It’s a little ironic that Cousin Lucy got sent to Grandma’s house to “straighten her out.”

Because I feel like describing it like that paints it as Lucy being only a decision or two away from relapsing. As if she could Do A Weed and revert from the wide-bodied landslide crammed into Cookie Monster pajama pants back to the moody seventeen-year-old who dated a gang member and got a tattoo on her ankle without my aunt and uncle’s permission.

Which, yeah, were both bad decisions.

But it didn’t stop my siblings and I from joking that our parents were going to send us to live with Grandma. It became this running joke between all of us that Living With Grandma was like getting Sent to the Cornfield on the Twilight Zone. That we could be unpersoned, just like Cousin Lucy. Even my parents got in on it as we got older.

“Not Cousin Lucy!”

“We agreed never to speak of her again!”

“Lucy. Was. Bad. Now. Lucy. Good.”

That sort of thing might imply that we never saw Cousin Lucy again, but that’s definitely not true. In fact, now that she didn’t have an excuse to bail on Christmases and birthday thirty minutes into a party, we saw her more than we used to. Living with Grandma has definitely evened out her moods over the years, but I’m not sure if that’s because she really was an At Risk Teen who needed tough love or just… y’know… a young adult with a rebellious streak.

But looking at her now from across the dinner table, it’s hard to imagine that the pad of caramelized butter lusting after grandma’s cooking was ever the problem child that my Aunt and Uncle made her out to be. With dewy lips and dreamy eyes, my cousin traced her plate’s descent as it happened, sausage fingers already wielding fork and knife in anticipation of the moment that dinner was served. Watching her slowly grow more and more accustomed to huge meals as she learned to revel in Grandma’s cooking has always made me feel like in hopes of squashing drug addictions, they just set her up for a whole different one in kind.

Over the years my brothers and my sisters and my other cousins and even my parents at some point started to whisper about how big she was getting. And like, fairly early on too. When she turned eighteen, two months after she moved in with Grandma, she’d already started to develop a little bit of a tummy. My sister gently picked at her about it for the three days and two nights that we stayed with Grandma when we stayed over that Christmas, and eventually I became… similarly occupied.

Listen—I’m secure enough in myself to admit that I’d always had a crush on her when we were younger.

My sister, however, was not; and that’s a story for another day.

We didn’t see my cousin super often so whenever we did, and she was invariably even heavier than the last time we saw her, it definitely had an effect on me. We got to watch her go from a budding Alt Girl asserting dark clothes for the first time to a chubby layabout who was forced to get a job straight out of high school because my Grandma made her, and then eventually to the sophomoric hamplanet that was currently slogging through an online two-year degree between meals.

“Oh yeah, it’s… going.” The conversation over dinner isn’t exactly *forced,* but it’s clear that her attention isn’t equally divided between her cousin and her dinner plate, “Hey, pass the sour cream? And the salsa…”

Cousin Lucy still isn’t the type to wait for much, though. I handed it to her, but she leaned in just a little to minimize the time spent between loading up and eating the extra calories she piled onto her plate. Her honeyed heft rolled thickly onto the table, the side spare tire that made up the center of her pudgy pagoda body had begun to visibly meld into the heavy lower roll that bled into an inseam-filling fupa.

“Ahhh…” she half-answers me between bites, “Mmm… yeah, it’s… *mmm*…”

To think that my Aunt and Uncle used to be worried about her dropping out of high school and joining her ex-boyfriend’s gang. That was like… so far removed from the moon-faced fat girl spreading across from me on the only bench seating in the house. Once upon a time she was a candidate for Pothead of the Year, but now she’s an Assistant Manager at a Jack in the Box in Tucson who’s trying to get into IT so she can work from home. Their biggest concern until that point had always been her running away, but she couldn’t even walk out to the car without needing to catch her breath.

“It’s super tough.”

“Yeah. *Ooh* yeah.”

“Mhmm—”

Her answers are short and deliberate as she grazes across the many plates, spread wide across the table. Grandma always made *way* too much food, but this was kind of surprising. I didn’t visit often just out of the blue, but my younger brother and I were going to be in the area anyway and that was apparently an excuse to bring out enough food to feed the whole family at Christmas.

And I’m willing to bet that most of it is going to wind up going into Cousin Lucy.

“What are we thinking for dessert?”

God bless my Grandmother.

As I watch the wide-eyed foodie prattle on about what would thaw quick enough for it to be ready by the time “we” were done eating, I can’t help but make a little correction to myself. “We” aren’t eating. My brother has been finished for twenty minutes, and I’ve been letting Lucy pick pieces off of my plate for about half that time now.

“I kind of want to do both—can we thaw out the cheesecake *and* the pie?”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Cousin Lucy happier than at this very moment.