

## A Talented Heart/Short Story

I inherited orange the first time I watched the New Orleans sun spread itself across the levees. It was 1973 and I was five years old. The second time, I was still five and it was still 1973. Every day that year Momma took me by my hand and walked up the levee to negotiate with the setting sun. I would dance and chew bubble gum while she tried to convince the orange ball to hold still. Instead it would slowly dip away, unfettered by the pains of the day.

The sun had a job to do. She woke up the day every morning and put it to bed at night. Mrs. Robinson's cancer, whether in remission or stealing her very life, couldn't give it pause. Neither could the fact that my best friend "Pissy" Paula would pee on herself because her wheelchair couldn't fit through the bathroom door. Blind Man Jack had lost sight in his good eye and his license to drive, even to the grocery store. His kids had stolen his car and never came to check to see if he was hungry or if he was still bumping into things. So my momma's pain wasn't special to the sun.

But everyday as it dipped away, I played in the wind while she prayed to the orange sky. For me it was a time of celebration; for momma, it meant another sad tomorrow was on its way.

My daddy left us on my fifth birthday that year. I didn't realize he had "left" us. I guessed he was busy at the church working on saving souls or practicing how to preach real loud to people. But when Sunday came and I didn't have to put on my pink birthday dress I thought it must be Judgment. Or daddy was dead. We never missed church; and momma's eyes were never closed after 6am or before 10pm on any given Sunday. I looked at the clock in the kitchen.

"Momma, what you doing in that bed?" She didn't even answer me.

"Momma? I asked afraid of the answer. Are you dead?"

I walked over to the white sheets with the hump underneath and shook it. “Momma, we gotta go to church.”

“No church without no Pastor Nana”, momma said. “Ain’t you noticed your daddy gone?”

“Well let’s call him and tell him to come on home. We’ve got to get to church and it’s my birthday.”

Momma turned her face to mine. Her good morning breathe was as hot as the fire in her eyes. She said, “He’s gone Nana. He left you. He left me. He is gone. Now get out of my room.”

I couldn’t cry because I just didn’t believe momma (God forgive me). Just last Sunday daddy preached on how your Father could never leave you, even if He wanted to. With tears trapped in my throat, I walked into the living room and stood behind daddy’s big chair. I closed my eyes.

“Amen.” I said out loud and spun the chair around. He wasn’t sitting there with his Bible and his beard-smothered smile. He didn’t say “how’s my Nana Bear’ or kiss my forehead. I wanted to yell for my Daddy but those trapped tears drowned the sound. Instead I whispered “Daddy?” to my heart. It answered with Momma’s voice. *Ain’t you noticed your daddy gone? He left you. He left me. He is gone.*

Just then, a light went off in my head. “I bet he’s at the church already.” I said out loud. I ran to the bathroom and washed my face. I had to brush my teeth really hard to be sure they shined real good when I saw him. I threw the toothbrush down into the bowl as I leaped off my step stool. I had to get back on it to get the brush and catch any hairs that tried to free

themselves from underneath my head rag last night. *Where's my birthday dress? My birthday socks? My birthday shoes?* Perfect, I thought as I looked in my mirror.

The hump in momma's bed shifted just a little as I tiptoed pass her bedroom. I didn't say good bye. Daddy's church, New Hope Church, was only steps from our house. Momma said her and daddy started it when they knew I was coming but according to my Daddy it was when the Lord called him to "say something to all the sinners in this town."

The man church people cleared away all the trees and helped to make a parking lot. This morning the small parking lot was empty. Those sinners must be sleeping in from drinking all night long, I thought. I heard Mrs. Stilton say that to Momma a bunch of Sundays ago.

The sun was quiet today. There was no special shine or warmth, just the sun being the sun. I could hear the crunch of lose gravel moving under my shoes. I realized I hadn't rubbed the Vaseline in good on my legs because the dust was sticking to me. I stopped to rub it in, when Mrs Robinson pulled on side the road.

"Nana, where is your mother?" Mrs. Robinson asked looking around as she rolled down the window of her car. She looked perfect. Her cancer must have been on vacation.

I looked up from my messy legs and noticed that her husband, Mr. Robinson wasn't with her. *He must be at the church already*, I agreed with myself.

"She's not feeling very well today maam. I'm going to church."

"Get in the car Nana." Mrs. Robinson said with a voice of embarrassed sympathy.

"I don't mean to be rude Mrs. Robinson but I gotta go get my daddy from church to see about my momma." I took off running.

The crunching of rock and road underneath my feet got louder and faster. I could hear my heart beat. It was fast and steady like a drum. Mrs. Robinson had parked her car and was

running after me in her high heels. I could hear her calling my name but I had to get to my Daddy. He needed to see about momma.

The door was locked. Why was the door locked?

“Daddy,” I screamed. “Daddy!!!”

Mrs. Robinson was coming close. I pulled on the door and saw the note in my daddy’s handwriting.

“Daddy!” I screamed at the note. The tears in my throat released their shackles and finally broke free. They made their way to the part of my eyes that made tears.

“Daddy!” I banged on the door. “Open the door daddy. Please open the door.”

Mrs. Robinson had me now. She was lifting me up. Up. Up. I wanted her to put me down. “It’ll be ok, Nana” she said as she tried to stroke my hair. I pushed her hands away. Kicking and screaming, I yelled for her to let me go.

She just kept saying it will be ok, Nana. It will be ok.

“Nooooo.” I screamed like a baby. “I want my daddy.”

I wanted her to put me down. I needed to run. I needed to feel my heart beat hard in my chest. I wanted to run away from all of the eyes now coming onto their porches to see the poor daddyless little girl whose mother was now a hump. I bet they all knew he had left me on my birthday.

“But I’m five today.” I cried into Mrs. Robinson’s neck.

“I know Nana.” she said. “You’re such a big girl now. Your mother is going to need you to love on her a whole lot more. Can you do that on your birthday?”

I shook my head up and down.

“What’s this?” she asked as she dug into her jacket pocket. She pulled out two pieces of pink bubble gum.

“This bubble gum belongs to the best and happiest little girl with a birthday today. I wonder who that could be?” she asked while looking around.

“It’s me.” I screeched.

She put the treats in my hand and whispered to me. “You are such a very special blessing Nana. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Ok?”

I nodded my little head forcibly and smiled. The tears on my face had dried as she sat me on her lap. I asked her about the note on the door. “What does that say?” I asked.

She looked down at the dusty gravel that covered my legs and her shoes. She then looked at me and then finally at the sign behind us and read:

*All services at New Hope Church have been postponed until further notice. Please respect the privacy of the Pastor and his family through this trying time.*

“Does that mean he’s gone?”

She replied, “It just may Nana.”

“Why would he do that to me and mommie? I asked. “What do we do now?” I asked Mrs. Robinson.

She replied from a place I was too young to understand. “Well,” she said, “do you know how when you and your best friend Paula have a fight sometimes and you scream “I hate you” to one another.”

“Yes Mrs. Robinson, but I never mean that. I could never. Paula is my best friend.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied. “because next day you are ringing her doorbell or she is at your house playing and all is well again. Right?”

I smiled at the thought of loving my best friend, when Mrs. Robinson got a serious face and said. “That is your hearts talent to forgive Nana. Not everyone has that talent. And you know what? It also makes you strong. There is strength in your forgiveness. It’s hard sometimes but it makes your heart bigger.”

My smile faded as I thought about forgiving my father. I thought about Mrs. Robinson’s cancer and how momma would take her homemade soup so much. She looked tired all the time back then.

“Is that how your cancer went away? Because your heart got bigger?”

“Well not exactly but kinda.” She said. “I had to forgive the sickness for even coming into my body. So yeah, I guess it made my heart stronger to fight it off.”

I smiled at her victory and she rubbed my cheek. She put her thumb on her tongue and loosed the dry tears on my face with her warm spit.

“Everyday that the sun rises and sets; it gives your heart another choice to love or to close up. Don’t ever let your heart close up”, she said. “So when you think of your daddy, even in your anger let your heart love him anyway.”

“But he...” I began to say.

She put her finger to my mouth and said, “No matter what.”

I didn’t know if she had ever had a daddy leave her on her fifth birthday, but I wondered if it was worse than having cancer.

“So, are we ready?” she asked. I nodded and put my bubble gum in my dress pocket. She walked me past her parked car to our front porch and knocked on our door. No one came.

“It’s ok. Mrs. Robinson.” I said. “Momma’s not feeling well today. She’s a hump.” The screen door slammed behind me as I walked into the unlocked door and back into the first day of the rest of my life.

Momma slept most of that day. That evening, before the sun set, Momma got out of her bed and she must have forgotten to comb her hair and wash her pits. As she sat in daddy’s chair, I put my thumb against my tongue and washed the dry patches on her face. She smiled just a little, closed her eyes and kissed the palm of my hand.

In silence, we walked from the porch, pass the church and stood atop the levee. The sun was setting as I danced and blew pink bubbles to the orange sky.