

Killer Cukes

by Michael Ball

Benign and algae-colored pickles would have gathered dust on hand-made wooden shelves in my grandparents' basement, except Grandmother Mable regularly dusted the jars in the basement.

She would can many dozens of quart jars of green beans and other sturdy veggies. The corn, lima beans and peas that we could discolor and even blister our thumbs and fingertips hulling or shucking went in bags into one of two freezers.

But those damned pickle were her husband's. The man liked serious and almost toxic cukes. One would think that cucumbers, dill, garlic, salt, vinegar and peppers would be gentle enough. But with nasty enough peppers, straight vinegar and two years of aging made a gray-green jug of eye attacking, nose burning vegetable monsters.

Surely all children have wondered after a single taste how adults could tolerate coffee, beer or God forbid, a martini. Granddad Bill's ferocious pickles were a legend on Marsham Street and larger Romney, West Virginia.

It with the fascination of watching hunters at their deer gutting that I would peep at three adults hurting themselves at the dining room table. Granddad, his son and daughter (my mother) would eat these things even after smelling them.

I could be upstairs in a bedroom and knew when he opened a jar of them. Tears would come to my eyes and mucus would run from each nostril.

Bill the younger would visit, bringing five pounds of boiled shrimp. Wanda would produce the real beer – West Virginia only sold 3.2% kinda beer. Their father had those pickles, those unforgettable pickles.

They would sit, dropping locust-like shrimp casings on newspapers, tossing back Miller, the champagne of bottled beer, and biting pickles. With each snap of a pickle, they too would cry. They never stopped joking, takings turns with family stories and even new confessions of country youth. The pickles united them. The oral, nasal passion of intense tastes and smells was a ritual sharing.

They were never more a family.

I regret that I was eight and vaguely terrified by the self-hazing. I would join them now.

