

Memories in Blackberries

“Madeline, you don’t know where you’re going,” says Rick sitting in the passenger seat next to her. He can see the frustration in her brow, a deep vertical wrinkle between her eyes, which are squinting hard as though this will make the proper street sign appear. Her grandparents’ new doublewide trailer really did exist *somewhere* out in Middle-of-Nowhereville, Mississippi.

After another half hour of turning down roads with unhelpful street signs and unmarked worn pavement, they find the original highway they drove in on and locate the nearest store. The green-brown mold growing along the white cinderblock building threatens to obstruct the sign next to the door that reads *Chimney’s Quick Mart*.

“Good afternoon, sir. I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to Johnston Hill road from here. We seem to have gotten turned around.”

After a long moment of rolling his toothpick around in his halfway missing and blackened teeth, the camo decorated store clerk gives Rick directions, which prove to be useful.

The driveway is quite steep. Rain has created small streambeds in the reddish tan gravel, and yellow and orange tiger lilies, shriveled and drooping, line the drive. It loops around a cluster of pine trees, standing tall and firm, presiding over the yard.

The chalky gray doublewide with the custom built wooden porch waits patiently as they gather up their luggage from the car.

“Madeline, are you okay?” This is Rick’s first holiday spent with Madeline’s family. He can see that her worry hasn’t diminished even though they are no longer cruising aimlessly down country lanes.

“Yes, I’m just really tired. You know, Chicago is a long way from here, and I just...I just really need some good food and some rest.” She gives him a weak smile, while only slightly decreasing the furrow in her brow.

The metal door creaks as they step through. The house reeks of cigarette smoke and cat piss, a bad mixture. One of the culprits, a mostly black cat with white feet, eyes Madeline and Rick distastefully from under the kitchen table. The other culprit, a very large man, both in width and height, sits smoking in a proportionately large recliner in the corner of the adjacent living room. A stream of blue gray smoke swirls from the cigarette hanging from his lip.

“Seems like you took an extra long time to get here. What, did you get lost or something?” Madeline’s papaw Dan gives a chuckle followed by a hacking cough.

Staring him blankly in the face, Madeline is reminded of her 9th birthday party when she was trying out her new rollerblades in the shoddily decorated pizza parlor. All her friends were smiling and cheering her on when papaw Dan sticks his foot out in front of her sending her slamming to the ground.

Rick greets Madeline’s grandparents, while Madeline starts reheating beans, cornbread, and mashed potatoes. Her grandmother Shirley, who has gained much unneeded weight, hunkers into the kitchen to bestow her latest worries.

“Madeline, I haven’t heard from your mother in about two months. Have you? I’m not sure she’ll be here for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow.”

“You know it wouldn’t be the first time,” utters Madeline.

Madeline seemingly finds extreme interest in the green, yellow, and red apples dancing across the tablecloth. Kindergarten was when she first learned that apples had different flavors. She was with her mother then, but graduated to living with her aunt at 2nd grade.

DING.

The steaming food regains Madeline's attention, and the aroma beckons Rick, who slinks into the kitchen.

Swinging the door open wide, Madeline's Uncle Matt, steps in, tall and unshaven, flannel long sleeve, long matted hair, with a wild look in his eye.

"That coyote got another one of my goats. I swear to God if I don't shoot that thing within the next day or two I'm not going to have any left. That's half my business out the window!"

Madeline breaks the line in her brow and laughs despite Matt's seriousness.

"Madeline! I didn't even recognize you standing there." He walks over to her squeezing her from the side, forcing her to drop the mash potato covered spoon onto her plate. Rick takes over, his stomach giving orders.

Uncle Matt sits down for a plate. He instructs Rick about locating a hunting stand in the middle of the woods in the dark morning hours, unaware of Rick's distaste for hunting.

Madeline's mind sinks into the tiny blackberries etched along the rim of her plate. They remind her of the summer weeks spent at her grandmother's old house.

Her little brother Keith stopped his scouting briefly to pluck a few barely ripe blackberries from a small bush about a hundred yards ahead of her. There wasn't a sound except the wind occasionally tickling the leaves. Madeline hid in a small dug out cove underneath a rather large fallen tree. She wanted to sneak up and scare Keith, he was so unaware, but that wasn't the object of this game. He moved on from the berries and advanced toward her cove, but missed her and kept walking. She leapt from her little cave and ran full tilt toward the base, a

large evergreen tree that was about to fall over one day until the other trees decided to catch it and hold it up.

“Madeline! Keith! Where are you two?!”

It was their mother’s voice and Madeline stopped dead in her tracks, Keith closed in on her and pushed her forward. She caught herself, scrapping her palms, mid fall.

“I got you! I got you! Now your it!” Keith taunted.

Madeline squinted toward the distance. Was it really their mother?

“Keith, the game’s over. We gotta go back. I heard Mommy calling us.”

“Mommy? Nah, she hasn’t been around lately. Couldn’t have been her.”

Madeline started walking back toward the house anyway, and Keith followed. They crossed the field with all the pricklies in it and carefully climbed over the barbwire fence. Sure enough there stood their mother Sue, hands on her hips, eyes glossy and wide, a goofy smile on her face. Keith ran up to her and hugged her around the waist. She patted him on the back.

“Mommy, what happened to you?” His upturned face staring into hers.

Madeline couldn’t run up and hug her. She couldn’t smile. She could only stare at the line of ants marching along side of the gravel road.

“Mommy, who gave you a black eye? Were you playing baseball? Did you get in a fight? Did you win?”

Rick’s laughter snaps Madeline back to reality. She eats the rest of her lukewarm mashed potatoes, leaves the table, and washes her dish.

“I’m really tired guys. I’m gonna hit the hay. I’ll see you all tomorrow. Rick just come on whenever you’re ready.”

Somewhere in the distance a rooster declares the day has begun. Madeline smells the beginnings of Thanksgiving dinner, turkey, candied sweet potatoes, and cigarettes. She sneaks out the back door and breathes deep. The smell of morning dew refreshes her mind, a light fog slowly retreats while the sun reclaims its realm. When they were young Keith told her this was the last time of day you could see the fairies again before midnight.

“Honey, what are you doing out here?”

Madeline feels her heart jump into her throat.

“Shit, Rick you scared the hell out of me.”

He envelops her into a hug. They stand there just long enough for Papaw Dan to come rapping on the glass door behind them.

“Hey! That kind of business is for the bedroom only! Now get inside and help your grandmother with the dinner.” His hacking cough always beats his laughter.

The cooking is slow going. Madeline tries her hardest to help without being in the way. Cooking is not included on the list of skills on her resume; her pancakes are usually black. After successfully burning a batch of cornbread, Madeline retreats to the swing on the front porch. Rick practices his lack of bird watching skills, but is entertained non-the-less.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The gunfire in the distance startles them. Rick resumes watching a couple squirrels chase each other around a tree. Madeline’s face goes blank and she stares through the cracks in the floor.

Pop! Pop!

Madeline heard them outside the door in the hallway. She could see a sliver of light under the door. They were shouting.

“What the fuck is wrong with me then!?” *Pop!*

The door opened and they came in. Madeline’s mother pretended like the bunk bed and her two children in it didn’t exist. Her lover, a young man with a ponytail that trailed down to the small of his back with a large rip in his t-shirt, was edging backwards toward the window. Madeline heard Keith whimper in the top bunk. She hastily climbed the small ladder and fumbled with the blankets until she was under them with him and pulled him toward her, shielding his eyes from the scene.

Madeline’s mother had a large knife in her right hand. She had backed the boy, who was five years younger than her, into a small space between the window and the head of the bunk bed. Madeline’s eyes were glued. Her mother’s eyes never strayed from the boy’s face.

“What in the fuck is wrong with me? Please tell me!”

She inched the knife closer to his face while hers glowered. His head turned away looking out the window, not wanting to face her.

“TELL ME!”

Keith began to quake against Madeline’s chest. She clutched him closer, her heartbeat growing faster with each second.

Pop! Her mother slapped the knife sideways against the wall to the right of her lover’s head then pulled it back to his face. He quickly slid the window open and began to yell for help.

“You motherfucker.” She began screaming at him, no words just screams, as he continued to plead out the window.

Suddenly he ducked down below the knife and shoved his hands into her stomach, the knife slipping up and out. He dodged it and ran for the door. Hugging the floor sobbing, she finally looked up at Madeline, and began to sob harder.

The roaring engine in Uncle Matt's mud covered 4x4 pick up truck cut out as he pulled up to the house. The tall antenna on top sways from his sudden stop.

"Woo Hoo! I got that damn coyote! Three shots and he was done." His triumphant grin disappears behind the metal door and the two left on the porch follow close behind him.

The sound of a woodpecker from the clock on the wall signals twelve. Madeline's family will continue to trickle in then sit down to eat in roughly an hour. She slips into the guest room to get away from the raucous, while Rick is tangled in conversation with her great aunt Alma.

Madeline rifles through the bedside table. A few rubber bands, a *TV Guide* from three years back, which hides a photograph of her grandmother in her younger days with her ex husband, the father of her three children. There is a little wooden logic puzzle, it is in its together state right now, but she can see Keith's little fingers fumbling over the pieces as he often did before she showed him the trick. She bites her knuckle, tears blurring her view. She buries her face in the pillows.

The smell of sweet potatoes wafts in as Rick opens the door and wakes Madeline with news that dinner is served. The noisy first few moments of passing dishes and serving up plates is offset by the silence that follows while the family enjoys the meal. Banter starts up again as appetites are curbed.

The fried okra on Madeline's plate stares back at her, she takes a few bites. Keith hated okra. There is a familiar creak and Madeline's mother appears followed by a tall slightly balding man in a gray suit and shiny black shoes. The okra threatens to stick in her throat. Her violent coughs distract the family from Sue's entrance.

"Well, hello everyone," Sue says sheepishly, "This is Patrick."

Sue sits down at the only empty chair and Patrick gingerly evicts the white-footed cat from a wooden stool and slides it to the table. Piling her plate high, Sue begins to eat. The family stares expectantly, but when Sue doesn't speak they resume chewing. Swallowing comes hard for Madeline now. She fidgets and makes her corn chase her green beans around the plate. Small talk creeps in around the table.

"It's good to see you, Madeline. You are so beautiful and I am so proud of you," says Sue. Madeline does not look at her but takes a few bites of stuffing.

"Madeline, I'm talking to you. What's wrong, honey?"

Madeline looks up at her for a moment staring into her dark chocolate brown eyes. Her mother's face looks much different from normal and especially since the last time she saw her, inhabiting a hospital bed, bandaged, and unconscious after a bad car accident. Her eyes are bright, and confident, no dark circles, no high induced gloss.

Madeline looks away and excuses herself from the table. She goes out to the front yard past the presiding pines and into the thick wood at the front of the property line. She can hear footsteps plop on the wooden porch steps and crunch across the gravel drive. Her mother catches her shoulder and spins her around trying to force her into a hug.

"Get away from me! How can you show your face here? How can you look so good and better now? Why couldn't you have been good and better on that day, Mom!? How could you do

that? How could you get all fucked up like that and take Keith with you and think it would be okay, that you could actually drive somewhere safely? Why do you have to be here and not him?”

Madeline sinks down to the ground, gripping her chestnut hair in her hands, forcefully pulling near the roots, gritting her teeth. She can see Keith’s body on the hospital bed. He was unconscious and they said there was nothing they could do. When the car flipped his seatbelt strapped him in and crushed the life out of him. His mother, who wasn’t wearing her seatbelt, flew out the sunroof and landed in a nearby field.

“Honey, I know there is nothing I can say to change or make up for what I did. I miss Keith too, but I am different now. I really have changed. That man in there, Patrick, he really did help me change.”

“Yea just like all the other people who have helped you change over the years. Like any man could do anything but drive you to insanity. I *really* believe it this time. Yes, I really fucking do Mom.”

Madeline musters some shred of her sanity back, gets up, and trudges away from her mother.

“I can’t force you Madeline, but maybe one day you’ll see before it’s too late.”

Madeline stops but doesn’t face her.

“Only time will tell Mom, but somehow, I still love you.”