

Ida's Beans

by

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FADE IN:

BLACK SCREEN

NARRATOR (V.O.)

(old voice)

I remember that summer of red earth
country roads and the clickity buzz
of the insects and the smell of the
river rising up through the tall
trees and their lush green
undergrowth.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A road runs along a tree-lined river. STRONG BUZZ of insect
life. A YOUNG GIRL walks along the road.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

I remember Mean Mike.

(beat)

I remember old skinny black Ida
listing to one side as she carried
a bucket of water from the pump
toward the dilapidated wooden
structure that was the only cafe in
that corner of the county, talking
to herself as if she were two
persons carrying the bucket.

IDA

lists to one side as she carries a heavy bucket of water,
while having an imaginary conversation with herself.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

But most of all I remember Ida's
beans.

Young Girl arrives at Ida's cafe

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Daddy was an engineer on a nearby
Roosevelt government project. We
had rented a small house for the
summer just up the road from Ida's
cafe. Since I was the only white
child for miles around, I roamed
and explored the area alone.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It was just a matter of time until
I poked my head into Ida's cafe.

Young Girl walks up three steps and into the cafe.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Ida wipes down the counter. She turns to the Young Girl.

IDA
Dis a colored 'stablishment, chile.

Ida leads the little girl to the door, who reluctantly
descends the steps and then turns around.

HER FACE

registers confusion and hurt.

The Young Girl walks away.

INT. CAFE - DOORWAY - FOLLOWING DAY

Young Girl stands in the doorway.

YOUNG GIRL
My mother's a communist so it's
okay for us to be friends.

Ida blinks uncomprehendingly.

IDA
(confused)
Youse a communist, too?

YOUNG GIRL
No, I'm just a girl who hasn't had
her lunch.

IDA
Maybe youse like som' my peach
cobbler?

INT. CAFE - DAY

Young Girl slowly relishes her peach cobbler.

Ida sits close to her and watches her eat.

NARRATOR

So at least once a day I went to visit Ida. She finally even let me help her in the kitchen, a practical decision, I think, to offset the many bowls of peach cobbler I ate there.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Young Girl carries dirty dishes to the sink.

Three black customers at tables watch her warily.

Ida walks up to them and waves her hand.

IDA

Nothin' tuh worry. She a sweet chile.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Young Girl stands on a bucket so she can reach down into sink.

She washes dishes.

YOUNG GIRL

Ida, what's the difference between white people and colored people?

IDA

Chile, all us colored folk know what it is tuh be down. Like do some white folk. Difference is us colored alluz be down.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

I soon realized that this was not a typical cafe, not even for poor Negroes. People from all the nearby farms came there seeking relief from their ailments and anxieties. Ida was a kind of natural healer, She had remedies for almost anything in her pharmacopoeia.

INT. CAFE - DAY

BLACK WOMAN

Muh Willie he got a sore on his leg
won' heal and beginnin' tuh look
awful.

Ida grinds leaves in a mortar until they become a
mucilaginous ointment.

She scrapes the ointment onto a square of waxed paper.

She carefully folds the paper and hands it to the worried
customer.

IDA

Put dese comfrey leaves on his leg.

The woman pays Ida with three large red tomatoes.

INT. CAFE - DAY

A father-to-be in denim overalls watches Ida as she puts
leaves into boiling water.

FATHER-TO-BE

Josie gittin' real big now and
'fraid she lose 'dis 'un too.

Ida strains the tea into a quart jar and wraps it with a
piece of cloth.

IDA

Haf Josie drink 'dis strong
raspberry leaf tea.

She hands the jar to the man.

He pays Ida with three sweet potatoes.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Young Girl walks slowly along road carrying a shovel.

She looking for something in the weeds next to it.

She steps into weeds and begins to dig.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Ida had me hunt along the roadsides
for the echinacea.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It looked like a purple sunflower,
and I dug up its silvery root. Ida
said it was good if you got poison
in the blood or sores on your head,
and she brewed up large infusions
of it.

(beat)
Which brings me to Ida's beans.

(beat)
Apart from dispensing her natural
curatives and nostrums, the only
thing Ida sold in her cafe was
beans -- just red beans -- along
with big crumbly squares of spicy
corn bread and, of course, the
peach cobbler. And for every plate
of beans eaten in the cafe, six
portions would go home in
containers her customers brought
in.

INT. CAFE - SINK - DAY

Young Girl stands on bucket at sink.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Ida wouldn't let me use the big
knife to cut the onion or the
celery or the green peppers. But
she would let me peel the garlic
and wash the beans in a colander
set in a washbasin full of cold
water. I had to stand on an
overturned bucket to reach down
into the sink.

IDA
Look for any stones, chile.

NARRATOR
She never called me by my name.

INT. CAFE - STOVE - DAY

TWO POTS

one black cast iron, the other blue enamel, stand on the
stove.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Two pots of beans always sat on the
wood stove.
(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The ordinary beans in the black
cast iron pot and what Ida called
her magic beans in the blue
enamelware pot.

Young Girl sits at a table with a glass of milk eating peach
cobbler

IDA
Da hocks, vegetables, hot peppers
and salt, dat is all deh is in da
od'nary beans.

Ida winks at the girl.

Ida cradles a heap of chopped leaves and flowers in her bony
hands.

IDA (CONT'D)
(pronouncing the 'h')
Dese my special herbs dat put da
magic in da beans.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Young Girl is cutting out paper dolls with big scissors.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Those days I went to the cafe after
lunch, I could always tell which
beans Ida had eaten. If she worked
about the kitchen, invigorated with
occasional sips from a pint of
bourbon, I knew she had eaten the
ordinary beans.

Ida moves busily about the kitchen, pausing to take a small
pull from a bottle in a cabinet.

NARRATOR
But if she moved slowly and often
stared into space, I knew she had
been into the magic beans.

Young Girl sits slowly flipping through Sear's catalog.

Ida moves slowly, stops and stares and mumbles something,
then answers her mumbles with a clearer, stronger voice.

IDA
You no mind her, see? You no mind a
word from her.

Young Girl watches Ida uneasily.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

I always felt a little uneasy
around Ida after she had eaten the
magic beans. It was as if a part of
her were somewhere else.

Ida looks at the girl.

IDA

Don' ever eat da beans from da blue
pot. Dez for da people live heh
'bout need special hep.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Young Girl sits alone in the kitchen. She cocks her ear and
looks about and then at the blue pot.

She sees the blue pot.

BACK TO SCENE

She gets up and walks to the blue pot and eats several big
bites of its contents.

Suddenly seized by guilt, she leaves the cafe and heads for
home.

FOLLOWING Young Girl who begins to walk "stoned".

Her face shows the effect of the special beans.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

I wasn't even sure I was home when
I got home. I told my mother I was
not feeling well and went to bed
and slept until the next morning
but not before experiencing the
most bizarre, kaleidoscopic dreams
of my young life.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Ida ladling her magic beans into a pan held by a housewife.

Ida ladling her magic beans into a bowl held by an elderly
woman.

Ida ladling her magic beans into a tin plate held by an
elderly man.

NARRATOR

It was some years after that summer I realized that at any given time a good fourth of the inhabitants of that corner of the county were stoned on Ida's beans.

(beat)

Ida administered her magic beans like a kind of natural, broad-spectrum antibiotic to treat everything, I'm sure, from nausea and glaucoma to arthritis and humdrum sex lives. They allayed the pain of poverty and hardscrabble farming and being a Negro in a white world. For a few hours they could create a place where time loosened its bonds and moved things -- a small flower or the grating of the crickets -- somehow closer to God.

CLOSE ON IDA

IDA

Eferbody who want tuh feel good down heh haf a right tuh.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Ida was the purveyor, the psychiatrist, the healer, and in the case of Mean Mike, probably the vigilante for that corner of the county.

INT. CAFE - DAY

A small, wiry man sits at one of the wooden tables eating beans with quick movements of his spoon.

The Young Girl sits nearby staring at him.

He looks at the girl and slowly resumes eating, now self-consciously.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

I only saw Mean Mike one time. He was a wiry little Negro who to me didn't look mean at all. He had sat at one of the tables eating beans. They said he killed one of his wives. Maybe two.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
From the bits of conversation I
overheard later in the restaurant,
I know he had not been seen for
several months.

INT. CAFE - DAY

A big tall woman laughs.

BIG WOMAN
Ida, where Mean Mike dese days?

Ida reaches into a cabinet and holds out a small vial,
wiggling it in front of the woman's face.

IDA
I'se got Mean Mike in heh, Margie.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I think Ida put strychnine in the
man's beans

EXT. IDA'S CAFE - MORNING

NARRATOR (V.O.)
When summer came to an end we
headed back north. I cried because
I would no longer be able to visit
the intriguing world of Ida's cafe.

A sedan pulls up and stops outside the cafe. Young Girl gets
out and goes into the cafe.

INT. IDA'S CAFE - CONTINUOUS

Ida is leaning against the sink with a glazed look in her
eyes. She slowly acknowledges the Young Girl.

YOUNG GIRL
I've come to say goodbye, Ida. My
family is returning to the city.

Ida leans toward the girl, her eyes widening as if she saw
her from afar. She waves weakly.

IDA
Guhbye, chile.

The girl is hurt by the unreality of Ida's farewell. She
walks slowly to the kitchen door and turns back toward Ida.

HER FACE

registers a hint of anger.

YOUNG GIRL

Bye, Ida.

She sees Ida raise a finger and talk softly in a tone of gentle scolding that quickly brings forth a chuckle and the louder, more confident voice of her other self from her other world.

IDA (LITTLE SISTER)

You pass duh whole day efer day in
dis here cafe.

IDA (CONT'D)

Who is you tuh scold me, little
sister? I mean, jist who do you
think you is?

FADE TO BLACK.