

A General Rule

My father's instructions were very clear: Ronald's diaper should be changed five times a day, as a general rule. Once before breakfast. Once before lunch. Two times before dinner. And then once before bed. He'd typed the instructions carefully in the letter he gave me last week as he lay dying at St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital. He added a handwritten note at the bottom in his neat block letters reminding me that the five-a-day rule is always subject to change, circumstances depending. With Ronald it helps to be flexible.

I finished reading the letter for the second time, folded it, tossed it on the bed. The four-poster had the same tasseled white bedspread on it I used as a teenager. Everything else in the room was the same, too. The silky sheer drapes around the windows and the red chili pepper lights dangling from the ceiling. Black and white photos of me with

friends from high school I hadn't seen since moving to New York City ten years ago. The clipping from the *Newburgh Times Herald-Record*, once crisp and white, now faded and golden, announcing my acceptance to Barnard College.

It was time to leave for the cemetery. I walked downstairs, pausing at a collection of photographs my father had arranged on a table in the living room. Front and center was a shot of Ronald and me taken when we were children. Ronald was tall for an eleven year old, standing with his legs stiff and planted wide apart, his chest pushed out slightly, the way little boys will pose when they want to appear older and tougher. One hand clutched a hammer. The other rested protectively on my shoulder. I was eight, skinny, shy, wearing a rainbow striped tank top and shorts. I remembered Dad taking that picture; our faces look eager to please, but a little guarded, too. His temper was unpredictable for a while after Mom's accident.

The photo didn't show it, but Ronald and I were posing in front of a tree house. The summer after Mom died, Ronald built it in the vacant lot down the street from our house using lumber he filched from a construction site. I can remember Ronald checking out a book from the library on construction and then sketching out a picture on notebook paper before he got started. He bought nails from the hardware store with money from his allowance, got the hammer out of Dad's old tool box, and worked on the damn thing for at least two months. I brought him nails, helped carry boards, and sat under the tree watching as he patiently hammered wood together. When he was done, we had a fairly sturdy platform high in the leaves and a crude ladder made out of stray boards hammered to the trunk of the tree.

Ronald normally helped me climb the ladder to the tree house, but one Sunday at the end of the summer, he and his friend Greg Brown were sitting up there smoking cigarettes. “Go away, Danielle, go play with Daddy,” Ronald called down to me when I asked to come up. I didn’t listen and tried to climb the ladder alone. I almost made it all the way, too, but I lost my footing towards the top. With hands grasping frantically at splintering wood, I fell backwards about ten feet down to the grass. I didn’t break any bones, but I’d gouged my leg on a branch when I landed and you could tell it needed stitches by the amount of blood pouring out. I couldn’t walk and I was wailing, so Ronald picked me up and carried me ten blocks to the hospital. He called our father when we got there.

I set the photo down, took a deep breath, and walked into the kitchen. Ronald and the live-in nurse, Kathy, were sitting at the table in the breakfast nook. Dad hired Kathy on a temporary basis last year when he started chemo treatments.

“Good morning,” I said lightly. I never knew how to act around Kathy (friend, family member, hired help?) with her drab grey tops and sensible polyester slacks. She knew my brother better than I did, now.

“Morning,” Kathy said. “Are you almost ready to go?”

“Almost,” I said. I sat down next to Ronald, who was staring at the flowers at the center of the table. “Hey Ronald, I was just looking at that picture of you and me in front of the tree house you built,” I said. “You remember that, don’t you?”

He didn’t reply, of course. He hadn’t spoken in something like three years. I made myself look at his face again, at his body. His hair looked like it was falling out. You

could see his scalp through the tiny, greasy strands, and he had a moustache like my dad's. His lips were red and drool was coming out of his mouth and snot was on the moustache. His eyes were still the same bright blue, but now one crossed inward while the other one faced straight ahead, and they were unfocused. I didn't think he was really seeing anything. His body was drawn into itself, his thin, waxy arms folded into an X over his torso, the wrists limp, the deteriorated legs slanted off to one side. His whole body looked unused, broken. Kathy had dressed him in brown pants and a blue golf shirt. A scuffed brown leather belt was loosely fastened about his waist, cinched with the large, gaudy, western belt buckle Mom had given him for his tenth birthday. Ronald always wore the belt; it was included in Dad's letter of instructions.

Kathy stood at the counter now, drying dishes, her back to us. "You shouldn't put so much pressure on him to remember things. You know he can't," she said. "I just talk to him about the normal, everyday things that we do. It's better for him that way."

Ignoring her, I stood up and began pushing Ronald's wheelchair's down the ramp to the garage. I climbed into a bucket seat in the back of Dad's van and watched as Kathy expertly strapped his chair into place with a series of complicated belts and latches. "You okay there, Ron?" I asked. Ronald just stared at his hands vacantly and didn't look up at me. I wondered if he knew where he was, if he even knew I was there.

I was in high school when Ronald first started hearing the voices. He had just graduated and was attending community college in town. He wanted to study science, maybe even go to med school one day. Then I came home from a football game at about 11:30 one Friday night. I found Dad on the sofa downstairs in the dark. He was wearing boxers and a white t-shirt with yellow stains under the sleeves. His arms were still

muscled from his years as a contractor, but for the first time ever, he seemed like an old man to me, with his thick glasses and bony knees and the scent of the Vick's he rubbed on his chest in the winter. "What's the matter?" I asked. His fists were clenched and it looked like he had been crying.

"It's your brother," he said. "I yelled at him, shook him. Jesus, I even smacked him. Nothing helps. I don't know what to do, Danielle."

Just then I heard an odd cackle from Ronald's room, a sound like a hysterical hen. The cackling was followed by loud shouts.

"Who's up there with him at this hour?" I asked.

"No one," he said. "No one."

Upstairs, Ronald was sitting on his bed, legs crossed. The room was dark and the news was on the TV, but the sound was muted. The room smelled ripe, sweaty, a combination of old perspiration and something sour and meaty, like a package of rotting raw liver I once found behind a butcher shop. Ronald ignored me when I asked him what was wrong. As I stood there and watched him, he occasionally burst into fits of giggles. "Are you stoned?" I asked finally.

"Did you know Iraq is really in Afghanistan?" he said, but he looked away from me as he said it and I had the feeling he wasn't really talking to me. "No, it's in China," he continued, "where the kitties are. Imagine what Mr. Kansas will say when he finds out about that one!" He babbled on about kitties and bunnies and strange men in black baseball caps holding machine guns. I just stood there, looking on wordlessly, trying not to breathe the smell in too deeply. Eventually I got the creeps and closed the door.

"Go to sleep," I remember telling my father downstairs. "He'll be okay."

At the cemetery, about fifty folding metal chairs had been set up on a square of fake grass next to my father's coffin and the adjacent hole in the ground. I was surprised by the number of chairs; I had expected a smaller gathering. The seats were filling up, and I could see even more mourners coming over from the parking lot. They walked over the carefully tended green grass, wet and bright and shocking next to the overcast sky, the mist, the black clothing. Ronald and I were the only family members. Dad's relatives were all dead and Mom had been estranged from hers. Simone, one of Dad's best friends, stopped me on my way to the gravesite to administer a damp hug. I shivered as I arranged myself in one of the folding chairs in the front row, and Kathy wheeled Ronald up next to where I sat. Kathy stayed for the funeral (friend, family member, hired help?), taking a seat behind Ronald's chair. My stomach hurt and I hoped I would not have to vomit.

When Dad was first diagnosed with cancer a year ago, I'd looked into bringing Ronald into Manhattan to live with me. I made an appointment at the Meitzer Support Center, a non-profit organization for schizophrenics and their families, to see what it would take to outfit my condo in Washington Heights for someone like Ronald. "Well, first of all, you'll need a personal nurse, at the very least," said Ms. Wilson. She was the head counselor. "If he's truly catatonic, everything will have to be done for him," she continued. "Baths, feedings, brushing his teeth, exercising his limbs, changing diapers, taking him for walks. Everything. It will be like having a newborn baby, only you'll quickly find he's a lot heavier than a newborn." She had chuckled knowingly and, I

thought, inappropriately, at this point. “And then there will be weekly visits to the doctors, both a psychiatrist and a primary care physician. Honestly, I don’t see how your father handled this all by himself. This is no job for a single person.”

The service was short. The eulogy was delivered by Herb Simms, Simone’s husband, and then Reverend Haley said a few words and led a prayer. Two men, gravediggers, I suppose, waited at a respectful distance until the end, then we watched as they lowered Dad’s casket into the hole next to the fake grass. I glanced at Ronald once or twice to see how he was taking it, but he still seemed to be off in his own world.

After the funeral, Simone and Herb had everyone over to their house for coffee and food. They had been friends with my parents for as long as I could remember. Simone was my mother’s best friend growing up, and when she died, Simone had more or less adopted my father as an additional family member. She was a tall, big-boned woman who always wore polyester wrap dresses with garish flower prints. Her hair was gray, greasy, and unkempt, and the bottoms of her front teeth were stained nicotine yellow. Simone chain-smoked, and when she talked it was in a hoarse, mannish voice that made my throat hurt. I tried to forgive her all these qualities, since I knew she had been a big help to my father and Ronald after I moved away, but it was hard.

“So, how’s life treating you in the big city?” she asked me as I helped her plate up cookies in her smoky, linoleum-floored kitchen.

“Fine,” I said.

“Dating anyone?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said, concentrating on arranging ginger snaps in a perfect circle on a white plate. Actually, I was seeing someone. His name was Dan, and he was another

attorney at my firm. He was a junior partner in the intellectual property division. I only saw him on Sunday afternoons, when his wife took their kids to visit the in-laws in New Jersey. I saw no reason to go into any of this with Simone.

“I guess Newburgh’s no place for someone like you,” Simone said. “Did your father ever tell you he lived a summer in Brooklyn? Right before he met your mother?”

“Yeah, he loved to talk about that time,” I said, trying to conceal my surprise. I never knew Dad had lived anywhere but Newburgh.

“He was happy to have you kids, though, and he loved your Mom,” Simone said. “But he was always unsettled, you know? Searching. It’s weird, but the thing with Ronald, as crappy as this may sound to you, it kind of settled him. Made him calmer, somehow.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“The stories he told me! I don’t know how he did it. Having to clean up after him like he was a baby. He told me the first time he had to change Ronald’s diaper, and it was full of shit, he cried, did you know that?”

I took a tiny bite of cookie, nodded, willed Simone to stop talking.

“Richard took him to the Orange Psychiatric Institute,” Simone continued. “After he was diagnosed. And after he stopped talking. Because that’s what the psychiatrist here told him to do. Commit him. Commit him to the loony ward. He wasn’t sure, but he wanted to do what’s best for Ronald. And maybe he wanted to see if the doctors up there could fix him, I don’t know. I went with him, for moral support. They took us on a tour while we were there. It was like hell. Full of zombie people, everyone had dead eyes. And it stank in there. Everyone’s shit and piss and medicine, all combined. We sat down

with the doctors to talk after the tour. As soon as they started talking electroshock therapy, like it was a good option for Ronald, that was the last straw for your father. He couldn't stand leaving him there. 'No one's putting any son of mine in an institution,' Richard said to me that day. 'Over my dead body.'"

My cell phone interrupted Simone, its bright digital chirp out of place in her old-fashioned kitchen. I glanced at the number. It was Julie, the partner I worked for. "I'll be right back," I said and walked into the hallway. "Hello?"

"Danielle, I know this is a really bad time for you," Julie said. "I just wanted to see if you could possibly come into the office tomorrow afternoon. We're meeting with the people from the Pratt Corporation, and we really need you there for the contract negotiations. Around four o'clock?"

"Sure," I answered automatically, without thinking. "I'll be there."

"So, what are you going to do?" Simone asked me once I'd hung up and walked back into the kitchen. "What are you going to do about Ronald?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Yes, you do," Simone said, her mouth twisted in a sour line. "Your father said you would take him with you to the city, but I knew better."

"Well, what would you do?" I said quietly. "What if I asked you to take him? You and Herb. Would you like that?" I stood up, bile in my throat swelling like lava out of a volcano. Simone just looked at me with wide cow eyes that were at once empty and reproachful. Then she turned her back to me, picked up a carafe of coffee, and started for the door. I sat back down at the table and rested my head on a placemat. Simone faced me again before she left.

“You’d have help, you know,” she said. “Your father and brother have a lot of friends in this town. Which you would know, if you had ever taken the time to visit. How many times have you been back down here since you moved to the city? Three times? Maybe four?”

I didn’t answer.

“Go on back to the city, Danielle. Go back to whatever life you’ve made for yourself there.”

I left her then, pushing past her and walking back into the living room. Kathy had positioned Ronald next to the fireplace, where Herb had started a blaze. It was the only cheerful spot in the room, amid the mourners, amid the black. Kathy wasn’t mingling. She sat next to Ronald, talking to him quietly and eating cheese straws off of a pink plate.

“Are you ready to leave?” I asked Kathy.

She nodded. I watched as she set her plate down, bundled Ronald up, wheeled him to the van. When we were back at the house, I thought about the briefcase upstairs in my old room. In it was a list of four institutions for the mentally ill, all highly recommended by Ms. Wilson from the Meitzer Center. The Orange Psychiatric Institute was number three on the list. I had planned on visiting two of them tomorrow, but now it would have to wait until next weekend. A wave of nausea washed over me and I thought I would go upstairs and lie down.

Before I climbed the stairs, I bent down to give Ronald a half-hug, his snotty mustache tickling my cheek. I inadvertently inhaled the meaty sour smell that was still there, albeit subdued, despite my efforts to keep a little distance. Ronald’s arms came up

unexpectedly, jerkily, pulling me closer before I could move away. I could hear Kathy's voice in the background, yelling at him to let me go, but Ronald held me until I heard a rumbling noise from deep in his throat. The rumble turned into a whisper.

“Remember, Danielle,” Ronald whispered. “I do remember.”

I put my arms around him fully, looked upwards, squeezed my eyes shut. I could no longer smell anything, but I could feel his warm, sweaty cheek pressed against mine.

“It's okay, Brother,” I said. “It's going to be okay.”