

*In the book Turtle in Paradise, Turtle is a young girl who is living with her aunt's family for a while in Key West, Florida, in the 1930s. In this selection, Turtle first gets to know her Nana Philly (who is ill) by going to help her at lunchtime. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.*

from *Turtle in Paradise*  
by Jennifer L. Holm

1 We're walking out the front door to go to the matinee<sup>1</sup> when Aunt Minnie calls to us from where she's ironing in the parlor.

2 "I'm sorry," she says, wiping a hand on her forehead. "But one of you kids is going to have to go over to Nana Philly's and give her lunch. I've just got too much laundry to do today."

3 "Not me," Beans says quickly.

4 "Me neither!" says Kermit.

5 "No way, no how, Ma!" Buddy says.

6 Aunt Minnie looks up at the ceiling as if she's praying for patience. She's going to be praying a long time at this rate.

7 "I'll do it," I say. Nana Philly can't be any worse than Shirley Temple.<sup>2</sup>

8 Aunt Minnie gives me a long look. "Thank you, Turtle," she says. She sounds surprised. "You're a good girl."

9 "Course I am," I say. "You're just used to rotten boys."

10 "Why, Turtle!" Miss Bea says with a confused smile when she opens the door. "How lovely to see you! But I was expecting your aunt."

11 "Aunt Minnie's got laundry. I'll give Nana Philly her lunch," I say.

12 "Aren't you a dear," she says. "Well, whatever you make her, just be sure it's soft." She lowers her voice a notch. "Her teeth aren't very good."

13 "All right," I say.

14 "I won't be long," she says, walking down the steps. "You're so sweet to do this!"

15 But I'm not sweet—I'm curious. It's not every day you find out you have a grandmother you didn't even know was alive. And despite what everyone says about Nana Philly being terrible, I've been wanting to see if she'll be different with me. After all, I'm a girl. Maybe she just hates boys. Wouldn't blame her if she did.

16 I walk into the house with fresh eyes. This is where Mama grew up. A thousand questions flash through my mind: Which bedroom did she sleep in? Did she run up and down the hallway? Did she sit at the piano? I hope not. That stool doesn't look too sturdy.

17 Nana Philly is sitting in the rocking chair in her bedroom reading a new magazine. She's dressed the same way as when I first saw her.

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<sup>1</sup> *matinee* — an afternoon movie

<sup>2</sup> *Shirley Temple* — a child movie star of the time

18 “I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m Turtle,” I say. “Your granddaughter.”  
19 She looks up.  
20 “Sadiebelle’s girl.”  
21 And blinks.  
22 “Mama’s in New Jersey,” I explain. “She got a job as a housekeeper to a rich lady.”  
23 Nana Philly stares at me.  
24 “I’m supposed to make you lunch. You hungry?” I ask.  
25 The old lady doesn’t say anything; she just looks back down at her magazine. It’s not exactly the tearful reunion I was imagining, although maybe that blink was her way of saying she was happy to see me. Then again, maybe she has dust in her eye.  
26 I go into the kitchen and look around. Mama’s always making fancy lunches for the ladies she works for. You wouldn’t even know people were standing in breadlines<sup>3</sup> if you walked in and saw what they were eating: iced cantaloupe, shrimp aspic, caviar sandwiches with cream cheese, hearts of lettuce with French dressing, meringue cookies.  
27 There’s no caviar or cream cheese in sight, but there is bread on the table and milk in the icebox,<sup>4</sup> so I decide to make milk toast. I toast up some bread, stick it in a bowl, and pour milk over it. It’s tasty, and it’s mushy.  
28 Nana Philly eyes the bowl suspiciously when I place it on the little table in front of her.  
29 “It’s milk toast,” I say. “We eat it all the time.” Strange as it seems, I want her to like it.  
30 She doesn’t move and then I realize why.  
31 “Oh, no! I forgot your spoon,” I say, and rush back into the kitchen. I hear a thump, and when I return, the bowl is lying facedown on the floor, milk splattered everywhere.  
32 “What happened?” I ask.  
33 Nana Philly doesn’t say anything. Not that I really expect her to.  
34 “I must have put it too close to the edge,” I say, and clean up the mess. Then I set about making another bowl of milk toast. I bring it out—with a spoon this time—and place it in front of her on the little table.  
35 “Here you go,” I say. “I hope you like it.”  
36 She looks at the bowl for a moment and then her hand whips out and knocks it right off the table and onto the floor.  
37 I’m so shocked, I just stand there. I didn’t really believe what the boys said about her before, but I do now.  
38 “You did that on purpose,” I say. “Why? I’m your granddaughter!”  
39 Her mouth twitches as if this amuses her.  
40 Something hopeful in me hardens. She reminds me of all the rotten kids I’ve ever lived with.

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<sup>3</sup> *breadlines* — lines of people waiting to receive free food given by the government in the 1930s

<sup>4</sup> *icebox* — refrigerator

41 “You don’t scare me,” I say.

42 I clean up the mess again and make another bowl of milk toast. But this time I don’t give it to the mean old lady who’s my grandmother; instead, I sit down in a chair and start eating. She stares at me, her eyes following every spoonful.

43 “This is delicious,” I say, and smile. “Shame you spilled yours.”

44 I swear I can see her mouth watering.

45 When Miss Bea returns, Nana Philly and I are sitting in the parlor.

46 “Did you two have a nice lunch?”

47 “We had a lovely time,” I say.

48 “Would you like to come again tomorrow? Give your poor aunt a break?”  
Miss Bea asks.

49 “Sure,” I say, and smile sweetly at Nana Philly. “I’m looking forward to getting to know my grandmother.”

50 Miss Bea’s waiting for me on the front porch with her shopping basket when I arrive the next afternoon.

51 “There’s grits-and-grunts-and-gravy on the stove and guava duff for dessert. There’s plenty for both of you,” Miss Bea says. “I’ve got shopping to do, so I might be a while.”

52 “Take your time,” I say.

53 “Thank you, Turtle,” she says. “You’re a dear.”

54 Nana Philly’s in her room looking at her magazine as usual. I notice it’s upside down.

55 “Must be some real interesting reading you got there,” I say.

56 The old woman ignores me, so I go into the kitchen. I spoon out two bowls of grits-and-grunts-and-gravy. Folks here eat this all the time. Grunts are little fish and grits are like porridge. That’s the one good thing about Key West: there’s food everywhere—hanging from trees, in the ocean—and it’s all free.

57 After what happened yesterday at lunch, I figured Nana Philly would have wised up. But I guess you can’t teach a mean old lady new tricks, because the bowl hasn’t been in front of her for more than a moment when her hand knocks it off the table. It falls to the floor in a splatter.

58 “You know, there sure are a lot of hungry folks who would have liked to eat that,” I say, but all she does is stare at the upside-down magazine a little harder.

59 I clean up the mess and eat my own lunch with her watching the whole time. It’s uncomfortable, but it’s just like dealing with a rotten kid: if you back down in front of them, they’ll never leave you be.

60 When I’m finished, I carry a bowl of guava duff out and place it in front of her. She lifts her hand to smack it, but I snatch it away just in time.

61 “You’re not wasting dessert,” I say. “I’ll eat it.”

62 I sit down and take a bite. It’s delicious. It tastes a little like plum pudding.

63 “Miss Bea sure is a good cook.”

64 Nana Philly pretends to ignore me, but I can tell she’s watching. She reminds me of a lobster, with her beady eyes peeking out at me from under her red hat.

65 “Mama’s a good cook, too. She makes the best caramel custard. One of our old employers,  
Mr. Hearn, couldn’t get enough of it. He had her make it four nights a week.”  
66 I study Nana Philly closely. “You know, Mama told me you were dead.”  
67 She glances down quickly, and it comes to me.  
68 “You were mean to her, too, weren’t you?” I ask. “Is that why she hasn’t come back  
to Key West?”  
69 My grandmother doesn’t look up, and I know the answer to my own question.  
70 “Poor Mama,” I whisper. Chased off by her own mother. No wonder she’s such  
a wreck.  
71 A shadow crosses Nana Philly’s face and, for a brief moment, I see something like  
regret in her blue eyes, but then it’s gone.

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72 It happens just like in the Bible: on the third day, there’s a miracle.  
73 “I can tell the old girl’s really looking forward to seeing you today,” Miss Bea says.  
74 I doubt that, but say, “Really?”  
75 “Even had me get out her best hat,” Miss Bea says.  
76 I’m not impressed. I didn’t even want to come here today after what I learned yesterday,  
but Aunt Minnie got used to me helping out, so I don’t have any choice now. This is what  
I get for being a good girl.  
77 When I walk into the bedroom, Nana Philly puts down her magazine and looks at me.  
She’s wearing a royal blue hat with a peacock feather.  
78 “You expecting the queen?” I ask.  
79 Miss Bea has made conch chowder, and it’s simmering on the stove. I fill two bowls  
and carry them out, placing one in front of Nana Philly. I sit down with my bowl and  
start eating, waiting to hear her bowl hit the floor. But when I look up, she’s holding the  
spoon. She brings it to her mouth with her good hand and swallows the chowder.  
80 She takes another spoonful. And another.  
81 Soon her bowl is empty.  
82 “You know,” I say, “I missed seeing a matinee the first day when I came here to give  
you lunch. It was a Shirley Temple picture.”  
83 Her eyes fly to my face.  
84 “Which is fine by me, because I hate Shirley Temple,” I say.  
85 A corner of my grandmother’s mouth turns up in a crooked smile, and her  
eyes shine.  
86 “Me thoo,” she says.