

He is Mine

SUMMER HAMMOND

Carolina Beach, North Carolina, 2023

George swings in right around 3. The cake door chimes clink and jingle.

I'm thinking about brokenness.

In the quiet following the noontime rush, I'm making cake decoration flags. *Happy Birthday! Congratulations!*—and I'm fumbling terribly. The flags are crooked, and the sticks break, a tiny yet sickening crack, baby bird bones snapping. I hide the broken sticks in the trash, beneath the crumpled receipts and sample napkins, like I'm a kid, trying to hide a dish I broke, one of mom's favorites, in pieces.

I kneel for a moment by the trash and breathe, listen to the girls in the back chatter about classes and exams, their love lives, where they're going out tonight.

"Alexa!" one calls. "Play *Good as Hell!*"

"I do my hair toss, check my nails!" They all scream-sing.

The owner isn't here. I'm just as relieved and happy as they are, in my own quiet way. When Barb's around, she treats me like I'm one of the girls. Seventeen instead of forty-three. She throws an apron at me, wagging her finger, if she catches me not wearing one. She adjusts my top. Fawns, fusses, baby talks me, very nearly pinches my cheek. Barb's only fifteen years older than me. What I hate most is, when customers ask (and it happens daily), "Are you the owner?" Because they expect someone my age to be an owner, not a clerk. Sometimes they lean in, whisper, "What are you *doing* here?"

It's scorching because—it is an echo of my own question.

My grief counselor, Eleanor, in our last session, wondered the same. "You talk about your current job as a source of pain and shame. I'm curious, Rosie. Why do you stay there?"

I'd shrugged, though flinching within. "Apparently, Master's degrees aren't the golden key I thought they were." I tell her that Sister and I—though we aren't speaking—we're

both of us first generation college graduates. And we both earned our Master's. "I came here to rise, and instead, I've tripped over the cracks. There's no getting up."

At this, Eleanor had grown thoughtful, looking through her notes. "You haven't mentioned it, but my instincts compel me to ask. Were one or both of your parents—addicts?"

"No," recoiling. "Absolutely not. Why would you —"

"I'm sorry, I just —"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Some of what you've told me. Family estrangement. People-pleasing. Haunting fears." She'd met my eyes. "The troubling belief that you don't deserve, aren't good enough to succeed. That failed efforts spell doom. Adult children of addicts often endure these things."

I'd erupted. "My mother wouldn't even touch a glass of wine!"

Startled, Eleanor had tilted her head. I saw the question rising.

Just stick to your job and talk to me about my father's death! I'd screamed in my head, too scared of getting in trouble to actually scream. But I had grabbed my purse and walked out, breaking a nail, which now, captures my gaze. I stare at the fracture, the split, think of how to fix it, hide it, escape, as the girls hoot and clap at the finale of the song, the same instant the chimes clink and jingle and George arrives.

I rise from my crouch by the garbage can. George salutes. "Oh hey! There you are! I've got stories!"

George, wearing a coffee colored newsboy cap over his rambunctious gray curls, has just returned from a trip, back to our shared hometown. When George and I discovered this odd connection, two Iowa castaways landed here on the coast of North Carolina, he was purchasing a dozen of the trendy overpriced cakes this popular bakery chain sells, more frosting than cake, and something so weirdly elating about the cake itself, I'd often wondered if it were laced with some illicit drug.

"Where you taking all this cake?" I'd asked him.

"A little trip to the Midwest. Figured I'd bring something for my fishing buddies. Show a little love. Get 'em hooked on this evil..."

I'd smiled. George sauntered into the shop at least once a week, protesting that he shouldn't be there, had no business what with his blood sugar, then peering in the cake case, eyes on the prowl for the latest flavor—Strawberries and cream, Snickerdoodle, or Lemon Raspberry. "Dang it, why," he'd say, smacking his knee, "why do they all have to be so good?"

"Where in the Midwest?" I'd asked, sliding over a copy of his receipt to sign.

Leaning over, pen in hand, he'd chuckled. "Oh, a nowhere town in Iowa, just a dot on the bend of the Mississippi, a sidewalk, couple of bars, a post office. More train tracks than town."

My throat had gone numb and prickly because, as I've been saying for years, my throat is psychic. It knows things before I do.

"Princeton," I said, and George said, at the same time.

His hand, holding out the signed receipt, hung suspended, our eyes locked.

Then, after a moment of perfect stillness, he'd let out a squawk, grabbed my arm and shook it. "Well, I'll be!" He'd cried. "I'll be damned!!" And then, lighting up as he collected his cakes, "Say, who are your people? What name? Why, look here, I'll go ask around. See what I can find out."

Now I can tell—he's done just that.

Swaggering up to the register, he brings his hand down, smack! Onto the countertop. "Oh yes!" George says. "I know all about you!"

Princeton, Iowa, 1992

Sister and I leave the house while the grownups—Grandma Lucy, mom, dad, Aunt Beck—are still talking. They huddle around grandma's teeny tiny kitchen table. Grandma made a box cake, which isn't a fancy kind of cake, but simply Duncan Hines. She calls it box cake, and no one makes a box cake like Grandma Lucy. She bakes them in a long metal sheet pan. She slathers them with frosting, covers them with plastic wrap, then slides them in the fridge. She makes two or three box cakes at a time. She says, in an important way, they're for company.

We're *company*, even though we live only five miles down the road.

Sister and I would like to stay for the cake, but not the conversation, which involves Grandma Lucy weeping. You can't tell she's weeping unless you look very closely. She doesn't make sounds when she cries. She just brings her crumpled up napkin to her eyes, and gently presses. And mom sets her elbow on the table, pushes her fist to her forehead, and forks cake to her lips, shaking and shaking her head. Aunt Beck makes scoffing sounds, like sandpaper in her throat, before unleashing her scary, chain-smoking cough. While dad continues to murmur his counsel because he's the one we all look to for answers.

They are talking about the Old Man.

Some people have Grandpas, Grandads, Grandfathers.

Sister and I have the Old Man.

That's what they call him. Everyone. Except the bartenders at Kernan's and Bridge's. They call him—good business.

Sister and I pick our way down grandma's front porch steps, black iron, so wobbly and jittery they might as well be made of jello. Sister and I clasp the hand rails with both hands, like old women, guiding ourselves down, step by step. Across the street, a speedboat charges down the Mississippi, fire engine red and glittery, *thump thump thump*, bucking against the waves, throwing off bright shocks of splintered light. Sister and I, stepping onto firm ground, shield our eyes. A train horn pierces and we hear it coming, *clack-a-clack-a-clack*. The train will rattle Grandma Lucy's walls, knocking knick-knacks off her shelves. If you're using her bathroom, and you forget to lower the blinds, the train roars by so close, you can look the conductor in the eyes while your pee unleashes.

"I wish we could get some cake," I say. "It's coconut. My favorite. You think they'll eat it all?"

"If they do, she's got another one in the fridge. I saw it."

"What kind?"

"Yellow."

"Yellow!"

"With chocolate frosting."

“Oh. That’s *your* favorite.”

“Nuh uh! Mine’s confetti.”

“It is?”

“Yes. Duh, Rosie! For two months now, I’ve loved it best. Don’t you pay attention?”

Sister accuses me a lot of not paying attention. Lately, she gets mad at me for it.

Across the street, Arwen waves as he ducks back into his garage. He’s decked out in camouflage coveralls and duck boots, his signature fashion. He’s famous for the fish shop he runs out of his house. He also sells bait. He makes it, there in his garage, lures in the shapes of small fish painted neon, flashy feathers and twisters, like something out of a “fish disco nightmare”, Grandma Lucy says.

Arwen is Grandma’s ex-lover. He built her house, right across from his.

This is something of a scandal, I know that much.

Grandma was having shenanigans with Arwen, before she’d divorced the Old Man.

I know because mom told us, groaning, covering her face.

Sister and I wave at Arwen, then walk. “Never mind about cake,” Sister says. “We’ll get ice-cream at Boll’s.”

We stop talking because the train is too close. After years of experience, we know the precise moment to shut up. The horn blows, a long, wild cry that ripples our hair, lifts our skin.

The train rips past, juddering our jaws, shaking our ribs, rattling our bones right out from under us. The air saturates with creosote and diesel and it infuses us the way cigarettes infuse Aunt Beck. It is like there is no space between us and the train. None at all. The train roars and clatters and reeks through our lungs and blood. We smoke the train. We are possessed by the train.

A caboose man waves at us from his seat by the window and we stand nearly on tiptoe, Sister and I, in unison, waving back.

Then, we pick back up. “What were they talking about?”

“The Old Man,” Sister says.

“Yes, but what’s he done now?”

“He’s living with that woman.”

“Which woman?”

“Jonalyn!”

“Oh, Jonalyn.” In sandals that slap our heels, we’ve been walking down the road, but now, together, side by side, our feet find and step up onto the sidewalk. “There’s a woman named Jonalyn?”

Sister’s hand flies to her forehead. “You don’t pay attention. You really don’t.”

I should’ve known better than to betray my ignorance. Nonetheless, I dig myself in deeper. “Why is Grandma crying?”

And Sister, huffy as we skip over all the cracks in the sidewalk, grass shooting through, fills me in. Jonalyn manipulated the Old Man to sign over Grandma Lucy’s part of his pension—to her. She didn’t raise his five kids, put up with his benders and abuse, but now, somehow, this Jonalyn’s got Grandma’s money. And Grandma’s already poor, already scraping by, in the house Arwen built for her, with the Jello Jiggler porch steps, a leaking furnace that gives her migraines, practically sitting on top of the railroad tracks.

“How did this Jonalyn finagle that?”

“Who knows. She used her wiles. She’s a younger woman. Like fifty-something. And he was probably drunk.”

I can’t imagine a part of the world that doesn’t know the Old Man’s claim to fame. My classmates at school know. They’ve grown up making fun of him. Throwing things at him when they find him passed out, once in our school playground, just up the street. I’ve stood by, a silent witness, watching them whip sticks and apples at his legs, chest, and face. “Wake up, crazy old drunk! Hahaha! Get outta here!”

Didn’t want them to know he was mine.

He was a tornado.

Sister and I, growing up in the cornfields of tornado alley, had more than once paused kickball games to watch funnel clouds churn in wild, grimy menace, straight over our heads. We’d never had to use the storm cellar behind our trailer, but I was ready. I’d practiced, running when the winds kicked up, one cat tucked under each arm. I’d set the cats down, swing open the rotted wood doors, wrangle the two cats all over again, and stare down into the spidery depths I wasn’t brave enough to brave, until a real tornado.

Tornados could rip your house out by the roots and throw it into the sky, pieces falling into the trees.

Tornados could tear everything you ever loved out of your arms and destroy it, then spear you with the remains.

Shredded fields, twisted up tree trunks, piles of bricks and concrete, silence beneath.

No one ever said that *people* could be tornados, mangling the family tree.

A newborn, climbing out of the shelter, straight into the wreckage.

I turn to Sister. "You know our storm cellar?"

"What storm cellar?"

"The one in our backyard!"

"Are you nuts? We don't have a storm cellar."

Sister and I stride past Bruce's Barbershop, the swirling pole, which I believed as a little girl was Christmas ribbon candy, and I'd plotted ways to steal it, while waiting for dad to get his haircut. "We do too have a storm cellar! You know, the wooden doors, like trap doors, and the cement stairs, down to the bottom..." I know for a fact. Every summer, we've opened it up, the two of us, and crouched low, breathing in the dark, dank cool air, in the middle of a blazing hot summer drenched in the dizzying aroma of roasting pine needles. Together, we've closed our eyes, and together we've reveled in the pure cement cold, not daring to go down, because of the spiders, but treating it like our own personal AC unit, which we didn't have in the trailer.

"Dear God, are you talking about the *root cellar*?" Sister asks.

"Root cellar," I repeat.

"Don't tell me, Rosie. All this time, you thought that was for storms?"

Limp with defeat, I say nothing.

Yet Sister is off and running. "Of course you did! Because you think anyone gives a crap about people who live in trailers! They care so *much* they give us storm cellars out back! Save the poor! Save the trailer trash! Give 'em all storm cellars! Don't you know those doors are wood and rotting, falling apart? Haven't you seen, every time we open them, more wood falls off? Those doors are like zombie flesh. Those doors, a tornado would rip them off in a blink, and you and me, out we'd fly, two nothing nobodies, sucked

up like ants by a vacuum, whirling and swirling helpless through the air. No one would care. Because that's a *root cellar*, dumbass."

The air is sucked out of the space between us.

That's the word mom calls us.

Other words, as well, but *that's* the one, breaks us, snaps us in two, like twigs.

That word, flying out of Sister's own mouth, when she's been brought to her knees by that word, same as me.

I never thought she would.

We reach Boll's, climb the wide cement steps, and Sister pushes through ahead of me. I take a minute, standing just outside the door. I close my eyes, grit my teeth, and breathe through the pain of that word, the way I do bad cramps, the kind that bowl you over.

When I step into Boll's, the anguish eases, just slightly. Old wood floors that creak. The piquant perfume of varnish and newsprint and bread. Sister and I, planting our hands side by side on the freezer lid, lifting it together, and choosing our Fudgesicles. "See?" Sister says, glancing at me. "Who needs cake?"

I try to smile, past the ache.

Merlin greets us at the register. This was his father's store, and Merlin is sixty. Sweet as he is, he never looks at us. He's too shy. Grandma Lucy says, his father was the same way. Nonetheless, Merlin knows who we are. We are Lucy's granddaughters. We've been buying Fudgesicles at his store, all our lives. He says, "This going on Grandma's tab?" And we say, "Yes!" And he smiles, licking his finger, flipping pages in a pad, writing. We are Lucy's granddaughter's and we are known, treated like royalty at Boll's. Not nothing.

Yet for the first time, ripping off the wrapper and tasting, as we push through the doors outside, the river breeze lifting and dancing our hair, that Fudgesicle does not taste sweet. It's bitter, tastes terrible. I toss it in the trash. I don't think Sister notices. If she does, she doesn't say.

We head, as tradition dictates, across the street, to the park, the swings, on the edge of the Mississippi. First though, we check the bench beneath the weeping willow. We check to make sure it's empty. To make sure, the Old Man is not passed out on it, the way he was once before, when we came here, and we had to back up, on tiptoe, not to wake him, not to meet his eyes.

Not that he'd know who we were.

We check, find the bench empty, then scramble, climb into the swings.

We don't speak. The old chains moan and creak. They sing.

The old chains bite into my flesh but they are warm, and familiar.

No one ever says, there will come a day, when you will never swing with Sister again.

We swing, and twist around, and lean, all the way, legs kicked out, heads back, our curls tickling the earth. A barge thrums, heavy, and I feel it in my hands, the vibration of the chains.

It's a shame, isn't it, we have to check that bench, every time.

It's a shame we can never walk to the end of the road. Because that's where he lives. The opposite end of the same road as Grandma Lucy. It's a shame that, when we cross the railroad tracks to visit, we always turn right, and never turn left.

Well—once. One time we turned left.

The Old Man lives in a strange house that floats on the Mississippi.

I might have imagined that. Because sitting on a couch in darkness was my only other memory. Not total darkness, but getting there. I don't remember him, his face. Not even his voice. Only his hands, reaching out, holding a Sir Walter Raleigh cigar box, filled with pennies. His hands shook, and his hands were nut brown, emerging from the dark like they belonged to it.

I don't know about the floating house, but the Sir Walter Raleigh cigar box is real. I still have it, under my bed. The pennies were not dingy and dirt-encrusted, as you might expect. As I certainly had, inspecting them closely in the quiet of my own room. They were beautiful copper suns, bright and shiny, *and*, from different years, so it wasn't as though he'd cheated, gotten them brand new in rolls from the bank. Rather, it was easy to think, he'd gone to great lengths, to find and pick up the best pennies, lodged in the cracks of the sidewalks, during his daily wanderings from bar to bar.

It was a shame, wasn't it, to not remember his face, to know only his shaking hands.

A shame, a shame, a shame.

"What song is that?" Sister eyes me, dragging her sneakers through the trench the kids have carved out, year after year.

“Song?”

“The one you’re singing!”

“I’m not singing.”

We are still now, cradled in our swings, facing each other. “Were, too,” she says.

“Okay.” I shrug, look closely at her. Her face, these days, looks hunkered down. Like it is ready to fight, or hide. I am trying to pay attention. I see the freckle on her face that is shaped like a small lake on a map. She used to tell me, when I asked about it, that mom had hit her there with a hairbrush. After the hit, instead of a bruise, a freckle had bloomed. I had believed her. I was little. I had marched off to find mom, and, indignant on Sister’s behalf, ready to accuse her. “Why did you hit Sister with a hairbrush?” Shock covered mom’s face, pulling her jaw down like a weight. “Did she tell you that? Did she? I never!”

Just recently, we were all in the kitchen, cleaning up, when mom started sniffing over the kitchen sink, washing out her coffee cup. She switched off the faucet, turned to us and said, “Girls, I watched Phil this morning, and I know something now. I know that I am the Adult Child of an Alcoholic.”

Phil was Phil Donohue, the talk show host. She called him *Phil*, tenderly.

She called him her free therapist.

Sometimes, watching one of his shows, her hands hugging her coffee cup, she called him—the father she’d never had.

That day, she’d turned to us with the gravity of a fork in the road. She’d confided how the Old Man belt whipped her and her brothers, savagely. She’d described how he’d flung his fists at Grandma, a torrent of hits, and how she, our mother, only five-years-old, had stepped between, using her child body as a buffer. She’d told us that, every once in a while, he’d disappear on a bender. But he’d always return, hang dog and repentant, showering them with gifts.

I stare at Sister’s lake-shaped freckle. Of course a freckle didn’t bloom from a hit. Of course it was a tall tale. But why had she told me that? A hairbrush, she’d said. *Smack!*

Mom did not drink. Would not even touch a glass of wine.

When she raged, though, she blacked out.

She grabbed our arms, her fingernails biting like rabid animals.

She twisted our lips into ugly catfish puckers between her fingers.

She called us names. Left us shivering.

Showed up the next day, with earrings. “Look, look what I got for you.”

Like the tunnel scene in Willy Wonka.

Is it raining, is it snowing? Is a hurricane a-blowing...Are the fires of Hell a-glowing? Is the grisly Reaper mowing?

Sometimes, I wished she'd drink.

Always be bad, or mostly bad.

So we wouldn't have to wake up each day, and guess.

Sister's freckle blurs beneath my gaze, I am paying such hard and close attention.

“Let's go get grandma's mail.” She hops from her swing, brushing off the back of her shorts.

I follow, hopping, brushing off the back of my shorts.

Picking up grandma's mail is the last leg of our journey. We never venture any further down the sidewalk.

We walk, and I think about mom, our age, walking these same sidewalks, skipping over the same cracks. It's a kind of poetry to think that my feet might fall into her own steps, shadow steps from thirty years back, and I see her beside me, shadow mom, our feet rising and falling together.

And Sister says, “Who's that?”

She stops so fast I bump into her.

I peer around her. I see the post office, a compact square of a building, freshly painted brown. The same color as the vast mud puddle that's collected in the pothole outside.

And in the mud puddle, a man.

“Who's that?” I say, an echo.

My throat, I'm convinced, is psychic. It prickles and goes numb.

It knows things, before I do.

Even before Sister and I approach, and stand together, and stare. Even before Sister reaches for my hand, twines her fingers with mine. My throat knows who he is.

“I'll call 911.” Sister races inside. The door chimes jangle.

While I stand there, keeping watch.

He sits, up to his chest in mud puddle. He must have fallen in. Because he is covered in mud, dripping in long filthy streaks, from his hair, down his face. His eyes glazed, unfocused, his head wobbles, he mumbles, fights to stay upright.

Grandma said he started drinking at sixteen, after his older brother, Robert, died. She said, the Old Man blamed himself. One time, he'd accidentally shot Robert in the leg while they were out hunting. That had nothing to do with the leukemia that killed Robert a few years later. But in the Old Man's head, the cancer was his fault, his doing. Plus, he'd never recovered from his mother's death. He'd adored her. She'd wasted away at the tuberculosis sanitarium. The Old Man was only six-years-old. His mother, his brother. Grandma was eighteen when she married the Old Man. She confessed to Sister and me, over cake, she'd really been in love with Robert. The Old Man was second skimmings. Babies arrived, one after another. Five of them. Mom, smack in the middle. The Old Man didn't drive a car. He hitched a ride every day, with a coworker, to the Alcoa Plant on the Mississippi. He worked with aluminum, doing what, I had no clue. He knew he couldn't be trusted to drive. After work, he hit up the taverns, the bars. He'd stumble home, just in time for dinner. He'd pick on his kids at the dinner table. Told his sons they were weaklings. Sissies. He could beat them to a pulp with his pinkie finger. He could take them all at once, they were such cowardly, good for nothing shits. The boys, my uncles, had to focus like Zen masters on the food grandma had made, each bite of meatloaf, each forkful of cake. Because if they talked back, said one wrong word, looked cross-eyed, why, quick as a wink, the Old man would shove out of his chair, get around that table with breathtaking speed, grab them by the ear, and drunk as he was, he knew the way down the steps of that basement, wrenching out his belt. Mom was Sister back then. She wanted to save her baby brothers, but couldn't. She stood at the top of the stairs and listened to them scream and cry and curse and beg as the belt whooshed down, lash after lash. Drunk as he was, his aim was good. Mother's baby brother, the youngest, grew up, grew big, a champion body builder, told Sister and I once, over cake, the trophies meant shit, he did it so that one day he could take on the Old Man—and win. The other brother charged off fast as he could to 'Nam, still a kid, just a baby with freckles and sticking out ears, trading in one hell for another, just another

battleground, what's the difference between a belt and an M-16, and what do you do with all your pent up rage, from the dinner table and the basement, straight to Hamburger Hill, and he'd come back, mortally wounded mind, never the same. And mom became mom. Who never drinks.

You are a tornado, I think, staring the words into his mud splattered eyes.

His head bobs. He grins. Even his teeth are brown with mud. Jonalyn has gotten him to sign over grandma's money, and down the street, grandma is crying, and here he sits, the Old Man, in a mud puddle, bones swimming oblivious in whiskey.

Sister runs back out. "The ambulance is coming." She stands beside me.

Across the street, a yell. "Hey, Willard! Willard!"

Sister and I turn. A tall man with a beard swaggers out of Kernan's, and he's pointing. He's laughing. "Haha, Willard," he calls. "Haha, look at you! Take a fall, old friend? Take a spill? Go for a dive? A mud bath! Spa day! Hahaha!"

Beside me, Sister rises. I feel her, rising up on her feet.

Sister points. Sister screams, across the street.

"You shut your damn mouth! Shut it now! He's my Grandpa!"

The man falls back against the wall. He goes quiet, looks away.

Sister sinks back to her feet.

The ambulance arrives, we answer questions, then leave.

When we return, and tell the story, Grandma Lucy calls the hospital.

"Three broken ribs," she reports. "Could've been worse. Could've drowned, they said." She's quiet a minute. Her hand hugs the phone. "Good thing you girls were there."

Then she serves Sister and I, the last slices of box cake.

Carolina Beach, North Carolina, 2023

"Oh yes!" George says. "I know all about you!"

"You do, eh?" A teasing tone belies my terror.

In the back, the music stops. The girls step out, curious.

"I asked around," he says. "Your grandma was a bombshell! *Lucinda*."

“Lucy. She was beautiful.”

“So I hear, so I hear.” He rocks back and forth on his heels. “She got around a bit. Had herself a good time.” He winks.

“That right?” I wipe down the countertop.

George laughs. “They called your uncle Mr. Hollywood. Blond guy with big muscles? Pro bodybuilder. Mr. Midwest, 1981.”

“Yep.” His bear hugs. Suffocating, though he meant them to be kind.

“Your mother was a looker, too. Spitting image of Marilyn Monroe.”

“Natural blondes, she and my uncle.” I scrub that countertop.

“Small town Iowa movie stars.”

“For sure.” My mind is running away.

“...lived on a houseboat, a pontoon!”

“What?” My attention snaps into focus.

George repeats, “He lived on a pontoon. Fifty gallon oil drums, keeping his house afloat!”

I look down at my hand, gripping the cleaning cloth. So it was real. Real as the pennies, I still have.

“Quite a character. Everyone knew him. Wore bibs to all the bars. Bibs! You know who it is I’m talking about, right?” George is straight up cackling now.

The split in my fingernail.

The cracks I take with me.

Broken, the sidewalk that carries me.

I feel myself rise a little, on my feet.

“I know him,” I say.

Behind me, the girls watch, hushed.

In the gentle afternoon light, I look George in the eye.

“He’s my Grandpa.”

I hold George’s gaze. Until his laughter fades.

Until he nods.

Until he doesn’t have another word to say.

Then, I serve him a slice of cake. □