

## BACK IN THE OLD DAYS

Anita Bryant

[Assignment: You will compose a short story which reflects the concept of repression. Your story may be straight narration, with the point that it makes about oppression obvious, or you may choose to be more adventuresome and construct a piece in which the characters are symbols, or the story is allegorical. You may draw on your own experience or that of a friend that shows oppression as it occurs in our society.]

( 1 ) Today in a little town outside of Birmingham, Alabama, my son and I sit in a small diner that my father took me to once when I was a little boy growing up. The diner's appearance had not changed much in the twenty-something years. It still had a red bar with metal edging and the matching red vinyl-covered stools. The booths matched the bar and they sat at the left side of the diner, across from the bar as you walked in through the entrance. No, it was definitely not the appearance but the atmosphere that had changed. The fact, or privilege, as some of the white folk thought, that my son and I were in that diner was definitely both a physical and a mental change. Back in the days of my childhood, my pop and I weren't allowed to be at this diner because we were colored and the white folk did not find it fitting for us to be in their company.

( 2 ) It was the late 50's, when the height of all that fighting for civil rights around here was going on, when Martin Luther was preaching for peace and liberty and about all that other stuff we were supposed to be fighting for. My pop decided that he was going to take me to the "whites only" diner in town. My pop was a brave man and I was a timid, black seven-year-old.

( 3 ) The afternoon was dusty-hot and my pop suggested that we go to the diner for a glass of milk. He didn't bother tellin' me that he wasn't talkin' 'bout Jackson's, the local diner that all of us colored folk went to. My pop decided that on that day he was going to make me witness my first real fight against that oppression stuff that Martin Luther said we was fightin' against.

( 4 ) The diner we went to that day was called "Sid's." I remember 'cause it was the only diner in town that kept the glass on the door so clean that when the sun reflected off of it you was nearly blinded. I liked to call it "Sid's Sun" for that reason. My pop said he knew Sid 'cause he picked up the trash from that diner every Tuesday and Thursday. One day Sid came out and offered my pop a cup of coffee and they got to talkin' and Sid told my pop that he was a "mighty educated negro" and that if he ever wanted a cup of coffee to go to the back door and ask for one. My pop always said that Sid was one of the good white men. Sid wasn't workin' the day my pop wanted to take me there.

( 5 ) Me and my pop came to the glass and metal doors that opened up to my first lesson in fightin' for freedom. Pop grabbed hold of the handle and took the deepest breath I ever seen a man take. We went inside. I ain't never seen so many white foreheads in one place before in my life at age seven. Every forehead usin' the eyeballs that was attached to 'em was

lookin' right our way. I wanted to run the hell outta there 'til I got home to my bed an' then crawl deep into the covers to protect me, but my pop grabbed my hand and dragged me to the counter and plopped my ass down on that stool and told me to keep my back straight an' my mouth shut. I had the feelin' that I didn't do what he say, those white men wouldn't be only ones wantin' to whup my behind that day--an' I was a lot more scared of my pop!

( 6 ) Next thing I knew, the white men was screamin' at my pop to get outta there and to take the "little nigger boy" with before my pop taught me bad manners or somethin' like that. All I could hear was "nigger this," and "nigger that," and "Get outta here an' go to hell while you at it," an' other awful stuff that I couldn't understand but knew was bad 'cause my pop didn't smile once. Instead we just sat there. My pop kept on askin' for two milks, and I just sat there with every tear in my body wantin' to bust outta my eyes and every cry wantin' to bust outta my mouth. But I was too scared to do nothin' 'cept sit on that stool.

( 7 ) Someone struck at my pop's head with a leg from a wooden chair. I let out a scream, but my pop just sat there grittin' his teeth. He was bleedin' from a cut above his left eyebrow. He just sat there. I was whimperin' next to him tryin' to convince him that we should go on our way. My pop finally took his eyes off that wall behind the bar and looked at me. He didn't talk to me or nobody else. Instead, he just started singin' "Amazing Grace." With all of the cussin' and beatin' and chaos goin' on around him, my pop just sat on that stool singin' the gospel. I started cryin'.

( 8 ) We left Sid's and started back home with my pop's bleeding forehead and my cryin' self. The white folk back at the diner was sayin' stuff after us, but all I could hear was muffled voices drowned out by my cryin'. I didn't have to hear to know that they wasn't saying nothing nice. My pop just sang the gospel all the way home while I cried. That afternoon walk back home felt like we took days to get there.

( 9 ) When pop opened up the door to the two room shack we called home, my mamma took one look at his forehead and started to scream. She seemed like she was havin' a heart attack or somethin'. Mamma was furious askin' questions, but my pop wouldn't answer her. He just smiled at her and said, "Baby, all I want right now is a little bit o' sugar and everythin' will be all right." She kissed him and he started rantin' about how he felt like a new man after that kiss. I just went to bed. I didn't want to go outside an' play no games with the other kids on the street an' I didn't want no supper. I just whimpered some more and crawled way down deep in my bed so that my blankets could protect me from all that oppression stuff that Martin Luther says we should be fightin'--from all that oppression stuff I witnessed at "Sid's."

( 10 ) Sid caught wind of what went down at his diner so he come by an' apologized to my pop an' gave him two tall glasses of milk. Pop thanked him. He still say that Sid is still one of the good white men, but I don't think he never gone back there for his cup o' coffee on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

( 1 1 ) Today my son and I sat on the same stools in the same diner that my pop and I sat at. The only difference is that we are allowed to sit there. Nobody is trying to kick us out or start a fight. Nobody is calling us niggers or damning us to hell. Sid is still running his diner. It is his life. He offered my son a job when he got older. Imagine, a black boy working in a diner where, when I was a child, he would have never been allowed to set foot through the door. Times have definitely changed. Some people are still living in the past, but when you run across them, start singing "Amazing Grace" and keep on walking.