

DECORATION DAY

I was making myself useful, arranging the gardening tools on the open tailgate, when I was startled by Mom's voice behind me: "How you doin' Becky?"

My aunt was with her, and I glanced down at the two pairs of shoes that had come to stand beside me. The nearest were my mother's: clean white Keds with the laces arranged in parallel lines between the holes. Beyond those were her sister Kathryn's sturdy brown Oxfords, the left sole built up slightly. I always knew Aunt Kat by her walk, but when the two women were standing still, I had to check their shoes to be sure which one was my mother.

This time when I looked up at their faces, it was the differentness that I noticed rather than the sameness. There was a furrow in the middle of Aunt Kat's forehead and crinkles at the corners of her eyes, as though she'd kept squinting after the sun had gone away. Mom's face was still unlined, although the same look would sometimes cloud her expression when Aunt Kat was around.

She patted my shoulder and reached past me for the flowers from our garden. Pulling the damp newspaper back from the

blossoms, she winked at her twin: "See the nice ones Becky picked?"

The crease in Aunt Kat's forehead softened slightly. "Marlowe will be very pleased."

I looked at the flowers, suddenly embarrassed that I'd picked him weeds. Their wilting heads already hung limply against the fancier blooms, yet they still seemed to me to be perfectly suited to my cousin, and I smiled shyly at my aunt.

That morning the yard had been peppered with dandelions. They were just as Marlowe had been - everywhere at once - and just like Marlowe, their sunny charm brought a reluctant cheer to those around.

As mom lifted the flowers away, a few drops of water fell onto the tailgate, and I found my thoughts pulled back to the rainy day we'd come there three years earlier.

The rain had poured into the car as soon as Dad had opened the back window. Grandpa and Uncle Levi had unfurled umbrellas and the women had huddled close beneath them, waiting for us to unload the tools

My cousin Marlowe slid out past me and did a few quick spins, arms spread, face tilted up, and mouth open, catching

raindrops like they were peanuts at the State Fair. I turned my face into a pout and crawled deeper into the back of the station wagon, stubbornly avoiding my dad's eyes.

I knew that dad would insist I get out and pay my respects. I also knew I'd do so without crying. ("Such displays have no place on Decoration Day," my mom had told me the previous year, and I had already internalized the words.) But I was six and didn't yet understand that Dad probably didn't want to be out there either.

Rainwater poured off the rim of his fedora and pooled on the tailgate as he studied my rebellious posture for a moment. Then he reached for another umbrella. "You go ahead and stay in the car, Princess." He made it sound like his own idea. "No sense in all of us getting drenched."

I stretched out in the back and watched through the rain, already familiar with the rituals the families would follow: Marlowe went to the resting place of his older sister Marjorie who had died of blood poisoning the summer she was seven, and Uncle Levi to his father, who was also my mother's uncle. My dad looked after his sister who was born the year before I was and taken by consumption the year after. Mom and Aunt Kat walked off arm in arm to the spot beside the juniper where their mother and father rested.

Grandma and Grandpa worked about her parents' place, for Grandpa had no forebears of his own to attend to. Abandoned as a child, he'd been alone in the world until Grandma's family took him in.

By the time Grandma moved to where her sister had been laid to rest, the rain had let up. That was when Grandpa rubbed the cold out of his hands and headed toward the stone wall at the far edge of the cemetery. He stopped to peer in both directions, as though he were back at the farm watching for the mail truck to come down the road, then he climbed through a place where the rocks had tumbled down.

Soon I saw Marlowe get up and take a few steps across the grass, his tread as soft as angels upon the earth. None of the grownups noticed when he first glanced back at them, and he continued more purposefully toward the wall.

Then Uncle Levi looked up, and I saw his lips form his son's name. Marlowe showed no sign of having heard, nor did he seem to hear his father's footsteps which quickly followed. I don't believe he knew Uncle Levi was behind him until he felt his dad's grip on his ear, then he let out a little yelp. Grandpa, who was kneeling in the grass beyond the wall, stiffened at the sound, but didn't turn.

Uncle Levi alternately dragged and pushed Marlowe back toward the cars, stopping several yards away. His lips twitched as he tried to form a word, but the stutter he'd battled throughout his life gave his son the edge.

"Dad, I just want to know why he always..."

Uncle Levi's hand came up and hit my cousin across the mouth so hard that Marlowe's head jerked to one side. I thought I saw his eyes pop out and roll off across the gravel lane, but it must've not been them, because when I looked back, they were still in his face. I remember them especially for the sober respect that was there, something I had never seen in them before, nor ever would again.

"You sh-shut up!" A vein pulsed in my uncle's neck. "If you'd keep your eyes open and your mouth c-closed, you'd learn a helluva lot more than you would by asking those d-dumb-ass questions." I've wondered since then if Marlowe comprehended the advice or if he simply chose to ignore it. For the moment he just stood there stiffly as his dad then knelt and hugged him.

My cousin never gave up asking dumb-ass questions, though to his credit he never asked that particular one again. Instead, he made a game each Decoration Day of trying to discover Grandpa's secret. And each year it took a little less from Uncle Levi to rein him in - perhaps a stern glance or a subtle

clearing of the throat. Then Marlowe would hesitate in his stride and let his steps take him in a casual arc back to the family, as though he were only out to stretch his legs and respectfully read the other stones.

As for myself, my quest for understanding was founded on Uncle Levi's advice. Each year I'd grown a little wiser, for I'd had the benefit of observing Marlowe and the grownups throughout the preceding year.

I retrieved a dandelion that had fallen on the ground and a wave of apprehension swept over me. This Decoration Day would be different, and I was struggling with the change.

My mom returned with Aunt Kat. "You can help this year, Becky." She glanced at her twin as though for approval, and for a moment the sun returned to Aunt Kat's face. Mom ceremoniously extended the new green-handled grass shears to me. "I think you're old enough to use these." Warily, I accepted them.

Aunt Kat led me to the shiny new slab of marble that had been added to our family plot and showed me how to work the shears. I was nine. In only two and a half months, I would be able to use two digits to count the numbers of my age. I wished that Marlowe had been there to see how I'd grown up.

He was there, in fact, at my knees, for it was his name that was on the stone before me. In just two and a half years I would be the age that Marlowe had been when they had consigned his adventuresome bones to the ground, and I wondered what marvelous knowledge I'd have gained by then.

Satisfied with my grass cutting technique, Aunt Kat walked slowly to her daughter's resting place. I glanced at Mom, alone beside her father's grave, and with a pang I realized that it had been Marlowe who had unwittingly nudged me closer to adulthood. In fact, he was the first, among those whose graves we visited every year, of whom I had memory in life, and the reason for the day came more clearly into focus.

It had always been a time for hushed voices and respectful conversation, as though God himself had come out of the church and into the out-of-doors. My grandparents, who were always cool to each other in public, refrained from speaking to each other almost entirely. They tended her parents' graves in silence until, with a nod and a sigh, he would spread her old wool blanket beside her sister Rachel's grave.

I'd often heard my mom describe Dad's late aunt as having the mind of a child. Then she'd wonder out loud how even that simple mind did not grasp the dangers of a well where she had come each day to draw water.

Mom also mused about the scissors: Grandma used gold-handled embroidery scissors that hung from a black ribbon on her belt to trim the grass around the stones. Mom said that it kept her from having to observe my grandfather's obsession: the embroidery scissors were Grandma's way of stretching out her task to fit the time. Then a hint of irony would creep into her laugh: "I guess it's the cross that Grandma must bear."

My dad's reaction was always the same: "Be charitable, Nat." He'd squeeze her hand and his eyes would fill with that pained, befuddled look that he'd get when he watched his father trudge slowly to the far edge of the churchyard and step through the break in the wall.

At my dad's touch, Mom would blush and look away, then she'd lapse into a mood of contrition that would last until the sun had set and the evening prayers had been said. Yet she couldn't seem to stop herself from mentioning it; and I sensed that somehow, she felt it her duty to take Grandma's side, something that I have come to think of over the years as being her own cross to bear.

When I saw Grandma once more sitting beside Aunt Rachel, her back toward the stone wall, I moved to the other side of Marlowe's head for a clearer view. As Grandpa walked away,

Grandma focused on her sister's grave and shook her head: "She never knew the love of a good man."

My mom had often repeated those words with the same bemused shake of her head, as though this were a clue she could not interpret. But I saw Grandpa's step falter, saw him turn slightly, as though to challenge the words. Then, on seeing me watching, he reddened and continued on his way.

Last year when Marlowe had still been there, we'd snuck away as the tools were being gathered up and had hidden behind the wild roses that grew near the broken wall. When no one was looking, we'd crept through the break and across the lawn to where Grandpa had trimmed away the grass from a small wooden cross. We couldn't tell who had been laid there, for the cross bore no inscription, but the plot was small, and the wood was old, and I thought that a child must have been buried there many years before. We wondered at how evil this child must have been to be laid outside the hallowed grounds of the churchyard.

Terrified that this fate might befall the two of us, I quickly crept back along the wall and, with the adults still busy with their tasks, I casually reappeared a respectful distance away. Marlowe was not so careful nor so fortunate to escape notice: Grandpa turned in time to see him come back through the gap, and I saw anger flare in his eyes. Uncle Levi

also saw that anger, and when he turned to see his lanky son sauntering back between the headstones, the color rose in his face. He shook a finger at my cousin, his mouth twitching. Marlowe dashed away, and I feared that my uncle would catch him and strike him once again, but he merely chased him back to the car and made him sit alone until we were ready to leave. I had kept my own face averted in shame, but Marlowe had said nothing more.

As I returned my attention to the grass around his stone, I was grateful that he had kept mum about my involvement, and I decided it was probably that one act of charity that reserved this place for him in the family plot. I hoped that protecting my grandfather's secret would save me a place as well.

My grandpa paused when he came to the wall, then with visible effort stepped across the fallen stones, looking more like an awkward giant rather than the gentle teddy bear I knew. He sank heavily to his knees beside the tiny wooden cross and wrapped his handkerchief around his hand. It was the first time I'd seen him use any protection against the decrepit excuse for shears he always used. They were little more than a crossed pair of rusty metal blades with a bolt holding them together. They had no handles to cushion the grip, and the whole tortuous device looked like it had been pulled from a fire. The clippers

creaked when he began to work them, and I watched him gently apply oil from a little copper can before turning his attention to the tiny grave.

Sometime later, when he returned to the edge of Grandma's blanket, his expression was still as burdened as when he'd walked away. He paused, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder.

Grandma looked up at him, her eyes showing both scorn and pity then returned to her work with a click of her tongue.

Grandpa paused a moment longer before taking his place at the other end of the blanket. Opening his Bible, he began to read the 23rd Psalm, and his deep voice resonated across the graves as the family took their places around him.

We could not have known it then, but that would be the last time Grandpa called us in with the Psalms. By the time we gathered there the next year, the hole in the wall had been mysteriously repaired, and I whispered close beside Marlowe's stone that it would keep our grandpa's soul from straying off this hallowed ground.

THE END