

My Uncle the Failure

I WISH THE RIDE TO THE PARK TOOK LONGER, but in no time we are in the parking lot of Cedar Creek Park, backed up beside Uncle Ken's old green Ford. He is helping Grandmother Cochran from Martin's car and into her wheelchair.

"I'd think Ken would wash his car before the reunion," Mom says.
"It probably looks better hidden under dirt," Dad tells her.

Mom folds down her visor mirror to smile at herself while Dad pats the dashboard of our new Cutlass Supreme like a pet collie.

I look out the back window to see cousins running all over the place. My stomach feels sick. Last year they ran around me as if I had been a ghost. Maybe today they'll play with me since I'm a year older, but I doubt it.

Amy, Uncle Ken's girl, is as young as I am, but we never see her so she doesn't count. I think Uncle had a bad wife who stole Amy away from him, but Mother says we don't talk about that.

If my mother had told Uncle what to wear, he would not be in faded tan pants and a flowered shirt hanging loose. "Well, here's my little Dancy Nancy," he yells, coming toward us with his green shirt flapping. He lifts me, and we whirl about the parking lot. Around and around we go, my hair flying about my face, my breath coming in gasps and giggles, the park spinning by in a fuzzy green blur.

He dances me up to Grandmother Cochran. Her face looks old, even for a grandmother. Her hair is still pretty, soft and white.

"Momsie," Uncle says, "look who I found riding on a bluebird wing. I picked her off so she could come to this grand reunion."

Grandmother smiles, but since her stroke she can't speak. I hug her, but I'm scared. She used to smell like lilacs and be big and soft,

but now she smells like our medicine cabinet, and I can feel bones. It would be awful to break one.

The hug over, I look up and see Aunt Olive and Mother coming toward us.

Aunt has stiff black hair and sharp eyebrows. Her gold bracelets jangle when she pats my head. "How are you, little Nancy?" she asks.

I stand as tall as I can and start to tell her I am seven, but she turns away before I can speak. Leaning toward Grandmother, she kisses her. Aunt's shiny red lips make a smacking sound, but they don't touch Grandmother's white cheek.

My mother's hand moves softly across Grandmother's head, her rings sparkling, and her fingers tapping as though they say, "I love you, Mother Edith." My mother loves everyone, even me, some of the time. She works hard to see that I don't grow up a failure.

"Be friendlier," she had said as we drove to the reunion. "Don't wander off by yourself."

I want to be friendly, and sometimes I think up good words to say, but before I get them out someone else talks. This year I will not hide in the restroom but will go everywhere the cousins go. My mother will be proud of me.

Uncle Oshel and Dad come poking up to us and hug Grandmother. My father, a tall man with a closed-up face, often looks past me when I talk to him as if he is trying to see all nine of his computer stores. Now, he looks right at Uncle Oshel. Of course, Uncle is a grownup and says important things. During the week Uncle Oshel flies all over the place and bosses people. Then on Sundays he paints in oils. Uncle Ken doesn't have anyone to boss, and the only thing he paints is his beer joint. That beer joint is part of the reason he is our failure.

Now Uncle Oshel starts to speak to me, but Aunt Olive interrupts by talking about their trip to Hawaii. "Gorgeous flowers. Lovely beaches."

"Fine golf courses," Uncle Oshel adds.

"It was Disney for us this year," Dad says.

I look up past Uncle Ken's drooping socks, rumpled slacks, and flowered shirt to his sad face. He probably wanted to go to Disney World, but failures don't travel much.

"Ken," Aunt Olive says, "I was so hoping to see dear little Amy. Doesn't she enjoy our gatherings?"

Uncle doesn't seem to hear her, for he looks at the ground and doesn't answer. Other grownups gather around until Grandmother and I are in a tunnel of legs. Close by, swings creak and cousins yell to each other. When a cousin jumps from a swing, leaving it to sway above worn-off grass, I slip between the circle of legs and run to grab

it. Scooting onto the swing board, I push off, tugging the chains. The swing begins to lift, air cools my face, and with each pull of the chains the words “Dancy Nancy” sing in my head.

Dancy Nancy is not as good as Beet Top, Big Moose, or Stud, names other cousins have, but any nickname helps. None of my cousins play the piano or sew silly flowers on cloth the way I must do. They are into yelling and chasing each other. They also play on the swings, and last year I was the only one who needed a push.

Now, I start the swing by myself and pump until the chains reach out flat as I enjoy the good smell of oil and metal. Cousins swing, laugh, call to each other, and I’m in the middle flying closer and closer to the clouds. As I lean back for a hard pull on the chains, my shiny, black shoes stick out before me.

“I want to wear my Nikes,” I had told Mother when we were dressing for the reunion.

“They are worn out, Nancy,” she said. “All your relatives will be there. Wear your good shoes.”

White canvas shoes sway on each side of me. Only mine shine black in the sunlight for all of the cousins to see. Folding my legs, I hide the shoes under my swing board. The swing begins to slow. I jump while the ground moves beneath me and hope the cousins notice I did not fall.

Men are moving tables into a row so we can eat together—us Martins, the Sweeneys, the Cochrans, the Thurmans, and the Hunts.

Women spread out bright cloths, making the tables look like quilts. I had been too worried about the reunion to eat breakfast and now the smells of fried chicken and baked beans cause my stomach to rumble. Here is a cake, round as the moon with swirls of chocolate icing, but I am not allowed to have any yet.

Uncle Ken puts three cartons of Foodland potato salad on the table. Aunt Olive scoots them out of the way to make room for her bowl of potato salad with its green ruffle of lettuce. When everything is ready, we line up and move around the table to fill plates and then find a place to sit

My mother watches me. “Nancy, don’t you want to eat with the other children?”

My cousins sit on the ground in small groups, talking and laughing. A Sweeny cousin throws a grape at a Martin cousin, who catches it in his mouth. If I joined them, someone would say, “Yuck. Here’s baby Nancy.” I drag my fork through potato salad. “I want to eat at the table,” I mumble.

My mother’s eyes scrunch up and her mouth looks stiff the way it does when Dad drives too fast. I’m worrying her, so I carry my plate to a patch of shade where Uncle Ken has parked Grandmother’s

wheelchair. He had asked to be the one to feed her because he doesn't have money to visit often. Now, his flowered shirt floats forward as he leans with a bite of applesauce.

I sit on the grass beside Grandmother's chair, her thin legs—tan sticks. I know she can't stand or talk, but can she still think? Can she still love me? If only my grandmother could talk. "Grandmother," I would ask, "How do you feel when everyone talks around you as if you aren't even here?"

"Nancy, child," she might answer, "I feel like a stick."

"That's how I feel when the cousins don't talk to me," I would tell her. Grandmother might pull me onto her lap and hug me. That's what she used to do.

A row of black ants crawls through the grass at my feet. No one wants ants at a picnic. I know how they feel and lean over to crumble bread in their path.

I'm more comfortable with Grandmother and Uncle Ken than at the table with my mother, who would want me to be someplace else. I take a bite of beans. They are sweet with brown sugar. Aunt's potato salad with boiled eggs and orange stuff on top is good. No one has opened Uncle Ken's Foodland cartons.

On my way to get dessert, I notice the empty swings. If I take time to eat chocolate cake the cousins might grab them all, and I want to swing higher than anybody. A cousin might look right at me and say, "Way to go, Nancy."

I pour iced tea on my shoes, pat on dust to hide the shine, and then walk carefully to a swing. Some dust falls off, so I spit on my shoes and sprinkle more. I start to swing, but the cousins aren't watching. They are holding hands in a circle on a wide space of grass.

Uncle Ken parks Grandmother beside my mother, grabs a piece of cake and while eating it, comes huffing toward me. "Come on, Nancy," he says, swishing crumbs from his shirt. "Let's play dodgeball with the others."

"No." I push hard with my feet to start the swing. More dust falls from my shoes, but I don't care. "I hate dodgeball."

If I played, no one would throw the ball at me. No one would see me standing there like a stick. If they did bother to look at me, they would only see my dumb playsuit with a strip of lace across the pocket.

Uncle's big freckled hands stop the swing. "Come on, Nancy," he insists.

I follow him across the grass. The kids will not want either of us. My uncle, the failure, will play dodgeball while other grownups talk of important things.

We join the circle and right away Uncle grabs the ball and then throws it at me. "Catch it, Amy," he yells. Why did he call me Amy? There is no time to ask, for I'm in the middle of cousins as we yell, run, throw, slide in the dirt. The lace on my pocket tears. I taste dust, and my sweaty playsuit sticks to me.

"What can we play next?" I ask Uncle when the game is over.

He wipes his damp forehead with the tail of his shirt. His chest goes up and down with fast breaths. "Next, I head for home, Dancy Nancy," he finally says.

A cousin throws the ball toward us. He is almost as tall as Uncle but not as big around. His arm is big, though, and the ball hits the ground hard, sending up puffs of dust. "Hey, Ken Man, don't leave," he yells.

Another cousin, his red hair bouncing, grabs the ball, whirls around, tosses it into the air, and then catches it when it falls. "Yeah, Ken Man," he says. "Play volleyball with us."

Several others circle us, joking, talking, as if they like Uncle Ken. My Uncle Ken. He explains it's two hundred miles down I-79 to the Sand Valley exit and another fifty to his home. Saturday is an important night for the beer joint.

We leave the group, and Uncle Ken shakes hands with Uncle Oshel and Dad, and then hugs Mom. He hugs Grandmother for a long time and then turns to me. Kneeling, he looks into my eyes. That look means something, but I don't know what. His big hands hold my arms tight, and I don't want him to let go, but he does.

His car is the only one dusty enough to write on, and cousins have covered it with names. If only I had written "Dancy Nancy" in big letters so he would not forget me. I swallow, but I don't cry. I'm not a baby. At the car door, Uncle turns to look at Grandmother again. His face is still red from the game; his thin hair almost a Halloween wig. Dirt and sweat streak his shirt. He climbs into the car, and the door clicks shut. The motor chugs, then dies, chugs again, and then dies.

Aunt Olive rolls her eyes. "Leave it to Ken," she says.

"Do you have a set of jumper cables?" Dad asks Uncle Oshel.

Aunt Olive butts in. "Why on earth would Oshel need jumper cables? Our Cadillac came with roadside assistance."

My father sighs. "Well, maybe someone will have a set." He and Uncle Oshel wander off to find cables.

Uncle Ken sits behind his steering wheel trying, again and again, to start the car. My face feels hot, and I begin to cry. I don't want Dad or Uncle Oshel to give my Uncle Ken a start from their cars. I remember how it felt last year to be the only one who needed a push on the swing. It will be one more way for my uncle to be a failure.

I run down the grassy bank, across the sidewalk, and throw myself against the trunk of Uncle's car. I push until my arms shake. I shove with my body. The car will not move.

Push! Push! Push! The words are inside me, for I'm crying too hard to speak. *Push! Push!* I am a mouse pushing a mountain. Furious to be so small, I beat on the trunk until my fists hurt, then close my eyes and try again. "*Push! Push!*" I yell, as if being loud will make me more powerful.

"Way to go, Nance."

I open my eyes to see a Martin cousin pushing beside me. A Thurman cousin appears on the other side. "*Push. Push. Push,*" we call, and now other cousins come running—the rest of the Martins and Thurmans, joined by the Hunts and the Sweeneys. Shoving, chanting cousins cover the back and both sides of Uncle's Ford.

"*Push. Push. Push.*" Our voices are together, like a choir, and on each word we give our best shove. Finally, the car begins to creep forward, slowly rolling, rolling. Encouraged, we yell louder, *push harder*. Fast and yet faster we run, our feet pounding cement, the road a gray blur skimming beneath us. My breath is loud. My heart is loud.

Continuing to run, we finally hear the engine chug. Exhaust fumes sting my nose, and my legs hurt, but I run with the others until the car's speed forces us to stop. Standing in the middle of the road we cheer, clap our hands, and jump up and down. As Uncle disappears around a bend, he blows his car horn again and again. It reminds me of horns blown at a ball game after our high school team makes a touchdown. I rub an arm across my wet face. My legs shake, and I look for a place to sit.

"Come on, Nancy," a Sweeney cousin calls. The others had started back to the reunion, but they turn and wait for me. *Me! Dancy Nancy!* I take a big breath and run toward them.

Because of years as a parent, foster parent, elementary school teacher, principal of a primary center, Girl Scouts and 4-H leader, D. JEANNE WILSON often hears the voices of children when she writes. Her work has appeared in religious and literary publications such as *Seeking the Swan*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. Both her fiction and poetry have won prizes in the West Virginia Annual Competition, Scribendi Fiction International, Alabama Writer's Conference, and other competitions.