

## When the Flowers Come

I'm half nobody. Some people might mind that, but I don't. It makes it easy to sneak around because I can be so quiet. On account of me being half nobody and all. Also, sometimes, if I'm real still people stop seeing me so it's like being invisible. My Grammie, she says my mama got so sad she couldn't take care of no one, not even herself. She had to go far away to try to get better. And my daddy was a nobody and I don't need to know anything else about him. My Grammie says people are made up half from their moms and half from their dads. So I guess I'm half sad and half nobody. But I don't feel half sad. Sometimes I am sad though, and Grammie she'll say Maybelle stop pouting! I could hang a pot on that lip! The thing is, you can't just stop feeling sad because your Grammie says so. Doesn't work like that, not for me anyway.

At my house there's mostly me, Grammie, and Black Bean the cat. There used to be Dragon the other cat but he had to die on account of it being his time. Sometimes there's Uncle Scottie too. That's my uncle, but he's Grammie's son. I think he's Black Bean's uncle too, but I'm not sure about that. Usually I like it when Uncle Scottie's over because we play Old Maid and Go Fish and sometimes Monopoly even though I lost everybody except the thimble and the little doggie. Also I lost some of the cards and got the money all wrinkled up from being in the rain one day. But Uncle Scottie says that's okay, we can still play. Sometimes Uncle Scottie won't play with me because he has a headache or he's not feeling so hot. Sometimes when he isn't up for a game, he lets me stand behind him while he rests his head back on the couch and I rub his short shaved down hair because we both like the way it feels. It's mutual says Uncle Scottie.

The other reason I like Uncle Scottie coming over is 'cause then sometimes Grammie doesn't make me go to school. I say please, Grammie, pleeeeeeeaaase and I make my eyes all big and pretty. She usually sighs and waves her hand the way she does shooin' flies from the kitchen when it's hot. I

don't care Maybelle, I gotta get to work. Ask your uncle she'll say. Then I'll give a whoop because I just *know* Uncle Scottie'll say okay. I think he gets lonely when I go off to school.

School's an okay place. I'm in the first grade but I think I'm supposed to be in the second grade because I'm already up to eight years old. Problem is I get real confused about numbers sometimes and when I try to read, seems like the letters are doing some kind of jig around. Also, I forget if I should say *it don't work* the way Grammie would or *it doesn't work* the way Ms. Cartell my teacher talks. You know, that kind of thing. So learning just goes along a little slower for me, is all. Also on account of me using my nobody half. When my brain gets too tired I just sit real quiet and still until Ms. Cartell can't see me anymore and then I can just take a kind of break being invisible the rest of the day.

At school a few weeks ago I think I was doing so good being nobody, that Uncle Scottie forgot I was somebody. He left me waiting at school one whole hour. I heard Grammie ask Uncle Scottie if he could pick me up with my own two ears and I also heard him say yeah Ma, that's no problem. Well I just stood outside on the curb trying to be somebody again so Uncle Scottie would remember to come get me. Finally I did see his old blue truck pulling up so I knew it had worked. I'm so sorry May, he told me. The blue part of his eyes were still blue but the white part was more like pink. He had his favorite hat on, the black and silver snapback that I can't wear on account of everything I touch getting sticky as hell. The pink eyes and hat pulled down low made him look tired and sad. And a little old. So I told him right away it wasn't his fault, that he probably just forgot that I was somebody. Before we drove away he put his hands warm and heavy on my shoulders. Look at me Maybelle, he said. I never forget that you're somebody. Never. You're my favorite somebody. I smiled and told him okay. He said he just had to run some important errands and he was so sorry to be late. Uncle Scottie's errands usually made him forget about some other things he was supposed to be doing so I was pretty used to it. I wasn't mad at him about it.

Anyway, when Uncle Scottie's not around I always have Black Bean. Grammie's feet hurt too much from the hardware store to play with me usually. 'Sides she's gotta heat up some damn dinner. The game I love to do is putting on my favorite blue dress with a yellow sun and putting Black Bean in a doll bonnet. Then I pretend I'm a mother with my baby. We mostly go to fancy restaurants to eat desserts with our friends. Usually Black Bean wants his bonnet off, but I don't mind.

Sometimes Grammie lets me sit with her and have Couch Time after dinner while we watch a television program. I love Couch Time. The T.V. is just fine, but laying my head down on Grammie's lap is the best because sometimes Grammie runs her fingers through my hair and it gives me the good shivers. Only if I keep that rat's nest of mine under control Grammie says he don't want to run her fingers through no snarled up hair. Every now and then Grammie will brush my hair for me and put it in two long braids. She says I got pretty blonde hair just like my Sad Mama. A little while ago I cut my braids right off. I was feeling so sad that day and I thought maybe it was on account of the braids and my hair being like my Sad Mama. Grammie said you look like a damn fool. I won't have no clown for a granddaughter. Then she had to spend her hard earned cash on a hairdresser to fix me up right. But Miss Carla is Grammie's friend so she came over the house and fixed me up just fine and gave Grammie a deal besides. Maybelle I hope you're satisfied, Grammie told me. Well I was. My head felt light and happy with my hair bouncing just below my ears. Uncle Scottie said you sure do look beautiful Maybelle, so I knew it must be true.

After I got my Sad Mama hair cut off the weather started to warm right up. I love when the air does that 'cause I can sometimes get Grammie to take me to the playground down the street and also I can play in the yard without getting froze right into a popsicle. Grammie must not have been too mad about my hair because the next Saturday she said go on over and get Soup and I'll walk you over to the playground. Soup is next door and there's nothing but the little yard and an old chain link fence between our houses. We bent up the fence in one spot so we can crawl on through without going around. Soup's

only six but we're friends anyway. I don't mind if he's six on account of me being in the first grade which is chock full of six year olds. I hardly ever have to be half nobody with six year olds and I *never* gotta be half nobody with good old Soup.

Another reason I love the weather heating up is on account of my birthday. I know the ground is all soft and squishy and the sun is warm when it's my birthday. I know it's not warm enough for swimming but it's too warm for my jacket. I know it's called May because that's why I'm called Maybelle, but I can never keep track of the number. One day after school, Soup and I were in the yard building a mighty nice fort out of a rotting dog house that's been around long as I remember and some pallets we dragged from the warehouse 'cross the street. I felt the ground suck at my shoe a bit and I said to Soup, seems to me the ground is getting a bit squishy, Soup. He said I think so Maybelle and so I said I'll be right back and don't let nobody knock down our fort. I ran into the house yelling out Grammie! She said what is it Maybelle, and for Christ's sake stop yelling and slamming doors. I told her the ground is getting squishy so it feels like my birthday should be coming on real soon. Grammie said Maybelle your birthday is May 6. I said but Grammie how do I *know* when it's the right day? She said check a calendar. I reminded her we don't have a calendar and besides I don't know how to be checking one. She sighed at me like she does and said when the flowers come you'll know it's your birthday. Now take them muddy shoes straight outside. So I ran right back to Soup. He was crouching with his knees all muddy in our fort, squinting at me through his black curls. When the flowers come it's gonna be my birthday! I told Soup. Which flowers, he said. I was quiet when he asked me 'cause I wasn't exactly positive about that and I knew Grammie didn't want any more questions. Well Soup I said, I'm not sure. It can't be just any old flowers. Soup shook his head because he's always agreeing with me. I think I'll just know when I see 'em. Soup nodded his head. When's your birthday, Soup? Well he said, I think it's called November. You know the number? I asked him. He said he didn't and that made me feel kind of good because I didn't

know my number neither and Grammie had sighed about that. I bet Ms. Cartell would've sighed about it too.

I think maybe when you're half nobody you think about your birthday extra. My birthday's the day I became Maybelle and a part of this world so it's a special day all about me being alive and being *somebody*. I said I don't mind being half nobody and I don't. But still, it's nice to have a day where you're really somebody. After those warm days at the playground and in my yard with Soup, the outside got a chill to it again. The ground felt hard when I stomped it on my way to school. Uncle Scottie came to stay for a bit and we played Monopoly every day because he said he was pretty damn tired of Old Maid and Go Fish. Grammie even played with us once and she said Scottie you oughtta just stay here with us for good. He said aw Ma, I'm fine. I said yes you oughtta! Grammie said you won't get in no trouble here with us. Scottie said my kind of trouble's everywhere, Ma. Not in front of Maybelle, okay? I said is my birthday gonna take longer to come on account of the ground got hard and the air is cold all over again? Grammie wasn't looking at me though, she said you take care of yourself, you hear me? I'm still your mother Scottie. Scottie rubbed his big hands with their long skinny fingers over his face real slow like. Then he looked right at me and said Maybelle, I think it's your turn. And that was that.

I think maybe Grammie was worried because Uncle Scottie hadn't been feeling above the weather a lot of the times when he came to visit us. Sometimes I was worried too. I found him curled on the couch all wet with sweating even though it wasn't hot out even a little bit. He told me he felt sick like when you wanna throw up. Then I held my breath and went to my room because I didn't want to go catching any kinda bug. One other time I saw him leaning over the sink with his nose dripping blood. I guess if trouble followed me everywhere I'd probably get nose bleeds too, on account of all the worrying. Anyway, after the Monopoly game Grammie said to go on outside and get a little fresh air before bed. I never mind being told to go on outside so I took Black Bean into the yard to look at the night. I was lying on my back at the edge of the yard where it's darkest with Black Bean stretched out on

top of my stomach when I heard Uncle Scottie and Grammie's voices floating over to me. It sounded like they were doing some kind of arguing so I stayed real quiet and turned on my nobody half. I crept over until I was squatting on the bulkhead with its peeling up paint under the kitchen window where I could hear best. Scottie please, Grammie was saying in her feeling sad voice. I've tried. I swear it. I can't do it, Scottie told Grammie, and he just sounded downright tired. You *have* to Scottie, Grammie told him. Well, I didn't know *what* they were going on about but Grammie sounded like her heart was just about breaking. After awhile Scottie said Ma, I don't want your help. I don't really want no help he said kinda quiet like and then I could hear Grammie crying which I've only heard maybe five or six times. I sneaked away from the window then. I felt like staying nobody for a long time after that.

Next morning Uncle Scottie was gone and he didn't come around for a few weeks which made me feel worried that the trouble following him maybe finally caught him. Also, I had to go to school every day. The only best part about that was when I was walking along to school I made sure to keep an eye out for my birthday flowers. I saw lots of little green buds poking up along the sidewalks and even some purple, yellow, and white opening right up. They were so small and new, made me feel like everything was getting ready to start over and try again. Maybe now Uncle Scottie could too, like Grammie wanted. But they were still just regular flowers and didn't seem to be telling me my birthday was here. Maybe just telling me don't give up, it's coming. So I kept on looking and looking.

Two Saturdays ago Grammie was looking through some of her favorite magazines and I was lying on the floor doing some coloring art when the phone rang. Our phone doesn't ring too much so I got a little excited and Grammie said Hello? And then she said Scottie! You haven't been by. And then she was listening. I don't got money for you Scottie, I got a home and food for you she was saying, and no, Scottie. Please just come on home. And then she was hanging up. She kept her hand right on the phone and I could only see her back. Go on outside Maybelle. Go on to Soup's or the park. Just go on. Her voice was sort of dangerous like so I scrambled right up and out the door. I didn't even clean up my

art things or grab Black Bean on the way out. For a minute I just stood on our back steps not knowing how to feel but then I heard the jingle on the ice cream truck. I looked up and sure enough Soup was dashing out his door to catch that truck and I just knew he'd share with me so I rushed on over to him yelling Hi-o! Soup! We chose the popsicle with two sticks so we could break it right in two and each have a half. That's one fraction number I know because you gotta know it for sharing. We had orange 'cause it's Soup's favorite and it was fair because it was his Mama's money. Hey Maybelle, he said, you seen your birthday flowers yet? Naw, I told him, just the regular spring time flowers. Me neither, he told me, I've been looking for you. Thanks Soup, I told him, you're a good friend.

Last night Uncle Scottie finally showed up at our door. Grammie and I were both real happy about that. He didn't want to play any games but I didn't mind because I could wait until the morning. I knew Grammie wouldn't make me go to school on account of her being in such a good mood about Uncle Scottie being home. This morning I woke up and Grammie was already gone to work and the sun was shining onto my bed in the cozy way I like. The way that feels like an extra blanket on top of you. Then I remembered Uncle Scottie was here and ran on out to the living room. I saw him sleeping on the couch so I kind of walked real loud around the kitchen but that didn't wake him up. I tried to be pretty noisy making up my breakfast but when I checked Uncle Scottie was still sleeping. Now I'm sitting at the table eating my bowl of cereal and having some juice. I'm picking at the peeling table top but then remember Grammie says I better cut it out, we only have one goddamn table. I don't really want to wait much longer for Scottie to wake on up so as soon as I'm done with this cereal I'm gonna give him a little shake on his shoulder the way Grammie does with me if I sleep too long. As I finish my cereal I swing my feet against my chair so that it makes a quiet thump but it's not waking Uncle Scottie either. I rinse my bowl and spoon and put them in the dishwasher the way Grammie always tells me to and then I go over to shake Uncle Scottie. His back is to me and I shake him real gentle but he doesn't move so I shake a little harder and whisper Uncle Scottie to him. Still nothing. Uncle Scottie? I say louder. Still nothing.

I go into my room to lie in the cozy sun spot and do some coloring art with Black Bean. After awhile I go back out and give Uncle Scottie some more shakes. I stamp my feet real hard on the ground 'cause now I'm a little tired of his sleeping and sleeping. I lean over and take a peek at his face and blow some air on him. Finally I give him a smooch on the cheek which is when I know something isn't right. His skin feels all wrong to me. Not like Uncle Scottie's warm face should, more like a doll cheek, so now I'm starting to get worried. Uncle Scottie! I try yelling and shaking him real hard. I go on over to the phone and dial the number for the hardware store that I memorized, but only for emergencies. I think this might be an emergency but I hang up because I'm not sure and I don't want Grammie to be mad. My gut starts to feel all queasy and I know something is wrong so I pick up the phone and dial again. May I please speak to Ms. Jayleen Pritchard? I ask the way Grammie made me practice. 'Fore I know it Grammie's voice is on the phone. Maybelle? This better be important she tells me. I can't wake Uncle Scottie up I tell her and it doesn't sound too important when I say it. What do you mean, she wants to know. I mean I've tried everything and I can't wake him. He don't feel right Grammie, I kissed him on the cheek and he don't *feel* right. I think he's real sick. I feel the tears creeping into my voice so I hope Grammie knows this is a real emergency. Okay Maybelle, you stay right there, I'll come right on home.

I am sitting on the front step waiting for Grammie because I don't like being in the quiet house with Uncle Scottie all wrong on the couch. Maybelle! Grammie calls rushing to me from the car and she gives me a big hug which feels so warm and good I don't ever want her to let go. I just want to be nobody and disappear right into her hardware store apron she forgot to take off. But Grammie rushes right on by me and into the house. Scottie! Scottie, baby? Grammie kneels next to the couch and is rocking him back and forth. She rolls him over and touches his cheek and she's saying oh god oh god over and over. Then she pulls one of his eyelids up and I don't like that one bit so turn around and don't look anymore. I can hear her crying my baby, oh Scottie, my baby and when I turn around real slow she



is lying half on top of him on the couch sobbing and mumbling and he's still sleeping right on. Only I know deep down it's not called sleeping anymore.

I'm sitting in my room hugging Black Bean because it feels better that way and I can feel his little heart beating fast against my chest. It feels like his heart is helping to keep my heart beating because I feel so sad that I'm worried my heart might not want to work anymore. Grammie finally gets up off of Uncle Scottie and calls some people and then they took Uncle Scottie away. Then Grammie's friends and my great aunties all started to show up and fill our living room but I had to go be nobody in my room with Black Bean. While we waited for the people to take Uncle Scottie away Grammie said to me Maybelle, he's gone. He's really gone. You know about death don't you? I nodded at her, like Dragon I said. But Grammie didn't answer me I think because her heart is breaking. It was his time to go, I said and rubbed her back the way she did with me when Dragon died. But Grammie pulled away from me and said no it wasn't, it wasn't his time to go. He was too young, he was my baby. Then I knew it was time for me to be nobody because I wasn't making anything better by being somebody.

A couple of my aunties come to check on me now and then. Do I need anything to eat, am I thirsty, do I want to come sit with them in the living room. But I just say I'm fine and I'll stay here with Black Bean. Most people leave when it gets dark out but two of my aunties stay the night with Grammie and Grammie even gives me a kiss goodnight which helps a little but it's still hard to sleep because nothing feels right. I can hear them talking, but I don't exactly understand everything they're saying. I won't ask because it makes everybody too sad, and besides I don't care how it happened. Uncle Scottie died and he won't be around anymore. I have to get used to it like my Sad Mama and my Nobody Daddy and Dragon the cat.

When I open my eyes it is real early and I remember that nothing is okay. My stomach is growling because I didn't want to put anything in it yesterday besides my breakfast cereal back when I didn't know everything was changed. My Grammie and aunties are already up having coffee. Hi sweet

pea, they tell me and I say hello. Auntie Mara makes me an egg and toast and I sit with everyone but we're all pretty quiet. Grammie says we're going over to the graveyard to pick a plot for Uncle Scottie. I nod and don't ask questions. After breakfast I get in the car with Grammie and the aunts. At the graveyard I walk with Auntie Mara and I ask what are graveyards for exactly? I ask it real quiet so I don't upset Grammie too much. Auntie Mara says this is where you can bury the people's bodies who have died. Then you can come visit them and bring flowers and sit by their grave and talk to them if you like. I say, and then sometimes they come back? Even though I know the answer, I can't help it. I just have to be sure. No says Auntie Mara, no baby they don't come back.

The next few days I try to stay nobody most of the time because it's easier that way. I'm starting to feel a little better because I'm getting used to No Uncle Scottie. Also, the sun is getting so warm I can be outside in my t-shirt and shorts with no coat. I hear everyone talking sad in the kitchen so I run out into the yard with no shoes even. There's lots of mud around and I stick my feet right in and squeeze my toes so that it squishes all around just because it feels so good. Soup must've seen me out his window because he comes out his door too. I wave to him and he comes on over. Hi-o Soup I say. Hi Maybelle he says and sticks his feet right in the mud too. My mama says your Uncle Scottie died. He did, I tell him. Are you sad? I am, I tell him, but it's getting better. Maybe not for Grammie yet, though. Soup tells me, I've been seeing lots and lots of flowers opening up and the ground is just about as squishy as it gets. I nod and say my birthday must be real soon then. I haven't seen the birthday flowers yet so it's not quite here. You tell me when, Soup says. I will, I promise him. Then we get busy building the best mud castle you ever saw.

Today is what everyone calls the funeral which Auntie Mara says is like a celebration of Uncle Scottie's life. But we are at the funeral home getting ready for the funeral and it doesn't feel like a home or any kind of celebration. Everyone has to wear black because it's a rule for a funeral. Everybody is sad and serious and crying which I think is also a rule but I'm not sure. I'm not feeling too sad because it's

the sunniest kind of day and I get to wear a new fancy black dress. Also someone gave me a doll because they feel sad for me that I lost my Uncle Scottie. I didn't lose him I said, he died. Then I learned that losing someone is a way to say they died. I don't like that though, it sounds like maybe it's my fault.

Anyway, I'm just sitting on the floor rocking my new doll and trying to be nobody. I know Grammie doesn't like me on the floor in a new dress but she won't see because these days all she can notice is No Uncle Scottie. Everyone is scurrying around setting up for the funeral. I like the busy-ness and all the people moving around above me because I can almost pretend it's a celebration like Auntie Mara said. Grammie's not hurrying around at all. She's standing still staring at the box they put No Uncle Scottie in and she looks so small to me like a rock in a river with everyone else flowing around her. I can't look at her for long or I can feel her heart breaking inside my own heart. Instead I go back to watching the busy show. The sun shines in the huge double front doors and brightens everyone up. My eyes are almost watering from staring at the sunlight when the doors swing open and four people come in carrying the biggest bunches of fancy flowers I have ever seen. My heart does an extra beat of happiness. *This* must be my birthday day, finally! I get up off the floor and run on over to Grammie. Grammie look! I tell her. What is it Maybelle she says. Look! The flowers came! It's the flowers and it's finally my birthday! Grammie looks around and then I can tell she sees all the fancy birthday flowers. I wait for her to smile but she just shakes her head at me. Maybelle she says real slow and tired, those flowers don't got *nobody* thinking about birthdays. I want to tell Grammie to stop being so sad, that I could hang a pot on that lip! I know it doesn't work like that though. She can't just stop being sad because I want her to. But anyway, she's wrong. Those flowers got *me* thinking about birthdays. I am. I *am* thinking about birthdays.