

## Old Blacky

Sweet-smelling women in brightly flowered dresses moved in synchronized motion in Minnie's kitchen. With one oven and one stove top between them, they created collard greens, potato salad, corn bread, baked beans, macaroni and cheese, gravy and rice, sweet potato pie, and four-layer cakes with coconut on top—all in preparation for Minnie's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.

Aunt Louise pushed her third sweet potato pie into the oven while Sister Grace fussed about the filling looking too wet. "You always did make your pies a bit too moist for my taste," mumbled Sister Grace, never missing a beat as she passed the butter to Cousin Carol and took the mixer from Aunt Bessie Mae.

"Ah, hush up, gal!" replied Louise. Her big arms jiggled when she closed the oven door. "If you were a better cook, maybe that man of yours would still be around. And if *my pies* are too moist for *your taste*, then maybe you shouldn't sample such *large slices*. *Maybe* you should switch to Cousin Carol's coconut cake."

Even their laughter had a rhythm to it, like a Sunday morning choir. Sister Grace and Deena were the only two in the kitchen not laughing. Grace rested one hand on her hip and added a fat pinch of sugar to her cornbread batter. Deena swatted flies from her torn vinyl stool and wondered what all the commotion was about. After all, it was her birthday, too—her thirteenth, but no one seemed to notice. Rocking back and forth on the uneven stool, Deena stared out the screen door into the backyard where the men laughed and drank cold beer. They danced to the music on the static-filled radio, and they barbecued steaks, chicken, pork ribs, beef ribs, hamburgers, hot dogs and turkey necks.

Deena left the kitchen unnoticed and wandered upstairs to Minnie's bedroom. It smelled of yellowed books, old clothes, and wasted time, even with the windows wide open. From the second story window she watched her cousins play ring-around-the-rosy around the oak tree in Minnie's front yard. She walked over to Minnie's dresser and was careful not to disturb its contents, mostly old photographs in hand-carved frames. Deena noticed an old black and white picture of Minnie and her sister Odessa when they were little. In the picture they were standing beneath the oak tree; they both wore tattered dresses and no shoes. Odessa had one of her fists clenched as if she were holding something precious in that hand.

Nestled behind that photograph was a shiny black rock about the size of a penny and perfect for Deena's hopscotch games. She picked up the rock. It had an odd shape, flat on the bottom, with thin white streaks running through it. "If only she would talk," Deena whispered. Minnie had barely uttered a word in nearly 90 years, not since her sister Odessa died. Sometimes Deena heard her family speaking in hushed tones about Minnie and Odessa, but no one took the time to explain how Odessa died. She slipped the rock into the front pocket of her blue jean overalls and ran back downstairs, two steps at a time.

The screen door slammed shut behind Deena as she stepped onto the front porch. Minnie sat on the porch in her rocker with a hand-knitted blanket spread over her lap. It was brown, yellow, and white. She didn't notice Deena. Her cloudy eyes stared at the children playing ring-around-the-rosy beneath the oak tree. Deena sat down on the porch. She took the rock out of her pocket and tossed it in the air over and over again. The last time she missed it. The rock landed at Minnie's feet, breaking the silence.

"Every Saturday, my sister Odessa and me played hopscotch in the dirt lot next to Mr. Robinson's store. He had the only grocery store in Ellisville, Mississippi. The only one for colored folk that is. And every Saturday after

we tired ourselves out jumping from square to square, we walked over to the little store to spend the penny Papa gave us for doing our weekly chores.”

Deena’s eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open. Minnie was talking! She wanted to go get a grownup, but her feet wouldn’t move. Minnie rocked in her chair, never taking her eyes off the shiny black rock.

“Mr. Robinson stood watch over everything in that store, especially the candy. He stood watch over us, too, always following us with his mean blue eyes over the top of his glasses from the minute we entered the store. Odessa and me would walk back and forth in our dusty bare feet and scan the shelves for anything new.” Minnie was quiet again. She stroked her blanket with her thin, black, wrinkled hands. “You could get everything from pickled pig feet to perfume in that store, but we always ended up spending our penny on the same thing every Saturday. A strawberry candy stick and a piece of bubble gum.” Minnie rocked faster in her chair.

“One Saturday, Odessa and me had a fight in the dirt. She said I didn’t win because my foot touched the line in the number 9 square when I bent down to pick up Old Blacky. Who ever won the most games at the end of the day got to hold onto Old Blacky until the next Saturday. Well, we were tied 5 games apiece and I could tell by the look in Odessa’s eyes that she was about to try to steal Old Blacky, so I dove to the ground and grabbed the rock. This just happened to be the one day in Odessa’s entire life she decided to wear shoes, and she got so excited trying to get that rock, she stepped on my knuckles with her black plastic boots.”

Minnie rubbed her knuckles on her left hand and rocked even faster in her chair. She was still looking at Old Blacky.

“When I saw the blood on my knuckles, I got scared and ran to Mr. Robinson’s store with Odessa right on my heels. We asked him if I could wash up so mama and papa

wouldn't find out and he told me to use the sink in the back room. He made Odessa stay out front with him. Just as I was washing away the last of the blood, I heard Odessa scream. My hands were still wet, but I ran to the front of the store where I found her standing with a broken soda pop bottle in her hand. Mr. Robinson was lying on the floor next to the counter, bleeding from his head.

"For a minute, we both stood in silence until I noticed blood dripping from Odessa's hand onto the floor. I looked at Mr. Robinson again. I knew he was dead. I started to scream, but Odessa put her bloody hand over my mouth. She was scared, too, I could see it in her eyes. I took her hand away from my mouth and I said, 'I think he dead, Odessa. I think you done killed a white man.' "

Deena folded her arms tight across her chest. She was rocking too, back and forth, to the same rhythm as Minnie's chair. Minnie never took her eyes off Old Blacky.

"We ran as fast as our feet would carry us from that store, never looking back, never saying a word. We ran until we had no more breath, and we finally stopped in a clearing in the woods when Odessa tripped over a stump and fell down. There in the woods, she told me how Mr. Robinson had lifted her dress and tried to touch her where she peed. She was talking so fast all her words ran together and she was hard to understand. She said she told him to stop but he kept grabbing her, touching her. He got his hands in her panties and touched her there. That's when Odessa grabbed the soda bottle from the shelf and hit him on the head with it. Mr. Robinson bumped his head on the corner of the countertop when he fell. And that's when Odessa screamed."

Minnie wasn't rocking anymore. She sat still in her chair. Deena wanted to ask Minnie what happened next, but instead she waited for Minnie to start remembering again.

"We sneaked in the house and upstairs without Mama and Papa seeing us. I rinsed Odessa's hand in cold water and wrapped it with an old dress of mine. After a while the

bleeding stopped. I was plaiting Odessa's hair to calm her down, when I remembered I left Old Blacky on the sink in the back of Mr. Robinson's store. Everybody in Ellisville knew Odessa and me played hopscotch with Old Blacky. Mama called us down for dinner, and I overheard her tell Aunt Lula that Mr. Robinson was found dead in his store. Murdered. She said every white man in the county was on the look-out for his killer and when they found the nigger who did it, they promised to make him pay. Both Odessa and me kept our free hands hidden beneath the dinner table while we ate that night—me to hide the sores on my knuckles, Odessa to hide the hand that killed Mr. Robinson.

"Night came, but we didn't sleep at all. We decided we would tell Mama and Papa what had happened in the morning, before we left for Sunday school. We were on our way downstairs for breakfast the next morning when we heard the knock at the front door. I started to sweat when I saw the sheriff and his men. Odessa started to cry. The sheriff found Old Blacky on the sink in the backroom of Mr. Robinson's store.

"Odessa tried to run back upstairs, but the sheriff grabbed her by her foot and dragged her back down. 'She's thirteen years old! She's thirteen years old!' Mama yelled, but those crackers didn't care. The sheriff's men held Mama and Papa back. They made Odessa and me tell them over and over again what happened, but they didn't believe us. The sheriff put Old Blacky in Odessa's hand and told her if she didn't tell the truth he would hang her right then and there. And that's exactly what he did. Right there at that oak tree. Odessa was still holding Old Blacky when papa cut her down from that tree."

The screen door opened and Deena looked up. Cousin Carol was holding a birthday cake with so many candles she thought it would catch on fire. The children stopped playing their games beneath the tree and ran over to stand on the steps behind Deena. Then everyone started to sing, "Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy

Birthday Minnie and Deena! Happy Birthday to you!" Everyone clapped and Deena blew out the candles. They all piled back into the house to begin the birthday feast, leaving Minnie and Deena outside. It was quiet on the porch again.

Deena picked up Old Blacky. She placed the rock in the palm of Minnie's hand, "Happy Birthday, Minnie. Old Blacky is yours. You won it fair and square."

Minnie squeezed her fist around Old Blacky and closed her eyes tight. "Thank you Odessa," she said.