

6424 Avenue Z

Before she died, Grandma made me promise that I'd take care of her house. How could I say no? She was the only person in this whole world who didn't look at me and see a good for nothing N word. Yeah, I've been called that and worse.

Sometimes I thought I deserved it. After all, Mama left and didn't even tell me who my daddy was. He never bothered to find me either, so I guess he didn't care about having a son. Grandma, Mama's mother, had more going for her than any of us. She ran a flower shop up on Tyler Road and pretty much supplied all the weddings and funerals in our two stoplight town. It was enough to keep us in red beans and rice and nearly enough to maintain her little house on Avenue Z.

That house was her pride and joy and it was well-maintained when Grandpa was alive. He didn't ever have a steady job--working construction when he could get it and handyman tasks when he couldn't--but he did take care of that house. He power-washed and painted it every few years, replaced any rotting wood, mowed the lawn, and trimmed the bushes. After he died, though, Grandma couldn't do all of that, not alone. Me, I had enough trouble taking care of myself. Nobody wants to hire a man who didn't even finish high school and can't install Sheetrock or use a T-square. Grandpa wanted to teach me all of that, but I was too busy hustling a few grams to buy that gold chain so I could attract a girl with an eye for shiny things.

The only class I cared about in high school was auto shop. I can fix just about anything wrong with a vehicle as long as wasn't built after the years started to begin with twos. Computers and gadgets on these newer cars make them a bitch to work with. Maybe I could have still gotten

a job as a mechanic, except for my bad habit of taking the boys up on their offers to have just one more drink all the way up to three a.m., which made it a feat to drag myself out of bed at a reasonable hour.

Two years ago, though, I wasn't doing so bad. Grandma's house needed painting, but I got over there every Sunday to eat gumbo or fried catfish and mow the lawn. Back then, I was living with Sheryl. She had a little house on Avenue G and I'd mow her grass too, and trim the azalea bushes when they started to look like a crazy person's hair. She had a nice job at the post office with benefits and everything. Since she finished high school and even had a two year degree from the community college, she could get the kind of job that doesn't leave you sweaty and greasy at the end of the day. I wanted to hang on to her for sure, so I managed to keep a job with Bobby at his tire shop for the whole time I was with her, even though Bobby docked my pay when I showed up five minutes late or took extra time on my lunch break.

All that was great until Brick Wall got out of prison. I'd been knowing Brick since high school when he made his way into town like he was President of the United States instead of a chubby sixteen year old with a halter top-wearing mama. Everyone knew what brought him to town was his mama's relationship, if you could call it that, with a certain married councilman. Kids learned real fast, though, that mentioning Mr. George to Brick would get them a quick, hard fist to the face.

Brick was good looking, if you were into square heads and slit-eyed sneers. Sheryl couldn't keep her hands off him. Prison had transformed his fat into muscle and added even more sneer to his sneer. He showed up at Cat's Juke Joint one night and the next day I was out on the

street and he'd moved in with Sheryl. Naturally, I didn't make it to work and naturally, Bobby saw fit to fire me, even though I called him and explained the situation.

I started to think God really hated me when, a week later, Grandma up and died of a heart attack. Even though I was ashamed to do it, I'd been crashing on her sleeper sofa while I tried to scrape together enough cash for first and last month's rent on an apartment in that nasty brick complex on the edge of town. It wasn't fancy, being the kind of place where shoeless kids kick a half-dead rubber ball around the parking lot, but the bastard landlord's rent would still have left me with fifty dollars a month for food.

I stumbled out of my room one morning and Grandma wasn't up yet. I'd slept late, and it was nearly nine. Since I didn't have the job at Bobby's anymore, I could hardly see the point of getting out of bed at all, except that Grandma would be disappointed in me if I didn't find some work. She always made coffee as soon as she got up and then biscuits or grits and eggs. I didn't smell any coffee and the kitchen was empty. I stood there for a second, a bad feeling eating at me. At first, I thought I should let her sleep. For all I knew, she'd stayed up late working on the books for her shop or watching the Zenith in her room, but that worry would not go away and I had to go at least look at her.

Grandma always left the door of her bedroom open a crack when she slept--to let the air in, she said--so I just had to push it a little.

Now, I've seen dead things before. I had a dog once that got out the back fence and met the bumper of a truck. Even before I reached the street, I knew he was gone. Buried him behind Grandma's house and never had another animal. I've dug graves for squirrels back there, too, and even her eighteen year old Persian cat that turned up dead one day. But seeing Grandma there

with her eyes staring at nothing and her thick leg sticking out from under the quilt messed me up bad. I felt like I had floated outside my body--I wasn't standing outside Grandma's room anymore even though my feet were on that beige carpet.

I got my phone from my pocket and dialed 911 right away. The dispatcher told me to try to wake her up, but you can tell dead when you see it. Still, I made myself go in there and shake her, crying the whole time like when I was a little kid and found Spike in the street.

I lived in her house after that for a while, but then I couldn't anymore. I don't believe in ghosts, but I felt her there and it drove me crazy. A month after the funeral, I pawned her rings, sold her 1989 Buick, and got that first and last month's rent. It was such a relief to move into the rundown apartment, even though it smelled like mold and stale cigarettes instead of Grandma's favorite air freshener. I kept telling myself I'd get over to her house and mow the lawn, pack up the rest of her things, and tend to the bushes, but I'd talked Bobby into hiring me again and I had to hold onto that job. Weekends I stayed at the juke joint too long at night and spent most of the daylight hours in bed.

The letter from the city got me to go over there again. The piece of paper told me that if I didn't appear in front of the council at the next meeting, they'd tear down the house because it was a public safety hazard. I had to sign for the letter at the post office right there in front of Sheryl. She asked me how I was doing, as if she cared, and then flipped back her long, fake braids, showing exactly how much she didn't. I knew she was still with Brick. I saw them sometimes at the juke joint and whenever I did, I snuck out the back door.

I rode over to the house right after leaving the post office, hating myself for neglecting it for six months. Someone had broken the front window and the weeds reached halfway up the

siding. I sat in my truck and cried, telling Grandma I was sorry for being such a mess. I got the mower from the garage right then and shoved it through the lawn, which was so overgrown that I had to fight for every inch. By the time I was done, my T-shirt was soaked through. I couldn't make myself go inside, so I sat back in my truck and turned the air conditioning as high as it would go, too tired to cry anymore.

I had two weeks before the council meeting, but every night, I put off going to Grandma's house in favor of just one more beer. I was going to do it the day of the meeting, except Bobby made me stay late because I showed up five minutes after eight-thirty. No customers ever came in the shop that early, but that didn't stop Bobby from riding me for those five minutes like I was ruining his crappy business. I mean, the guy sells used tires, but he acts like he's Bill Gates.

The council met in the city hall, a building from the 1950s, back when our town was white. As I walked through the glass doors and into the chambers, I was greeted by photos of the past mayors--all jowly, pasty dudes with the exception of the most recent two. Mayor John Silver, the current one, sat in the middle of a C-shaped table with two black men, two black women, and an ancient white guy who looked like he'd been in office when the building was erected. I knew, though, because Grandma told me onced, that he was actually one of the guys on the wall, the last white mayor.

Right after I entered, they stood to say the Pledge of Allegiance. I mumbled along, checking out the crowd. All of the people in the room and up on the council had clothes without any stains and soft hands that hadn't seen any real work in decades, if ever. I wished I'd had time to change out of my work clothes.

There weren't many people in the audience--the police chief, the fire chief, a white woman holding a notebook, and three people wearing nice shirts with the seal of the city on them, whom I guessed were city employees. I wanted a copy of the agenda like the others were holding, but they were right by the big council desk. I had no desire to parade up in front of God and everyone to get one.

I waited through the approval of the minutes, whatever that meant, an award for an outstanding citizen, and the declaration of March as Diabetes Month in the city. I must have dozed off a little, but I woke up when someone said: "6264 Avenue Z."

I raised my hand like kids used to in school when they knew the answer to a question. I never did that.

"Please come up to the microphone and state your name and address for the record," said the council member in the middle--a skinny woman with a beak for a nose and a head full of kinky curls.

I trudged up to the front and went behind the lectern like a teacher, which was weird because I had nothing to teach these people. "Herbert Bower, 6264 Avenue Z."

"You live in that house?" the old white councilman said. His name was Paul Hines. I wouldn't have necessarily remembered it, but all of the council members had nameplates in front of them.

"No sir. I have an apartment at Oak Grove Place," I said.

"Good, 'cause that house ain't been habitable for a long time," he said. "It was owned by your Grandma, right?"

"Yes sir."

"An upstanding woman. She provided flowers for both of my sons' funerals."

I heard Grandma's voice sometimes and I remembered her saying now, "Old Paul will outlive us all. Eighty-five, at least, and he's buried two sons and a wife, bless his heart. His daddy was a preacher at that church off La. 24. Came here in the nineteen fifties and they been here ever since. Paul knows every street and soul in this town." That was two years ago, so if Grandma was right, he'd be eighty-seven now.

"I'm sorry, sir," I mumbled.

"I'm sorry for you, losing her. But you got to understand, we can't have houses like that in our city. Some kid wanders in there and falls through the floor, they hold us responsible. We don't want to tear it down, but if you don't fix it up, we'll have to. And then you'll have to pay us for the cost of the demolition. If you can't come up with the money, we place a lien on the property. I'm sorry, Mr. Bower. We can give you ninety days."

"Yes, sir. I'd appreciate that, sir. I promise I'll get over there and work on it," I said.

The old man looked at me and there was deep sorrow in those pale, blue eyes. I got the feeling he understood what I was going through. I almost started crying at that moment--for me losing Grandma so quick and for him burying two sons and a wife. How does a man continue after that? I guessed I'd never know, since I wasn't likely to ever have a wife or kids, and that made me want to cry even more. But I didn't. I sat back down and slipped out when they were discussing some other poor bastard's falling down shack.

I really meant to take care of the house. Right after the meeting, I rode over and parked in the driveway. I sat there for a long time, thinking. Houses die when there's no one living in them. I understood that. I knew I had to either sell it, rent it, tear it down, or move back in. I couldn't

stand the thought of anyone else living in Grandma's house and I also couldn't tear it down, since I'd promised to take care of it. I had to move back in.

I took a deep breath and got out of the truck. The tree in front of the house used to have a swing, but one of the ropes broke when I was ten. I swung on the remaining rope until it broke too, and after that, I just climbed the tree. I'd sit up there and think about what I would do when I grew up. First, I wanted to be a professional wrestler and later, an auto mechanic. Grandma told me I could be anything I wanted, but we didn't have the money for trade school or community college. Looking at the tree was painful enough, but I could barely focus on the house itself, which was painted white with green shutters. Grandpa's last paint job had been ten years ago and it was flaking off, showing the gray wood underneath. One of the shutters was also rotting. But if I was going to move back in, I needed to take care of the inside first.

I pulled open the screen door and the top hinge gave way. The green door behind it was smeared with dirt. I unlocked and opened it, recoiling at the mildew smell. Grandma had always made me take off my shoes when I went in her house, but for once, I left my work boots on. Rain had come in from the broken front window and soaked the beige carpet. I remembered how pleased Grandma was with the softness of it under her bare feet, though she wore house slippers or flip flops inside. I had taken most of her furniture to the apartment, but what was left would have to be thrown away. I hauled the old armchair and end tables to the curb. I couldn't bring myself to go into the bedroom yet, so I used my pocketknife to rip out the living room carpet, revealing some decent hardwood flooring. I got an old quilt and fixed it in the window, to stop the rain getting in.

I had to stop when it got dark because the electricity had been shut off. I locked the door and sat in my truck again. I knew I had to replace that window right away, but this is the thing about me and home improvement--I'm just not very good at it. I'll measure wrong, miscalculate, screw things up. But I'd promised. I had to try.

I went back to my apartment. Since I hadn't been able to afford new furniture, getting my own place hadn't quite banished Grandma's memory. After all, I still had her table and chairs, her sofa, and the bedroom set from when I was ten, which I stored in her laundry room when I was in between apartments. My life. I, a grown man, couldn't make enough money to provide for myself.

Grandma never made me feel bad, though. Tomorrow is another day, she'd say. And then, she'd point out all the good things about me, my honesty and kindness, my ability to fix cars, my desire to improve myself. Usually, it worked, but now she was gone, so who was going to tell me that I wasn't actually worthless?

I remembered that I hadn't eaten, so I fixed myself a plate of leftover red beans and rice, the only thing I knew how to cook. I sat at the table and ate, reminding myself that tomorrow was another day. I would start over.

But while I was asleep, it started raining. I didn't think much of it. I woke up, heard that God had decided to take a shower, as Grandma used to say, and went back to sleep. By the time my alarm went off at seven, though, the rain was still coming down, and not a little drizzle either. We get plenty of rain in Louisiana, so I wasn't alarmed. Like I said, I've been through hurricanes and plenty of other wet times.

As I shuffled around the apartment, making coffee and sniffing the possibly expired milk, a bad feeling started in my stomach and it wasn't the cow juice. This rain was different, I thought, but I couldn't say exactly why. Grandma's more spiritual friends might have said that she was warning me--giving me a message from beyond the grave. I didn't think I believed that, but I never could quite laugh at it either. Who really knows what goes on in heaven or wherever we go after death?

The feeling would not go away, even after I finished my breakfast, so I called Bobby's cell. He answered right away. "Tire shop's okay, but roads all around are flooded. Don't come in."

Things had to be serious if Bobby was telling me not to come in, so I hung up and turned on the TV. Sure enough, schools were closed and local officials advised people to stay off the roads. I would have enjoyed the day of leisure if I hadn't known that no work meant no pay and no pay meant no money to spend on Grandma's house. I debated between beer and more coffee, decided on coffee and settled in to watch daytime TV. I couldn't relax, though. I felt something nagging at the back of my mind, like a mosquito buzzing around my ear.

At 2 p.m., the power went off, so rather than staring at the blank screen, I looked out the window. Rain was still coming down hard enough to soak you through to your underwear, but the water was draining off the parking lot fast enough that I could still see my truck's tires. Remembering the road advisories, I got a beer and returned to the couch. But I couldn't stand doing nothing. What happens when there's no TV, no work, and no one to distract me is that I start to think, and they are never happy thoughts. My brain wants to know if Grandma would approve of me now, if I'll ever actually fix up her house, and if I'll be a screwup my whole life.

I peeked outside again and sure, it was raining, but the water was still draining off, so I decided to go for a ride. I wasn't really thinking of Grandma's house, not yet, because I didn't realize just how much of the city God's shower was going to drown.

I grabbed my old parka and a pair of boots and banged down the outside stairs, the rusty metal slippery from the wet. When I got to the last step, my boot splashed into ankle deep water. My pickup was one of my weaknesses--if I had money, I spent it on a new set of mud flaps, window tinting, or just a custom wash. It was the only thing I had pride in, besides Grandma's house. I'd like to say I paid for the truck myself, but Grandma gave me the down payment for my eighteenth birthday and she also helped me out with the monthlies a few times. I climbed in and grimaced at the dirty water on my clean floor mats. I gave the Southern University Jaguars bobble head a tap for good luck and started the engine.

The public service jingle goes, "Turn around, don't drown" because some people don't have the sense God gave a squirrel, as Grandma used to say. I knew better. I eased the truck onto the main road in town, avoiding the standing water by driving almost over the center line when necessary. After a few blocks, I decided to go see Grandma's place. I wasn't really worried about it, just bored and feeling guilty that I'd been avoiding going out there, even though I knew only a month remained of the ninety days the council had given me. Despite Bobby's warning, I still didn't have a clue how bad the flood was. When I got near the drugstore, though, it started to get real. The street disappeared under a pool of water. I couldn't tell how deep it was, so I did what the jingle says and turned around, heading down the side road that led to Grandma's house.

By that time, I was starting to wake up to the fact that this was no ordinary storm. I'd lived through a lot of rain--during hurricanes Katrina, Gustav, and a couple others, but I'd never

seen the streets in my town actually flood. I just took it for granted like everyone else that we were on high ground. Seeing the water lapping up to the sidewalk, like a huge, slimy animal thinking about swallowing the town, froze my hands to the wheel. For the first time that day, I was scared.

Grandma's street was lined with oak trees older than me and houses that ranged from nice to ones with cars on blocks in the front yard. Grandma had nothing good to say about the people with the bad yards and I felt deep shame that I was now one of them. The neighborhood wasn't exactly dry, but the water was still flowing into the gutters. Few working cars were parked in driveways or along the road, testimony to the fact that people weren't taking chances and had already left for higher ground. The water got deeper as I approached Grandma's house, sloshing over the tires. The freeze in my fingers spread up to my head. Fear. I knew I would have to stop soon or get water in my tailpipe.

I slowed the truck to a crawl to minimize the splashing. By then, that ice had spread all the way to my brain, freezing my hope. I hit the brakes when I was close enough to see the house. The busted window didn't matter anymore and neither did the moldy carpet I'd piled up by the side of the road. I couldn't see that carpet or the water-damaged end tables or the grass I'd just mowed. There was only water with trees sticking out of it and, if the rain continued, the front stoop would be sucked into the body of that filthy beast.

The rain tapped on the roof of the truck like ghostly fingers and memories rushed into my cold brain--Grandma waiting with me at the edge of the lawn for the school bus to come, telling me the other kids would not make fun of my off-brand sneakers; Grandma planting flowers in the garden, wearing the old straw hat she'd had so long that bits of it stuck up like unruly hair,

and Grandpa painting the house for the last time before the heart attack made him too weak to get out of bed. I owed Grandma nothing now. I couldn't have saved the house from this. After it was all over, the drywall would have to be ripped out, the floor replaced, and all of the appliances scrapped. I wanted to drive away and forget about the house. The job had been big before, maybe beyond me, but now it would require a team. I had been defeated again, but this time my enemy was nature. One thing I know is that nature always wins--you can't stop yourself getting older, you can't stop the weeds growing, and you can't stop the sun rising in the east, even though you might want to. I surrendered.

I almost sat there too long, but something woke me up, like an alarm bell in my head. If I didn't get moving, I would lose the truck too. I backed up slowly and when the water was down around the bottom of the tires again, I turned around in a deserted driveway. I drove back to my apartment, to my beer and dead TV. It was over.