

## Ole Bill Waters

It was noon but Ole Bill Waters couldn't tell cause the old wooden slats on his shuttered windows gave only a faint glow to the sun's attacks on his living room. He never quite knew what time it was. Day or night was fairly clear, but the moments between had faded.

"Morning" was when his wife left for work with the screen door slamming. Mrs. Rosie Waters was his alarm clock, the door banging his cue to start the day. His routine consisted of showering then limping downstairs where Rosie always left a breakfast of milk, an apple, and a bowl of plain Cheerios. She was considerate like that.

Each day of the ten years after his surgery, Bill had kept the shutters closed to watch television without glare. Usually he'd watch sports documentaries. At noon that day he was watching Kurt Rambis get clotheslined by Kevin McHale in the 1984 NBA finals. He'd watched it live surrounded by friends and the touch of pain free memory kept him rooted to the recliner now.

Rosie interrupted his reminiscences by opening the shades. Piercing spears of light infiltrated the living room and turned the TV invisible. From the screen Larry Bird said, "I don't think Kevin hit him that hard," but Bill's squinted eyes couldn't adjust.

"Jesus Rosie. Has the lord finally taken me? Looks like the damn pearly gates in here"

"Shut up Bill. Just wanted a little light to read," she said, her mouth curled in a familiar smirk that meant she'd thought of some clever way to mess with him. "Anyways, I thought you needed a little light. Plants need sun and if you sit in that recliner any longer you'll turn into one."

“Guess you’re right. I’m damn lucky I don’t need to photosynthesize or nothing. I guess I’ll have to find some way to forgive you.”

It must have been Saturday if Rosie was here. During the week she worked at a plant nursery ten minutes towards what passed as a downtown in Pineville, Tennessee. In the mornings she walked on the greenway that snaked by their house till it passed the nursery. At nights she took the same walk back, slamming the screen door again to let him know she was home. Later she’d appear in the living room with dinner on a platter. He was always hungry after spending all day snacking purely on peanuts. She’d curl up on the couch and read by lamplight while he watched television from the recliner till bedtime when Rosie took his arm and helped him to bed.

It was only the comings and goings of Mrs. Rosie Waters that gave his days any time. If she wasn’t around, “days” would be singular and without distinction. The light would rise and fall unheeded from the shuttered windows.

Maybe that’s what did it, that’s what made him want to jump. Not off a bridge, but up in the air; an effort whose difficulty his grandkids would laugh at but which felt impossible for Bill Waters. As hours passed in the lightened living room he thought about how he reclined while Rosie moved, how he idled while Rosie worked, how she made his food every morning and night, and how she walked alone to and from work while he sat blind to the world's cycles. In all, he realized he didn’t deserve her anymore.

Getting up was a challenge for Ole Bill Waters and that didn’t change now. It started in his throat with a grunt that got louder as his hands pushed against the armrests. The recliner creaked along with his joints as he rose. A cacophony of cracks rippled through him while his

balance returned. His right hip burned with the acute sensation of fifty flesh-submerged needles. But he was standing.

He'd fractured the hip in a tumble off Mackaton Bluff while hiking with Rosie through the Smokies. From the ground he could see Pineville looming like distant gray boulders. He took the grandkids on this same hike every Christmas to see that view, but those memories were tinged in red, pulsing pain now like a photograph burned along its edges. The hip never seemed to heal quite right.

He remembered the doctor saying something similar after the anesthesia wore off. "It'll take a while for it to feel normal again and even then it might never feel the same."

Bill was woozy then. The room was fuzzy like his eyes were squinted to the verge of closing. The white walls swum about him and seemed to contract inward. Rosie had to talk for him and took time off work to spend his short hospital stay playing Uno, watching home improvement shows, and talking about where they'd go when he was better. Once discharged, she drove him home.

"Don't worry Rosie. You'll only have to care for me a couple weeks. Then we'll go for nice long greenway walks every day." It was a lie he didn't know he was telling.

"You better keep on that rehab. I ain't too keen on lugging you around now. It's hard enough just lugging myself."

He never would finish another walk with her, though he limped on crutches and worked through rehab. The hip muscles got stronger till one day he asked if Rosie wanted a greenway walk.

It was different. There was a hitch in his step and he felt strange. Younger people zoomed by on bikes, scooters, and feet. He felt all their disdainful eyes fix upon him till Henry Hendricks, the eldest of a friends' five sons, stopped his run to greet them.

“My dad’s been asking for you. Doin’ good?”

He didn’t know how to answer so Rosie again talked for him. “He’s walking now ain’t he? I’d say that’s pretty good.”

“Damn good ma’am. I’ll tell my folks I saw y’all.”

The young man ran off. Rosie held his arm but it felt like support. He was dragging her down; an elephant she held above a raging fire.

“Rosie dear, I think I left the oven on. Excuse me while I go check that.”

“Well I’ll come back with you.”

“Nah. It’s my mistake. Wouldn’t want to mess up your walk.”

“Our walk honey. It’s better with two.”

The next day he was affixed to the recliner and rarely detached in the future. Rosie would ask him to walk to work with her or to watch the sunset but was met with feeble excuses about not wanting to hold her up. Eventually she stopped asking and their routine settled.

The hip got tighter as he sat and his joints cracked louder each day. He embraced feeling old; inside his only thoughts were what program was next and when the screen door would announce Rosie’s return. Outside, the world shook as the greenway youth overtook him.

The first Christmas after the surgery Bill’s grandkids came to visit. He heard their arrival from the living room over the television. The kid’s boisterous laughter at the front door was

quickly subdued by their mother's hushes. He could still hear Rosie and their daughter Shelly talking after the latter quieted the children.

"How's he doing mom?"

"Oh alright. He's off the crutches now and he's got a lot of rehab done but he's trying to rest a bit or else he'd have let you in himself."

"Where's Grandpa?" One of the kids broke into the conversation.

"We wanna see him."

"When can we go to Mackaton?"

He grabbed the bum hip as the red, pulsing pain returned in shadow. Pointing out distant Pineville from on high with his grandkids close always made the hour and a half drive through the valleys and cow farms of eastern Tennessee worthwhile. The shadow pain left yet another kind remained. On the TV Greg Lemond was explaining why he retired from cycling.

Shelly started whispering to the kids so he turned the volume down to hear. "Go to the living room and give your grandpa a hug. Be careful though cause he just had surgery and needs rest."

"Don't worry, he'll take you out to Mackaton next year," Rosie said.

He turned the volume up as their footsteps came closer. "I just felt I couldn't keep up anymore," Lemond said.

The kids looked uncomfortable when they walked in flanked by Shelly and Rosie. They must've thought he was a different person from the grandad that played catch last Christmas. Dany, the oldest, shuffled forward but didn't look him in the eyes. Lue tried to jump up on his

lap but Bill grunted and the kid got down gingerly. Hailey went behind her mother's back and had to be pushed forward. They all hugged him lightly.

People started calling him Ole Bill Waters soon after the surgery. He didn't go out much except when Rosie forced him. Yet his slow, limping gait betrayed his age. People picked up on his leaning against Rosie and reluctance to speak as the hallmarks of an elderly man. The epithet followed what had become obvious; he was old.

Rosie forced him out to get a beef roast from Hendrick's Grocery two days before Christmas the year of the tumble. Mr. and Mrs. Hendricks owned the small grocer adjacent to the plant nursery Rosie worked at. They kept good relations with them that had only improved after Rosie started working next door. She often had lunch with Mrs. Hendricks and was often asked how Bill was. The grocers wanted to see him and that's why he came, though he mostly wanted Rosie to stop asking him about it.

The parking lot gravel crunched below. As they parked, the tires kicked up little gray dust clouds. Rosie crossed over from the driver's side to help Bill get out. He made a big show of grunting his way up, but eventually they walked arm in arm inside.

It was a slow day with only a couple other shoppers around. Henry Hendricks was working the register. Of the five Hendricks boys, he was Bill's least favorite cause he'd dated Shelly in high school and quickly dropped her before she left for college.

"Ole Bill and Mrs. Rosie Waters. How'd you get him out of the house?"

"It wasn't too hard. He wanted to see your father real bad. Be a dear and go get him for us won't you." Rosie was talking for him again.

The boy disappeared down a back room and came out with Mr. Hendricks, an elderly and heavy-set man with a sparse white beard and a permanent glare cause he refused to buy glasses. He was cracking peanuts and tossing them into his mouth as he came to shake Bill's hand.

"Well Bill how are ya?" the old man said.

"Tell you the truth Hendricks, it's nice to see that one person don't call me Ole Bill nowadays."

"Hell we're all old. No point going round announcing it."

"I'd agree to that."

"Here, have a peanut and talk with me a sec. It's good for your heart."

"The peanut or the talk?"

"Maybe a bit of both," Mr. Hendricks said with a chuckle.

The first peanut Bill got was empty inside. He didn't think that was possible.

Ten years later Ole Bill Waters was standing in his living room, breathing heavy from the effort of rising. The Celtics V. Lakers documentary had ended and the screen now showed Spike Lee egging on Reggie Miller in the 1995 Eastern Conference semifinals.

Getting up broke Bill's muscular atrophy and left every joint screaming. He felt the depths of lactic acid rising inside.

The effort and grunts had attracted Rosie's attention. She looked up from her book, right eye raised over left with that familiar smirk playing on her lips.

"Now Bill, where are you going off to?"

Mr. Hendricks wasn't the only person left in town that never added "Ole" to his name. He realized Rosie still called him Bill. A forgotten energy coursed through his formerly dead muscles as his breath stabilized.

"I'm gonna jump Rosie. I'm gonna jump and I don't know how high it'll be but I'm gonna do it. Goddammit I'm gonna do it."

"Do it then you coot."

She was smiling like he hadn't seen her smile in a long time. She was reminded of who he was, like the "Ole" had fallen into oblivion and left only Bill behind.

He forgot the bum hip and atrophied muscles. He forgot the young people on their bikes, scooters, and feet. He even forgot Henry Hendricks and any mention of Ole Bill Waters. On the screen Reggie Miller pulled up for three, stole the inbounds pass and stepped back into another three. Things aren't impossible. He ignored the creaks of old joints and screaming of tired muscles to gather himself for elevation.

Hark the herald angels sing; the sword's been pulled from the stone and the Pacers beat the Knicks. Bill Waters jumped in the air.

When the ground returned he looked at Rosie with an exuberant smile. It hadn't been high but it had been something and that's what mattered. His joints and muscles felt just enough strength to get by with. They were sore and lactic acid coursed through him, but the feeble remnants of strength remained.

Rosie rose from the couch, her book forgotten, and hugged him hard. His body wasn't too old for love so he let her without grunting. Her eyes were wide and bright and he remembered first seeing them.

The sky had been clear over the tarnished basketball court by Pineville Middle School that summer day. Young Billy Waters dribbled through both defenders and tufts of grass shooting through the cracked concrete to finish up and through the tattered net.

A young Rosie was biking by the court and saw them shooting. She stopped and joined in. Long after the other boys left, Billy and Rosie were still playing. The sun dipped below the horizon, the Smokies stood silhouetted in the distance, and they biked together down the same greenway that snaked by their future home.

Now he went by Bill and she was still Rosie. In the living room they separated, still holding the other's arm, as Reggie Miller and the Pacers celebrated on the TV.

“Say Rosie. What do you think about going down the greenway?”

“As long as you make sure the oven ain't on.”

She wore that familiar smirk and Bill laughed. The screen door banged behind them. Arm in arm the pair ambled down the greenway where they talked about the present and reminisced on the past. The concrete snaked below unheeded.

Young people streaked by, but Bill Waters didn't notice. He was with Rosie and that made any speed comfortable. It was a nice day and he had time for a long walk.