

# PROLOGUE: STEAL AWAY TO JESUS: DIED OF GRIEF

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You can die of grief. You can literally get so sad that your heart shrivels up and dies. You can invest so much of what you need in others that you don't know how to live without them. You can't live without what they give you. I know this because my great-grandfather died of grief. That's what Mama told me and what Grandma told her.

Grandma's voice explained tersely: "My mother died of pneumonia. The youngest girl, LePearl, was only three years old. Six months later, my father died of grief."

I understand the story to go something like this:

My great-uncle Robert was a child. I try to picture the old man I know now—small, dark brown, with thick glasses and graying hair—as a little boy with a big grin. In my mind, boy-Robert is wiry and has the same spark in his eyes that Great-uncle Robert has when he banters with Grandma. The boy-Robert pulled the chair.

"Now hold the chair still," said his father. "You got it?" he asked, stepping onto the chair. I imagine my great-

grandfather reaching up and fingering the rope. Checking to make sure he tied the knot right.

“Yes, Daddy.” I imagine the twinkle of meeting a parent’s approval in boy-Robert’s eyes.

“Now when I say, pull the chair. Pull it all the way out, okay?”

“Okay,” young Robert chirped.

“One, two, three, now!”

Was my great-grandfather calm and relieved as the rope closed in on his neck? Were his eyes bulging? Did his face contort into someone barely recognizable to his sons? Or was the immediate loss of consciousness his first taste of peace in ages?

Did boy-Robert think it was a trick? Look at how Daddy’s arms and legs thrash! And then stop! Is this a game? Or did he immediately know something was wrong? Did he run to show his brothers and sisters? Did he tell “Uncle Sam,” a former slave and family friend? Or did he go outside and play, expecting to see his father later? Did he know he was helping his father commit suicide?

The questions raced to my mind. Why did my great-grandfather kill himself? Was he that overwhelmed with the idea of parenting eight children on his own? Did his wife’s death leave a hole in his heart that escaped words? Did he wrestle with mood swings? Did he fear what he might have done to his children if left to his own devices? Did he think he could push through no more pain, poverty, and farmland? Why did he involve his son? Couldn’t he do it alone? Did he think of what this would do to my uncle

Robert? The other children? His grandchildren and great-grandchildren? Could he think of anything but escape?

No one is alive who can tell me these things.

But I know Uncle Sam raised the eight orphan children; some stayed down south, and some moved north. I was in my late twenties before anyone told the story. One Christmas season, LePearl's daughter Grace fussed in her kitchen, grabbing serving spoons and paper plates to dole out to my awaiting hands and those of my cousins. My cousin Theresa asked what Grace remembered about the South.

Grace wiped her hand on her apron and recalled, "When I was fifteen, we went back to the old house. The rope was still in the shed. They never took it down, you know."

Grace lifted her glasses from the beaded chain around her neck and situated them on her nose. She started opening cupboards in search of paper napkins. "People will be here soon. Get the table ready."

With spoons and plates in our hands, my cousin Theresa and I walked slowly toward the dining room. We started adding in our heads. Our great-aunt LePearl wasn't even eighteen when she had Grace. We looked at each other with the same realization.

The noose was in the shed for thirty years.

When I think of growing up in that setting, I begin to understand. Every time they played in the shed, they saw the rope. At least once a week. Ten times a day. They got used to it; it became normal—part of their days. And a

heaviness hung over each life, and the sadness remained. Like a heavy fog.

The fog was so thick the children had to leave. They couldn't see themselves or each other for the ghostlike presence of their father. Maybe the oldest stayed because only he remembered "Daddy" before the rope. As for the others, "Daddy" and the rope were synonymous. I understand. They had to leave. Some went as far as the next county; others left the state, moving north to Washington, D.C., Baltimore, New York. As adults, my grandmother's generation refused to speak of it. When forced to, they called it as they felt it, and Grandma said it from her heart: "He died of grief."

Depression is like grief. It's a sadness that creeps in on you and slowly overwhelms you. Sometimes, I feed it like a repast after a funeral; other times, I sing and shout my way through it. But after the relatives leave, and the food is eaten, and the lights go off, it's still there; and it feels so bad that you try to escape it by any means necessary.

No one diagnosed my great-grandfather with depression. No one diagnosed Grandma. Who's to know or care about the mental and emotional state of poor sharecroppers from South Carolina? And who can stop to think of a clinical illness when the children need to be fed? What's the difference between depression, war, being black in the Jim Crow South, and plain old hard living? Who would know to alert children or grandchildren to the slippery slope of despair?

Without the story of Great-uncle Robert and his father,

I only knew that grief kills. There was no judgment or blame. Just a fact. Two breaths out of slavery, and my great-grandfather still wasn't free. He was oppressed by the memories of his wife, his fears, the burdens of what lay ahead. Sadness can own you. You can die of grief. It took me years to learn what generations of African Americans have long understood: there are things worse than death.