and Linda wave goodbye and head out to the playground. Ruby makes her way to the kitchen. One of the cafeteria ladies hands Ruby a long, rubber apron.

“Here you go, hon. I’m Mrs. Eastman. You come to me if you got any questions. First carry the trays from the sideboard over to the sink. Use the sprayer to wash off any food still sticking to ‘em. Then stack the trays in this bin here, and put it through the dishwasher. When it’s done, you can take ‘em out and stack ‘em over there. Got it?”

Ruby nods and puts the apron over her head. It’s heavy and comes down way past her knees. It’s hard to walk with it on, and the difficulty is multiplied because the floor is wet and Ruby can feel herself slipping in her leather shoes. After carrying the first dozen trays into the kitchen, Ruby’s arms start to ache. The sprayer is unwieldy and soon her clothes are as wet as the floor. Every time she opens the dishwasher a cloud of steam rushes into the room and she feels her lungs praying for a breath of fresh air.

Ruby looks out the window over the kitchen sink. Pam and Linda are playing tetherball with Joyce and Shirley. They laugh as the ball goes around and around the pole. Karen is playing hopscotch on the sidewalk.

Ruby knows her house is just beyond the playground. Her mother, grandmother, sisters, and dog are almost within her reach, but in that moment Ruby knows that they are also very far away. Ruby realizes that she will never learn to leave well enough alone, that she will never be satisfied with a small patch of Oklahoma dirt, and that as long as she stays here she will never truly fit in. Ruby decides that in wanting variety, God must have made her different. She takes one last look out the window, and heads back into the lunchroom for another load of trays.