



Grace (Queenie) Waters  
Grandma Braun, Grandma Waters and my  
cousin Joannie, Fritz' sister

## Chapter 3

### Queenie

### Fall, 1958

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Boys, we didn't talk about mental illness in 1958. It was something to be hidden; we felt embarrassed and ashamed if anyone in our family struggled with mental illness. While we still have a long way to go, we are beginning to understand that mental illness is like any other sickness, it is not the fault of the afflicted and it can be treated with therapy, medication, and hard work.

Today, my Aunt Queenie would probably be diagnosed as bi-polar. With a good therapist, medication, and dedication, she would be a functioning adult. That was not the case in 1958. Here's what happened.

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Mom dropped me at Grandma Waters' house on a beautiful summer Saturday morning. Aunt Queenie was taking me to the movies in Denver. Aunt Queenie lived with Grandma Waters and Aunt Hazel in Grandma's little house at 900 Arapahoe. Queenie and Hazel never married. For many years, they both worked as live-in housekeepers for the Phinneys, a wealthy Denver family, but returned home after both Phinneys passed away. Hazel took a job at McKeon's a clothing store in Golden while Queenie worked for a short time at the county courthouse.

Aunt Queenie descended the narrow staircase. She arrived on the scene perfectly thin, beautifully dressed, hair coiffed, makeup applied, and seams straight, ready for the matinee.

She didn't drive so we walked from the little house across the Clear Creek Bridge to downtown Golden where we caught the trolley to Denver. The trolley ran on railroad tracks and was electrically powered. The route from Golden to Denver ran along Colfax Avenue, a commercial strip full of shops, car dealerships, and more. I was amazed as sparks shot regularly from the connection to the power line that ran above the tracks. The fifteen-mile ride took an hour as the car stopped to drop off and collect new passengers, giving Queenie plenty of time to ask endless questions about my life and me. Her sincere interest made me feel special. Eventually, we were dropped on 16th Street in downtown Denver, a short walk to the Orpheum Theater.

After the movie, which likely featured the Lone Ranger or Roy Rogers because Queenie and I loved westerns, she took me to Woolworth's where we sat at the soda fountain and ate ice cream sundaes. Then it was on to the toy section where I always chose a small metal car. I loved Saturday matinees with Queenie; she was warm and engaging, my favorite aunt.

A few months later, on a September afternoon I started my walk home from school to our house on 5th Street. I met my friend Donnie at the back of the schoolyard and we headed past the steep alley that served as Fritz' sledding path on snowy days. We immediately walked across the Clear Creek Bridge stopping momentarily to throw rocks that we collected in the schoolyard at the ducks who floated in eddies near the shore. No ducks were ever harmed by our efforts.

Then it was down Washington Avenue past Parfet Park and Golden Junior High where we turned left on 10th Street. Two blocks later, we turned right on Arapahoe, dropped Donnie at his house, then I went next door to Grandma's to say hello and see what was in the cookie jar.

As I knocked on the screen kitchen door and simultaneously pulled it open, Aunt Queenie shot from her chair at the kitchen table and ran up the stairs to her bedroom without saying so much as a word to me. Greasy hair hung down her back and she was dressed in a dirty old housecoat. Why did she run from me? Did I do something wrong? This was not the Queenie I knew. I looked at Grandma and asked what was wrong?

"She's gone off the deep end again," Grandma said with a deep sigh. "I don't think she can 'elp it. She's not 'erself," She said staring at the floor. And then, a few seconds later she added quietly, "Go check the cookie jar in the pantry. You'll find something there that'll suit your fancy."

I looked in the cookie jar and found dark, moist muffins filled with raisins and nuts that Grandma called a poor man's muffin. I took one and looked at Grandma as I came back into the kitchen. She was looking absently out the window toward the front gate, her chin in her hand.

"You go on 'ome" she said, dropping yet another H. Her thick Cornish accent didn't include H's making her a little difficult to understand on occasion. "Tell your dad that Queenie is off again, she added.

"I will," I promised as I headed out the door. Two blocks later, I passed my Uncle Roy's house. His daughter Diana was two years ahead of me in school, and Peggy was a year behind. They were sitting on a swing on the front porch. I walked to the porch and sat down on the steps to eat my muffin.

"Looks like you stopped at Grandma's," Di observed as I stuffed myself with muffin.

## Boys, Here's What Happened

“Yeah,” I replied while swallowing a large bite. “Do you know what’s wrong with Queenie? Grandma says she’s gone off the deep end again.”

“What’s the deep end,” Peggy asked looking at me curiously?

“I don’t know, but she was acting strange. She ran upstairs the minute I walked in and didn’t even say hello. And she was wearing really dirty clothes. She looked bad and smelled worse.”

Di and Peg were equally concerned. They had been the beneficiaries of Aunt Queenie’s trips to matinees at the Orpheum, too. They promised to tell Uncle Roy and Aunt Margie when they got home from work. Muffin finished, I resumed my trek homeward.

Once home, I turned on the TV and tuned into the Mickey Mouse Club. As Annette, Bobby, and the other Mouseketeers sang the last lines of the Mickey Mouse theme song, Mom’s car pulled into the drive at 4:55.

Dad was usually home from work by 6:00 from his job in Denver for the Public Service Company. Mom started making supper the moment she got home from work. The meal usually consisted of beef or pork, some variety of potato and canned corn or beans. Dad had a very limited palate that didn’t include fish or many vegetables and Mom didn’t consider meat done if any shade of pink remained.

Supper was served a few minutes after Dad arrived home. During the meal, I described Queenie’s erratic behavior when I stopped at Grandma’s for the muffin. “Grandma said to tell you Queenie is off the deep end again.” As I relayed this information, Dad slumped in his chair and Mom sighed deeply. “What’s the deep end?” I asked.

“Queenie has times when she isn’t herself,” Dad started. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but this happens once in awhile and then goes away after some time. She hurts and upsets Grandma, so we’ve got to do something about her this time.” I could sense his frustration and anger in his voice.

Mom added, “She refuses to bathe, smells awful, wears filthy clothes and won’t talk to anyone. She treats Grandma and Auntie Hazel horribly. She doesn’t speak for days and then she yells and screams at Grandma or Hazel for no reason.” Turning to my father she implored, “Don, you’ve got to do something!”

She was nicknamed “Queenie” by her brothers and sisters. They interpreted her changing moods and silent periods during which she was not able to help in any

way as aloofness and laziness. They thought she acted like a Queen, hence the name. Queenie received little if any sympathy from a household where everyone worked and nearly every cent earned went to Grandma to support the family.

Dad got up from the table and reached for the phone. He dialed Uncle Roy and I listened as they discussed the situation and formulated a plan. Uncle Joker, the oldest in Dad's family was called and recruited to help. The next day after work, the three of them arrived at Grandma's where they met a Sheriff's deputy. Dad and his brothers made Queenie bathe forcibly. Later on Dad told me the three of them had to drag her to the bathtub and throw her in filthy clothes and all. It was a battle, and Dad came home with his arms and face scratched and bite marks on his hands and arms.

Since this was not the first time Queenie had struggled, Dad and Uncle Roy had papers drawn previously to commit Queenie to the State Mental Hospital in Wheatridge. Dad said it was so hard for Grandma. As Queenie's only parent, crying silently with tears falling from her chin, she signed the papers with Dad, Uncle Roy, and Uncle Joker looking on. Once Queenie was dry and in a clean dress, she was put in a straight jacket, loaded into the deputy's car, and taken away. Dad and his brothers followed to the hospital to be sure she got there without any more trouble.

I missed Queenie especially when I stopped to make my usual raid on the cookie jar after school. It was strange to find Grandma sitting alone at the table. I don't remember how long Queenie stayed at the hospital, but I do recall stopping at Grandma's months later, and there was Queenie, in a clean dress with her hair washed, and pulled back. No one told me she was coming home. I stood with a shocked expression on my face looking from Queenie to Grandma who sat at the opposite end of the kitchen table.

"I'm back and I'm OK, Choppy," Queenie said smiling in my direction. I was happy to see her looking like her old self and told her so, but I was afraid. Dad's story and his scratches and bites made a lasting impression. I grabbed a cookie from the jar, said a quick goodbye to Queenie and Grandma, and headed for home. She could never be my favorite aunt again.

Queenie's recovery didn't last long. It wasn't long before Queenie went off the deep end again, and they had to put her back in the hospital.

## Boys, Here's What Happened

Over the years Queenie had periods of being herself and periods of being off the deep end. My memories of her fade after my grandmother died in 1963. I do remember she came to holiday dinners at our house with Auntie Hazel when she was good, and would not attend when she was off. Hazel had to bear the worst of it since they lived together until Hazel died in 1984. Queenie was moved to an “old folks home” until her death in 1992.