

Pepsi-Cola-Coke

By Katie Vosgien

“Would you like a Coke or something?” Aunt Lyda called from the kitchen. All Marie could see from her vantage point were sizable hips and thick, muscular legs sticking out from behind the fridge door. The ruddied flesh of her blistered and calloused feet spilled over the edges of her bright yellow pumps – an interesting choice for a day as hot and humid as this one. Perspiration pooled over the sides of the glossy shoes, slipping from the soles and puddling onto the floor. Marie wondered if Aunt Lyda might soon slip on the glistening sweat and slide across the tan kitchen linoleum. Or would she surrender to the heat and pick, in Marie’s pointed but suppressed opinion, something more sensible? She didn’t yet know her well enough to guess.

“Oh, no, but thank you,” Marie replied, quiet and a little distant. Aunt Lyda, using the fridge door to prop herself up, raised her head over it while pushing up her gold horn-rimmed glasses, a holdover from the 80s. To Marie, that decade was ancient history. A time she’d never lived in and would only experience through TV and movies. From the faded pictures hung and crammed together on wood-panelled walls, to the floral duct-taped settee and frayed burgundy carpeting, here the past lingered heavily into the present.

Aunt Lyda’s bright orange perm had both deflated and frizzed in incremental measures as the day wore on. Still, it reached the tippy top of the fridge, where six or seven or maybe eight cereal boxes were lined in uneven rows. Most were pushed back too far to reach for all but the towering Aunt Lyda, while others stood at the precipice

of the appliance, threatening to leap to their demise if the door were to be opened too quickly. Only two boxes, furthest to the right, stood resolutely together, each corner meeting the other. While the rest were half-empty and sporting colorful cartoon characters offering sugared glutenous delights, these two—whole grain, whole wheat, no sugar added—hadn't been opened for who knows how long.

Aunt Lyda continued to squint at her, considering whether or not to offer her milk, juice, tea, or plain old water. What did teenagers drink these days anyway? **Goodness!** *Not adult beverages, surely?* Reflexively, her hand – dotted with sun spots and wrapped in an imposingly large bronze watch and bracelets encumbered with charms – flew up to her chest. The charms clinked together in a cacophony of sterling silver and swarovski crystal. The thought of such blatant debauchery took her breath away, and stole with it the memories of her own teenage years of wild abandon. Those booze-filled-bonfire, Make-Out-Point nights. *No, of course not. Marie is a good girl, even if she's from Oregon...of all the places for her mother to have taken her...*

"I'll have a glass of water, Lyda....but I – " Marie hesitated, drawing her lips together and fiddling with a stray creased napkin, forgotten after dishes had been collected and left to soak in the sink.

"That's *Aunt* Lyda, Marie," she said kindly, and with authority. She rose to her full nearly six feet as she shut the fridge door. If Marie had been the one to hold the door open for so darn long, she'd have been grounded for the few but precious cents added to the energy bill that month. Cool, not quite frigid air had seeped into the kitchen, mingling with intermittent gasps from an ancient swamp cooler. It uttered throaty

grievances by the breakfast nook table. Marie sat as close as she could to it, silently encouraging its thwarted attempts to suppress the heat, if only a little. Aunt Lyda's booming voice, consistent in its overwhelming decibel, carried over the swamp cooler's racket and then some.

"Right. Sorry." Marie sighed. "I just...I don't..."

"What is it girl? Out with it! I won't bite..." Aunt Lyda paused, having convinced herself that it was to great dramatic effect. "*Much!*"

"Actually...I would prefer a Pepsi, if you've got one," Marie said. She didn't want to seem rude or ungrateful to the only one willing to help. She'd been spoiled up until now, that was true, but not rotten enough not to know any better. She preferred Pepsi, while her mother would have picked a Cherry Coke, or Diet Dr. Pepper. Not Diet Coke, though. The only *diet* pop that tasted right was Diet Dr. Pepper. Straight from the can, and not plastic bottles. Or even a soda fountain. Her mother had instructed her tastes in life in every capacity, and she didn't have an option to choose otherwise. Marie paused again, considering; working up the nerve to voice an opinion to one of the only adults in her life who had ever asked for it. "Or...uh, a Sierra Mist-type pop? Those are my favorite."

"*Pop...?*" Aunt Lyda wondered aloud. "Oh. Of course. Soda *pop!*" She laughed, deep and lovely. She lurched about the kitchen in a half-saunter, part dance, inexplicably giddy over the way the word *POP* bubbles up and dissipates on the tongue like foam, lips closing around it.

Taken up in the sudden and inexplicable excitement, her brain a mush from lack of sleep and the kind of thick Southern air she hadn't yet figured out how to breathe in and out of, Marie exclaimed, "Pop *Cola!*" and burst into laughter along with Aunt Lyda. Hers was lighter, and airier, rising above the muggy thickness instead of lingering clamourously in it. Like her mother and her mother's mother and all the sisters in between. All but Aunt Lyda.

"A *Coke Pepsi!*" Aunt Lyda reached into the fridge and pulled out a Pepsi cola.