

Labor Day was Yesterday

Labor Day weekend was the responsible time for the high school science teacher to have his wisdom teeth cut out. It was late in life. He was twenty-five. He had insurance and an 8:00-3:00 schedule. He could be in the dentist's chair by 3:30 on Friday, healed by Sunday with still Monday off to enjoy. Maybe he would clean the garden or gutters for Pop. In his third year of teaching Norman knew the drill: don't tell the kids about the surgery. They'll just ask for the pills.

In the classroom Friday before his surgery he backed himself into his U-shaped cubby of floor-to-ceiling shelves behind his podium. Each shelf carried a weight of labeled jars filled with formaldehyde and something dead but not dissolved. He met the blank stares of small town teens looking at him. He sucked the sick smell of chemical behind him. Teaching was only a temporary occupation to pass the time until he figured on what he wanted to do, but it had been three years and he lived in what amounted to a shed behind a widow's house on the edge of town. There were no highlights, only science projects sans vigor and over-cautious frog dissections, under-cautious frog dissections. A man was about to cut his mouth and pull the bones from his head, and for his year that would be the peak. Often when he spoke to the kids about their possibilities he wanted to say them, I did this because it was easy. With everything spread out before me, I settled like a scared cat in high wind, wide-eyed watching the leaves blow. Now I think I'm stuck.

Friday evening he didn't wake up on his own accord in his own bed. It was the floral couch in his Pop's living room while his busy little momma fluffed his pillow and adjusted his blankets.

She said, We're glad you're with us, and helped him sit up.

Norman took in the dismay of his dead grandmother's hundred clocks stacked on the walls between pictures and mirrors, all ticking out of sync so that every second became a second with a hundred seconds between its beginning and end, forming a solid beat of time that stretched out until it was broken by a chime, whistle, or cuckoo.

Why are we here? he asked.

She straightened his body on the couch, pressed her thin fingers to his shoulders, his forearms and hands, then his head, then gently to his cheeks. How do you feel? she asked.

Groggy.

Do you hurt?

No, ma'am.

He looked at the vacuum tracks in the carpet, the end tables cleared of dust, the wiped down pictures of aunts and cousins, and the thousand mammy trinkets on walls, shelves, and cabinets, each rubbed free of fingerprints. Why is it so clean? he asked her.

She told him to hold on just one second and left for the kitchen.

The house had been filthy since Nanny died two years back. Pop thought indoors were useless for a man except for sleeping. He didn't leave the bric-a-brac all over out of love or remembrance. It just wasn't his to fool with. Norman worried his momma was

death cleaning. It's how she kept herself through loss—buzzing into every corner with a broom, scouring pans, polishing knobs. Grief management was vinegar, newspaper, and clear windows.

Is Pop all right? he called down to her.

She came back with a frosted mason jar of cold potato puree. She held his jaw and tilted his head. Open up, she said and fed him like a baby bird.

Sis is on her way, his momma said.

Norman made an affirmative noise. She tilted his head back one more time, but he stopped her. Can I feed myself?

The clocks beat a thousand ticks and woke Norman up late on Friday. He turned and tried to sleep again. He pressed one ear to the flowers in the couch and covered the other ear with a pillow, but the pressure hurt his mouth. The living room ceiling was low enough that he had to dodge the fan cords when he stood, but he forgot about the series of ornate birdhouses hanging from an exposed rafter and sent one swinging with the center of his forehead.

Norman found then opened the door to Pop's room and saw the thin sheet laid across his belly two stutter-step rise and collapse in rhythm. He went to the old man and tugged the blankets back over his chest. There was a picture of Marilyn Monroe having a laugh on the nightstand. Pop replaced a picture of his wife with this one when she died. They never got along, with each other and most people, and when Pop's mind began

slipping away from him not long after she passed, Norman wondered if in Pop's confused head he'd been married to the beautiful woman he said goodnight to the last couple of years.

When the garden went to hell in middle summer, they figured Pop wasn't much left for the world. His long time habit was to walk the yard each morning, and each morning he discovered his garden and tended it. But then tomatoes-uncaged sprawled on the ground. Pigweed and lamb's quarter and false groundcherry choked the squash. Pop had been laid up regular three months now, and it galled his ass, Norman was sure, to lie in bed with daylight burning.

Even if Pop had never been close with Norman, or close with a single other person in the world, Norman admired the man for his energy and resolve—he wanted to work until he couldn't, and he did. He didn't want people messing with him, so he acted a way that made everybody stop. It still broke Norman's heart a little, the indignity of shitting yourself so that a daughter you never had much to do with had to clean it, the only daughter that would really fool with you at all. It wasn't exactly sadness Norman felt, more an impatience to see the man quiet in a suit in a box in a church.

Norman noticed a tinny taste in his mouth while he stood next to Pop's bed. In the bathroom sink he spit and saw thin blood and bubbles. He rinsed the sink and went to the porch for air and escape from the thousand ticks of his Nanny's clocks in the small room.

In the full dark he could only see right in front of him. He cracked the screen door and spit. He smelled his sister's cigarette and saw her ember down at the other end in the swing. He couldn't see her. He pictured her. She looked like a weed—a pretty enough face, though boyish, almost a copy of his, but with wild hair. Her bellow laugh and

disregard made strangers and family uncomfortable. And when he was around her while she was around people, the back of Norman's neck tensed. He sat beside her, and she put her head on his shoulder. He knew her mouth was crooked in the dark.

He's almost gone, she said full of pity.

Norman shifted a bit. He wanted to say that she fought like a cat with every single relative every time they came down for Sunday dinner back when Nanny was alive, that she never had much to do with Pop at all, that she married a lousy carpenter—wait and see if Pop forgives you that—and that generally when people died she fell to pieces not because there was a bright love between them, but because people would look at her and maybe feel something sweet for her. But he said, I think I'm bleeding.

He took her lighter then rubbed his finger over each of the wounds in his mouth. In the flame he saw the blood channeled in his fingerprints. He cleaned his finger then checked each cut. Bottom, left.

Sister asked him if he wanted a cigarette.

He did, very much. But he couldn't brush his teeth yet, and his momma would skin him if she smelled it.

Saturday morning was when Norman couldn't talk for the hands in his teeth.

What? his momma asked. She took her fingers, her head, and her whole body out his mouth and clicked off her flashlight.

Your hands taste like Pine-Sol.

She frowned at him. You're still bleeding on the left side, and now it looks like you're starting to ooze on the right.

She came back at him with gauze. She pulled his jaw down by his chin and gently swabbed his wounds. She said, And you're so pale now.

He closed his eyes and listened to the white noise of the clocks. Nanny used to click her dentures together. She couldn't get used to the horsey, artificial things. All day long, in the kitchen, in the yard, a steady beat of clicks. Pop told him something not long after she died. It was a rare moment of openness after they'd plowed the garden in the early spring. He had asked for Norman's help, though he never asked anybody for anything. Norman worked. Norman thought Pop seemed to notice that his grandson was getting to be a grown ass man, that he wasn't just the grandboy that was catered to by the women because he was the first grandboy. Pop drank water under a pear tree and said that the clocks haunted him—their million clicks, Nanny's million clicks. Instead of taking the clocks down he plugged his ears when inside, as if she lived in her clocks and he could spoil her fun.

Pop wants you to have the house, his momma said as she dabbed his cuts.

Norman moved his eyebrows around and tried to look down at her.

He doesn't have a proper will, she said, but I found something he wrote in a drawer. Norman comma house it says. Your Sister won't like that. His momma sat up a little straighter to look in his eyes. Have you seen those stickers she's starting to put out on the pots and pans? His momma rolled her eyes. I guess it's because you're the oldest grandson. And the only one that ever tried to put in some time with him. You could get

out of that shed and set down some real roots here. And I'm just down the road, she said smiling.

The mess of gauze tickled something soft in his throat. He gagged a little, and his momma pulled the wad out. He coughed and coughed. He'd swallowed what seemed to be a quart of blood when he woke up this morning. He thought it might come up. Deep in his throat felt sick.

Oh, darling, his momma said. She touched his head and patted his back and rubbed his shoulders. I'm so sorry.

He lay back breathing, and she pulled his legs into her lap and held them. They each were quiet. He didn't like his legs there. It made him feel so small and ten. His joints itched in the sockets to move.

She asked, Do you think you'd want to live here?

He sat quiet a second before asking, Do you think Pop even likes me?

Hard to say, honey. He's a hard man. I guess he may love us all in some way.

He stared at the too short popcorn ceiling, looked over the wood panel walls, and the laminate floors. You think he'd like me staying here? he asked.

He wrote it down for a reason. Do you want to stay here?

Norman sat up, and his momma turned to look at him. He saw the bloody, wet cotton still in her hands. Something riled in his guts. He put his hand out and turned his head.

He said, No, no, no, no, no.

Norman had seen a few red stickers early in the day scattered through the house and thought it a matter of course, his sister reconnoitering, marking pieces of interest. Then there they were, all at once it seemed, on Saturday evening as the light waned outside, like a flea market had jogged through. Red stickers on eight of the clocks, twelve decorative dinner plates, one hundred and six mammy figurines, one stuffed parrot that parroted back what you said, most of the cookware, and all of a neglected stack of put-up green beans and tomatoes. Sis had industry no one conceived.

Norman asked his momma, Should we tell her those beans have probably gone bad. The lids are rusty.

His momma just flipped her hand and kept cleaning the gutters.

Let me get up there and do that for you, he said.

No, baby. Go lay down. You need to rest.

I remember exactly where I was standing when Pop told me I could have this, Sister said Sunday morning.

She was hovering over a table saw in the shed, making shit up. Norman envied her cigarette. Norman envied that she'd take this saw home to her lazy husband, even though he had one already and Norman could use it to build shelves or something if he'd ever get some drive. He envied the pressure of her want, the way it made a space feel like the air had left. Norman could never see to getting what he wanted. Pop could. Sis must

have caught that habit in her makeup. Norman had weak, vague longings, nothing ever clear or solid as a table saw or clock or twelve inch skillet. He couldn't say what was inside of him for fear or manners or sweetness or, really, for not knowing what the hell was there.

All those stickers will make Pop think you're hurrying him, Norman said.

A waxy look of concern coated her face. You don't think he'll think that, do you?

Norman looked at the clean, sharp tools hanging from the rafters. He bent his neck around the corner to look into the yard and see if his momma was there.

Let me have a cigarette.

You'll smell like it, Sis said.

I will anyway standing out here with you.

He took a deep lungful and sat on a bench to wait out the dizzy. He spit blood into the little pail he'd started carrying and touched his tongue to the gauze packed behind his teeth.

You should just tell her you smoke, Sister said.

He wanted to say to Sis that she had fucked around more than their poor, old momma could stand; that he was the good one, the one that didn't sneak away at night, smoke or drink, etc. Every one of those things was true about him, but he kept it better hidden. He said, Sis, I don't think that would be a good idea.

Sister walked around the shed touching the shovels and hammers. Under the guise of straightening things Norman watched her make discrete plunder piles.

Just take the damn saw, Norman said.

Sis was on the roof red-tagging shingles Monday coming into evening. Nimbostratus clouds welled up and grayed the sky behind her, and Norman stood on the top rungs of a ladder, shaking it back and forth, rattling it against the gutters.

It's not fair about the house, she said.

What am I'm going to do when it rains?

Get more shingles I guess.

I haven't decided on staying here yet.

She looked up at him with genuine sweetness. Normy, you need to get out of that shed.

He laughed at her and spit blood through the rungs. I probably do.

She sat down and a quick bite of wind carried some of her stickers off the grit of the shingles.

You made your point yet? he asked her.

Not all of it.

What else you got?

You need to be a grown up and tell Momma that you smoke. That's the only reason she's letting you get the house is you hide things from her.

Norman nodded. That'd break her heart.

It's not fair that I always have to be the bad one.

Nobody made you that way.

Norman, I've got high stress. I always have.

She did not. So Norman just climbed up next to her and asked for a cigarette. His stomach reeled from the motion and the blood he swallowed the other day. He smoked and watched a big tree shake.

Sis said, Momma would stop doting on you so much if you just disappointed her every now and then. She'd treat you like a man instead of her baby. Sis sucked a long drag off her cigarette. Pop would've, too.

Uh huh, Norman said. Where'd you get that insight?

She looked over at him. I think, dummy.

He watched his cigarette glow between his knees. He wanted to say to Sis, Let's burn the place down with him in it. He might like that—just Pop, a fire, and the dissolution of mess. But he didn't say it. He swallowed it. Instead, when he heard his momma call out the front door he threw his cigarette in the clean gutter and asked, Ma'am?

Green lizards blew their throats out, provoking. They did pushups at each other on the porch screen fussing over a girl or their own square of mesh wire. Norman watched them half an hour waiting on them to go for each other, but they wouldn't. It was still raining from the night before. Everyone else was busy inside: his momma cleaning, Pop dying and Sis red-tagging inheritance.

He spit bloody water into his pail then put more water in his mouth, rolled it around, and let it sit while his mouth filled with blood again. When he tossed the mixture

out the door, it was not raining quite hard enough for the blood, spit, and water to arch from the pail and disappear into the thick downpour like he imagined in his head. Things never happened like he imagine in his head. Instead, the mixture made a wet thunk on the dirt and spread.

Norman couldn't stand up anymore. He wobbled back and sat down heavy enough in his chair that each of the lizards, still without the spines to make a move toward the other, bent its neck to see Norman's eyes and blinked. He thought he felt like them. Like he, too, was looking at somebody that won't do shit.