

Y DYNASTY

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With her butcher's knife in one hand, Grandma steps on the squalling chicken, wedging it between her foot and the cement patio, and chops the head off. When she lifts her foot up the chicken wobbles from one talon to the other, flapping its wings and the head lies a foot away, motionless, with its eyes open. I scratch dry skin off from my forehead and watch, propped between the house and the back door, while the chicken wanders in circles, and then flops onto one side with a wing cocked, slightly.

"Floor or feathers?" Grandma calls and gathers the chicken's plump body under one arm. Behind her, rows of dusty corn stalks sway together in a gust of wind.

"Floor." I always choose cleaning chicken guts off the patio floor because the body is still warm when feathers are plucked from it. It's much easier to spray splattered guts off the patio, and more fun. For a while, there was a nozzle on the hose which sprayed in three different ways, but it broke somehow and now I have to put my thumb over the hole to generate enough pressure. I spray back and forth until the patio is drenched with water and all the crimson chicken guts are pushed to the edge.

"Is your mother going to join us for dinner tonight?" Grandma asks as I come back into the house.

"No, she's working a double shift at the restaurant and I'm going to leave right afterwards to hang out with Billy and John Rogers."

"Aren't those boys older than you?"

"Billy is."

“You could stay here, it’s rummy night. What’s so special about those boys?”

“I don’t know, they’re fun.”

“What does your special friend in Florida think of them?”

“Brett doesn’t care what I do. They’re his friends too. They were his friends before they were mine.” I sniff from deep down, which inflates my nostrils, a habit of Brett’s I picked up from hanging around him too much. It’s just natural now.

We used to get drunk on the roof of his dad’s tackle store and then play Nintendo in his basement before he left for a technical school in Florida. We would stack two bean bags on top of each other and lie on our backs in front of the television while our thumbs tackled the remote controllers. Sometimes, when it was just the two of us hanging out, Brett narrated what he thought Frogger was thinking when he jumped in between the cars. I would laugh until I got the hiccups. I couldn’t help it.

He’s scheduled to move back to Iowa the week after I graduate from high school and then we’ll rent an apartment together in town. He’ll probably get a job at the garage and I’ll keep working at the grocery store. I’ll probably be a manager once I graduate. Grandma thinks I should go to college, though.

In junior high I was the one person from my class to get a scholarship to Kirkwood Community College. The whole school had to gather on the gym bleachers for an assembly which recognized all eighth graders who were graduating and they announced my award right at the beginning. After the principal shook my hand and gave me a beige certificate, I went back to my seat and the boy sitting next to me wearing a faded batman tee-shirt called me an over achiever like it was some kind of debilitating disease he could catch from just sharing air with me.

When we filed out of the musky gymnasium I folded my award in half three times and slipped it into the trash bin, but the money is still in an account somewhere, I think.

“What are you doing back here so early, Lester Hawley? It isn’t even four o’clock yet. Today isn’t any holy holiday that I’ve ever heard of,” says Grandma before Grandpa even gets through the doorway. He removes his cap and scratches the back of his neck.

“Eleanor, we’re cutting the tree down,” says Grandpa. “Guy Johnson just stopped by and said it’s infected.”

“You better leave that tree alone, Lester Hawley, I’m serious.” Grandma wipes the chicken guts from her hands with her apron and glares at Grandpa. “You’re just letting him push you around.”

“I have to do what the mayor says, Eleanor. He said our tree is infected and if I don’t cut it down then he will and he’ll charge me twenty-five dollars,” said Grandpa. He wipes his nose with a dirty-white handkerchief and thrusts it back into his overalls pocket.

Grandma’s lips curl over her dentures and she chews on them while shuffling past Grandpa, around the coffee table, and out the front door which slams shut behind her. I watch her from the bay window sit down on the dry, lumpy ground underneath the old oak tree. She wraps one wrinkled hand over her forehead and the other around her chest.

I roll over and stare at the white bumps on the ceiling, imagining they formed figures and faces, if only I looked at them from the right angle.

When I was young, Grandma and I would sometimes make chocolate chip cookies together on summer afternoons when Mom had to work at the restaurant. While they baked, we would spread an orange tablecloth underneath that tree and sip apple juice from her white china tea cups which have little purple flowers painted around the edges. She showed me how to delicately hold the cup between two fingers and stick my pinky finger straight out like she said they do in London.

“Now we are beautiful women in lacy yellow summer dresses drinking fine tea we bought on our last expedition to India. You know, in India they train snakes to do tricks like dogs,” she would say, which made me giggle.

We transformed the stiff cornfields where Grandpa was driving his tractor into lavish flower beds filled with lilies, roses, and chrysanthemums. We made the brown farmhouse with paint peeling off in large strips a quaint castle hidden among the hills of the countryside.

“Pardon me, Lady Lindsey, but the maid’s out sick today,” Grandma would say when the cookies were done baking. “The poor thing has gotten the chills. I’ll have to fetch the scones myself. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” I learned to say.

She'd come back with the cookies and white paper napkins, which I spread over the lap of my jeans. After every bite of my cookie, I gently dabbed my lips with the napkin. As soon as we finished our snack, we had to clean up so Grandma could make dinner before Grandpa came in from the fields.

"I don't understand you women. There's plenty interesting things to do around here but you have to go and pretend you are in Ireland," Grandpa would say. "We were in London, Lester, and that's what real women do. They sip tea in their gardens every afternoon. I'm teaching Lindsey how to be proper."

Then Grandpa would take off his gray cap and run his hand over the prickly white hairs sticking out of his head.

"I'm going to get the axe," says Grandpa. I stretch my legs and hop up from the ground. I grab a carton of apple juice from the refrigerator and go outside to sit down next to Grandma, underneath the tree.

"It's not proper to drink from the carton, Lindsey," Grandma says, without looking at me. She sighs and closes her eyes, which sink into her head. I wedge a spot for the juice to stand in the grass, fold my hands across my stomach, and lean my head back. Rays of sun twinkle between bunches of dull brown leaves.

Brett said he'd call me tonight, if he wasn't too busy. A few weeks ago Brett had called me at three in the morning and promised he hadn't drunk more than two beers, but his speech was slurred and I could hear people laughing in the background. I hung up on him and called him from my garage the next morning to yell at him and I started crying half way through. He told me he missed me and wanted to come home over Christmas to see me.

"I love you," he said. "Don't get mad at me, Linds. When I move back I'll get a job and we'll find an apartment and spend every night together. Okay?"

"Okay," I had said. "I love you too."

"Au revoir, tree," says Grandma.

"What?"

"That's how you say 'goodbye' in French, 'Au revoir'," says Grandma. "Then you kiss twice. That's how they do it in France."

She kisses each of my cheeks with her withered lips.

“You know, the first time your grandfather kissed me, it was underneath this tree. Back then, this was still my father’s house, and your grandfather came for a visit one afternoon. We went out for a walk down the road and when we got back, he took my hand and kissed my cheek. Mother always peeked at us out the window, but under the tree she couldn’t see.”

“You girls better go inside,” says Grandpa.

“No sir, we’re going to watch. I have to make sure you don’t hurt yourself. Lindsey, help me up. We’re going to sit on the porch.”

I stand up and Grandma uses my arm to maneuver herself onto her feet. She holds it all the way to the porch. Loud cracks from Grandpa’s axe echo each time he strikes the tree. It vibrates with every blow and leaves fall from its long branches, settling on the ground. We huddle together as the tree slowly topples, the tips of its gnarled branches landing inches away from our feet.

Grandma looks at her wrist watch.

“Now Lester, look what you made me do. Its twenty minutes until Mistress at Midnight comes on and I haven’t even changed my clothes yet,” she says and rushes inside.

Grandpa stoops down and begins breaking branches from the tree.

As is her tradition on Saturday afternoons, before she starts to cook dinner, Grandma will wear her finest black dress, with lace and long sleeves, and sit down in her rocking chair next to the radio box. She’ll paint her lips dark red and wear the pearls Grandpa gave her at their wedding. Her black hair will be tied back in a tight bun on the top of her head with a red faux-jeweled hair pin sticking out the side. Then she’ll listen to her show, a rebroadcast which originally aired before Mom was born. The radio projects deep voices over constant static telling about how rich men save glamorous women from being dishonored while traveling all over the world. She’ll sit with her back straight and stare out the window at rows of cornfields, divided by our dusty gravel road.

While she changes, I wander through the living room decorated with pictures of me and my mom from when I was little, at the creek catching crawdads, with cake at my princess birthday party, at the LaVerne Days barbeque. We have the same smile, but I usually had fewer teeth. Then

through the kitchen window I see the chicken head, sitting on the side of the patio, shaded by long grass.

With a salmon-colored rag which used to be my mother's prom dress, I go out and grab the chicken head, which feels limp and delicate in my fist. Without ever looking into the rag, I wind up and chuck my bundle over the hill, into the cornfield, which doesn't even rustle when the head lands.