

Watermelon Seeds

I am crammed between Megan and the car door because of the stupid left seat buckle. It hasn't worked since we bought the car. We are on our way to grandma's house. Grandma's house on the road past the hospital, past grandpa's rows of corn, tomatoes, and cabbage. Grandma's house where there was always flowers arranged in vases and never enough seats. Christmas last year there were three people to every armchair, five people on the loveseat, and two people squatting on the floor by the fireplace. The house was overflowing with family and happy kids running in between legs and showing off their presents.

We pull into the winding driveway, all of grandma's flowers in full bloom. The driveway that leads to the pond. The pond where the fish I named Francesca and Humphrey live. Where the frogs jump. Where the path to the mulberry bushes lays hidden.

I topple out of the back seat pushed by Megan into the lawn. Ben greets me there. His bright pink tongue flops in his mouth as he bounds over and leaps up to put his muddy paws on my shoulders, wiggling his docked brown tail. "Down," I giggle. I throw a branch for him, and he leaps after it. Up the three concrete steps, past the blue pots of fragrant flowers, I open the door.

I step inside. Kicking my shoes off, I make sure to move them onto a shelf where Ben can't reach them. "Knock, Knock!" I yell so grandma and grandpa and my cousins and aunts and uncles know I'm here. A little head pops out from behind grandpa's chair. Grandpa's chair, massive, fuzzy, and worn. When grandpa's sitting, he fills the entirety of it, but now, Zach barely fills it up. Zach looks even smaller than usual when he sits in grandpa's chair.

"Move!" Zach yells at me for blocking the television instead of saying hello. His mind is

in Bikini Bottom not grandma's living room.

I hear clamor from the busy kitchen. The kitchen where we make gingerbread houses every year on Black Friday with Grandma while the mommies shop. The kitchen always stocked with Oreos. I smell garlic bread baking in the oven.

In the kitchen I find grandma, flitting from pot to bowl to salad, like a hummingbird moving from flower to flower. Grandma. Grandma with her short gray-brown hair. Grandma who loves frogs, and snowmen, and me. I run to hug her. I feel her soft, freckled arms wrap around me, enveloping me in warmth.

"What's for dinner?" I pry as she releases me to return to the grape salad she is making.

"Steak," she answers before cursing because she forgot to use an oven mitt. "Excuse my French, dear."

Steak, of course. Almost always, when the whole family is together, steak is on the menu. Steak, garlic bread, at least two different salads, devilled eggs, and watermelon. I leave grandma cooking as I look for the rest of my relatives. Uncle Paul and Aunt Jill are outside on the deck talking, Aunt Jill holding a sleeping Josh. The deck where the birds gather during breakfast in the morning. The deck where grandpa grills the steak. Grandpa the farmer. Grandpa with his hearing aid, who is hard to understand because of his constant murmuring.

I find Katie in my dad's old room. Now it is full of puzzles and crayons and Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle books. Katie, who is a year younger than me but always two inches taller.

I hear Uncle Todd, Aunt Kellie, Noah and Emelie come in. They get the same greeting from Zach as me. Uncle Todd forces Zach to stand up and give him a proper hug. Katie has now come out to the main room. Megan, Daddy, and Mommy are all on the loveseat. Aunt Jill and

Uncle Paul come in, with Josh now alert, his eyes darting around, looking at all the people.

“It’s been too long!” ...“Josh is so much bigger!” ...“How is school?”

My family. Everyone fights for whatever seat they can get a hold of, except grandma, who is still buried in the kitchen. I take a seat at the fireplace, the one that is always blazing around Christmas time, but is now off because of the heat building room. Mommy cracks a window open and a cool breeze flows in. As we wait for the food to finish cooking, Grandpa comes in to ask how everyone wants their steak cooked.

“Rare.” Grandma doesn’t even have to tell grandpa what she wants, because her steak is always rare.

“Medium rare please,” request both Mommy and Uncle Paul.

“Medium,” the rest of us exclaim unanimously.

During dinner, grandma still flits around her kitchen until everyone demands that she sits down. I load my plate with garlic bread and steak. Zach won’t touch his food until he gets A1 steak sauce. Ben wanders around, hitting people with his rapidly wagging tail, rotating between licking my knee and picking up bits of food Josh drops.

After dinner, we all make our way back out to the deck. Grandma brings out a big bowl of watermelon. Everyone grabs a piece, Noah grabbing two. I swing my feet over the side of the dark brown deck, looking at the forest with the sun setting on the other side of it, eating my watermelon as its fragrant juice drips down my chin and wrists. I spit the seeds into the grass.

Many dinners later, I am still spitting watermelon seeds, but now my legs reach the ground when I hang them off the side of the deck. Except now, Emelie is in Germany. Except now, Noah is engaged. Except now, Megan lives on her own. Katie is still taller than me. Zach

has an Instagram, Josh an iPod. Grandma, her hair a little grayer, more than half of her grandkids taller than her, still doesn't sit down. Grandpa still stands at the grill turning over the steaks. Except now, I am a senior in high school, realizing so much time has passed. Realizing that when people older than me say time flies, they aren't kidding.

What seems like only a few more dinners later, Noah took over the farm. He came home. Emelie is still figuring out what life has to offer. Wherever she goes she makes it an adventure. Megan is in her freshman year at med school. I'm home for the summer, waiting to go back to a college hundreds of miles from home and trying to figure out what to do next. Wondering where time goes. Josh is starting high school under the weight of Zach's success. Zach is a jock and brings his girlfriend up when he visits. Katie towers over everyone now, but I didn't grow anymore after my freshman year of high school. There are too many seats now, and not enough people to fill them. Schedules are too full, the traveling takes too much energy. Grandma still flutters around the kitchen, a little slower. Grandpa's hearing aid is turned up a little more. But there is still dinner at grandma's house. There is still watermelon seeds on the deck.