

TUG

Hk Hite

All my life,

I have followed the tug, the pull of an unseen thing controlling my every whim, what I like, what I don't like. I've never understood polite choices.

Why do I get in trouble because I don't like something?

Why do people pretend to like things to be polite?

Why am I so different from my family?

What makes me different?

I have the same genes. I have the same predispositions. I was set up to have the same plot line, yet somehow I shifted. I became a stranger in my own home.

Ostracized.

Alone.

Growing up was always an argument. I didn't like a lot of things. I wanted to eat the same thing every day. I liked the comfort in tastes and textures remaining unchanged. Somehow, this was always



a capital offense to my father. Which is funny, because I don’t think he realized he did the same. He ate the same few things every day, the same five meals rotated throughout the week. So I never understood the argument. My five things were just different from his. I didn’t get upset and scream at him because he loved weird things like livers and tongues, so why punish me for wanting only pepperoni every single time we ordered pizza?

One big example of this I can think of is a trip to my Aunt Geneva’s house in Jackson, Mississippi, when I was around ten. I never rode with my parents. My father was someone you’d call a hot head. He would 100%, without a doubt, get upset about something any time we were in the car for over an hour. Sometimes he didn’t even make it 30 minutes. He’d clench his fists, fidget in his seat, huff and puff and scream obscenities that could make an entire cell block blush, all while being the same color as a perfectly ripe cherry tomato. This was always a wild sight for me because, well, my father was a ginger. A true stereotype of a ginger: freckles merged into a splotchy tan, hair stained a deep rust, eyes glinted icy blue, and a temper with a fuse shorter than a fleeting thought. People outside our family would probably describe him as jolly, but growing up around him, I never trusted his cheer. Once his skin matched his hair, it was time to make yourself as small as possible and play dead.

Go unnoticed.

Grizzly tactics.

For this reason, I always rode with my Aunt Lynn and grandmother.

My paternal grandmother was the complete opposite of her son. She was cheery to a fault, wouldn’t even curse. Her cuss word was fiddlesticks, and even that made her feel rude. She was a nurse, compassionate to everyone but herself, one of those women whose husbands died young, and she never remarried. Her time was devoted to church and taking care of what was left of her family. She would always stop at a specific bakery on the way to Aunt Geneva’s and get me a bag of their freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. A whole bag just for me! It was about the only sweet I liked that wasn’t candy, and she knew it. I loved this bakery in particular because they had huge cookies that were thin yet perfectly baked. The crisp edges were slightly burnt, giving it an almost toffee flavor. The warm, chewy centers filled with melty chocolate chips...and paired with the best Dutch chocolate milk. The texture

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was so heavenly that I always had to have a couple in the car before we even left the parking lot. By the time we pulled up to Aunt Geneva’s home, I was stuffed with cookies, crumbs pasted cheek to cheek. My grandmother helped me out of the car and saved my bag of cookies from tumbling onto the ground.

Children are so oblivious to gravity.

As we stumbled into the house, my aunt squealed with glee and clutched me and my little brother close to her. This happens a lot in my family, as we’re all spread out, and they feel the need to squish how much they miss us into our tiny bodies every time they see us. They super love hugs—I super do not. I found a way to make my escape and began to explore the house until dinner.

Aunt Geneva had an extravagant house compared to my family. It was a 4-bedroom. 4-bath house with vaulted ceilings and a huge deck, which had a giant pecan tree coming through the center. Deep below the deck was a forest of berries, all different kinds that my aunt used for jams, jellies, and preserves. I used to pretend her home was my secret garden, a magical place full of greenery to escape to. My family would always be busy visiting, and I could be forgotten, able to explore. I always loved her house. Back then, it felt like a secret world. I often wished someday I’d somehow inherit it and the mystical whimsy it provided.

A tug that would never be fulfilled.

Dinner at Geneva’s was always a big event. She would cook for days to prepare for the whole family to come. Dumplings, catfish, cornbread, pecan pie, fried chicken, crawfish, gumbo—the works!

Her most famous dish in the family was lasagna, a homemade one with noodles sitting all over the place, cheeses galore, and pots upon pots of piping hot tomato sauce on the stove. The lasagna was always made last, always enough to feed an army, and always the day we arrived, so it would be the freshest thing on the table.

I’m not sure if it’s a black sheep thing, but at every family event, I took my chance to snoop. Nothing evil or vindictive, I was just a super nosey child who didn’t particularly like small talk and hated being the center of attention, so snooping was my way of learning fun things without the hassle of conversation. During this particular snoop session, I remember finding my aunt’s music room. She was a retired opera singer and choir teacher, her husband a retired piano and

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Photo by Kiran CK on Unsplash

music instructor. The room was covered from floor to ceiling in pictures, awards, degrees, and memories from their lives and careers. All I really knew about my aunt up to this point was that she was my grandmother’s sister and lived in Mississippi. As the accolades towered around me, I found myself sitting at a piano, just staring at everything and taking it all in. I didn’t fully understand then, but it felt like my aunt was almost like a stranger living a life I’d never known.

Child or not, it’s wild how much you don’t know about your own family.

I left the music room and tiptoed around the rest of the house. Smells of the savory meats and sauces were beginning to fill the air, and my belly was grumbling again, aching for something to fill its tug for sustenance. I skipped towards the kitchen, stopping at the dining room table to gaze at the spread they were building for dinner. I grabbed a couple of grapes and popped them into my mouth. The crisp skins burst and filled my mouth with juice. I loved appetizers. Grab-and-go was definitely my forte, and I loved having options. I grabbed a couple of cubes of cheddar next. A sharp twinge erupted in my jaw as my mouth tried to recombobulate after the dramatic contrast of sweet to savory.

Why do I like this?

I wondered to myself as I kept recreating the experience. I didn’t understand why it made me giggle every time my jaw lit up.

Grape.

Cheddar.

twinge

Grape.

Cheddar.

twinge

My father walked up behind me and grunted out a question like a loud burp, “Are you going to save *any* room for dinner?” He was already annoyed by my habits before dinner even began. He bumped the back of my head with his round, firm belly. I silently looked up at him, grimaced, and walked to the kitchen. I wanted to see if the lasagna was done, and I wanted to leave this room as soon as possible.

In the kitchen, Geneva squealed with glee that I wanted to help her cook. I never offered, but she was so happy I agreed to avoid conversation. I walked over to her and took her place in stirring the pots, so she could begin assembling the noodles, meat, and cheese. I could handle the sauce. I listened as she chirped on about her day with my grandmother and mom, suddenly very aware of why they call a gaggle of women talking a hen party. I’d never understood why adults liked talking so much. I guess I’d never understood why anyone liked talking so much, especially adults because it always seemed they could get riled up faster than any child. Maybe this was just my experience. I kept switching between stirring and pouring ladles of sauce into the casserole dishes as they talked, enjoying the dull buzz of their conversation while I slowly started to daydream.

By the time I came back to reality, we were done. The four lasagnas were placed evenly in the oven to cook with two on each shelf. I washed my hands and went to explore some more, taking a handful of grapes and cheese cubes with me. I walked outside onto the sprawling deck and looked up. The pecan tree’s canopy swayed in the summery breeze. It was balmy out, but the breeze was cool.



I closed my eyes and let the sun warm my face, trying to melt away the tension that ached inside of me. I listened as the breeze swirled through the trees, rustling the leaves into a soft whisper. A light crackle of twigs fell as squirrels danced above me. I took a deep breath as I listened to the forest sing its melody. It always smelled so nice here: earthy, floral, and sweet, like I could smell the garden just below on the breeze.

I spent the next hour waiting outside, watching the nature swell. I picked up old pecan shells and tossed them over the railing, watching them plummet to the earth below. I listened to the satisfying rustle of leaves followed by a sharp, defined plop every time one thwacked the ground. The deck was tall, and the ground below it sprawled with ivy that trailed a light pebbled path, the only sign that a garden was nearby. I got bored waiting and decided I was going to find my secret garden and see where my aunt’s ingredients came from. I always loved a good mystery.

Yet another good, simple tug in life.

Once down the stairs, I started following the pebbles. I remembered my Aunt Geneva told me that the pebbles ended at the garden gate and was determined to find it. I was going to follow this tug to the end no matter what. It was just a humble garden for everyone else, but to me it was a grand adventure waiting to unfold. Now, I see it wasn’t mere curiosity that led me there, but a yearning for escape.

A desire to find a place that was mine and mine alone.

A sanctuary away from the world I never quite fit into.

I kept walking along the trail looking at the lush woods around me. It was so pretty but also so mysterious. It was too thick to see through, so it felt like walking into an unknown forest somewhere

remote, far away from everyone, from everything. The garden called to me, a tug I couldn’t ignore. Just like the tug that made me ask too many questions at the wrong time or like the wrong things.

A pull towards something just out of reach.

Forbidden.

Forgotten besides this tiny pebble walkway.

I approached a small rickety gate after five minutes of walking. Vines curled around the wood like fingers guarding a well-kept secret. As I reached out, the sun caught something on the latch. I squinted. I noticed something newer on the gate, shiny and metallic as it glinted in the sunlight.

My heart dropped. A chain and lock were fastened to the gate; it glowed mockingly in the sunshine back at me. I walked up to it and jostled the lock around, desperate for release, but sadly, it was sealed tight. I peered over the top to look at the garden I was missing out on.

Inside, ivy wove like whispers from the gate to the outer trees that were bursting with jewel-toned fruits. They seemed to bend and bow as they towered like silent guardians over rows and rows of lush greenery. Branches heavy with fruits and veggies shimmered in the dappled sunlight. Shrubs, bushes, trees, flowers—all kinds of plants everywhere. She really *did* have a secret garden. It felt like a place suspended between worlds, untouched by time. It was way more than berries! Upon this new development, I was eager to beg Aunt Geneva to show me her garden up close. I wanted to know all the names and needed to know if any of them were magical.

I skipped back to the house, thrilled with my new discovery, completely lost in the magic of the moment. It’s funny looking back now. It was just a garden with a locked gate to anyone else, but to me, it was a hidden world waiting to be explored. It’s strange how a child’s mind works, how the simplest



things in life can feel like life’s greatest adventures.

I often wonder if that garden became so important to me because it was a place where no one told me how to think, feel, or be. It was one of the first few places in my life that let me exist exactly as I was. Now I realize how free the garden let me be. I truly became myself when I was alone in the wild.

After that, I begged for the keys to the garden gate every time I visited my aunt. It might have been her garden in reality, but whenever I was there, it was mine. Before heading up the stairs and into the house, I stood there for a moment, reluctant to leave my new secret world behind. The magic still fluttered in my chest, the peace of finding a place that feels like home—somewhere I could belong.

A tug for adventure fulfilled.

Reality pulled me back as I rushed up the stairs and opened the glass door to a barrage of smells. The lasagna was done! It smelled like it wasn’t the only thing either.

Finally, dinner was ready. After we sat down at the long table, we all bowed our heads. I never really understood prayer at that age; I don’t think I understand it any better now. I always thought it was like playing pretend or something that made grownups feel better—something to help ease the bad, a way to wish good for people. I could never silence my mind during those times, which always made me feel guilty.

Why do I always ask so many questions?

I couldn’t understand why adults got so mad at my questions. It made me feel like I was doing something wrong.

Like being curious was wrong.

It made me sad as a child, and when I got older, it made me mad. This was something that plagued my childhood: me, always in trouble for asking too many questions.

It was “impolite.”

It was “unkind.”

I wrinkled my nose and tried to wipe away the questions. It was always so difficult to clear my mind and allow my family to pray.

**his needs
weren’t met,
but mine
were**

“Amen.”

I raised my head and opened my eyes to a gargantuan feast. There were a million choices on the table, but my pickiness allotted for maybe six. I piled my plate with sides and one big piece of lasagna. I began to eat, not paying attention to anyone or anything going on around me. As I cut the first piece, mozzarella and ricotta oozed and stringed out of the tower of noodles. I put the bite in my mouth. The noodles were perfectly chewy. The sauce was so perfectly seasoned it made my jaw tingle with flavor.

I loved my aunt’s lasagna. It’s probably the only one I’ve ever liked because she always made one just for me without meat in it. The texture of ground meat was (and still is) only tolerable in certain very specific circumstances. I loved that she thought of me enough to make an entire separate lasagna.

Only for me.

The same couldn’t be said for my father. I watched him take his first bite, the fork pausing mid-air as his jaw clenched around it. His eyes narrowed as he chewed, slowly, deliberately. My heart thudded in my chest, a hollow echo that seemed to drown out all the noise around me. He grumbled and grunted as he forced out a demand:

“What the hell is this? There’s no meat in this.”

My heart dropped deep into my stomach as soon as I realized what had happened. He was accidentally served a piece of my lasagna and not the others’. He was a big meat-eater, refusing to eat any meal without meat attached to it in some way, shape, or fashion. He was instantly infuriated. He started questioning why there’s even a lasagna without meat, and once they explained the reasoning, it didn’t lessen the blow. He was beyond help now, huffing and puffing because his needs weren’t met, but mine were.

Me.

The problem.

The one always in trouble.

The issue.

Despite having a new piece, the rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Every scrape of a fork was a new scrape on my dignity. I stared at my plate, picking at it as my chest tightened with every



moment that passed, every anxious breath. I couldn't feel smaller. I wondered if my family could see the despair pasted across my face or if I was already invisible, like an empty chair witnessing my father's latest tantrum.

Just another piece of furniture sat at the table.

I wished I could escape and run to the secret garden.

To the place where no one's expectations could reach me.

Where I could breathe without feeling judged.

Where the only rules made were by the wind in the trees and the whisper of leaves.

Forever.

Away from the rules, the questions I couldn't ask, the people I kept disappointing; away from everything that made me different. At the time, all I knew was that I felt tiny, like I didn't matter. Like if I disappeared, it would do everyone a favor. It wasn't until many years later that I realized something.

Why do we cater to the ones who throw the biggest tantrums?

The ones who make us feel inferior.

The ones who make us ashamed of our joys.

I guess that is my culture. A generational tradition (curse) where we appease the tyrants of our family tree.

The biggest and loudest win the argument.

Fear reigns all.

I attempted to finish my plate in silence until I couldn't stand it anymore and took my plate from the table. I went to the sink and washed my plate, shame pasted clearly across my face. My aunt walked up and hugged me from the side, trying to squeeze out the shame like yesterday's sponge.

"It's okay. You're different, honey. Not everyone likes the same things. It's not bad that there was a lasagna without meat. Hell, it might even be healthier!" she laughed. It was sweet that she was trying so hard to make me feel better. I cracked a small smile and placed my dish on the rack.

"Thanks, Aunt Geneva. I love you." I hugged her and went to the bathroom. I had to have time alone to shake off the tension. Once I was done, I felt better. What my aunt said resonated with me. I was fine. So what if I'm different? It's okay to be different.

The world won't burn down, the sun will still rise. It didn't matter what the tyrants thought; I refused to be one. I walked into the kitchen and looked for my cookies. I wanted something sweet to finish off the night. I picked up the crinkly, plastic deli bag and opened my treasure. I bit into the crispy shell and relished in the chewy center as I gazed out the kitchen window and into the night. Fireflies floated all around, a dazzling show as I enjoyed my treat and watched the night come alive.

Sometimes the simplest things in life are the world's greatest tugs.



Hk Hite is a writer and artist based in Pearcy, Arkansas. Their work sits at the intersection of horror and nonfiction. They draw from their personal histories of familial violence, survival, and neurodivergence to create atmospheric narratives that refuse to look away. Most of their writing is memoir driven, rooted in lived experience, and refined through obsessive revision. Hk will graduate in May 2026 with a BA in Professional & Technical Writing, a BA in Studio Art, and a certification in Graphic Design. They are currently developing *What Lurks in the Dark*, a memoir-horror graphic novel about their nightmares of childhood and the long work of understanding what happened. after everyone insists nothing did.

