

TOAST

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Most days Grace did not mind that her dad didn't exist. She didn't even seem to mind how her mom was pretending to be one from two states away. But today the heater broke. The house was as irritable as usual, clothed in wallpaper from the '70s, rooms swollen with knick-knacks from her grandmother's uneventful life. When her grandmother passed seven months ago, she left a void, a void that was quickly stuffed with unpaid electricity bills from a log mansion deep in a Missourian forest. The forest forgave often but the house refused to, and this made the days long for Grace.

When she got to the house, the sun was setting and draped shadows over everything but the tips of the towering pines. In the distance the school bus gurgled away, taking half a dozen high schoolers and their immaturities with it. Grace clenched her fingers sluggishly, the cold already persistent as she walked from the road to the house. She walked around the back, tripping over rusting gardening tools until she reached the back door. The quieting buzz of Missourian insects alluded that winter was approaching quickly, a whisper for Grace to find shelter somewhere, anywhere, and to do so quickly. The garage was dark and cluttered, lined with shelves of paint thinner and broken pots and her grandfather's large rubber boots. Though she'd never met him, she had loved her grandmother, and so she loved him by default. Grace kicked something away that clattered as she tranquilized the memory of her grandmother and tucked it into a darker place to rest. The garage hadn't changed in the six months Grace had lived there, and although she hated the musty weight of dusty shelves and disuse, she felt understood by the room. It opened into the kitchen, though Grace never stayed there long. *That's where the people gather, Grace.* She plucked this thought from her mind with false indifference and tucked it below her ribs. *You need people to gather.* Her stomach grumbled.

Grace abandoned her backpack and phone on a counter which was still decorated by stale coffee rings and toast crumbs from the morning. She found a soured rag but she cleaned the counter anyways, making a mental note, *Google how to get mold out of dish rags.* She stepped into the pantry. She was thankful it was empty. It usually was, due to a lack of time or something like that, but she checked four or five times after school, as if her mom had suddenly returned from her job in Oklahoma, or as if her grandma was home baking cookies, not lying beneath a cheap headstone. Grace was held up by empty shelves, the single lightbulb dimmer now, 'light' still idling on the grocery list from where she scribbled it a week ago. Behind her, the kitchen frowned deeper, slowly digesting the room and everything in it, which wasn't much because the girl was alone. It was a familiar and prideful hollowness. She collected her AP chemistry book, a glass of water, and shuffled through what should be the living room.

The house settled as Grace paused at the bottom of the stairs. She climbed one floor, two floors, three floors, the hallway parting with cranky sighs with each of her steps. She found herself in her room. The bed stretched from wall to wall and was dressed in a tired duvet that no longer smelled of home. It had been too long. The room was small, but it was hers. Through the walls, the crickets harmonized and Grace put on another sweatshirt and listened. The sound swallowed the house and the girl too. Grace began to hum along, but the sound was tired and she swelled with emotion, quickly collecting herself in embarrassment as if someone was watching. *No one is watching.* The crickets listened. *No one is here.* Grace had never really minded being alone except solitude was no longer a choice. Solitude was an obligation.

She rose from her bed, grasping her other arm to keep the chills out, and flicked on the bathroom light. To the left was an outdated bath and shower, the toilet to her right, and in front of her, the mirror. A girl stood in the reflection. In the mirror, she watched herself. She was average in height, with long legs and thighs that touched. She had grown into her womanhood at the age of 14 and she blamed her wide hips for her early isolation. She turned to the side and quietly cringed at her lovehandles. With both hands around her waist, she measured how close to her belly button both her fingers reached. *Not close enough.* Behind her, the house stirred as it cooled. Grace wrapped her thumbs and index fingers around her thigh, just above the knee, where she knew her leg measured 18 centimeters around. Slowly she slid her hands upwards, all the while keeping her thumb and fingers locked in a circle; she stopped when her fingers spread, indicating her thighs changed diameter. With her fingernail, she scratched a line into her fat, a centimeter higher than the one before and the one before that. *Eighteen centimeters is all I want.*

Her face was very Irish, delicate and pale, with freckles scattered across her cheeks. She glowed, not from joy or health, but from transparency; skin so sallow she sometimes wondered if she might melt in the bathtub like tissue paper in water. Most nights, this wonder becomes a quiet and demanding desire and so one day in August, Grace broke off the bathtub spout. *Showers only, Grace.* There was no hot water and so it didn't really make sense to bathe anyways. *It's for your own good.* In the mirror, her eyes met the gaze of eyes as complicated and green as the forest that spanned in every direction. Apart from her eyes, she was plain, and her mind never let her forget it.

Grace looked absent-mindedly, not quite there but not quite gone. *Maybe this is all there is.* She'd grown used to the idea that life was just a series of lame attempts to cope with existence. As a kid, she was raised in movement. Without a permanent sense of home, independence and

isolation felt inexorable yet somewhat desired. She attended seven schools within three years and didn't gain many friends or memories along the way. After a few years of living life on a roulette wheel, Grace stopped crossing her fingers that her chances would improve. *Grace, you know this, bad events are independent. Just because you get 'bad' every day before doesn't increase your statistical chances of getting 'good' any day after.* Grace and her mom were compelled to become friends because they were all each other had. They often bickered in the car because each new city and apartment and job was one more reason to keep distant and that somehow that felt safer. Grace found separation to be the only asset of change. *The less time in one place, the less to attach to, the less to lose, the less to hurt.* She sought safety and though her mom worked three jobs at any given moment to provide some sense of this, it never seemed to manifest. As Grace mulled over this thought, she flicked off the bathroom light. She loved her mom. *I love my mom.* But her mom wasn't there.

Grace's mom found a partially stable job in Oklahoma back in January. So when Grace's grandmother passed in March with lots of land and no other children to tend to it, Grace was promoted to the lonliest of positions. At 16, she was solely entrusted with a million dollar log cabin to live in while her mom remained in Oklahoma. It was an impulsive and desperate decision, but Grace didn't spite her mom for making it. She assumed physical distance wouldn't have that great of an impact; a drop of water into the ocean wasn't as detectable as adding a drop of water into a half-filled glass. The same was true for loneliness.

The night was full now. Somewhere in the distance the forest was shifting. Grace hadn't ventured into it since she was a tomboy, but she was content avoiding whatever lurked there that her kid self hadn't seemed to mind. The trees were untouched and mossy with roots spurting out of the ground. They often tripped little tomboys trying to run through. Through the window, Grace could see dark silhouettes plastered on even darker backgrounds. The vastness chirped louder. She could never find silence. Even when she was little, she found herself submerged in her own mind, asking herself the questions that no one could answer because she never spoke them. And while she explored both thought and forest, she wasn't searching for knowledge; she was searching for perfection. Everywhere that her life felt incomplete was a means for her to alter herself to fill in the cracks. *My existential and uncalled for obligation.* Though, with enough time, Grace morphed into so many different people that she was unable to trace her way back or remember if back was where it was better. Somewhere in the mix, she shed her tomboy spirit for porcelain, and any smudge or crack made her worthless. *Place me on a shelf,* she thought. *Look at me but never come close.* She scoffed. *Ain't that what you did, dad?* Her jaw hardened around that thought, *didn't even have to meet me to shatter me.* She couldn't decide if it was worse to hate someone you'd never met or to be begrudgingly adopted and carted around by your own mother. That's why she hated her father: not for abandoning her, but for abandoning her with a mom that wasn't particularly interested in her daughter. Grace couldn't blame her. The roulette wheel spun faster.

She opened the window, not to breathe in the fresh air, but rather, to avoid looking at her reflection. The air was fully cooled now but the house continued to adjust to the onset of darkness. The floorboards fidgeted underneath Grace's feet as she sat on the bed, still looking out the window. Something felt missing in her ribs. It wasn't a sudden sadness, but the cumulation of too many nights spent alone in a log mansion in the middle-of-nowhere Missouri.

All she could do was sigh. The house responded with a mechanical yawn as dusty as a Texan drawl, and after a sudden clang deep in the house, Grace perked up in fear or curiosity or maybe hope. The old house was falling apart. *You and me both,* she thought. Maybe the house was growing on her after all. *We could be friends.* With bare feet and her chemistry textbook in hand, she trotted down to the first floor, careful to skip the third step from the bottom which was caked in splinters. She peered around to see if something had fallen or a pipe had burst, but everything was as normal as it could be. *This is the part where the murderer comes out of nowhere, isn't it?* Grace giggled slightly, buoyed by black humor. *Maybe my murderer would stay for a cup of tea.* The faucet patted with its usual and torturous leak. The light cast a murky haze over everything and only then did Grace realize just how ugly the old house was. It was made of dust and pipes and books that would never be read and paintings that were beautiful but briefly noticed.

Humph. After another skeptical glance around the kitchen, Grace settled on the couch to do work and wait for whatever her gut said was about to happen. But she felt no fear. Within three minutes, the house cried out again, this time ending with a bloody screech. *Fuck.* Total darkness slapped Grace in the face like a familiar abuse. She was absorbed in a thick, black, stale air while her flashlight taunted her from two stories above. A chill caressed her spine.

Grace attempted to navigate out of the room by memory, but when memory failed, crawling followed. Now on all fours, she bumped her way into the kitchen. Her foot caught on a cord and a small table lamp clattered and shattered around her, as if verifying that Grace will be without light tonight. Two steps up, pivot to the right, she reverted to her toddler years where everything was to be learned, except now, everything unseen was a threat. The stairwell greeted her with a thud. One, two, four, *how many stairs are there?* She never thought to pay attention to these things. *Maybe you really don't see until you're blind.* Two flights of stairs later, Grace surfaced on the third floor embarrassed to be so uneasy by such a thing as darkness. Since there was nothing better to do, Grace fell into a brief and numbing sleep.

When morning awoke, Grace could see her breath. Frost licked the floorboards and her eyebrows and it was then that she wondered if her mom had told her what number to call when things broke. Grace buried herself in layers of clothing and went about her morning, assuring she wouldn't miss the bus. She flicked on the bathroom light by habit. Nothing happened. She showered in the familiar but worse cold water, shivered herself into her clothing, and stared at a partially frosty, partially foggy mirror. Nothing but shapes and colors could be seen in this state and for once, Grace felt beautiful. *Today I will have toast.*

As she descended the stairs, she discovered that the heat had only gone out on the third level. Feeling proud to still have two-thirds of a working house to come home to, Grace congratulated herself by allowing a bit of peanut butter too. For today, and today only, Grace allowed toast to be more important than 18 inch ideals. She was convinced that she had earned fuel by enduring a power outage, and she ate the toast furiously. *Maybe everything is going to be okay.*

After school, Grace fiddled with her phone before calling her mom. "Hi mom. The power went out. Yep, no lights. No, you didn't show me where the switch is. It's where? Why is it in the wall of the pantry? But there are black recluses everywhere. No, I don't have gloves. Okay, I'll try it. Talk later? Oh. Maybe another time, then." She hung up and fell away from herself for a moment. It was her and a long wooden spoon against the darkness and the cold and crawlers in the pantry wall. While on all fours, Grace reached for a hastily cut out part of the wall, no more than a foot by a foot, and stuck the spoon in. It caught on the switch and she jerked her hand up to flip the lever. As she did so, she wondered if she was allowed to hope. When it fully flipped, the world remained as it was the moment before. Dark.

Nighttime was arriving again, so Grace hurried to the second floor before it was pitch black. She tucked herself into her new room on the second floor. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the lack of light but she wasn't sure how temporary this situation was. The thought spooked her. *Come home, mom.*

Morning came, school passed, evening settled in. But when Grace went to study on the second floor, there was an eerie bite to the air. *Another heater broken.* Her skin was unprepared and so she went to bed without dinner to escape the cold.

The days passed similarly, and it wasn't until four days later that the last heater broke. The house had given up and Grace's mom had never called. Winter was approaching and appeared unforgiving, and Grace was falling further from herself. She ate bread now on the days that she ate, because the toaster became useless the day the last darkness came. No one was there to keep her warm or fed, and while she shivered constantly, she relished in the freedom from judgment. It was a paradoxical existence, a drive for something she couldn't have but didn't want. Some nights, when the darkness had settled in and there was nothing more than the beam of her flashlight, she would look in the mirror and whisper, *"I just want to be your friend."*

The house never warmed. Days became weeks, and as the log mansion in nowhere-Missouri grew colder, desperation set in. After school, Grace would turn on her electric blanket and light a candle and undress. She opened the windows more often now, again not for the air, but for warmth. It was 25 degrees outside, but colder within, and so she let the outdoors warm her room while she showered. She would shower for as long as she could endure the piercing water, often a minute at the most. She choked on air as it numbed her further. Then she'd stumbled over splintered floors to her electric blanket, paralyzed by chill or hunger or surrender, and fell into a deep sleep, where she was grateful that she couldn't consciously acknowledge the world.

Grace accidentally went days without speaking to anyone. She'd eat bread but refused herself more. She existed too many days without hope or kindness. And at some point it all became routine. Most nights she would whisper to whatever would listen, but even the crickets refused to hear her sorrow. *Is this what I deserve?* She grew angry some nights, but often fell into resignation. Consistent anger would have been better. Anger was better than emptiness and she knew this because Grace was starved.

When December came, so did her mom. While she felt something resembling excitement, she was cautious. Grace dreaded the caloric home cooked meals and unenthusiastic *"how are yous"* that she brought. *No more starving.* She rolled her eyes. *Great.* On Saturday she heard a knock on the back door, and weaved through the living room where no-one lived, through the kitchen that fed the demons in her head, past her grandfather's old work boots, and her grandmother's memory. She sighed at the door, unprepared for what to say to the person that loved Grace so conditionally. Another day, another spin to the roulette wheel that Grace couldn't stop losing too, another piece of toast to rest her worth on, another night shivering in an old log mansion in Missouri. *Maybe another body will warm this house into a home,* Grace wondered. She wanted love but knew that her mom gave it randomly and sparingly. *Maybe today is different.*

Grace opened the door. *"I'm cold, Mama."*