

## In the Heartland

Granny says that I am expected to finish my homework. Always within a timely manner. Always while sitting at the kitchen table. Sometimes she cooks while I work. Smells of browned beef and cooked tomatoes surround us like a crowd. Watching us as we do our jobs. My “little job” she says is to be smart. She says “little” because everything I have done, up to this point, has been little. Because I am little. Teachers at school, people at church, and especially my family all have little nicknames for me. *Skinny Minnie, Tiny*. A reflection on body size, I’m told. That’s all. But this is the most important job I could ever have, she says. She thinks it takes me an hour and a half to finish my homework. It only takes forty-five minutes. With the remaining time, I write stories or in my journal. Sometimes I create fake recipes while listening to Granny recite her own. Sometimes I pretend that my homework is actually to read a certain book. Granny will ask me what it’s about. I tell her. Then she’ll say *sounds interesting* as she adds different spices to her mix. I ask her about what she’s cooking. I want to know how she does it, what ingredients she’s using and how long she’s been using them. What she thinks I’m asking is *what’s for dinner?*

When we eat dinner, we eat in shifts. Granddad and the boys eat first. Granddad sits at the head of the table and the newspaper is folded in his lap. He reads while he eats. To his left, there will be John. He will eat in under ten minutes, depending on how much he talks throughout the meal. Talking about cars, or girls, or the weather, or whatever happens to float his way. To Granddad’s right, there will be Eli. John’s little brother, the one who doesn’t talk during dinner because he’s thinking about what he’s going to do after dinner. In the summer months, he’ll eat to his content and then rush outside to catalogue frogs and tadpoles. A project that he has been working on for the past four years of his life. Granny will ask if he has homework and he’ll say

*no we don't really do much in fourth grade.* Which is to say, he does his homework on the school bus before he comes home.

After the men eat, Granny and I eat. We sit across from each other and sometimes we talk, but most of the time we don't. I compliment her food after each meal. Mostly because I know that no one else will and also because I mean it. When we are finished eating, we do the dishes and put away pots and pans. This is the third shift. The least exciting one. The one where we are the only two people in the house. Everyone else outside working or playing. I'll rinse the dishes and scratch away any leftover crumbs with my fingernails. You're supposed to wash dishes with scalding hot water, so my hands will turn red and pulse with an ache by the time it's done.

When it's done, Granddad will walk in and ask me *are you ready?* Then we'll settle into our places in the living room. He sits in his chair and pulls the leg rest out. I sit on the couch with one of the pillows in my arms. On the rare occasions that Granny joins us, she sits across from me on the love seat. There has to be a lot of seating on account of all the people who pass through this house. It begins with Granny and Granddad. Then the four children, two of which no longer visit this house, my mother and John's mother. But the other two, the good two, remain. Then there are the seven grandchildren. Me, John, Eli, Hanna, Will, Roy, and Sarah. Three of us are a permanent fixture. Like the tile floor in the kitchen or the tiny crack in the small kitchen window. We are forever projects, or at least, a forever that lasts as long as live here.

But during this time of the day, it's largely empty save for the two, sometimes three, of us. We watch *Dateline* every night. Granddad times me—challenges me—to see if I can solve the crime before the episode ends. The only ones I can't solve are the ones where no body is ever recovered and the person is just labelled as *missing*. Those cases, Granddad feels, are the hardest

ones. If the missing person is a woman with a troubled past, Granddad cries a little. He doesn't think I know, but once I asked him why he cried. *A parent shouldn't have to bury their children. Even worse, a parent shouldn't wonder if someone else will bury their child before they can.*

Lucky for us, those episodes are rare and we don't watch reruns.

Once, John walked in at the end of an episode. The kind of episode where the husband's business partner is the killer and is found through a paper trail. He plopped down on the couch next to me. Bristling.

"I heard once that if you say 'surprise' before your rape someone that you can get years taken off your sentence. I wonder if it's the same for murder," he said.

I threw my pillow square into his face, "That's premeditated, stupid. You get more for that."

Granddad laughed. He called me his Little Lawyer. Little because of my size. Lawyer because I told my teacher once in the fifth grade that I wanted to be a lawyer and Granddad, upon hearing it, said *She'll always argue her case. And win.* That's all.

When I was seven years old, I stole a can of Vienna sausages from the local convenience store. The tiny can slipped into my pocket, the one sewn into a blue denim dress my grandmother had just bought from Walmart. My hair was pulled back into a braid and I was missing one of my front teeth. It was summer time then, the middle of June. There were visible freckles laid across my cheeks and nose, they magically appeared every summer. I was wearing a pair of pink sandals, the jelly kind, the ones that sparkled. The sort of shoes that squelched a little when I shifted my weight from one foot to another. Which I did often back then, especially when I was about to do something mischievous. I shifted my weight like I shifted my options: Back and forth

for far too long. The sound of my shoes was the tiny alarm bell which caught the attendant's attention. Mary Kate, a woman who wore wire framed glasses and kept her brown hair in a tight ponytail, heard my shoes before I saw her.

By the time Mary Kate peeked around the aisle, past the bags of chips and Little Debbie cakes, she saw the shiny top of the can slip into my pocket. At first, Mary Kate thought that she would wait at the register. Surely, she decided, I would walk up to the counter and place a wadded up five-dollar bill down, as I always did. I did always pay for whatever I picked up prior to this moment. Mary Kate waited. She listened to the sound of car doors opening and shutting with muffled *thuds*. She watched the heat rise off of the asphalt outside, reminding her to take her car in later to have the air conditioning unit charged, again for the third time that month. She even glanced at the rack of keychains to her right. The display spun around in a circle twice as Mary Kate looked for her name. There was the classic *Mary* and the rarer *Meredith*. Her name was missing from the line-up, so she spun the display again and this time looked for my name. There in neon green thread was the much-anticipated *Lily*.

It was almost as if I knew someone was trying to conjure my name. Suddenly, I appeared in front of the counter. The first time I did it, Granny was called immediately. They thought I had wandered off and was lost. I would come in and ask for a bottle of water, sometimes a Coke. Always on Thursdays before church. No one ever asked where I got the money. This time, however, I didn't even look up at Mary Kate, I simply walked out.

I have no real recollection of stealing the canned meat. I can't remember the jelly shoes or the denim dress. The only reason I know about the incident is because everyone in town, at the school, at church, and especially the attendants at the town's only Exxon station, tell me about it almost weekly. Everyone loves to remind me of the time I stole two dollars' worth of sausages,

something I didn't even like to eat. When they tell the story, they always laugh and mimic the blank expression I had when her grandmother stopped me at the front door, hours after the initial theft, and demanded that I hand over the can. Everyone remembers how hilarious and downright humorous it was for little Lily Harlow to steal from the gas station. Granny, however, remembers how embarrassing it was. How the woman who lived three houses down the road called Child Protection Services and told the agent that I, "must have been so hungry to have stolen sausages from the gas station." After all, I was tiny for my age.

Perhaps the thing my Granny, Martha Harlow, remembers best is the simple reasoning I gave for her crime. *The fish, Granny. I wanted to feed the fish. I had no money, but I could tell that they were hungry.* The fish I was desperate to feed were the small catfish that swam in the deepest parts of the creek in front of our house. As angry as Granny was, she couldn't remain furious when I cried. I cried a lot as a child. Cried because I felt that there had been an injustice committed on that hot June day. I could only feel a deep sadness for the fish, who I thought were boiling in the summer heat. The way they lazily swished from side to side seemed, to me, to be a symptom of hunger.

I do remember the fish. I remember the brown water, still clear enough to see through, but brown nonetheless. I remember the feeling of wet sand and pebbles between my toes. Then the way the fish would appear, then disappear again and again. I remember the cool water being a gift during the hottest parts of the summer. I felt endeared to the fish, I felt alone when I went to see them but I always felt apart of their little spot of earth when I left them. So when someone reminds me, or Granny Martha for that matter, of the time I stole from the Exxon station we both smile and go about our day. For me, it reminds me that the entire town is watching my every move, that someone could call my grandmother in a heartbeat and tell her anything they wanted

to. For Granny, it is a reminder of the need to protect me. *To preserve me*, as she says. *Because this town is full of people who sometimes tell the truth and others who sometimes believe in it.*

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The radio in the backyard is booming like a heavy pulse. Strings of yellow lights are hung along the porch and side of the house, lighting the pathway outside to the keg and the music. Michael, John's long-time best friend, thought the lighting was essential for those who had never been to the house before. For all of the classmate that didn't know that the hallway between the house and the garage is always dark. The second door on the left is the one that leads to the backyard. You press down on the handle and pull. The twinkling lights were meant to help with that. John shimmies out of the truck with a cigarette carelessly placed in the corner of his mouth.

"You really have to smoke every time we go somewhere?" I ask. Realizing that the moment he knows we're away from home he can light up. Granny doesn't have eyes everywhere.

"You really gotta ask me that every time we go somewhere?" He puffs on the cigarette and reaches into the bed of the truck for a six-pack of Heineken, his contribution to the party. He walks around the house, his friend's house, following a darkened gravel path he knows well. He doesn't need any help from the festive lights.

"Get laid or something!" He yells through his smoke as disappears.

For a minute my cheeks get red. Even though no one else is there to hear it or see me, I still blush. If we had been actual siblings we would hate each other. We wouldn't ride together to a party. Wouldn't joke like this. Granny used to tell John and his brother Eli to act like cousins, not

like brothers. *Pretend to like each other.* Eli and John are separated by six years and different fathers. The age gap is enough to make them strangers. But we're only months apart, ten exactly, so we go to parties together, make jokes. We act like siblings.

I notice a porch swing, with red stained wood, in the corner of the porch. I decide to sit there. Relishing in the nighttime for a minute, taking in the complete pitch of the night. There's only one streetlight on this road, it's in this yard. I think about all the times in my life when the streetlight at our own house went out. How dark it gets in our corner of the world. Last summer, John and Michael held down one of the neighborhood boys. Upside down. Pressing him into the pole of the streetlight. Then they took out one of Granny's three-foot-tall rolls of saran wrap and wrapped the boy to the pole. When our grandparents heard the commotion, they came out immediately and Granddad laughed so hard he couldn't breathe. Granny did too. It took two pairs of kitchen scissors to cut the wrapping away and someone to catch the boy's body when he was finally free. John was rolling in the grass with laughter.

But here in front of Michael's house, there is no one. He was throwing this party, a bring your own beer because I can't afford any party, to celebrate graduating. Each of the boys in the backyard had been planning for weeks on the where, the when, and what each of them would bring. With so many of them coming there was no shortage of beer.

Once when Michael and John were fifteen, they stole a can of Pabst from Michael's dad. They snuck off into the woods behind our house and took turns sipping from it. John said that it took them half an hour to get through the warm can of beer. *It tasted like piss.* Michael burped and thought he would vomit for a minute before he realized he was just feeling the alcohol in his system for the first time. Michael crushed the can under his tennis shoe and they threw it into a trashcan in the driveway. They completely forgot about it until a week later.

John said that Granddad must have knocked the can over one evening while working on the truck. When he went to grab it, the white can fell out. Crushed but still obvious. He didn't tell Granny. Instead he asked John to go on a drive with him. John never said what happened then. Whenever I got in trouble with Granddad, which was rare, he always asked me to take a walk around the garden with him. Where Granny is fire, Granddad is a stream of water. Through persistence, he gets the point across. I remembered when John came into the kitchen that night and his cheeks were gleaming with tears. I was on the phone with a friend, Gillian, when I saw him crying. Her voice on the phone kept saying *are you there? Hello?* He went straight to his bedroom and shut the door. *I'm here* I said. *Just distracted.* I never asked anything else about it. He only gave up information when he felt like it. I knew better than to ask.

The swing creaked under my weight and sounded like a bullfrog croaking. I didn't like the taste of beer, I knew so from sneaking sips from the green bottles John kept hidden in the tall grass behind the house. I think he knew that I did this, but his sense of pride kept him quiet about it. Maybe, he thought, I would drink with him too. I pull my feet under me and listen to the waves of music and laughter. A hearty laughter. I imagine that they're all slapping each other's backs and laughing about things that they can only talk about around the crackling of a bonfire. About girls, cars, jobs, and strict parents. About all the things that are about to become trivial. Trivial because college and marriages and babies and careers all come next for most of us. I think that they have already figured this out too. That's why there's so much beer.

"Can I sit with you?" Carry appears, surprisingly, standing in the driveway.

"I guess so. What are you doing here?" My face is contorted in the question, the confusion. In my mind I was asking different questions. *How did he know about the party? Why did he choose to come speak to me?* More over, I thought about how many times we had had sex.



At this point the number was between seven and nine, but I couldn't be sure anymore. I only knew that we rarely ever spoke to each other in public. Carry, the boy with the longer than usual hair. That's how my grandparents remember him. From yearbook photos and town gossip. I picked a "good one" when I settled for him.

Gillian would skim through her own yearbook, from the safety of her bed, while I sat in the floor. *His parents are rich.* Or something like *I heard he dumped a girl last year at Valley because snorts when she laughs.* Carry, she remained convinced, was perfect boyfriend material. No harsh rumors, no extraordinary parents.

Then Carry spoke up again.

"I'm friends with Michael too you know." Carry smiled but only for a moment before he sat down. The wooden swing lowered with his weight.

"You don't seem like the type to come out to a holler to chug beer," I said trying to smooth my voice out, like silk.

"Neither do you." He lightly shoved my shoulder. The way he sometimes did when he thought I was being funny. This is how he laughs. Not with sound but through movement.

I came to the party because John had come. Only that was half true, I had been invited too. I knew that I would have a corner—a space—where other girls my age would gather and the friendliest among us would laugh and gossip. My friends were here. Michael was like another younger brother around our house, like another younger brother to me. Gillian would soon be here, bringing with her something fruity to drink because she can't hold down beer. I go to these parties often. After the second round of drinks, someone breaks out a deck of cards. I always win because I'm always sober enough to do so.

“Did John already go around back?” Carry asks. John doesn’t know about Carry, except that he might be a boyfriend. He places great emphasis on the word *might* when he teases me about it. John has had many might-be girlfriends and we always keep it to ourselves. He does so because he knows it’s not serious enough to bring a girl home. I do it because John did it. I have no reason to keep Carry away. My brother dated before I did. He set the rules.

“Yeah, you know he lives to be around other rowdy men his age. It’s good for him.” This makes Carry chuckle a little. It has become a game of sorts: Me trying with all of my might and charisma to make him laugh and him sometimes getting close to it, but then again not quite.

“You know you can go out back too. You can do anything he does.”

“I know I can. Which is why I won’t. I don’t want to be like that.”

What I’m saying is that I don’t want to drink the way he does. Pass out in someone’s yard face down the way he does. He drinks so heavily that I’m afraid his body isn’t made up of water and blood anymore, but of beer and vodka. He says it’s under control. But some weekends he disappears, sleeping it off at a friend’s house. Once he even slept in his truck while it was parked in an empty lot off of the interstate. Anything to pretend like he didn’t get wasted. On the rare occasions when he did drink at home, he does it in the dark. Two bottles at the most. Then he throws the empties as far away as he can. Expelling. Sending them into the trees where they shatter leaving shards of green glass sprinkled among the pines. Carry understands. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

Carry knows all of this because I’ve told him in bursts of panic. Walking between classes, when I’m at his house. The drinking got so bad once that Granddad picked up on it. He smelled it is what he said. For any other teenager our age, grandparents are absent figures. But our grandparents are the only consistent people in our lives. Granddad made both of us sit down

in the garage with him. By the end of the conversation both of us were in tears too. Only because Granddad told us something that no one else ever had.

“Your grandmother’s first husband was a drunk. He beat her senselessly every time he got wasted too.” I did the math, the possibilities. My mother would have been around a year old when Granny married Granddad. Later that night, when Granddad and Granny went to bed I heard him say to her *we should have been done with raising kids a long time ago, Martha. I’m too tired to keep having the same talk.* That was all the warning I needed. John, it seems, needed more time to come to terms with it.

“Well, I’m going in. Are you coming?” Carry stands, smoothing out his jeans. A nervous gesture I think. Unsure of what to say, knowing that this was a drinking party. Feeling the tension of sobriety and drunkenness.

“No, you go ahead.” I say. Walking off, he gives a little wave. Smiling only a little.

I wait five minutes before I go inside. I don’t want to be seen with Carry either. It would mean that someone would ask and then there would be an expectation. None of which I wanted. So many of the girls our age had little crushes on Carry. But none of them knew that he was both not paying attention to them and paying close attention to one of them all along.

Besides, I was going to go to college in the fall and Gillian and I had made a pact: No boyfriends our first year. A deal that she made because her mother told her that we wouldn’t be able to imagine all of the boys we would meet on campus. *Thousands of members of the opposite sex that you never knew existed.* She wanted to be in a sorority like her mother had been too. But after doing the research, she found out that you had to maintain a high-grade average and a “lady like” composure. She decided that this meant that her first year of college would be purely about working hard, pledging, and being a legacy after her mother.

My family doesn't see it that way. My guidance counselor had to help me fill out all of the paperwork. She was the one who told me that the pre-law program at the university was the hardest to get into. I reported all of this back to my own family. Pre-law and sororities. Granddad keeps a mason jar of change next to his side of the bed. Collecting pocket change for me. It's a dull silver: Full of quarters. *I'm saving up to give you some pocket change for when you become a spunky college girl.* He winks when he says it. I think it's the best way he can support me right now. One of the only ways he knows how.

Gillian is waving me over from her corner on the kitchen. This is where the women come to gossip and be among each other. Out back it's mostly a lot of backslapping. Some girls would sneak out to have a beer with a boy she was smitten with, though rarely. Gill's red hair glistens under the light. She is smiling. Once I get close enough, she rests her head on my shoulder. Her cheeks are already a little red from drinking.

"I saw Carry walk in." She doesn't move, her head still resting on my shoulder.

"I saw him too." Now she's looking up at me, really seeing my face this time. I guess she sees something that interests her. A spark in my eyes or a feather stuck in my hair.

"So you're just going to fuck then? Nothing else?" She laughs a little, but quietly.

"Watch your fucking mouth," I say and lightly bop her on the chin. Whether or not she understands, she agrees. I can tell by the way she sips from her drink again and changes the subject, that we won't have to talk about it again. We have a pact. I'm thankful.

Someone says something about nursing school. *Are you going? I'm going, my parents are paying for it.* Someone else talks about a hair appointment tomorrow morning to get high lights. *For ceremony tomorrow.* Someone is always talking. It's like dinnertime at the house but

beer instead of food and no one here is related. Gillian banter with a few people but keeps looking back at me, from the corner of her eye. I finally ease myself into a seat across from her.

“Lily, aren’t you going to school? You got like a full ride or something?” Caroline from my fifth period literature class is asking me a question now. I’m no longer the outsider listening in.

“Um yeah. I got a full ride at the university. I’ll probably live at home though, it’s cheaper that way.” I’m swirling the contents of my bottle as I say it. Also a nervous habit.

“Yeah but you’d miss out on all the parties and stuff. You could never have a boy over for the night either. My parents have been freaked out about stuff like that since my sister got pregnant her junior year.” Caroline is an over sharer. She’ll share your darkest secret in five minutes flat and never realize she’s done it. Caroline keeps talking about her sister and her sister’s baby. *She’s raising it herself, can you imagine?* Carolina snaps her gum in between her own questions. Sometimes she moves a piece of her blonde hair behind her ear. I’m trying to take in Michael’s mother’s kitchen. She’s decorated everything with chickens. The salt and peppershakers, oven mitts, and even the cookie jar. Chickens. It’s a perfect fit for all of the clucking going on tonight.

Everyone gets quiet and I notice that they’re all looking at me. I reach for my mouth and try to wipe away whatever it is they’re looking at. But they remain affixed. I look around the room and I think that maybe their gaze is directed over me, that I’m in the way. When I turn around and see Carry standing behind me, looking at me, I know I’m right.

“I think you should come out here for a minute.” His hair falls into his face and he’s chewing on the inside of his cheeks.

“Why?” I ask, trying to establish that I don’t know him. Trying to fool everyone else. It works.

“Your brother. Or cousin. Whatever he is.” That’s all he says and he turns for the door so I follow. Once we’re out the door, Carry stops me. He closes his eyes and lifts up his hands and whispers, “It’s really bad. He’s really far gone. No one seems to care but it’s too much for me to watch.”

I know what he’s talking about. Before I see it, I know. John takes everything to the extreme. When we were kids and we played truth or dare, he would make me eat a worm or dirt. The worst I ever made him do was eat a blade of grass. His mind works in gears, moving forward, never backward or stopping. He’ll black out or pass out.

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When we walk to the backyard it’s almost like nothing has changed. No one is alert or aware. The faces of the boys are illuminated by the bonfire and the shine of brown beer bottles. He isn’t here. Carry, taller than I am, scans the crowd and shakes his head every time he thinks he sees him. It seems like everyone has sandy brown hair. Each of these boys is wearing the same plaid shirt with khaki shorts. All of them have been the first one to vomit at the party or the one who got angry over a joke and stomped off. None of them blink an eye at my searching. I feel a tugging sensation. Something telling me to turn to the left and face the front of the yard. That’s when I see him stumbling forward. Walking aimlessly, away from the party. He was aiming for his truck, I think.

He is going down. Falling down the creek bank. Thorns, weeds, and water all whip at his face as his body lurches. His hands come up and out. A reflex. The sand of the bank swallows his hands. He lands with enough force to break his nose, his body. Instead, he rolls over. His face

smearred with sand, some blood, and water. Then the tears come. He cries like a mute toddler. Expelling the tears fast. There might be sound accompanying the grief but I'm not close enough yet. He vomits. Every beer, every shot. It all floods the section of the creek around him. He can barely wipe his mouth clean before he does it again. Now the amber color of his spit, brightened by the streetlight, mixes with the blood, the grass. All of it staining.

He thinks that no one saw. That he was invisible. The lights from the streetlight and the porch light create little fires in his welled up eyes when he sees me coming. He sits up and pulls at the neck of his shirt. It's covered in the mess too. It cannot be saved. He sits like this for a little longer. Straight up like something brought back from the dead. Clarity comes over him, his face. He is suddenly sober or at least halfway there. I can't lift him up with my own weight so I stand there too. Watching.

Carry reaches down and helps him up. He doesn't even wipe his hand off after touching him. Instead he puts one arm around him and we walk toward the porch again. Finally I break the silence, "You can't go home like this."

I'm so angry with him. All of our lives we've been tethered together. Two motherless kids, living with their grandparents, so close in age. But we're polar opposites now. It falls on me to clean up after him, to hide his problems away. I always wonder if he'd do the same for me. I don't think he would.

"I know I can't." He says it so quietly that I wonder if his throat is dry or if he knows exactly how angry I am. Both must burn deeply.

Carry and I look at each other for a minute. I feel lucky. Then shameful. He should never have been responsible for our problems. But he was, he's here. He catches me looking and he mouths the word *shower*. So we sneak into the upstairs bathroom and John does the rest. We

wait outside the door, sitting underneath a painting of a winter landscape with our backs against the wall. I regret not inviting Carry over.

“How often does this happen?” Carry’s gaze is still fixed on the opposite wall of the hallway.

“I really don’t know. I’d bet that it’s happened before but beyond that I can’t say. I’ve never seen it before.” I’m trying very hard to remain in this moment. Not to cry out of anger.

“Does anyone in your family even drink? I thought your grandmother was strict?”

“She is. And no. No one else does. His mom and dad did though. Years ago. His dad is still a drunk.” I can’t imagine these people really being his parents though. Granny and Granddad are our parents. They raised us. And yet here we are, sitting outside of Michael Brewster’s guest bathroom. Talking about John’s alcoholism. We turned out to be such well-behaved children.

“You’ve never mentioned his real parents to me before.” Carry turns to face me now and I think he regrets ever saying anything about it.

“Well, they weren’t his parents. One of them is dead now and his dad is just gone. He left town four years ago.” I hear the shower stop and the floor creak a little as John steps out. I stop talking immediately.

Carry starts to say something. An interjection maybe. But the bathroom door swings open and the hot air from the shower fills the hallway. He’s got a scrape on one cheek and a cut across the bridge of his nose. It looks like his left eye might be fixing to bruise.

“Well. I counted and I have all ten fingers and ten toes. And all of my teeth are still in tact.” He holds his hands out, fingers stretched out. If no harm has been done to his body on the outside, then there is no harm done at all. Even though I disagree, even though I think Carry would too, we walk away.



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I dream vividly. For my sixteenth birthday Gillian bought me a dream encyclopedia because she said I told her every morning about the dreams I had. *Maybe you'd like to understand yourself better.* I kept the book by my bed and each morning would flip to the accurate pages. There have been dreams about otters living in our bathtub. Otters symbolize joy and happiness. That they lived in our bathtub meant that I was making the most of my situation. The bathtub that had backwards knobs: cold meant hot and hot meant cold. For months you couldn't take a bath because the stopper had broken, Eli had accidentally smacked with his foot. For those months there were no otters in the bathtub.

Last night when we came home from Michael's we sat in the truck for a few minutes. John switched the truck off and he sighed deeply. We were parked in the grass, next to Granddad's truck. There were deer in the front yard, four, they stopped and twisted their necks to look at us. Not sure if they should run yet. John's hair was still wet from the emergency shower. I knew I had to go inside first. Granny would ask me how the party was. She would assume it was a pool party or what she called "popcorn parties" where the rich kids had people over to eat snacks and sit around while their parents stayed in the kitchen. For the sake of telling the story right, and protecting both of us, I would say it was a popcorn party. I would say that the boys went out back and grilled hot dogs. The girls stayed inside and we munched on chips and salsa and talked about boys. *Carolina told everyone about her sister's baby.* That's what I would say. Granny doesn't go to parties, even if invited, so she would believe me.

But then when I fell asleep I dreamed something new. I was standing in our yard, in a nightgown, with no shoes on. My family, all of them, were in two lines, facing each other. They

were wearing church clothes. Dress pants, shiny shoes. They were smiling with their hands behind their backs. But then they all pulled bats from behind them. Baseball bats, wooden ones. *Come here* Granny said. When I reached her, she was still smiling but she hit me with the bat. Across my mouth. I fell down in shock and pain but she told her stand up and keep going. *You have to finish what you started.* It was a gauntlet. The kind we read about in history classes, a form of punishment.

My grandmother hit me twice, both times in the mouth. Granddad only once but to the back of the head. The boys, Eli, John, and Michael got in a quick smack. To the knees and ankles. I thought that I was close to the end of it. Only my mother and a man were left. I had never seen him before and so I stopped to look. I paused for only a breath to take in his green eyes and beard. A dark beard that was longer than Granddad's. This man didn't smile but he raised his bat in a stance like a baseball player. Like he intended to knock my head off. Behind me I heard John scream. He was being hit by the bats now. He broke rank and tried to tell me something so they beat him. So the sequence started over. I was standing in the yard in a nightgown. The grass wet under my feet and Granny said *come here.*

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Overhead, I can hear John roll over in his bed and the sound of his feet hitting the floor. It must be later then, ten o'clock at the least. He would have had to sleep off the hangover, the hurt. When I walk to the bathroom I can smell food cooking. Bacon and waffles. She's cooking us a big breakfast. She catches me in the hallway and smiles, "Good morning, lazy. You both slept in this morning. I figured you were tired." I shake my head yes to answer her before I shut myself into the bathroom.

My head aches a little. A dull pulsing behind my eyes. I hear the bacon crack and sizzle and the smell makes my stomach vibrate. Looking in the mirror I can see a lot of things. First, I see myself. No freckles or a false front tooth. The scar on my left temple from an accident when I was four when my best friend at the time, Sara, threw a rock at my face out of anger. I see my Granddad's nose, stern but not cooked or bent. Granny's eyes, which are the brown of fallen leaves. Thinking of what Carry said about John's parents—his real parents—made me think of my own.

I can't see my mother in my own face. I push on the skin, smile, even try squinting my eyes but I can't see it. She was a beauty queen and thin. Granny used to say that vanity should have been a deadly sin because *just look at what it did to your mother*. Gillian's mother heard that it was drug related. *That she had overdosed*. John once heard someone say that my mother hadn't died but was on drugs and therefore banished from our lives in accordance with my grandparents' wishes. I frequently thought about what had happened to her. I was with her for only three years before she left. I have never heard from her since.

Sometimes I imagine that she died in a fiery car accident like Princess Diana. Except there was no fanfare or funeral. That she was driving recklessly, with no seat belt on, and went over the edge. If what Gillian heard is true, then I imagine she choked on her own vomit after succumbing to her vices. Because she was selfish, there was no one around to roll her over onto her stomach or rush her to the hospital. It's so much easier to think of her as an episode of *Dateline* rather than seeing her as a mother. When I imagine her gone, I see fault in her. I see her doing terrible things—being selfish. She is selfish to have left me with her parents. Her aging parents. Whatever happened to her is always her fault. I accept no accountability for it and I give it to no one else.

I turn off the bathroom light and greet my waiting grandmother.

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“Hello again,” she says to the cream-colored tomcat, as he struts across the road and bolts for the open screen door. Granny has been feeding this cat for well over four months now. The cat, “Feller” as she likes to call him, is bald in places where his fur had been pulled out by other neighborhood strays. We call them battle wounds, but I know that Feller is completely unaware of them. It all feels the same to him. Frequently, the wiry sound of cats fighting fill the night time atmosphere, haunting anyone who listened for more than a few seconds. Granny especially finds the sound to be grating as it usually means that her little friend is taking a beating.

Sometimes I catch her standing in the kitchen, in her cotton nightgown, looking out the window. Like she’s waiting for reprieve from the screaming and hoping that her friend will come home. On many occasions she feared him dead but left the food on the porch just in case. With each drop of dry cat food she secretly hoped he would return. I’ve caught her doing this several times. Each time she pours a little into the bowl and she whispers *please come home*. He always comes home. As he streaks through the front yard you can hear him chirping. Small admissions of relief on his part. *I’m coming* he seems to say. In his own way of saying it, he always says *I’m coming home*.

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