

## *Boxing Day*

I hated going home for Christmas. Yet every year thanks to philanthropic efforts on my Aunt Jane's behalf I begrudgingly boarded the plane from New Orléans for the winter wasteland of Minnesota. My mother had wet-brain basically, Alzheimer's brought on by excessive alcohol consumption. A disease that would have sobering effects for most drunks threatened by its possibility. My mother was only 53 when diagnosed. She was looked after by my stepdad, Red. They met at a bar, not a nightclub or anything that brings up visions of a romantic run in. It was a towny dive that I've never actually been inside not that I'm missing out on anything. They were drinking buds—their entire relationship was based around getting drunk. Red had only been looking after her for just over a year but from the condition of her home, he hadn't been doing much of job of it. The day after Christmas, Boxing Day was always reserved for Red's family's Christmas celebration. I made it in on Christmas morning taking a cab out to the suburbs to see my mother. Jane who paid for my ticket had decided to take her family to Aspen for the holidays and felt guilty leaving my mom and Red all alone.

“Tre”, she said, “Why is your hair so long, it’s a little faggy.”

“Mom don’t say things like that, it's hurtful”, I said, “Wheres Red?” He usually spent Christmas day with extended family up north coming down to the cities the 26th for his mother's celebration.

“I’m just goofing with yah”, she said. Her teeth were growing yellow moss.

“Have you brushed at all in the last couple days ma? Isn’t Red making sure you do these things?”, I said.

“Red doesn’t know shit.”, she said, “When we were kids she stuck her hand out the window dad started yelling at her...”

“Yah-yah mom I know she got a stick through her hand”, I said “Mom listen, where's Red? His phone is going to voicemail.”

“I dunno he went to Walmart.” She said, “Karen Henkel you remember Karen? While her sister Hamy, we always called her Hamy because she had a pig nose and she was a little fatty.”,

“Mom that's not right.”, I lit two cigarettes handing her one. “Don't tell Jane.”

“Whatever Tre, Jane's not in charge.”, She said.

“That's not my name anymore.”, I said, “It’s been Valerie for almost a decade ma.”

“That’s a chicks name Tre don't be gay.” She said, “I didn’t raise you to be a fag, Tre.”

The thing was I had been out of the closet for over nine years at that point and her symptoms had started to show less than a year ago. She was actually quite supportive granted, I had sent her whatever money I had left over from my barista gig in Des Moines and visiting her monthly. It wasn't until her conditioned worsened and she began to forget the last 10-12 years of her life and she became a bitter bitch.

“You don't mean that mom, your brain isn't working anymore, remember?”, I was beginning to grow worrisome of Red. Christmas day was brief we got Chinese food and watched a loop of Christmas movies on cable. Red never called but he always answered, I figured he got distracted by the family up north and left late. I didn't know anyone from that side so there was really no way to contact them.

Red was a nickname he earned for his rosy pigment when he was intoxicated. He always claimed it was a German thing. The first time I met him was when he tried to pick me up from detention

in my mother's car. I remember walking up to the car toting my skateboard by the trucks in my fifteen-year-old slouched shoulder shuffle. I looked up and noticed his shiny bald-head and his dirt-brown scraggly attempt at a beard. He made eye contact with me holding up my oversized framed yearbook photo from my mother's dresser.

He rolled down the window "Oh-hey Tre?"

"Who the fuck are you!?" I said. I was an angsty little queer.

"Oh-yeah sorry about that, I'm her friend Red" He said. "She's not feeling well I brought her home from Miester's around four." Miester's was a local dive bar with velvet walls and mirrored ceilings.

"That doesn't answer my question, Red." I said holding my skateboard like I was dug into the batter's box waiting for a pitch.

"Your mom said you gotcha your permit, right?" He said. "You can drive if you wanna?"

I remember that the story seemed contrived to me. It wasn't unlike my mother to not pick me up but typically it was our neighbor, an elderly pug enthusiast Ms. Obrest. I still opted to take the opportunity to drive. And he looked harmless with his beanpole stature and doofy demeanor. He wasn't a bad man to weak to ever hurt anyone yet to dull to ever comprehend emotion. It was him or what I always assumed was far worse considering I had been anthropologically studying drunkards over my short lifetime. He stayed out of my business and bought me cigarettes and booze upon request, I was always fine with his presence.

We wasted away the day chain-smoking and watching reruns of Roseanne not hearing a word from Red. Around six or so I made a few calls and got his mother on the phone. She was surprised to hear from me explaining that she hadn't heard from her son in a couple of days,

however; she not terribly shocked by this he was prone to drinking benders that could last a week. I said Merry Christmas and apologized for missing her. I was supposed to leave the next day. My mother was typically fine for a day or two with the neighbor Ms Obrest checking in on her but, Red was eventually needed.

Around nine my mother went off to bed and I decided to give the house a look around before I packed up to see if maybe Red had left a stash of vodka somewhere. I went out to garage where I knew she had an old green corduroy pull-out couch buried in against the back wall I used to use to smoke pot and make out with girls on. Red loved shoving pints of cheap clear liquor in the cushions.

The light didn't work and, the garage was a mess boxes and lawn tools everywhere so I used my phone to light the ground for safety. I came to the middle of the garage where a ladder was propped up to reach the rafters. It was peculiar I thought until I shined the light on, Red's body lying between the tool bench against the wall and the ladder. There was a socket set scattered across the floor that must have been why he had gone up there losing his balance and hitting his head hard enough to end it all.

I had expected to find either one or both lying in a pool of their own waste every day on my way home from school, every time my phone rang from a family member or a Twin Cities area code, and every time I layed on a couch across from another Freudian hack attempting to focus on my gender or self-image.

I went back inside in an emotionless daze shutting the door and leaning against it. I remember being equal parts saddened by Red's death and worried that I would need to stay here longer to handle it.

My ruffling around in the garage had woken up my mother. She stumbled out into the living room peering at me with the same gaze I became familiar with getting caught sneaking home in the early morning hours as a teenager “Tre what’re ya doin?”, she said.

“Nothing mom, go back to bed.”, I said.

“Dontcha go telling me how to parent, I’m the adult here!”, she started preaching her usual spiel. Time was no longer linear for her mind she jumped seamlessly through memories slowly untying the knot that bound them till they were all dangling electrical lines slapping into each other causing short circuiting and burning out.

“Just go back to bed, do you need help walking?”, I said, her strength seemed situational. I concluded that it was more memory than muscle, she knew how to control her body instinctively yet her legs seemed to disagree at times.

“Where’d Red go?.”, she said.

“He went to work.”, I said. There was no way she could have comprehended his death then we still told her my grandfather who passed away before her condition worsened was alive using Mari’s husband as an imposter over the phone, “Don’t about him you have a big day tomorrow get to sleep.”

She formed a sardonic smile —little yellowed tiles are worn away by tobacco and plastic liters of vodka, “Tre what’s with the hair?” she said, “Its kinda faggy.” my hair was clipped up in the back my ponytail peacocking from the back.

“Goodnight, love you.”, I said clenching my fists.

I called the local police and, Jane interrupting her ski trip. We handled the police easily and Red had no life insurance to speak of so Jane footed the bill for services. She hired several different nurses to look after her before I ended up back in the childhood home.