



Video Story Transcript

Hot Chili and Crackers: A Racial Stew with Danger

By: Storyteller
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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWb-X7RhWIE>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hello, my name is Edith McLeod Armstrong but most people just call me Mama Edie.

You know, growing up as a child in the 50s and the 60s was a very, very exciting and stimulating time for many reasons. Some of them weren't so pleasant but some of them were great. Oh, we had some of the best music and some of the best dances. And whereas at one point in time people, many people who were not of African-American culture, would shun our music and say, "Oh those are bad dances." All of a sudden, Dick Clark came along and, honey, everybody was doing our dances. And everybody was trying to sing our songs and we came to a place of sharing that we had never been before.

Well, along came the time that I needed to go to college and I wanted to go to college. I was excitedly looking forward to it. I went off to Northern Illinois University, in DeKalb, Illinois, in 1969. And during that summer, there was an orientation weekend. And I got a chance to meet some really, really great kids and the campus was beautiful. And I frequently went to my favorite area by the lagoon, where we had these great weeping willow trees and swans swimming all over the place. It was really great. Well, this one particular day, a friend and I, a new friend, his name was Corky, went to town. Well, in those days we didn't have the buses so we walked everywhere we needed to go. But of course, I stayed streamlined in those days. But in any case, Corky was a great guy. One of the things that I appreciated about him was that he had such an intelligent conversation without really sounding highbrow. I mean he had something to talk about. So, we talked about everything from soup to nuts. And so, we went to town and on our way back, I remember we were crossing

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the bridge of the lagoon, going back onto the campus. And he had started asking me some serious things. And all of a sudden, he asked me, "Edie, what do you think about the establishment?"

I said, "What establishment?" Well, I had been raised in Catholic elementary schools and I had good upbringing and we had social studies. But nobody ever asked me of the establishment. And so, I said, "I don't know what are you talking about."

He said, "You know the way the country is run. What do you think about that?"

I said, "I don't know. I guess it's all right."

"Well," he said, "But what about the civil rights movement and what about the people who still can't vote, especially down in the south? And what do you think about Affirmative Action? And what do you think about reparations and do you think we're really free?"

Holy moly! My head was spinning. I didn't know what to say. And so, he said... I tell you what, he did make me feel stupid as I felt. He was very kind.

And he said, "I tell you what, I got some books you need read."

I said, "OK. Lay them on me." I loved reading anyway. And he gave me a book by a man whose name at that time, his birth name, was Don Lee. But he is now known as Haki Madhubuti. And this is a book of his poetry. He was on fire. He was angry with the way things were going for our people, for African-Americans, for Latinos, for Asians. He was angry about the inequities about the injustices, all across the board. He was a little bit disappointed. No, he was a big bit disappointed. He was downright disgusted, as a matter of fact, with how frequently African-Americans would seem to forgive too quickly and then forget. And then we'd be right back into the same situation that we were in before. So, as I read his material, his poetry, it shocked me into consciousness. It prompted me to read more. I read everything I could get my hands on. And suddenly, I wanted to make a difference in the world. I wanted to help make things better not only for my people but for everybody.

So, I wrote a piece, I don't know what you call it, I guess it was kind of an essay, called "Metamorphosis." And it was spoken from the voice of a black woman directed to her black man. Now, this was actually a piece that you would say that was directed towards all black men who were moving from their colored boyhood into their black manhood. Well, a friend of mine Mac Jones who was at the university working on his master's in theater. Both of us were involved with black theater at the time of the university. And he decided he was going to get nosy and went through my notebook that was laying on my desk and saw some of the poetry and the other pieces that I had written.

When I came back into the room, he said, "Edie, girl, this stuff is good! We need to do something with this!"

And I said, "Oh go on." I said, "What are you doing in my notebook anyway?"

And so, after we got serious and we talked about it, we ended up combining some of his material with some of my material and we developed a Reader's Theater Production. And we got the support of the university to do the production there. And then, there were some people from a university in Iowa who saw it and everybody responded so well to it, that we were invited to do the production in Iowa. Well, we were so excited. This was our first road trip. And we had gotten the support of the university to get a bus and we had food. People had fried some chicken and you know what I'm saying. We had some potato salad and lemonade and fruit and we were even playing Bid Whist on the back of the bus. We had drummers and so we used the skins of the drums as the Bid Whist table, a very popular card game among African-Americans. And everything

was going well. Some people were just sitting quietly reading in the bus. Some people were having quiet conversations. But then, as we approached the wide-open countryside and the cornfields, all of a sudden, our bus driver, who happened to be a white American, said to us, he said, "You know, you guys, might want to put your heads down during this particular stretch of the road."

We said, "What did you say?"

He said, "You need to put your heads down for about another mile or two down the stretch of the road."

And we said, "Well, what are you talking about? Why?"

And he said, "Well, people have been taking pot shots at blacks, and Latinos, and Asians down the strip of road and a couple of people have gotten killed. And they don't know who's doing it. And quite frankly, I'm not sure that the local law enforcement is really looking very carefully. **So, you may want to put your heads down.**"

Didn't have to tell us again, we put our heads down. We went into a stony silence and we continued that way until our bus driver said, "OK, you can come back up now."

And when we did, we remained in silence. Each one, I'm sure sharing the same thoughts, all the way, almost to the town, where we got to a little side cafe restaurant, where we went inside to get some food. And then my friend, Mac Jones, decides he's going to be a little bit devilish. So, he goes inside. We're all inside. And of course, the people are, they turned and stared at us coming in the door. We did not feel like the welcome wagon was there. And everybody was ordering their food and were going in very carefully, very carefully, because we weren't feeling a sense of being welcome there.

And Mac, who's a very tall, husky guy with a big beard, he looks dead at the waitress and says, "Hi. Do ya'll have any chili? I'd like some chili." And he looked at me.

And she said, "Yeah, we had chili."

And so he looked at me and he said, "Yeah, that's fine. That's fine. Well, tell me, do you have any crackers? Cause I'd like to have some crackers with my chili?"

And he looked at me again and I said, "Oh, we're going to die." Because you know the term crackers, when it was used by African-Americans, was actually a derogatory term to refer to white folks who were poor and disenfranchised as we were. And I'm sure that everybody in that restaurant knew it.

I said, "Oh my, this man is going to get us killed." Well, as it happened we didn't die because I'm here to tell the story. And we were able to leave. We continued on our way. I blasted Mac when we got outside of the restaurant but we laughed it off. We continued on to the University of Iowa. We had another great show and we came back with a lot of memories.