

This is how it ends. July 1997. She looked like something out of a 1950s sci-fi movie, the kind of B-grade drive-in horror that she winced and screamed at from the front seat of her boyfriend's De Soto, while jumping onto his horny lap. After she finally threw my father out, horror is what kept her, my brother and me together. It was what we bundled up to in her bed to fill many a restless night. That was back in the days of "Creature Feature," "The Night Stalker," and "The Night Gallery." We had eight TV channels and three of them were a "trilogy of terror" late Friday and Saturday nights. To Mama, rest could cure anything. I have a headache. Go lay down. I can't do this. Sleep on it. I think he's dying. Let him sleep.

I used to have two friends who had a girl dog and a boy cat. The dog belonged to Will and the cat belonged to Donna. Whenever Will said, Good girl, the cat would look over the dog and hiss, and whenever Donna said, Good boy, the dog would glance at the cat and growl. Will rarely praised the cat and Donna rarely praised the dog. The cat and dog each had their own territories within the house and spent all day, each day, hissing, swiping, growling at, or avoiding one another. That was what being a child in my household was like. Since there wasn't enough love for everyone, there wasn't enough for anyone.

I often fell asleep before the shows started, and the next morning Mama would always say, "We tried to wake you, but couldn't," and my brother would smile a toothless smile—not that he didn't have any teeth. He saved his toothy smile for birthdays, Christmas, and fireworks shows, for occasions when things were either fun or funny. He smiled his toothless smile only on mornings he and Mama would tell me, "We tried to wake you."

The Greyhound bus hits bumpy road. I wake up and look out the window. I'm three, and I'm running up a hill in my Grandparents' backyard, searching for painted Easter Eggs. My older cousins keep beating me to the eggs, so Grandfather starts snapping his fingers and beating his thighs, and I look over at him as he points at spots around the yard, but I have short legs, and my cousins are bigger and begin to wait for him to point, and then outrun me to all the eggs.

We're rolling through a rusty canyon in Utah, surrounded by mountains that look like Silly Putty. Red, orange, and green—my favorite colors, and it's morning, and we run out of milk, and Mama has a strange look on her face, because my father's mad at her because there's not enough milk in the house, and my father says, "What about Brenda?" And Mama asks me if it's okay with me not to have milk yet because my brother needs milk for his cereal before he goes to school, and I say, "No," because I don't know what she wants me to say, so my father throws the money for the milk at Mama and she gets up fast and goes to the store and comes back with a quart of milk. My brother and me have "Rice Krispies." I like the popping and crackling sounds they make. Mama rolls her eyes at me as I eat, and I don't know why. I'm only four.

We climb a steep black highway that looks like a pool, because steam is rising from it, and it makes the road look wobbly, and I'm five years old. It's my birthday, and I'm in a blue dress that has lots of white lace and I am stuck up a tree, just outside our kitchen window. I know it isn't right for me to be

stuck in a tree when I'm wearing a beautiful dress Mama made for me, while she is in the kitchen making a big chocolate cake with white frosting for my party. I tried to be careful, but after I got up the tree, I couldn't get back down. The tree isn't knobby below. It's smooth and dark and all of the branches are up where I'm standing and most are really thick and the others are thin and spiraling because the tree is nearly against the two-story housing project where we live and doesn't have room to grow. I only know how to go down head first, and I don't want stitches again, so I yell.

"You know you're not supposed to climb trees."

My brother comes and gets me since he's three years older than me, and is always trying to boss me around, and Mama's icing the cake and my father hasn't been kicked out of the house yet, but he's still not home. My brother still likes having a little sister. I don't think he thinks he's bossy. I think he thinks it is his job to get me out of trees.

When we got back home after spending Easter in Kansas, my father was nowhere around and many things were missing—some of his clothes and our music records. Stormy, our dog, had dragged all of the sofas cushions onto the floor. The dishes that were left on the rack were in pieces on the dusty blue and white linoleum that had designs that looked like golden dragons. Stormy had even pulled the drapes down and off the rods and the covers off of the beds.

I wake up on a winding decline that feels like a Kansas plain and its dark, but I can see shards of lightning and hear the rain and see it splatter the window, and my Grandparents are alive again. The patch of farmland my Grandfather owns is full of puddles, making the ground too wet in places to walk and the beans grow so fast you can watch them shoot up. The peas all come in at once right after we pick the beans and the onions need weeding, but we stop for lunch and a tall man who's harvesting one of the fields next to ours comes over, and Grandfather smiles, a big white smile, and tells the man, Mr. Johnston, I think, that I'm his granddaughter, and it feels good to me to be so close to the earth. We eat, then weed and pull and scrape for three whole days. In a few weeks, Grandfather will plant some more seeds, and after the first frost, the carrots, kale, parsnips, Brussels sprouts will take on that really light, sweet flavor. But I'll be back home and in school by then.

The bus is a tunnel, forcing a huddled intimacy upon us. Mothers whispering to their children to go to sleep, and men looking straight ahead as if they were driving on a racecourse and occasional flashes of lightning and the aisle is all I hear and see.

I fall asleep. I wake up, and I'm in the chapel—shaking. I don't know whether to laugh or cry, and I don't really know why I'm here. I can see her from the doorway. I had wondered what seeing Mama would be like, and I found out one step at a time. I'm now hovering above her with flowing wings of sackcloth. I'm studying my mama as she lies in her coffin with her left arm out a little and crossing her body, a straight-haired wig with bangs that my aunt choose for her covers her high, flat forehead, and the shade of blue beneath her yellow skin makes her look green. Her face is twisted, and I think her as Lazarus and me, apparently, as God, commanding her to rise as the reason why she would. "Of course you're only

sleeping. Ma, Mama, Mama! —Wakeup!” *How could you do this to me?* Somehow I was sure that she was only sleeping and that seeing me would wake her up. She was too stubborn die. Plus, I didn’t say that it was okay. I say to the mortician, “Put her arm down.” He says, “I can’t.”

When Inca children died, they were dressed in an assortment of brilliant colors--reds, blues, yellows. Necklaces and rings made of shells more precious than gold adorned them. They were then set high on a ledge in the Andes as a sacrifice to the gods. My mama is wearing a dark blue polyester pants suit, because one of my aunts thought that was her. I want to act as an intermediary, to offer her to the gods, but I’m hesitating, because I don’t think she’s dressed right. The State of Kansas, I was told, does not allow people to be buried with anything as precious as gold, so Mama’s rings are gone.

The sky moves beneath my feet, and I lie on a cloud, slowly close my eyes and see Mama in my dreams, and I’m six and she’s asleep and I’m just sitting on the floor next to her bed, staring at her. I wonder why she keeps shooing me out of the family portrait taken at my Grandparents’. I notice her pointy nose and bulging eyes and notice I don’t look like her, but my brother does, though he’s dark skinned, like me and my father, and I wonder what she will die of, since Grandma just had a stroke and was lucky to be alive, and I think Mama might have a stroke, too, because her mother had one, then I realize what I’m thinking about and don’t want to think about it no more because it makes me sad, because it means Mama’s going to die some day.

I open my eyes and for a second, I don’t think that it is her laying in that coffin, but the woman laying before me has the same bulging eyes as my mama, but still I don’t want her to be dead, and I can’t hold the image of her asleep in my mind long enough to compare it to what I see, because I can’t stand the feeling of her being dead, so she must not be really dead because I can’t stand for her to be dead. I wanted her to sit up and take notice. I’m here. I care. I look down, and I’m wearing the same dark blue skirt suit that I wore to work a month earlier. I then look up to catch my breath, and I see Mama with outstretched arms and begging eyes saying , “Come here,” the last time I saw her twenty-three years ago.

All of this was my brother’s idea. He said, “I’m a man. I’ll make the arrangements.” I spoke with him the Sunday before, and he said, “We’re going to put her away very nicely.” Just like that. Put her away. I wondered if my brother and I had some type of unspoken understanding left after these years. Yes, Mama had to be put away. But not by the ambulance drivers who I thought realized on the way to the hospital that she had no insurance and just let her die or by all the relatives who loved her so much that they loved her to death.

“It all began with a train ride south to pickup a baby girl --“

*What is he talking about?*

“-- in October of 1961. Beryl wanted to help and loved children, so when she was told that there was a beautiful little dark princess that she could have and raise as her own, her bags were packed.”

I recognize the story and look up thinking, *I'm about to learn how the transaction took place*. I am about to find out how I became hers and no one else's, even if for a brief period.

The chapel is an auction house. A ragweed sneeze, the swatting of a fly, a grimace that holds back tears—all were cues to the minister. He looked at each person, as if he was waiting for an answer to a question. Then he changed topics, and all I heard throughout the rest of the eulogy was Mama was so kindhearted that everyone who knew her couldn't help but be inspired by all of the jealousy and resentment that kindheartedness brings. I don't bother to glance over my shoulder.

*God?! I ask God why he let this happen.*

This is how it begins. I look in the mirror. I see my cousin, Judy. Sometimes I look, and I see Ann. I look like Ann around the mouth and chin, maybe the shape of the face. I look like Judy, too, although Ann and Judy don't look alike. It must be the chin, or maybe the lips. My nose is flatter than theirs. No – I think it's the eyes. Most of us, my cousins and me have the same eyes, I'm told. Friends of mine say almond shaped. I say, deep-set with heavy eyelids. Sort of like Elvis Presley's.

I always think that one day my eyelids will fall, and I won't be able to see, but I'm getting wrinkling below instead. I wonder if anyone else has wrinkling below the eyes, because I like it when I know who I take after. So even if my eyes don't look like Mama's or my father's, I know my eyes came from my father's side. We resemble each other. My father's boss said, when he saw me after my father died, "Brenda. Good-god! You look like Phillip." I looked like my father's sister, Betty, too, although their faces were longer, and they had thin lips and didn't have the eyes we have. Put us all in the same room, though, and line us up and you'll see we're connected by our faces. Like if you put me in between Ann and Judy, you'll notice we're related. It's sort of weird to be connected by mostly a face.

This is the first memory, which I can remember that my Mama's dying didn't dig up. I can remember bits and pieces of things from when I was real little, but it's like I'm watching myself in a movie, not even a whole movie really, like me holding onto the furniture and walking pretty drunkenly around the living room, my diaper heavy, and my brown legs pudgy. What's different about this memory is that it is the first time I remember not feeling nothing--and thinking about nothing, either. It was either Friday or Saturday night and we kids were in my brother and my room playing. We had been since they came over. So I think it must have been getting dark already when they came. It was a couple of my father's sisters and brothers-in-law and some cousins of mine. The grownups were downstairs getting drunk while we kids took turns making funny faces to get each other to laugh. We could hear the grown ups laughing and would try to ignore them, just like they were ignoring us. We would line up on the bed like little soldiers, sitting with legs outstretched, trying not to laugh. When someone laughed, they got clobbered with a pillow. The pillow would land anywhere, which usually turned it into an all out pillow fight. We were knocking each other around, laughing and giggling when we heard bottles crashing to the floor and yelling. Me, my cousins and brother stopped in mid-swing. My brother went to see what was happening. When he didn't come back, we all lined the staircase.

By this time my father was telling Betty and Sammy-Dee to “Get the fuck out!” Betty looked tearful, but wasn’t crying. It was like in the movies when people beg. “Phillip, listen,” said Sammy-Dee. “No, you listen. Get the fuck out of my house now,” my father shouted over Betty, who was saying, “Come with me!” She stretched out her arms to me. I slowly walked down the stairs. I was an obedient kid at that point in my life, but Mama was bent over, glancing at me then my father, Betty, and Sammy-Dee. Sammy-Dee put Betty in a choke-hold and starting dragging her to the door. Betty kept saying to me, “Come with me—and you don’t belong here.” Sammy-Dee pulled a knife, and my father balled up his fist, but he couldn’t hit Sammy-Dee without hitting Betty, so he chased them outside. Everyone went out, and I heard the crowd forming, rooting like it was “Friday Night Fights.” I stood in the orange glow of the living room lights, looking up at a cobweb hanging from a light fixture. I didn’t know if I was embarrassed or proud. *My daddy can whip your daddy* type of proud. My brother and I like to watch boxing and wrestling. We take our cotton house shoes and put our hands in them like they were gloves, and punched each other until someone yelled, “Enough.” I ran out the back door, fast like a race car, kicking up puffs of dust onto my bright white ankle socks, made it around the row houses of the projects and landed on the Heslip’s front porch. I’m shaking, but I don’t feel a thing. The screen door swings open. I look up. I can hardly even see, but I know it’s Mr. Heslip. I can hear yelling, but it’s going farther and farther away. I thought about apologizing to Mr. Heslip for sitting on his porch, but I couldn’t speak.

I look at the street. Mr. Heslip sits down next to me, and we just sit there. And I can’t feel my body and I can see a bright light from the street moving towards me. Everything is white. I don’t move. I don’t know how long we sat there, but after what may have only been a few minutes, I could hear Mama’s voice. Mrs. Heslip let her in through the back door. Saying nothing, I stood up and went home with Mama, but I can’t remember going home. It was probably because Mama didn’t say nothing, either. But a little chill came over me, because I realized I still had my mama.

I can remember that night, because I had nightmares for years about it. At first, they were all about my father getting killed. Blood’s seeping through the white sheet that’s being pulled over his head as he’s being lifted on a stretcher into an ambulance.

Sammy-Dee was about an inch over or under six-feet, but was acting like he was afraid of my father. I had never before seen my father fight a man. It wasn’t until the repast after my father’s funeral that I understood why Sammy-Dee pulled a knife on my father, even though he was bigger than my father. At the dinner, Earl, a boyhood friend of my father, told us stories about when they were boys. One was about what happened after my father found out a kid in the neighborhood, who was “about six feet tall,” beat Earl’s “ass” one day. Earl and my father were about thirteen.

Earl’s right behind my father. They cut through fields and marshes, pass spindly pines, magnolias, and scotch brooms on their way down the main road through that part of town. The sun’s rays patch the canopy of leaves, where the weeds and bushes darken the road, and it’s “damn” hot. The marshes and swamps give way to a limestone bed at the creek, where the water spills west over rock into the

Mississippi. The creek is nothing but a slight depression, no more than fifteen feet wide, with crater-like edges, where the water has a small current. Sweat trickles down their foreheads, and they swipe their arms across their brows. My father says, "I'm hot from my chest up, like a snake." He takes off his shirt and wraps it around his waist. Earl takes off his T-shirt, too, and his shoes and rolls up the bottoms of his pants and stands on some rocks at the edge of the creek.

"We should go back," Earl says.

"If we go back now, everyone will think we're sissies."

"Everyone already thinks I'm one."

"You want them to keep calling you names?"

Earl stares at their images on the creek. He says, "Remember when we were little; how we use to do this." He flexes his muscles and beats his chest. We were so flat and boney.

They put their clothes back on and take off again. The road hits a steep decline, and then rises suddenly. Shrubs, poison ivy and oak crowd the bank below. My father climbs down and runs through the weeds. Earl watches and points down the road, "I'm going that way. Meet you there."

My father's doing cartwheels and throwing small rocks at birds by the time they meet up at a small apple orchard.

Earl whispers, "There he is."

The boy's with two other boys. Earl and my father walk over to the boys.

"Are you the boy who beat my friend's ass?" My father's shirt is sticking to him, and he rolls his sleeves up just above his elbows. My father stares the boy down, even though he only comes up to about the middle of the boy's chest.

The boy shrugs and says, "You're nothing but a pipsqueak, and your ma's nothing but a two-bit --"

My father charges the boy like a bull, knocking him to the ground and jumping on top of him.

They roll and swing and kick and knead, until Earl and the other boys finally pull them apart. My father's lip is dripping blood, but the other boy has a busted lip, a bloody nose and a swelling eye.

My father's still kicking, yelling, and pointing, "Next time I see you, Man!"

Earl said that the other boys backed away, and he pulled my father a couple of feet before they finally turned and quietly headed home. My father was ruminating. Earl had never seen my father so quiet before.

When they finally reached the creek, the sun was at its highest, and they collapsed onto the grass to catch their breath. My father stooped down and cupped water in his hands to cool off his face. He then got up and beat his chest and flexed his muscles.

"I'm going into the cave," he says.

They get up, and start making their way through a narrow passage.

After a few feet, Earl stops, but my father crawls into a jagged opening.

"It's not a dead-end," says my father.

Earl and my father had been in that cave plenty of times before, but they never made it anymore than about fifteen feet inside of it before one of them would realize that they hadn't had lunch yet, or it was almost dinner time, or they didn't have candles or rope.

"We should go home. It'll be dinner time soon," Earl says, with his chest sunken and shoulders bent forward.

My father slides through a small passage. Earl soon follows, and his wiry body slinks down.

"Ahhh!" my father sighs, when Earl kicks him on the top of his head. "Watch it!"

They find their way to the other side of the opening by removing a few small boulders and climb to bypass a large boulder choke. They follow the washed passage to a junction. To the right, a hands and knees crawl over cobblestones soon turn into a steamy small section that soaks into a gravel bank, exiting up a vertical wall. The passage is bent and twisted. It looks like solid rock. It slopes gently downward and to the left. Since he is only about five feet and barely a hundred pounds, my father has an easier time sliding through on his stomach than Earl, but they get through, and then stumble down a tunnel, thick with smoke and acrid. Choking fumes sting their eyes and they start coughing deeply. Visibility is only a foot or two, and everything is blue in the fragmented sunlight.

The cave turns low and wide. They walk until they can see clearly again, and then writhe for breath, and fall to a stone floor.

Earl rolls onto his back. "Listen. What's that?"

The sound of rushing water is much stronger there than it was outside. Once he catches his breath, Earl climbs a few feet up a short incline of muddy rocks. His eyes widen.

"Phillip. Phillip!" He starts waving for my father.

My father rushes over. "Wow-woo! I've never seen one before."

Wonder why no one ever talks about it?

"It's a long way in here."

My father just bends over, cupping his knees and listens.

It turns out the stream enters the chamber through a small waterfall and drains away between the rocks on the floor. The passage to the left leads to a short climb, and at the base is a low crawl that opens out into a chamber.

They wiggle their bodies through another hole and soon are standing in another passage--where slime molds, hairy tree roots, and albino amphibians, with huge eyes and visible internal organs and furry patches of fungi are everywhere. The upper part of the passage is steep. My father climbs a small pit that drops through the floor, then climbs numerous other pits too, until stopped by one too large to climb.

Earl yells down, "What's down there?"

"Plants!"

With plants growing on a mud bank and a large bat colony visible in the roof, the chamber shows signs of leading to the surface, but my father can't see a way out. My father wriggles through a gravel sump and walks to the base of a stone climb.

“I’m going back!” Earl yells. “Come on, let’s go back!”

My father’s quiet.

“Phillip, let’s go back!”

Still my father doesn’t answer.

Earl slowly backs away from the hole, and then turns and runs, slipping, sliding, and scratching his way out before falling onto the mud outside.

My father finally came out yelling, “Man, you afraid of everything! Don’t nothing want you!”

Earl said, “No one fucked with us ever again. And I always made sure I had an excuse made up ahead of time, before I went with Phillip anywhere.”

My father’s widow commented that my father was like that, very brave—but wouldn’t hurt a fly, unless provoked--unless someone hurt one of his friends or his family.

Aunt Zeola giggled and shimmied until she couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Shit! Phillip would finish them and start them, too.” Before Zeola said that, I sat quietly wondering if I should sit there and let his widow remember him her way or mine.