

## *One Day Off*



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**I**t was a good thing I had a garage. New BMW's just looked conspicuous in my neighborhood. I blinked, and her clothes were in my drawers. I blinked again, and it was time to remove the tumors she could no longer avoid. And I wondered what would cause someone to wait so long. The doctor took her mom, Lillie, and I into the room to tell us the hysterectomy went well, and Drea still had her ovaries, and it was the first time I cried about ovaries. That was our first year.

I envision her kin in the glowing-hot fields as Drea hums hymnals in the shower as she rinses off the week. Lillie once told us that they could summon the wind with song out there, and they knew exactly how many pounds of cotton they had picked before it was even weighed. She said her brother used to pick just enough to provoke the stuttering of the white man who weighed it. "Ninety-s-s-s-s-s-s-six pounds." And they worked their way through another day. I squint a little from the pain it brings to mind, and I stick my head into the heavy steam of the bathroom. "You want some coffee, Sugar?"

It took me some time to accept her sister's diagnosis. More specifically, it took me some time to understand what family meant to them. Drea would do anything for her. And anything meant just that. And it didn't matter that perhaps others needed to wake up and help out, and it didn't matter that perhaps it was hurting us. That scene in *The Color Purple*—"Nothing but death can keep me from her," and I was either in or out. No new lease on a Bimmer. This was our third year. I drink my coffee and stir the onions and green peppers. The bacon pops me out of my tired daze, and I should probably have a shirt on. Laundry. I look out the window and see our two dogs in the backyard. They turn one soon. They've been outside since they were eight weeks old because,



apparently, crate training makes them suicidal. Apparently they were not interested in spending any time alone in a strange box. I didn't know pups could scream like that. They woke us with their shrieks for the last time, and my already thin spirit wished that we never got them. It was time for a talk. "Fall in, cadets! You need to be free? You can't be regular? Fine. But if a hawk gets you or a snake eats you, it's your own damn fault. It's real out there, and you might not make it." They signed the contract, and into the briar patch they went. Right now they have expressions like life couldn't be better as they crash in the air like rams in the wild. I think they might be the incarnation of my sister-dogs that got shot on that ranch back in Oregon. "That one's dead right there," the little girl said when I asked if they had seen two dogs. Time to add the eggs—this one has a double yoke.

It took me some time to accept her Uncle's diagnosis. Lillie would do anything for her brother, and anything meant just that. She quit her job and went back to Alabama to take care of him. Time went by, and all our wells went dry, but only death could keep her from him. After eight years of decline, he passed. I watched Drea hold her mom up at the funeral—the strongest woman I had ever met was skin and bones from her sacrifice. Her healing process was going to take some time. This was our ninth year.

Drea's out of the shower now, and back on the phone. I hear her say "1:30." Her Uncle Ronnie is coming over later to drop off some rainbow trout and play a game of poker with us (I usually win because neither of them bluff enough, which is always Uncle Ronnie's cue to harass me about how white people are good at lying...and free-throws). Drea and I sit down to eat. I grab the dream book to look up snakes. I tell her how a snake had our dog Capers, and it was swallowing her. "Had her half-way down. So I ran outside with the gun and shot at the snake, but guns and locks never work in my dreams. The bullets just plopped out and fell to the ground. Maybe that means I'm impotent? Can girls be impotent?" We figured, yes—girls can do anything boys can do. The snake also had a pair of scissors sticking out of its head, so I look up scissors too: broken relationships. I tell her how I had to squeeze Capers out of the snake's mouth, then give her mouth to mouth resuscitation. Drea takes another bite and simply waits for what's next—she's used to my crazy dreams. "So anyway, I saved Capers. You're welcome." Silence:



we each worry if we have time to play poker today. Sometimes I wish we didn't work so much. Sometimes I'm sick with fear that we're ruining our lives with it—that instead of doing our part to be a family and follow some dreams of our own, we're really just chiseling away at whatever's left of us.

It took me some time to understand the black hole that was her dad's passing. He played basketball for Talledega College, and in 1970 the boy from the shack graduated valedictorian from the best school in the South. In September of that year he and Lillie moved to Cassopolis, Michigan, where he would teach and coach. The newlyweds put in a decade of double jobs, double shifts, and double pay for the house in the white neighborhood they had the audacity to buy. Nigger this, and nigger that. But the gold from their toil was piling up. Their foundation was solid, and soon they would have that day off. Drea was a star athlete and a straight A student, and she was on her way to Cassopolis High School, where Donnie would continue her preparations for the NCAA. And that's when it happened. And that's when instead of sharing the gym for her boot camp, they shared it for his funeral, and the veil dropped in, and the great teacher was gone, and the family of five was now four, and taking a day off became as distant as day.

Uncle Ronnie appears in the back yard and greets the dogs with his classic Southern drawl, "heeey Butch, heeey Penelope." Those, of course, are not their names. He walks past them with his limp and his aches—sixteen hour days for sixty years. Next comes the speech about how dogs are supposed to have jobs: "There's coon dogs, there's rabbit dogs," is how his speech always begins. We play poker while we watch football. I tell them both how I was looking through some of Drea's old pictures the other day, and how his ex-wife used to look just like Aretha Franklin, oh my god. Then I ask Uncle Ronnie if he has any pictures of he and Donnie from their childhood. He says his sisters haven't let him look at any of the old photos ever since the car accident. He gets sad, and Drea gets sad, and I can't help but to let a drop out. All three of us look at the framed picture on the wall from the Opelika Daily News in Alabama. It's their high school basketball team picture from 1966—one of only a few pictures I've ever seen of Donnie. Uncle Ronnie points to the guys in the back row. "You see back there?" We wait for what's next. He always makes us wait for our lessons. "They don't have any shoes on. We



used all the good shoes for the front row.” Drea and I look at the front row and see six guys in classic black-and-white Chuck Taylors—two of which are the identical twins, Ronnie and Donnie.

Eventually Uncle Ronnie leaves, always forgetting the thick reading glasses he uses to see the cards. Drea and I prepare our desks for more work. I look at the picture again, thinking about how they grew up in those fields. And picked that cotton. And lived in the one-room shack on the white man’s land. And used horse shit for cough syrup. And didn’t cross some bridges because of the coyotes and others because of the Klan. And I look out the kitchen window and see the sister-dogs asleep now, back to back. And I think about this world, and about me, and how I grew up in such a strange box, screaming but never let out. And no one should have to scream like that. And after decades I’ve gnawed my way through—mouth full a’ blood—to be counted in for the glowing-hot glory of the fable with the snakes and the hawks, summoning the wind, working back to back with a family from Alabama that in four-hundred years hasn’t taken one day off.