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Aunt Eulahline and the Wal-Mart Curse

Meredith Walsh-Beteta

Every time my Aunt Eulahline goes down to the Wal-Mart, something happens. Not that things don't happen to her wherever she goes, but there's something about that place. Aunt Eulahline says the Wal-Mart was built on top of an ancient Indian burial ground and, on account her momma's daddy's line has Indian, the spirits of the dead use her to stir up trouble. I can't say whether our family has Indian blood or not or if the Wal-Mart was built on top of an Indian cemetery, but I do know that trouble does seem to follow Aunt Eulahline wherever she goes—especially at Wal-Mart. Sometimes I think she uses that Indian story as an excuse to cover up for her misbehaving, but she insists they're the ones doing it, and always asks me if I can't hear the drums beating too.

It was last summer when the first strange thing happened. Our town was getting a Wal-Mart, but that's not the strange thing, it was good and everyone was excited about it. Me and my Momma, my Grand-Momma, and Aunt Eulahline had been counting down the days to the Grand Opening. When it finally arrived we put on our next Sunday best to go see it. As we came through the door, along with everyone else who had been waiting since seven-thirty that morning, a wind stirred up from out of nowhere and made my aunt’s dress fly up. I guess I am forgetting to mention that my Aunt Eulahline is pretty, and consequently, Vern, the door-greeter, fainted dead away at the sight of her trying to hold her hem in its proper place and he hit his head. They had to take him off to County General in the ambulance, no less. Aunt Eulahline felt real sorry about it. She said a man Vern’s age had probably never seen a pink thong before, and was flattered by his reaction. She said she felt like Marilyn Monroe, and Grandma said only hussies show their under things in public and Aunt Eulahline should be ashamed.

Besides her racy underwear, Aunt Eulahline's a normal enough aunt as far as aunts are concerned. That is, if your aunt's thirty-something but insists she's twenty-nine, loves high heels, red nail polish, and fake fur, and makes you call her your "big sister" whenever you're out, even though the whole town knows who she is and how you're related to each other. But Aunt Eulahline pays it a
"never you mind" and that's all she'll say about it. She puts up with me because it's her job to keep me out of trouble while my Momma's at work. She puts on airs like the best Hollywood movie star, and I can't tell you how many dates Aunt Eulahline has gotten at the Sunoco station by pure chance. But I'm jumping ahead of myself. I'll get back to the real reason why she had to switch full-time to the Sunoco station to help out her love life in the first place.

It all had to do with the Wal-Mart.

My Grandma says the best place to find a good husband is in church but Aunt Eulahline didn't agree. In church she would fan herself and look around while the preacher droned on and on. She never paid no attention to the sermon, and my Momma would get mad. She pinched my aunt on the arm once when she started to fall asleep. While my Grandma and my Momma insisted that church was the way to salvation and a good marriage, Aunt Eulahline complained that all the men in church were too young, too married, or just plain too old. And I suppose she was right. There's not many men my aunt's age around town who would be suitable marriage material, at least by my Grandma's standards, well none except for Earl Rickerts.

He and my Aunt Eulahline had grown up together, and he'd had a crush on her since those days. The whole town knew about it, and so did Aunt Eulahline, although she'd die rather than admit it. Earl was an auto mechanic and worked at the garage at the Sunoco station. He drove a red Camaro. It was old and had a few dents in it that he hadn't been able to pull out, but it ran like a top. Earl had dated a few girls here and there, but it was Eulahline he cared for, and my Grandma and my Momma told her she was a fool for not paying attention to him. Every Sunday they pointed out how handsome Earl was when he cleaned himself up and every Sunday my aunt ignored them, but I could tell she was sneaking a glance in Earl's direction to see if they were right. After all, they were the ones who were sure he'd make an excellent husband, but Aunt Eulahline wasn't so sure. She insisted on holding out because something better was sure to come along, and some day, when they had seen how good she'd made out, they'd all be sorry they'd ever tried to push old Earl Rickerts off on her.

One day, while we were driving around town in her old butter colored Cadillac convertible, she said, "I have had an epiphany!"

"What's an epiphany?" I asked.

"I've had enough of that church and its defunct offerings to the Altar of my Womanhood." I was confused until Aunt Eulahline laughed and said, "I'm going to start shopping someplace else for a man, sugar, that's all."

We pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot.
I still didn't understand.
"Come on," she urged, "I'm going man-shopping!"

And then I understood.

From then on, we started going to Wal-Mart every day to test out the waters
and see if the fish were biting. We'd buy a pack of bubble gum or a bottle of sparkly nail polish and walk around looking at everything, pretending to shop. Aunt Eulahline said you could tell heaps about a man if you studied what he had in his shopping cart. She might see a good-looking fellah, but wouldn't make her move until she saw what he was fixing to buy, and if it agreed with her, she'd walk up and accidentally crash into his cart. She swore if conditions were right, chemistry would do the rest. But for some reason—whether it was the way she crashed carts or the perfume she had sprayed on that day in the cosmetics department—she couldn't figure out why it wasn't working.

There was something else at work at the Wal-Mart.

Ever since the day when the unseen wind had lifted my aunt's skirt, which came to be known as the Vern Incident, little accidents and coincidences happened each time we visited the store. We really didn't pay it no mind. Then Aunt Eulahline said she could hear what sounded like drums beating. She insisted I had to be hearing it too, but I insisted I couldn't hear a thing and it bothered her to no end. I think that's when she got scared and it didn't take her long to put it all together and tell me. I'd have rather she'd kept it to herself, especially since she chose to clue me in before we went to sleep one night.

She said the Wal-Mart was built on the site of the old McMaster's Farm. All's I could remember was the abandoned barn but all the old timers knew the McMaster family went back to the pioneer days. It was said the first McMaster had cheated the Indians out of their land and then plowed up their ancient burial ground. Aunt Eulahline figured the things happening to her must have been the Indians' way of sending out a message.

I believed her.

Display items fell to the floor when we walked by. Things mysteriously appeared in the bottom of our shopping cart after we had gone through the check out and were certain the cart had been empty. After a while Aunt Eulahline would stop what she was doing and cock her head to the side. It scared me to no end. I knew they were at it again. Sometimes the store lights would flicker when we walked under them. Static would come out of the intercom system speakers above our heads. The final straw was when we were walking out of the store one day and the security alarm sounded. John Bose, the daytime security guard, who, when he kindly asked Aunt Eulahline if she had anything in her pocket which might have triggered the alarm, found a man's watch. Well, Mr. John is a good acquaintance of Grandma, and he didn't think Aunt Eulahline was a thief anyhow, so he believed her when she reminded him of the county lore and how her deceased ancestors were out to get her with their cruel tricks. I thought for sure Aunt Eulahline was headed for the county jail, but Mr. John let us go. Aunt Eulahline was so grateful to Mr. John for not causing a scene she promised nothing like that would happen again. I could tell Aunt Eulahline had had it with the whole situation because she muttered about the Indian Curse all the way to the car.
Aunt Eulahline's luck may have gone south, but she wasn't one to let the spirits of the dead get the best of her. She insisted she was going to find her a husband at Wal-Mart if it was the last thing she did because if she didn't get married before she turned thirty no one would ever want her. It was a Friday night when she decided it was time to take drastic measures and pay a visit to the psychic lady but she told her momma and my Momma that she had a date. I couldn't believe they didn't suspect anything. Of course I knew better, but didn't let on as I had been sworn to secrecy. It made me feel important to know that I was privy to something that would have uncurled Grandma's hair if she found out that her youngest daughter was paying a visit to a psychic lady, even if it was just Mrs. Thibodaux.

Aunt Eulahline poured out her troubles to Mrs. Thibodaux over a cup of tea that night and after the leaves were read, she told my aunt to conduct a séance and chant a special prayer begging for the spirits' forgiveness. This would lift the curse.

Aunt Eulahline prepared herself for a showdown. Everything went as planned. She went to the Wal-Mart and pretended to shop, and then she hid out in a tent display in the sporting goods department until closing time. When the night security guard, Mr. John's son John Jr., found her she was seated inside a circle of candles, chanting away. She would have run off, but being in the Lotus position, was unable to jump to her feet. Although John Jr. didn't want to, he had to follow store policy and call in the law. The next morning, there it was, a picture of Aunt Eulahline wearing a feather headdress and her face all painted up. It was front-page news. The caption read, “Local Woman Banned-for-Life from Wal-Mart,” because she was, according to the paper, conducting a “Voodoo ritual.”

That's how Aunt Eulahline's life changed on account of the advice from the psychic lady, but it still didn't solve her man troubles. Once the embarrassment wore away from the Banned-For-Life Incident, Aunt Eulahline didn't seem too upset anymore. She seemed optimistic.

“At least those ole Indians can't bother me now,” she said. “And who knows, maybe what my love life needed was to get out of the Wal-Mart anyhow.”

“Maybe this means you should come back to church on Sundays,” I said. “It gets mighty lonely without you. Besides, Momma's pinching me on the arm now and I don't like it.”

She smiled. I think it was the first real smile that crossed her face in weeks, and that made me feel better.

“Come on,” she said, “let's go for a drive.”

When I saw the odd look in her eyes I knew she had had another epiphany.

I got a funny feeling in my stomach. I knew it was from the spirits of the dead who must have returned, and were now floating around us ready to stir up some more trouble.
If I was feeling scared before, it couldn't compare to the way I was feeling when Aunt Eulahline said, "I think I'm going to try to find me a date for Friday night," and she turned left on Main Street and headed in the direction of the Sunoco station.

I was relieved to find when we got to the Sunoco there weren't any cars in sight, but that could change at any time, and Aunt Eulahline would circle the block until she saw some fellah gassing up or visiting the convenience store. The funny feeling was getting worse. As we went around the block for the third time, the hairs on the back of my head stood up and then I saw it, the latest addition to the outdoor décor of the Sunoco, a Cigar Store Indian.

"Look, Aunt Eulah," I said, pointing.

"It's not polite to point."

"There's an Indian in front of the Sunoco."

She slammed her foot on the brakes without checking the rearview mirror and looked.

"Land o' Gooshen!" she cried. "Why won't they leave me alone?" Her face paled, but my aunt's a determined woman, she clench her teeth and took her foot off the brake to give it some gas. We continued circling the block. But this time it felt different. I knew something was going to happen, something that wouldn't go along with her plans, and maybe change her whole life.

We kept driving, and the sun was hot. I got carsick.

"Please, Aunt Eulahline, I can't take any more!" I begged.

"Oh, all right!" she said. "I don't want you messing the upholstery." We pulled into the station so hard and fast that Aunt Eulahline drove into the Indian. He fell on the hood, denting it, and rolled off. His expression and pose didn't change, just his perspective. He landed on his back, his noble face staring up at the cloudless sky. I wondered if anyone had seen or heard all the commotion, but nobody came and nothing stirred.

Aunt Eulahline clutched the steering wheel and stared straight ahead.

"Do you think you broke him?" I asked. She didn't move, and then lowered her cat-eye sunglasses to get a better look.

"I don't think so."

"Do you think anyone will notice if we just pick him up and put him back?"

We tried to set things straight with the Indian before anyone saw but he was too heavy, Aunt Eulahline wasn't strong enough, and I felt too sick to help her. She sat back on her heels and opened her purse.

"Here, take a dollar," she said, handing it to me. "Go get yourself a ginger ale to settle your stomach." I took it but stopped in my tracks when he appeared.

"Hey, little sis!" He always called me that. "Eulahline," he said.

Aunt Eulahline, squatting by the Indian, looked up at the sound of the voice. It was Earl Rickerts. He wore a dark blue uniform blotted with grease stains, everything about him looked worn out and faded. I wondered how he got all
that black goop out of his fingernails each Sunday.

"Hey, Earl!" I said, cheering up. Things might get interesting and, stomach ache or not, I wanted to stick around to see it.

"Earl," Aunt Eulahline said. I was surprised she was being so polite. I knew we wouldn't have stopped if she had seen his red Camaro parked next to the garage, but the car was mysteriously absent. Once Aunt Eulahline told me she didn't want to marry no poor man because she was holding out for something better, and when I asked her why she just didn't settle down with Earl, she informed me that Earl Rickerts wasn't that something. She had told me to mind my own business and I hadn't mentioned it since. But now, things had not been going as planned. We had pulled into the station because I was sick and had nearly killed a wooden Indian. I could tell my she was annoyed because there would be no man-fishing to be had at the deserted Sunoco that day. I secretly wished Earl would be the catch of the day, but it didn't look like Aunt Eulahline was in the mood to cast her line.

When Earl tried to help she said, "I can manage just fine," and he stopped. He watched her bend one of her French manicured fingernails backward and adjusted his cap. Aunt Eulahline could not pick up the wooden man without some help.

"What do you want, anyhow?" she demanded.
"I jus' came out to help, Eulahline, that's all," he said.
"Well I don't need your help."
"Aunt Eulahline," I interrupted, "I think Earl would be able to pick him up."

I don't think she remembered I was standing there. One of her eyebrows raised clear up her forehead, "Aren't you supposed to be curing your stomach ache?"

I shrugged and went inside the station. Roseanne, the cashier, had finally noticed her Cigar Store Indian was not in sight, and then she saw me in front of her.

"Is your aunt up to her old tricks again?" she asked. I didn't know how to reply, and I just sat my Schweppes on the counter and slid the dollar bill in her direction. "I think Eulahline's bad luck's rubbing off on the Sunoco," she continued. I knew she was referring to my Aunt Eulahline's Wal-Mart Curse and I wished I could disappear. Roseanne near broke her neck to watch what was happening on the other side of that window. I think if she wouldn't have been so amused, she would've started swearing.

I started watching too, and could read Aunt Eulahline's lips through the window.

"Leave me be, Earl!" she said. She was getting one of those vertical frown lines between her eyes that they give the Botox for. My Aunt Eulahline could test the patience of a saint on one of her good days, but what she didn't realize was that Earl was one of the most patient men around even on his bad
days. Heaven and the whole town knew he'd been waiting for my aunt long enough already, and now Roseanne and I were anxious to see what was going to happen next.

Aunt Eulahline looked real pretty in that clingy dress she got on sale at the Wal-Mart face to face with grungy Earl who looked like he musta been working on the greasiest engine he had. They each had a hold of the Indian. It was a stare-down. If I was Earl, I would have let go because I know my aunt, and Earl wouldn't want to cross her now or ever. I decided I'd better go back to save him and arrived just in time to hear Aunt Eulahline shout, "I don't want your damn help!" Earl was smart. He backed off quick.

"Don't get excited, Eulahline. Jus' trying to help," he said. He thoughtfully stroked his goatee while Aunt Eulahline pulled as hard as she could. When she tore the Indian's arm off, I choked on my ginger ale and Earl laughed.

"You see what you made me do, Earl?" she hollered. "I'm never going to get a date this Friday night! And it's all your fault." She shook the arm under Earl's nose. I admired him more then. Aunt Eulahline wasn't going to get the best of old Earl Rickerts.

It was Earl's turn to have an epiphany.

"You sure are pretty when you're mad, Eulahline," he said. She swung the arm at him but Earl ducked just in time. "When you act all crazy," he stepped closer, "it makes me more crazy about you." Aunt Eulahline swung again, but Earl grabbed the arm and used it to pull her closer to him and farther away from the Cigar Store Indian.

"Get away from me you damn dirty grease monkey!" She tried to wrestle the arm from him but Earl was strong. "I wouldn't date you if you were the last man on earth."

"Damn dirty grease monkey? Last man on earth?" Earl echoed. For some odd reason he seemed surprised that Eulahline would think those things about him, but then he surprised all of us, especially Aunt Eulahline. He pulled her into his arms with one clean jerk and laid a kiss on her the likes many a person at the Sunoco had never seen before, including myself.

On the other side of the plate glass window Roseanne had been laughing, but now her mouth was hanging open like mine, and I don't think no sound was coming out of hers either. I forgot about being sick, about my ginger ale, and about the hot sun beating down. Aunt Eulahline's face was red and she was having difficulty recovering her senses. She fiddled with the gas cap on her car and said in a loud voice, "I didn't need no gasoline anyhow, the gauge is stuck." I thought that was a silly thing to say considering we hadn't stopped for gas. She got in the car, and I barely got my legs in motion in time to join her.

It was no trouble for Earl to lift the Indian onto its feet and put the arm back where it belonged too. Earl looked like the happiest man alive. He called after us as we drove away, "I'm going to pick you up on Friday at eight o'clock, Eulahline. You'd better be ready for me."
It took my Aunt Eulahline some time to recover her composure after the Sunoco Incident, as it would come to be known. I had a feeling that she had withdrawn her participation from the Friday night dating scene, and that she had finally found a worthy sacrifice for the Altar of her Womanhood. Now there was a different scheme hatching behind her cloudy blue eyes.

We pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot.

"I don't think we should go to Wal-Mart right now, Aunt Eulahline," I said, "You do have a date with Earl, and you don't want to get into trouble with Mr. John now, do you?"

"I'm going to need a new dress, this one's all greasy," she said.

"But, Aunt Eulah, what about the Indian Curse?" If she got arrested, she'd never make her date with Earl, and he had waited so long for her too.

"Oh, sugar," Aunt Eulahline shook her head and squeezed my hand, "that Indian curse is just a local folktale." I opened my mouth to disagree but she interrupted me, "I was silly enough to get caught up in it, and I'm your big sister. Someday you'll understand."

That's all she would say about it. She fixed her hair in the rearview mirror and put on some fresh lipstick where Earl had kissed it off. She looked the happiest I had ever seen her—she looked relieved. I shut my mouth and decided not to say anything more but my mind was racing because, like I said before, every time my Aunt Eulahline goes down to the Wal-Mart, something happens. Not that things don't happen to her wherever she goes, but there's something about that place, and I wanted to know what it was before we got inside. I wondered if I would ever figure things out, and then didn't care anymore when I saw Aunt Eulahline's smiling face. She put her arm around me as we walked toward the store.