

1995

Bonanza

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Recommended Citation

Beard, Jo Ann. "Bonanza." *The Iowa Review* 25.2 (1995): 52-59. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4363>

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Bonanza · Jo Ann Beard

MY GRANDMOTHER MARRIED A GUY NAMED RALPH, about a year and a half after Pokey, my real grandfather, died of a stroke in the upstairs bedroom of Uncle Rex's house. At Grandma and Ralph's wedding ceremony a man sang opera-style, which took the children by surprise and caused an uproar among the grandchildren, who were barely able to sit still as it was. Afterwards, there was white cake with white frosting in the church basement and bowls of peanuts. My mother and my aunts were quite upset about Grandma marrying Ralph barely a year after their dad had died. They sat in clumps in the church basement, a few here, a few there, and ate their cake while giving each other meaningful looks, shaking their heads ominously. My grandmother, a kind woman, was way above reproach. So, it was all Ralph's fault.

He took her to Florida on a honeymoon, a place where no one in the family had ever been. There was an ocean there. They walked the beach morning and night, and Grandma brought home shells. She divided them up evenly, put them in cigar boxes and gave them to each of her thirty-five grandchildren. The cigar boxes were painted flat white and pictures cut from greeting cards were glued to the top: a lamb, a big-eyed kitty, a bunch of flowers. I always imagine my grandmother, on that trip to Florida, walking in the foamy tide, picking up dead starfish, while Ralph sat silently in a beach chair, not smiling at anyone.

When we'd drive down to Knoxville for a visit, everyone would be hale and hearty, the food eaten, the iced tea drunk, the new rag rugs admired, and then we'd pile back into the car for the hour ride home. Ralph was always grouchy and harsh, with big fingers that he pointed at everyone while he talked. As soon as we pulled out of the driveway, my mother would look at my father and say, "That old sonuvabitch, I'd like to *kill* him."

One time I went to visit Grandma and Ralph for a week right after having learned how to whistle. I whistled at all times, with dedication and complete concentration. When I was asked a question I whistled the answer, I whistled along with people as they talked, I whistled while I worked, I whistled while I played. Eventually they made a rule that whistling was forbidden in their house. I felt bereft and didn't know what to do with my

lips if I couldn't whistle. I would blow gently, without making a sound, while helping my grandmother get dinner. She must have felt sorry for me because she said once, kindly, "Honey, you *can* whistle when you're outside." But that was no comfort to me. Part of the joy of whistling was knowing that it was always available, you carried the equipment right on your own face. If I couldn't whistle *at all times*, then I didn't care to whistle outdoors. I couldn't wait to get home, where no one could make me do anything.

Grandma and Ralph both worked, so when I went to visit I had hours and hours each day to occupy myself. Grandma took care of senior citizens, some of them younger than she was, shut-ins and disabled folk who needed company and assistance with some of the necessities—cooking, talking. She was a volunteer. Ralph was a butcher and a sheep-shearer. He drove a panel truck out to people's farms and killed their cattle for them. Eyes like pebbles, tanned face pulled into a knotty smile, bald head glinting in the sun, a foot-long knife blade aimed at unsuspecting furred throats. Afterwards he would use a garden hose to spray out the back of his truck. White walls and floor, pools and spatters of brilliant red. I glimpsed it once, without knowing what I was looking at. I remember thinking, "That looks like *blood*." It never occurred to me it *was* blood. The sheep, after being sheared, stood stunned, in masses, their sides heaving, long cuts and gashes on their pink, exposed skin. The wool stank like crazy and lay in mounds everywhere, gray and filthy. I was taken along on his sprees, sent off to play with complete strangers, farm children, while he went to work with his long knife, his buzzing clippers. I was known for being sensitive to the plight of farm animals and bunnies killed on the road, but I steadfastly refused to acknowledge what was taking place on those visits.

I went along with Grandma sometimes, too. I saw a lady who slept in a crib, curled like a four year old, so tiny. She stared out from the bars at me with blank blue eyes. My grandma helped her husband turn her over. Their living room smelled like pee and something else. We had a covered dish for the husband in our trunk and I carried it in. The old woman had white hair that stuck up in patches on her head. I couldn't get over that she slept in a crib, and I couldn't stop looking at her. My grandma called out to her before we left. "Eva!" she called, "we brung Walter your noodle-ring! But it don't taste nothing like what you made; I didn't have pumpernickel so I used white!" The words of grown-ups rarely made real sense to me. But

Eva understood, and smiled faintly at us, her blue eyes staring through the bars.

“Oh, I got her smilin’,” my grandma crowed. Walter walked us out to the car and stood while we drove away, a wide man in overalls and a pressed shirt. He waved to us by touching his temple gently with two fingers and then pointing them at us. I waved back at him that way.

But mostly I stayed behind, at their house, and wandered through the rooms, picking things up and putting them back down. There were unimaginable treasures there, old things that you didn’t know the purpose of, beautiful spindly-legged furniture, and things with exotic, lost names. Chiffarobes and highboys, antimacassars and lowboys. Every surface of every wall was covered, and nearly every inch of floor space was too. Only in the middle of each room was a cleared space for living, a more or less empty zone. Jars of buttons, every kind imaginable, homemade ones, bone ones, small pink and white ones (“Them’re for a baby’s dress,” she told me), enormous black ones. They were endlessly fascinating to me, all their colors and textures, the satisfying churrr as they poured out of the jar and onto a table. I didn’t quite know what to do with them then; they seemed to call out for some special kind of play, something that would lend itself to a pile of buttons. But I could never think of what to do with them next, so I would put them back in the jar, put the jar back on the table or shelf or closet that it came from, and wander on to the next thing. A small drawer in a small dresser, long thin tools with carved handles, a whole bunch of them rubberbanded together. “Them’re buttonhooks,” she told me, “from when you had buttons on your shoes.” I didn’t know what she was talking about and set them back in their small drawer, closed it. On almost every surface there was an antique vase with a bouquet of flowers in it, set in the middle of a starched doily. Beautiful, exotic blooms, all plastic, all covered with a heavy layer of dust. “They throw ’em away, just like they didn’t cost money,” my grandma would explain.

I spent long days of blistering, stupefying boredom in that house, opening the refrigerator and staring into it forty times in an afternoon. Butter, milk, bowls with clumped food visible through their Saran wrapped tops. There was stuff to eat to make you go to the bathroom, stuff to drink to make you go to the bathroom, and then several things to make you *stop* going to the bathroom. Nothing sweet whatsoever. She’d make a batch of cookies before I came and put them in the fat-chef cookie jar. I

would eat all the cookies on the first morning, and then hunt relentlessly the rest of the week for something sweet. I would remember the cookies—greasy peanut butter ones with peanuts stuck in them, or chocolate chip ones with oatmeal—with a kind of hysterical longing. I couldn't believe I had eaten every one of them the first morning. What could I have been thinking?

I ate sugar cubes from the sugar bowl, one every hour or so. They were actually *too* sugary and each time I ate one I swore I wouldn't do it again. But another hour later would find me creeping sock-footed out to the kitchen, lifting the plastic lid of the sugar bowl, and selecting another.

Sometimes I would jump energetically on the beds, two twin ones that were in the room where I slept. I'd kung fu all the embroidered throw pillows onto the floor, and then jump and jump and jump, saying a Chinese jumprope chant: "Chicka-chicka China, sitting on a fence, tried to make a dollar outta fifty-nine cents," until I was so out of breath I had to collapse on my back and wait for the rotating fan to turn in my direction.

Oh, the rotating fan.

The lovely rotating fan, something that moved of its own accord in the dead house during the long afternoons. I would set the rotating fan on a footstool in the long, narrow bedroom. My job was to feed Kleenexes into it and then pick up the shredded pieces. By the end of one of those stultifying afternoons, I'd have an empty Kleenex box and a whole wastebasket full of soft pink confetti. Once I took an ancient roll of toilet paper out from under the skirt of a knitted doll that sat on the back of the toilet. I thought I could start one end of it and the fan would suck it through and I could just stand back and watch without worrying about my fingers. It was too papery, though, not soft enough, and it didn't work. A big piece tore off and flew through the blades without shredding.

Nobody ever questioned where the Kleenexes went when I was visiting, but once my grandma gave me another white-painted cigar box that was full of handkerchiefs, neatly pressed and folded. Every kind imaginable: flowered, embroidered, ones with Scottie terriers, ones with lace edges, the whole bit.

They ate terrible food, things mixed together that weren't supposed to be. Mashed potatoes with corn in them, pieces of white bread with gravy poured on top, peas and carrots in the same bowl. And Ralph's eating was an all-body experience. He'd have a dish towel tucked into his collar and

hold spoon and fork in his enormous paws. He'd get something on the spoon, a great gob of potatoes, say, and then open his mouth as wide as it would go, like a bird in a nest getting fed a chewed worm. He had deep creases on either side of this mouth, and as he chewed gravy would run down the gullies in rivulets, land on the dish towel and stay there. It was an amazing and horrifying thing to watch. I had a sensitive stomach and sometimes, sitting across from him, eyes carefully averted, fastened on the Aunt Jemima potholder hanging on a hook or a pan lid with a screw and a block of wood jimmied up for a handle; at those times, just hearing him eat could make me gag. I was in the habit of rising from the table and walking around the kitchen every few minutes, breathing through my nose to keep from gagging. Then I'd sit back down, pick up two peas with my spoon, and put them in my mouth. This is what my grandma said to me once: "Eat your chicken, why don't you? And don't take the skin off, that's what's good." They were trying to make me eat something with *skin* on it. At my own house, everyone knew enough not to say *skin* in relation to food.

My grandma, when she was cooking dinner, would send me down to the fruit cellar for jars of home-canned stuff. Then when I'd bring them up she'd open the jars and smell the contents thoughtfully; sometimes she'd have me take the jar outside to where Ralph was and have him smell it. He always said the same things: "There ain't nothing wrong with *that*, tell her," or he'd bawl toward the house as I was walking back in, "Maw, that'll be okay if you cook it a little longer!"

Once she served me red raspberries that she'd put up; poured them in a plastic bowl and put cream on them. As I started to dig in I noticed that there were some black things floating around. "Grandma, there's bugs in this," I said. She came over and looked into my bowl, head tipped back to see out of the bottoms of her glasses. "Them're dead," she told me. "Just push'em to the side; the berries is okay." And I did, and the berries *were* okay.

At night we watched one show on TV and then had to go to bed, when it was still a little bit light out. They'd go in their room and my grandma would come out with her nightgown on and her teeth out to tuck me in. It was awful. I'd be lying stiff as a plank under the bedspread and here she'd come, without her regular clothes on, with her arms and feet exposed, her mouth folded in on itself. "G'night honey-Jo," she would lisp, pat me on the shoulder and turn out the light. And there I'd be, while they snored up

one side and down the other in the room across the hall. I'd tiptoe all over the bedroom, gazing for a while out the window, watching the sky turn black, the stars come out. I'd quietly open all the drawers of all the dressers in the room, take out things, examine them, put them back. I didn't dare jump on the bed, although sometimes I said "Chicka-chicka China" to myself out of boredom. I tried counting sheep like on the cartoons, but I couldn't concentrate, couldn't for the life of me imagine what sheep looked like. I knew but I didn't know, just as I couldn't conjure up the faces of my long-lost parents and siblings. I was wide awake, staring out at the vast Milky Way while the grown-ups snored on and on and the moon rose and sank.

The strange thing was I always asked to go there. I don't remember them ever inviting me, or my parents suggesting it. It was me. From far away the idea of their house was magical to me: all those nooks, all those crannies, all those things to play with—the button jars, the lowboy with a little drawer full of marbles, the flower arrangements, the rotating fan. So, every July I got dropped off on a Sunday and picked up the following Sunday. By Tuesday I'd be counting the hours, sitting on the backyard glider, staring at the black lawn jockey and the flagstone path that took you to the garden, the broken bird bath with a pool of rusty, skanky water in it. Their yard had as much stuff in it as their house did, only the yard stuff was filthy, full of dirt and rainwater.

The last time I went there my parents drove off on a Sunday afternoon as I stood on the gravel sidewalk and waved, already regretting my visit. My grandma fed us, dinner was the usual ordeal of gravy rivulets and tainted food, and then they turned "Bonanza" on. I lay on the living room floor, in the cleared-out space in the center; on either end of the couch were Grandma and Ralph. She was crocheting an afghan and he was sharpening a stack of scissors.

We were watching my favorite show. The dad, Ben, had a buckskin horse with a dark mane and tail, Hoss had a thin-legged black one, and Little Joe had a pinto pony with an intelligent and young face, just like Little Joe himself. They had Hop-Sing for a servant, in place of a mom. Back home my little brother would be humming to himself through the whole show, "Umbuddy-umbuddy-umbuddy-ummm Bo-nanza," and everyone would be telling him to shut up. My mom would be smoking her cigarettes and drinking beer out of a bottle; my dad would have his socks off and be

stretching his bare toes, drinking his beer out of a glass. My sister would be trying to do homework at the dining room table.

Here I was with Grandma and Ralph, staying up one hour later than I would the rest of the century-long week. Little Joe falls in love with a school teacher who comes past the Ponderosa in a buggy. He kisses her a long one, it stretches out forever in the silence of the living room. There isn't a sound from behind me, on the couch. No one is moving while the kiss is going on. It's horrible. I look around the room, at the pictures that cover every inch of wall space, my aunts and uncles and their families, framed sayings from the olden days, plaques with jokes about outhouses, a pair of flying ceramic ducks with orange beaks and feet, and on and on. Too much to look at. The pecking-hen salt and pepper shakers, the donkey with a dead plant coming out of his back, the stacks of old magazines under tables and on the seats of chairs. Underneath me are three scatter rugs, converging their corners in a lump under my back. Rag rugs, one of them made from bread wrappers. Hoss Cartright saves the school teacher when her horse shies and now she's in love with him. Little Joe tries to punch Hoss out but he's too little. Behind me my grandmother's knitting needles click together in a sad and empty way, Ralph's breathing is audible over the scratch of scissor-blades on stone. In the dim circle of light that I lie in, my head cushioned on an Arkansas Razorback pillow, I feel completely separate from them because of the simple fact that in seven days I will be rescued, removed from this terrible lonely place and put back in the noisy house I came from.

It occurs to me that Grandma and Ralph have nothing, they don't even enjoy "Bonanza" all that much, they just turned it on because my mom told them to let me watch it. There can't be anything for them to enjoy, with their long empty days, full of curled-up old ladies and dirty sheep. They don't even drink pop.

I am crying on the floor, the tears go sideways and land coldly in my ears or on the velveteen pillow. I can't bear, suddenly, the way the television sends out its sad blue light, making the edges of the room seem darker. A coffee can covered with contact paper holds red, white and blue Fourth of July flowers, taken from a dead person. I wish suddenly that my grandma was dead, so she wouldn't have to knit that afghan anymore. The rest of the year, while I'm back home and playing with my friends, this is where my grandma is, her needles going, her teeth in the bathroom in a plastic bowl.

My ears are swimming pools, and I feel trapped suddenly inside the small circle of light in the center of the room. I'm tiny Eva, watching Little Joe Cartwright through the bars of my crib, I'm a monkey, strapped into a space capsule and flung far out into the galaxy, weightless, hurtling along upside down through the Milky Way. Alone, alone, and alone. Against my will, I sob out loud. I turn over and weep into the Arkansas pillow, wrecking the velveteen. Suddenly my grandma's hand is on my hair, her poor sad and empty hand, the knitting needles have been set down.

There is telephone talk, and muffled comments from Grandma to Ralph, from Ralph to the person on the other end of the phone. My nose is pressed against the pillow and I'm still crying, or trying to. I suddenly want to hear what's going on but I don't have the nerve to sit up. My clothes are gathered, the television is shut off, I am walked outside and put in the back seat of their great big yellow car. In the back window, there's a dog with a bobbing head that I usually like to mess around with when I'm riding in the car. I don't even bother to look at it. I just stare out the back window at the night sky.

After about a half hour of driving we pull over and sit at the side of the road. I'm no longer weightless, but unbearably heavy, and tired. My dad pulls up with a crunch of gravel, words are exchanged through open windows, quiet chuckles, I am placed in the front seat between my parents. We pull away and as we head toward home, the galaxy recedes, the stars move back into position, and the sky stretches out overhead, black and familiar.

They've decided not to hassle me about this. "What happened, honey?" my mom asks once, gently.

"'Bonanza' made me sad," I reply.