

The Aunts

by CL Bledsoe

My father's heart stumbles like a punch drunk fighter. I don't notice until I'm bending over him to help him up. He's lying a little down the hill from his truck, his door open, the motor still running. The truck rolled to a stop on the gravel drive about a hundred feet from the house. That's a blessing; at least it didn't roll into the house.

Aunt Jolene down the hill called to ask why Dad's truck was sitting in the road. She couldn't see him lying there, and I hadn't seen him from the house.

He's lying beatific in the tall green grass in a little wallow he's made for himself, just like the cows trying to get under the wind further down the hill. He's asleep. I hear his heart and heave him up, and, half on my shoulders, half on the ground, drag and carry him back towards the house. I take two steps before I realize I'm alone; there's no help the way I'm going, so I backtrack and drag-carry him to the truck.

His rifle is lying across the seat. I have to lay it down on the floor so I can flop him across the seat. Then, when I get in, I worry the whole way not that he's died, but that if I get pulled over, I'll have to explain the gun, the empty bourbon bottle rolling on the floor. At least he hasn't shot himself, I think, and for a moment, I know something in me is slipping away, something important that I'll never find again. But my father is dying, and I have to hurry.

The aunts have already descended on our house by the time I get back from the hospital. The kitchen table has been hastily cleared of old mail and magazines (which have been dumped in piles on the floor beneath) and covered with dishes. There's aluminum foil as far as the eye can see.

My brother is home from work, holding court on the couch. When they ask, what I don't say is that the reason I hadn't gone looking for Dad was because it's usual to find him passed out in

the grass. I don't say what I've begun to think, which is that it's the house he can't stand, that's why he sleeps in the grass. There's worry in Aunt Jolene's eyes, on all of their faces, and I'm too young to be so tired of seeing their concern for someone other than me. That's not entirely fair; I would rather they just leave, not transfer their doting onto me.

I tell them he's okay; it was a mild heart attack and he'll recover. I dangle his room number invitingly and mention the visiting hours twice. My brother leads the expedition, and just as suddenly as everything else that day, the lake of sound and bodies empties and I'm left alone in that house.

I'm tired, but first I fix a plate of food while it's there. There are casseroles and pies and other things; I can't imagine how they cooked them so fast. I take a little bit of everything and it's something like it was before Mom got sick. I take it all back to the couch and leave the TV off. I'm working on my third helping when my brother comes back.

"They're all still there," he says, turning on the TV out of habit.

He makes a plate and sits. "They're all worried, now, but where are they going to be tomorrow? Where were they last week? They act like it's our fault." He turns to me, having to scream over the noise of the TV. "Aunt Earline said, 'Aren't y'all taking care of him?' Like he's not a grown man"

"It's Mom," I say, not because it's something he doesn't know, but because I know it'll shut him up. "He feels guilty."

It works. He sulls up and stares at the TV. I take my plate to the sink and through the window, watch the pasture grass move in the wind. It looks like hair on a tired body, the hills could be elbows, shoulders. Somebody just gave up and laid down. A buzzer goes off on TV and my brother yells something at the screen and I remember that I'm supposed to be washing my dishes.

I visit Mom in the nursing home for the first time in months so William can tell Dad it's getting done. I don't visit Dad. I can't face that yet.

The nursing home is busy and strangely engulfing, and what I always remember about it is the mundane-ness of death, the bodies sitting in rooms, already damaged, waiting to stop working completely. They wait so patiently, or maybe that's the meds, I don't know.

What I never remember is the smell, which makes me think that they've thrown bleach on the walls to cover another smell I don't want to think about.

I have to ask where her room is because they keep moving her. She's in the terminal hall, though she'll probably outlive everyone else there. The worst cases are closest to the nurses' station. Whenever someone dies, they move her closer. She's in the first room, this time. She was three doors down last time I came. They used to have her in the Alzheimer's hall; they don't know what to do with her.

She's sleeping and I wouldn't dare wake her. I stand by the window, watching her twitch. She looks small, like a puddle withering away in summer heat. Dad comes everyday, sometimes twice. He brings chocolates and flowers and other things. We find them when one of us, the kids, come. He never tells us, except when he complains that the nurses eat the chocolates; but he keeps bringing them.

For some reason I remember the time she woke everyone up in the black of night and made us all stand in the bathroom because my brother was snoring so loud, she thought it was an earthquake. Once, she woke up screaming because she thought a cow had jumped through the window, but again, it was William's snoring. I laugh, one quick bark, and choke it down in embarrassment. No one comes running to throw me out.

I make myself stand there for fifteen minutes before I leave. She doesn't wake. On the way out, I want to cry, but I don't because some of the patients might see it and I've figured it out: it's

the illusion of order that keeps everyone docile. Nobody cries, nobody does anything human when faced with the horror they're living; they just sit there and wait. One kid crying over his mom might muck the whole thing up. Next thing you know, all these oldsters will be gumming at each other's throats. I'm thinking it as a joke, but it isn't funny, it's just sad. That's how a lot of jokes are, though, if you think about it.

From the nursing home, I go to Dad's room at the hospital, thinking I've already seen the worst. I should've known; I can barely get into the room, it's so packed with visitors. The aunts are there along with some of his drinking buddies and my sister Elizabeth who came down to see him. I squeeze into a corner and everyone goes quiet, sneaking looks at me like I shot the president. I get the feeling the stares have been transferred from Elizabeth. The aunts go out into the hall, passing me with stern looks, and one of his buddies takes the opportunity to pass him a flask.

"Dad," Elizabeth starts to say, turning to me for help, but I walk out, knowing he probably won't even notice. As I pass the aunts, they all stop speaking as one and watch me walk. I turn and pick one and stare her down. Their eyes are full of hate and blame.

"Go look under his pillow," I say, "Before you fucking talk to me."

He comes home the next day while I'm at school. It's a let down; I'd gotten used to coming home to a quiet house, but now it's full of noise. Aunt Jolene takes me aside and asks where he hides his bottles. I shrug and the piss rises in her cheeks.

"We have to help him," she says. "It's your place as his son to help him."

What I want to say is that he doesn't hide them, that he'd laugh at the suggestion of hiding anything. He prefers to die right out in the open so he can play the martyr, only he's stupid enough to really be one too. Instead, I say, "He keeps his cooler full of beer. Sometimes he keeps a pint in there. Or under his seat."

She nods conspiratorially and tells me to sneak out and get them and hide them somewhere he won't find them. "Pour them out later, when you get a chance."

I find a half-full pint of good bourbon in the cooler with half a dozen Budweisers. There's nothing up front but that empty bottle, still rolling around. I take the pint and the beers down the hill to a little erosion cave, on the far side of the stock pond a little ways, where they mine gravel. I haven't been there since Elizabeth and I were kids. I down the half-full pint, chasing it with the cool-piss taste of the beers and watch the sun set over the red-brick house. It looks lonely on that far hill; trees obscure it so you can't see any details. It looks like a nice house.

I drink as much as I can and leave the rest, intending to bring Dad's rifle down and use the rest of the cans as target practice. When I get up to the house, though, the aunts are gone and everything is quiet. I go into my bedroom, instead, and sleep.

The next time I see Dad, he's lying on the couch, and for the next three days, he doesn't move. Finally, one afternoon, I pass him on the way back from the bathroom, and he nods at me. I go back to my room and pretty soon he's knocking and calling out, "Dinner! Come and get it!"

It's shit-on-a-shingle and German fries. The fries are good, I like the egg-batter, and the toast is good but the egg in the hamburger meat is runny and tastes strange.

He tells me that he went through DT on the couch, that the only thing keeping him from shitting his pants was his belt. He notices that I'm not eating much and starts to get mad, but plays it off. "This is all we had to eat in the army," he says.

I eat it, and ask him more about the couch.

Later, I tell William about all this. "What does he want," he asks, "a fucking medal for not crapping his pants? He hasn't had a drink in three days? So what, I haven't had a drink in three years. More than that, probably."

I want to tell him that Dad's trying, but I don't feel like arguing. Instead, I wait till he's through yelling, and tell him there's some supper left, if he wants it. He wallows out of bed, reminding me of a cow, which reminds me of that first afternoon when I found Dad on my way home from school. William follows me into the kitchen and makes a plate.

Elizabeth comes back that weekend and sits with Dad on the couch. I don't sit there, just in case maybe he did shit his pants. She talks about work and he tells jokes. The only difference is he isn't as dark, but there's a kind of tired anger that shows its face every so often. She takes me aside late, and I tell the belt story and about Aunt Jolene.

"Have you seen him drink?" she asks.

I shrug. "I hardly ever saw him drink before," I say.

Aunt Jolene stops in every few days, eying Dad like a cat watching a can opener. She greets me when she sees me, and if she doesn't see me, she comes to my bedroom door, opening it without knocking, and talks at me until I come out and join them. I suppose she's trying to recruit me into the club.

When she leaves, she nods at me as though we share a great secret, which is better than being glared at. Dad sits on the couch sipping his Gatorade or tea and doing a crossword puzzle.

It takes two days before I find the bottle stashed in the bottom of the big deep-freeze in the utility room. I don't tell anyone, but I check it every so often and it gets emptier and sometimes he switches it out with a new one.

I keep nodding at Aunt Jolene until her visits dwindle down to once a week, then every two weeks, then she stops coming. Dad keeps cooking, branching out to beans and pork steaks and lots of meat and potatoes kinds of meals, which I'm fine with. He keeps his cooler full of Cokes. After a few weeks, he puts beer back in it, making a point to tell me they're for whatever lowlifes he's got

helping him out on the farm. He holds my eyes when he says it, and I know he's telling the truth, though I don't know why.

I drink the Cokes when I ride with him down to see mom, which I try to do every couple days. He stands in the hall and tells the nurses jokes, then we sit in Mom's room and talk about what we did that day or something one of us heard on the news, pausing to agree with whatever noise she makes, as though she were participating in the conversation. Maybe she is.

He always knows what room she's in, even when it's different from the day before. He never seems lost. He doesn't fall out of the truck, anymore, either. He's careful. I don't know how he manages it.

