

Fifth of July

by Nat Akin

On the day my grandmother was buried, my grandfather shucked corn. The thick sun of July had already begun its retreat; the drooping top-leaves no longer bathed in yellow, the hot circle now leveled down toward the horizon at the end of the field across the highway.

Papaw made his way steadily through the narrow rows, the long stalks whispering as he pulled clear the fresh ears. "Another nub'n," he would utter at intervals, casting away those abnormally small or underdeveloped. Even though his vision had declined over the past five years where he could not drive or see to read, the field was Braille to him, a home to his hands.

My father followed my grandfather immediately behind, single file, carrying two large white-plastic chemical buckets washed clean to hold this late harvest. Dad paused in the dirt, clenching the arced metal handles tight, then setting them to the earth with a full thud. A red-winged blackbird shot from the last row and pumped his wings, red there, then gone, toward a blackened line of trees along the field's lower edge. Dad put a forefinger and thumb to the bridge of his nose and passed a strained sigh through his teeth. He stood very still and swiveled his head, white now at the temples, and watched the tops of the corn with a suspicious narrowing of his eyes. Following his father and performing this work of the field, the work he'd grown doing, did not seem to sit well with him, not today.

My grandfather noticed none of this. Feeling up the last stalk on the final row, his weathered hand hesitated, fondled the green upright as if to make his footing stable, then hooked its thumb onto the right pocket of his trouser. The other four fingers rubbed the pant leg, tapped lightly on the fabric, and then my grandfather looked down at his hand. He still wore his best dark gray suit pants from the funeral.

"We'd better get to shuckin' Paul. Sun will be down not too long."

“Coming, Dad.” My father looked tired as he picked up the corn buckets growing heavy at his sides. A cloud passed high overhead and he studied it, waiting for some answer, as if continuing to do what my grandfather asked might be some kind of conspiracy.

I did not know a place to take in this, had not known any right space to occupy myself with that whole day, so I sat under the carport in a lawn chair and watched them, and stayed quiet.

Dad shushed through the stalks and followed Papaw back toward the house. I turned in the chair as they came, and saw the figures of my two great-aunts, lighter shadows on the dark blacktopped drive running up from the highway. Their houses stood down to the east of the field, one next to the other where my grandfather had built them. Montine, Papaw's older sister who never married, lived in the closer of the two. She had taught school for forty years but gave her time over to a garden now, and sealing things tight in jars and stacking them with dates in masking tape in palsied magic marker. Gertrude was younger than both of them, had a family of her own, but looked nearly as old under her stooped back, grown by helping Uncle Louis pick decades of cotton. I saw she had a plastic E.W. James grocery bag on her arm with snap-beans jutting from the edges.

“Well, Nathe, we saw you and Paul pickin' up here, and Tine and me thought we'd come on up,” Aunt Gertrude said.

“Okay.” Papaw took a clod of keys from his pocket and found one by fingering across the top of them; he unlocked the office door at the back of the carport and took down two yellowed Tupperware bowls from a high shelf and handed one to Auntie, one to Gertrude.

“Dad,” my father said, “don't you think this can wait? It's late.” He set the two buckets on the smooth concrete and loosened his tie.

“Naw. I need to get these shucked and put up.”

Dad held his palms open and gestured at the buckets. “Dad, these are all fresh. They're not going to spoil sitting here tonight.”

“I’m gonna put these up, then I’ll come in.” It was no explanation—only a statement of what would happen. My grandfather pulled three lawn chairs into a half-circle facing the highway, and then another for himself, next to me. He reached into the open office door again and took two brushes from a hook on the wall. Then he dragged the two buckets to the center of the semicircle, hung a brush from the side of each and handed an ear of corn to me, offered one up to my father. Dad rubbed his thumb over the nails of his other four fingers and took the ear of corn; his face and eyes rounded and softened a bit as he stood before his own father, and he looked to me then more like the grainy pictures of his childhood.

“Yes. Me and ‘Tine saw y’all up here, and I’ve got more beans down there growing ‘till I don’t know what to do with them,” Aunt Gertrude repeated, starting things fresh. “So we thought we’d come up here and sit and get it done. Yes we did.” She chuckled.

We started working into a long, delicate silence. A breeze trembled through the corn and rustled swirls of dust across the concrete of the carport in faint, tiny tornadoes. The sunset had spread flat and wide in a stripe of heated lavender above the treeline at the dark end of Miller’s field stretching off from the other side of the highway. I could hear the beans at intervals swirling down the sides of the Tupperware. The evenness of the sound, the routine of our gathered movements offered a real comfort to me in a day that stuck out like a bone breaking skin. I was glad to be doing anything.

All faces tended to the work in their hands, but my father’s was regaining its hard angles and becoming again more uncertain. Papaw fumbled for an ear at the edge of the bucket, where the corn’s shape had become more gray and fluid to his failed sight in the painted dusk.

“Nathan, you ought to hang that brush on your chair where you can feel for it,” Auntie said.

My grandfather erupted. “‘Tine, don’t tell me my business up here! I’us reaching for some more corn.”

“Alright. Well, I didn't know.” Auntie's voice was always faint and flat, fainter than usual then.

Aunt Gertrude looked at me and gave another quick, raspy chuckle, a means she used to make all her moments less severe.

“No, you didn't know,” Papaw said. The two aged women sat close together in the aluminum chairs, facing my grandfather over the corn bucket, and in that moment he was just a boy taking issue, stamping out his own space between the older and younger girls his parents had put there.

I needed to reach across the bucket for the brush, over my grandfather's knee, but I was hesitant to move it, afraid he might have need of it and afraid to see his fingers fumble when they could not find it there. I had an ear in my hand, clean of its green shuck, and I tried to brush the silks off with my palm and then to pinch them out one at a time with my fingers. They were fine as hair, and soft and so many, but they clung with strength, imperceptible at their roots among the tight, creamy colored kernels. I realized then that I was looking at my father as if I expected him to tell me what to do.

But he was staring at my grandfather. Papaw's lips pattered motorlike now, a syncopated sound like the John Deeres he drove, and his hands moved in rhythmic, trained strokes stripping away the rough browned-green shells. He seemed to be looking through the bucket, past us, at something even beyond the far end of Miller's field.

Dad's face sharpened and he stood and said, “I think I'll let you all finish up.” The corn he held was unshucked; when he let it drop it tottered on the edge of the bucket and fell to the concrete with a fat, fleshy skidding. His hand had shot forth in the same moment to try to keep it safe and when it hit he hurried to snatch it from the ground, as if the surface held some invisible and fatal stain. Dad cupped the green sheath and fed it slowly into the white mouth of the bucket this time, and said, “I'm sorry. Sorry about that,” to no one.

He turned and walked away and reached at a bulge in his back pocket as he moved toward the far corner of the house, away from the garden and carport. In the shadows of early evening, his form had regained the familiar shape of my father—a little stooped but strong—while he paced back and forth, I guess trying to get a clear signal to call my mother, who'd probably made it back to Memphis and home by now.

I sat next to my grandfather and handed him an ear each time he finished cleaning the one in his hands. The fragile rhythm returned then for a few minutes, beans spilling rapidly from my great aunts' fingers, sliding with gentle taps down the identical bowls held securely between skirted knees, and the hush of shucks stripped away in single pulls, stacked now in a loose feathery mound almost a foot at the top.

When there were none left to hand him, I said, "Papaw, that's all."

"Oh-kay," he said, slow and quiet. He moved to clean up with the same determination, and Dad returned from the corner of the house and asked what he could do. He and I gathered up the spent shucks and cradled them to the back corner of the yard, to the square black-iron pen where trash was burned. He poured diesel from a rusted red gas can on the pile and handed me a match, and we stood a minute beside each other before the blue-green crawling flames and the one slender column of smoke. When we came back to the carport, I asked Aunt Gertrude if she wanted me to drive them to the foot of the hill, and she chuckled and handed me the empty plastic bag and said, "We'll see you boys tomorrow." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dad with his hand cupping Papaw's elbow so that he wouldn't stumble when he climbed the steps into what was now his house alone. As his foot sought the first brick step, I could see my grandfather's shiny dress wingtip clumped with dirt at its heel.

My grandparents' home is a ranch style, a rectangular box sitting at the swell of a bare hill, appearing a small dash in the

middle of a great green circle from above, I've imagined. I can stand before the sink in the kitchen and look out through the carport to where the long, sloping driveway fades into the highway. In the opposite wall, there is an identical window with the stove sitting beneath it, where I can look out back and see the yard and barn and acres of lolling crops. That night, I noticed that if I stood at the corner of that window, I could make out the silhouette of the corn off to the right under a full, blazing moon. I could see by the fierce light that several of the stalks' tops were shorn off, jagged against the blue-dark sky.

After helping my grandfather to bed, my father came wandering into the kitchen in boxers and a T-shirt. He reached under the cabinet and pulled out a chipped green mug with a gold duck in flight on the side and filled it with water.

I crimped tinfoil around the edges of an aluminum casserole pan still half full of the finger sandwiches my grandparents' Sunday school teacher had dropped by that morning. My father and I hadn't really talked that day, except for his practical words about me giving Mom a ride to the church because he had to be there earlier, or mine when I told him I thought what he had written on the yellow notepad for me to say (on his behalf) about Mamaw during "Family Remarks" sounded just fine.

I wanted to tell him now how fine it was, how sorry I was for him—at the least ask how he was doing. All the words I thought of seemed too slight. I wasn't sure what I really meant anyway. I opened the fridge while he sipped the water and gazed out the back window.

"Dad," I said, "what happens if you don't pick corn? Will it spoil?" I had in mind the broken tops, thinking maybe the stalks would give under the stress of the corn's weight and drop the overripe ears to rot into the ground.

He didn't respond. I looked away, back into the fridge, balancing the casserole pan on my left forearm while trying to make some room for it. A Wal-Mart-sized jar of maraschino cherries, my grandmother's favorite, had been moved behind the thin railing on

the door's inside, beneath the tinted butter compartment and white plastic dimples that held the eggs. The shelves in the fridge were stacked with dishes and pots friends had cooked for our family, delivered along with heating instructions and brief condolences.

“Dad?” I said again, thinking he hadn't heard my question. He walked from the window to the open fridge and stood behind me to look inside. He saw the cherries on the door, took the jar carefully in his hand, and moved it back to the center of the top shelf, pushing hard enough to bend two aluminum pans to make a space for it there.

My father's answer was punctuated with a heavy sigh, as all his words had been that late afternoon. “No, corn won't spoil.” He breathed. “Hard. It'll just get very hard.” Then he took another sip of water and shuffled back through the darkened hall to finally lie down and rest.

