

A Bird Called Una

Had to clean up the tracks Grandpa made on the carpet again. It's happening more often now—him sneaking out late at night. I guess it doesn't bother me much anymore. The worst part was it started three weeks after Grandma died. Just three weeks. Now, I don't know. Now I guess I just wish he'd take off his boots.

Some of them are starting to stain for good, I think. Some of them are starting to go so deep they won't ever come out. Thing is, we only got about four square-feet of carpet in this place. It's not brown or tan where the stains will just blend in and people won't notice, either. Our carpet's blue, light blue. Grandma used to say she'd love to meet the hard case who designed this worthless trailer. Putting periwinkle blue carpet in the entryway of a three hundred square-foot mobile home. Not to mention that band of gold siding tacked around the outside of it. Takes a pure numbskull to do something like that. Tacking up gold siding on an emerald green trailer—it just doesn't make sense. Back then Grandpa and I'd be sitting over in the kitchen smiling into our Lucky Charms and he'd mention that it would be no trouble to take the siding off come next weekend. She didn't ever respond. She always just kept scrubbing that little patch of blue.

Woke up Tuesday morning cause Grandpa started snoring and it sounded extra close. Sure enough he was leaned back in his recliner with the footrest up and both boots crumbling red mud all over the place. There was a brown paper bag on the floor next to him, and I could almost smell the alcohol on his breath. I got real annoyed cause he keeps coming into the living room, my bedroom, to snore after being out all night long. It's like he doesn't even care if I know he's been out at the bar all night—like he wants me to know or something.

Through the holes in my angora I could see his face, and I just laid there all morning long breathing through that scratchy blanket thinking about what it meant—the way his face looked. The really strange thing is I knew about those tracks on the carpet the whole time, and how the longer you leave them there the harder it is to really get them clean. The deeper they go. But there was something about his face that kept me under there. Something really miserable about his face. It was like his skin was sliding down off each side of his skull and kind of melting into the fabric behind. On top of that I wasn't quite sure that there were really legs leading into those muddy boots either cause of the way his pants looked so empty. I wasn't sure he was there at all. Somehow it felt like I was there in that trailer all alone. No one for miles who could even say my name and maybe Grandpa was just watching me there from a distance. It felt like any second he might be whispering in my ear too loud from some place far off. There was one thing about Grandpa I could make out though, and it was how his breath was wrestling in and out of his chest, like always.

After a while the sun started bearing through the living room window and sweat dripped down the sides of my neck. I finally crawled out from under the blanket all clammy, and made my way into the kitchen trying not to stare too much at Grandpa's thin cheeks. I laid a kitchen towel underneath his boots and then filled a cereal bowl with warm soapy water like Grandma used to. I picked each piece of mud from the blue carpet, careful not to let any of them collapse between my fingers. Dipped a rag into the hot soapy water and worked at the brown smudges.

Trying to make as much noise as possible I poured two bowls of Lucky Charms and waited for a few minutes before eating, and then poured the uneaten bowl of mushy cereal down the drain. It was two o' clock and he still sagged empty in that recliner.

The sun fell below the windowsill and filled our trailer with grey. There is some misery that hits you when you realize that a day has come and gone and you never even stepped outside or brushed your teeth. So, I flipped on the television and was comforted by the voices there. After half an episode of *I Love Lucy* Grandpa got up and walked into the kitchen. He poured a bowl of Lucky Charms and ate it slowly. I watched him folding a piece of newspaper with his thick fingers. He kept folding and unfolding and creasing, and he never said a word. He put that paper swan inside Una's cage. It kept falling, but finally he got it to balance on the side of her bowl and kind of dip its beak down into the birdseed. Grandpa waved in my direction and left. Pieces of dried mud in a trail behind him.

I didn't clean up the mud. I watched two more episodes of *I Love Lucy* and fell asleep with the television on and a chapped nose because I'd used my angora for a Kleenex the whole time.

Grandpa wasn't at home the next morning. He didn't come in to find the brown stains he'd left or to sink back into his chair or pour himself a glass of sweet tea. He wasn't outside working on his pickup either. He'd never stayed gone this long before, never until daylight.

It's a strange thing I did then, and I'm still not exactly sure what made me do it, but what I did was go inside and open up Una's cage. At first I thought I was gonna take out that paper swan and throw it in the trash, but instead my hand caught Una. She didn't

flinch because she was used to Grandpa reaching in and petting her. He says she knows things that he wishes she'd tell him, but she's too sensible.

I took Una out of her cage and held her gently in one hand asking if she really wanted to live in that little metal cage for the rest of her life. Told her I was sorry Grandpa had kept her in there for so long. I told her about flying and singing and building nests.

She never struggled or made a sound on that long walk. After a while I began to feel like I couldn't tell if I was squeezing her too tight or about to drop her. She weighed nothing in my hand and her feathers were now wet with sweat. We walked across the dusty field behind our trailer and I pointed to some crows flying low to ground. I shielded Una's eyes from the dusty wind and told her how she'd have to find her own food now, but her instincts would do it for her. We got to the riverbank and I motioned toward the water and then I pointed toward to the mountain on the other side of the river whispering to Una that she could fly to the very top if she wanted. She could go tell her secrets to all the other birds, and they would sing back to her and tell her about what she'd missed all those years. Una was a wild bird once. Grandpa found her, I think, a long time ago. Well, he says she found him, but he always tries to make things sound better than they really are.

I stepped to the edge of that overhang and clinched my toes over the side. My fingers opened one at a time and I held Una straight out. She didn't move. She didn't even ruffle her feathers; she just crouched down smaller in my hand, tucking her head inside the fluff around her neck.

What I did was lift my hand up to give her a boost and then quickly sweep it out from under her.

Una's wings opened and she flapped them frantically. She kept dropping a little and then fluttering her way back up before dropping again. I screamed at her to fly. To flap harder and fly! She went up and back down a few more times and then she stopped coming up at all. Una couldn't fly. She whirled down fast and landed softly in the blue water below. Her wings beat on the surface, she barely made a splash. Then I watched Una disappear—just a little red speck around the bend of the river. For the rest of the afternoon I stayed there on that ledge and I tried hard to remember all the things Grandpa used to say about Una. About how she sees the details of things—the important parts that we can't see, and her job is to remember them. To keep them safe, but never to tell. How she is a special bird and how she found him one morning real early. She was perched on the front bumper of his Ford, real patient. He told me all those things about her. Never said she couldn't fly.

That day I laid flat on my back and watched the sun make its way across the whole sky. I didn't know if Grandpa was home, and I didn't know how to tell him what I'd done. He couldn't know how it made so much sense in the beginning, and that I understood about her now. I knew now that the paper swan was there so Una could tell her secrets to it. That she didn't need to fly and sing and watch the world from the tops of trees because she had a more important job than that. I wanted to say that I saw now how we needed her...to kind of hold in the good parts all these years, to store them up.

The sun fell over the edge of the earth and the desert got cold, but I still laid there and listened to water rushing below. I told myself I'd sleep there on the very edge of that

cliff with one arm dangling over the side, no matter what. The only fair thing to do was stay there all night no matter how cold it got. To stay, no matter how close the wolves' howling seemed.

A couple of hours later I stumbled home barefoot and shivering. Kept staring too severely into the darkness and couldn't even stop to pick the cactus needles out of my feet. The front door, the only door, to our trailer was unlocked and inside I found a note pinned underneath a glass of watery iced tea. It said, "I see you took Una. I see you took her to set her free." That's all.

I fell asleep slowly to the sound of Grandpa snoring through the thin door that separated us. It was the first night in at least a week he hadn't stumbled into the living room in the middle of the night and slept in the recliner next to me.

The smell of coffee was strong in our little trailer the next morning. I watched quietly through my blanket as Grandpa drank cup after cup, slowly reading through last week's Sunday paper. Grandma used to say he's always a week away from being clued-up—seeing how he's too cheap to buy current newspapers. He picks them up at the end of each week from our neighbors five miles down. They have a delivery boy.

The door to Una's cage was still open and that paper swan had fallen down to the bottom of it. I wondered how angry Grandpa would be when I finally had to tell him what happened. Did he know she couldn't fly? Grandpa's always said that he sees all and hears all, and somehow I never was too confident he didn't.

For two more hours I stayed there on the couch waiting for him to leave, but he just wouldn't. Went right through a stack of five outdated newspapers and another pot of coffee before I finally decided to face him. I'd never slept that late in my life and he

probably knew I was faking it despite the flinching movements I'd been doing with my feet and the heavy breathing. I threw my angora to the floor and stood up facing straight toward Una's cage. I could tell my face was just covered up in guilt, but there were no words to say. All the sophisticated explanations I'd come up with under that blanket were gone and I just stood staring right at that birdcage, waiting. When Grandpa didn't say anything or even look in my direction it seemed like a better idea to head into the kitchen. Like nothing was going on I went to the cupboard for a bowl and emptied the remaining crumbs of Lucky Charms into it, and since there was no milk left, and since I really didn't want to interrupt the silence I just poured orange juice in there instead. When I sat down in front of Grandpa he didn't say anything. He just gathered the newspapers that covered the table and stacked them up to make room for me. After a couple bites I realized it would have been a better idea to forget the cereal and just have a glass of juice. Thing is, that would have looked real suspicious.

After thumbing through a few more pages Grandpa started shuffling the papers around until all the edges were even and he tied some twine around them like a bow. He took one more long drink of coffee and stood up. He stood there for a few seconds and I just waited because I knew he was about to ask a question I had no good answer to. Then Grandpa took those newspapers in one hand by the twine and he looked at me hard. I could feel it, so I looked up at him too. His face wasn't angry, but there was some misery in it, and he said, "I could have been wrong." Then he took his newspapers and walked out the door, and I didn't say anything at all. Just when he was good and gone I started to realize what Grandpa meant. I started wishing bad I could tell him he wasn't wrong. Una was all he thought she was, and I'd ruined it. I'd thrown her from the edge of a cliff and

just watched the water take her away, and it was my fault that all those good parts she had stored up were gone too.

For the next hour I scrubbed at that carpet in the entry. I just kept on filling up bowl after bowl of warm water and dribbling it over the brown smudges. By the time I finally quit, the whole piece of carpet was sopping and it wasn't periwinkle anymore. It was some dull brownish blue.

I went into Grandpa's room and found his toolbox on the dresser surrounded by all the rest of his things: a real long book, pictures of family members I knew and some I didn't, stacks of filled-in crossword puzzles, and a harmonica. I looked for a hammer inside the box, but the closest thing I could find was a flathead screwdriver. On the way out my bare feet sunk into the mushy wet carpet, but outside it was dry and warm and soon they were caked in red dirt. The tacks that held that gold siding on were strong and stubborn, but so was I.

By evening our trailer was pure emerald green and not ridiculous at all. I was pretty sure from the main road it could hardly be noticed. It took on the look of the land and didn't ask more than it should.

When Grandpa got back I was sitting in the dark trailer watching another *I Love Lucy*. His boots squished through the soggy carpet, but he didn't seem to notice. After finding the tea pitcher empty he took a long drink of orange juice from the carton and then rummaged in the refrigerator before leaving again with that same brown bag in his hand.

Just when he'd almost disappeared completely into the darkness I slipped out the front door and started down that long dusty road behind him. I stayed just far enough

back that he didn't notice me, but still close so I didn't lose him. He stopped at Gale road to light a cigarette, but the thing is, he kept on walking straight. He didn't turn left toward that blue light in the distance, Lumpy's. It was the only bar in the area and there was nothing at all straight ahead. He walked past the Raulston's farm and the road turned into a trail. Grandpa climbed through a barbed wire fence and into a large pasture. I followed him deep into that pasture until I thought he might be looking for the edge of the world. Finally, he stopped at a little place where three Acacia trees crowded together and an old horse was there too. In the moonlight I could see the horse was flea-bitten grey with crooked legs and a real swayed back. She was skinny and old and stood completely still as Grandpa came up to her. What Grandpa did was walk slowly over to the mare and run his hand down her neck and brush her thin forelock out of her eyes. He opened that brown bag and pulled out a carrot, breaking it into three pieces before holding it out to her. She nuzzled the carrot and gently took it from his hand. I watched as Grandpa waited for her to chew each piece before offering her another one until the bag was empty. He took a flask from his back pocket and sat down in the dirt resting there for a minute before taking three or four long drinks. Grandpa laid down flat on the ground with his palms against the earth and I lost all sight of him until the moon flashed off that flask as he brought it to his mouth again. For a while longer I watched him there and that old mare who didn't move except to grind her teeth together a few times. I walked softly over to where Grandpa was and he never even opened his eyes. I laid down in the dirt beside him and then turned my cheek so that it pressed against the ground. It was quiet. I think from a distance, maybe we couldn't even be noticed at all.