

Heaven on Earth

I heard the trotting of Father's horse approaching the house, but I waited inside. It was just after noon, the time of day when everyone lounges about the house, waiting for something to happen. The children and grandparents take their naps, the kids play outside, and Florence sits blankly at the kitchen table, her hands crossed and her gaze stiff. It was an ambiguous void in time, with which no one knew how to pass. It was sickeningly quiet while the Independence, Missouri sun beat on all those below. The only thing to break the spell was my father's arrival home every day. He dismounted from his horse, calling out my name. "Ethel!" he would always shout. I could hear the smile in his voice as he said my name. He seemed to be the only person on this earth who enjoyed saying my name. I burst out the front door and rushed across the porch. I leaped from the porch and into his arms as he welcomed me for a hug. It always felt as though he had been gone for years, but he'd just been gone for the day. I loved my daddy, and it felt like he loved me. He was an angry man though, as men are. I saw my daddy kill a man once. It was in plain sight, in the middle of the day. We were in town, Florence and I were selecting apples to make a pie later, and the man stole Daddy's wallet. I thought it was kind of clever, the way he did it. He bumped into my daddy and stole his wallet clean out of his pocket. He began walking faster and faster until my daddy reached for his wallet and it wasn't there. He drew out his gun, cocked it, and shot the man right in the heart. Everyone turned at the sound of the gunshot and looked at the dead man lying in the street. No one helped him or called a doctor. He just lay there.

"Pick-pocketer!" Daddy announced.

"Men are animals," Florence said, under her breath. She shook her head and went right back to looking at apples. At dinner that night, not a word was mentioned about it.

I always knew my dad was the abusive type. One time, he nearly beat Florence to death. He had this idea for the longest time about heading North on a wagon. He said everyone was doing it. Every time I walked past the train station, all kinds of folks were getting off to go get in wagons. My dad thought that heading North was the only good option. He didn't like Missouri anymore. "We'll find heaven on earth in Colorado, Oregon, Montana, California. Any of those!" he'd tell my mom. I had never heard of those before. I didn't know what they were like, or where they were. "They're heaven on earth," my daddy would say.

Heaven on earth? I thought it sounded wonderful, but Florence never liked the idea of going North. She said she didn't have the energy to pack up her life in a wagon. She didn't seem to have the energy to do anything. She just sat around and stared out. At the kitchen table, or on the rocking chair in the living room. She just sat and looked out into the distance like she was thinking about something that really bothered her. But I don't think she had any coherent thoughts at all. She was kind of useless in that way, to me. She was never a good mom, always absent in her mind. That's why I called her Florence, and never Mom. She was never a mom to me.

When Florence and Dad got in a disagreement about it, Florence insisted that we stay, and Dad wouldn't give up this time. He had been sitting on the idea long enough that I guess he just couldn't keep sitting. His breath smelled of liquor and he had just come back from the bar. Liquor summons evil, and evil hides behind closed doors. It lurks in the hands of men, and it glows in their eyes, rots their breath, and limits their patience. Men and alcohol are like politicians and lying, they enable each other. I've seen him hit her before, but never like this time. He was like most men, too much of a coward, and not clever enough to use their words to hurt the women in their lives. His patience was thinning as they went back and forth, and I could anticipate what was coming as he set his flask down. He paused for a second and pinched his lip with his thumb and index finger in thought. Then he raised his left hand, pulled back, and struck her in the face with his fist. The fight was abruptly over. Florence's body hit the floor so hard that it knocked the paintings that hung in the living room crooked. There was a framed photograph of her mother, Alice, and now Alice was turning her head to the side. It looked as if she was sympathizing with Florence, but her face was so stubbornly stern that there was no sympathy left in her eyes.

On the following Sunday, we all attended church. I never saw my dad go to the confession box to confess for the things he did. He didn't see the things he did as sins, they were just necessary parts of life to him. Whenever I leaned forward to watch his face during Sunday service, he always looked like he was listening, but only to satisfy Florence. Both Florence and I knew he wasn't listening. "If he really listened in church, then he wouldn't drink," she told me. And he wouldn't hit, I thought. I wondered why she allowed him to do that to her. I assumed it was because she didn't have a big enough problem with it to stop it, but really, she just didn't care enough to stop it.

Father John always led service on Sunday. He was charming and charismatic, and a little over middle age. His accent was so thick that people often squinted in confusion to understand what he was saying. His hair was blonde just like mine, and whooshed to the side in a swirl. Sometimes during service, I imagined his hair was rolling waves, just waiting to roll off of his head and hit the shore. Everyone loved Father John.

On one Sunday, after the Sunday service, Father John had the idea of holding a youth service. Being a devoted Christian (and with strong encouragement from Florence, of course), I attended. There were only a few kids there, a couple I knew from school, and one new kid who had just arrived in Independence from Germany.

"Welcome," he said. "Y'all're here 'cause y'all are devoted to God, ain't ya?"

"Yes, Father," we responded.

"Who is the head of the Church?"

"Jesus!" Shouted the boy from Germany.

"That's correct. Now, ya'll better listen real good. The husband is the head of the wife as Jesus is the head of the church. Now Ethel, you's is always gon' be below your husband. Dudn't ever forget that." He always kept a smile on his face when he talked. When he addressed me directly, he pointed his long finger right at me. I tried to curve my mouth into a smile, to show

that I accepted what he said. I wanted to be a good Christian girl. Father John continued with his sermons, dropping verses here and there to support his word. After a good while, he hastily put his hands on either side of the podium and suddenly dropped his head in thought.

“Y’know what? All’a ya’ll but Ethel, y’all can see ya’ll’selves out. I needa talk to Ethel, that’s all.” My legs grew sticky to the wooden pew that I sat on as everyone but Father John filed out of the big double doors entering the church. I wondered why he would only want to talk to me.

“Hey, you! Shut the door on your way out, would’ya!” he said. He composed himself on the podium, taking a deep breath.

“Y’know Ethel, you really are beautiful. Your parents done made a beautiful girl. You’s pretty, smart, and you’s a good Christian girl, ain’t ya?”

“Yessir.”

“You wanna please God, doncha? You’d do anything for him, right?” I hesitated before answering, my legs growing stickier from the sweat.

“Yes, father.”

“Then you’ll help me out with somethin’,” His tone was stern and serious. He didn’t have his usual smile and I felt an urge to run. I wanted to find the nearest door and run like a rabbit runs from a wolf. I wished someone would burst through the double doors, needing something from Father John. I wanted anything to happen; the chandelier to come crashing down, a brick to fly through the window, anything- anything to stop him from coming any closer. Father John’s gaze gripped mine like a predator in the wild carefully watching its prey. His American blue eyes ripped through my flesh. The church pew that I sat upon hardened, and I was stuck under the eyes of God. Both He and Father John watched my face turn pale and my spirit leave my body and neither was eager to help.

Father John walked down the aisle of the church, in between the church pews. I heard the deafening sound of his cowboy boots clicking as he came closer. I expected him to turn into my row of pews, but instead, he turned into the one behind me. The click of his boots slowed down until they were behind me. He began to run his fingers through my hair, humming a biblical song. He made me feel dirty, and I already knew I would be washing my hair thoroughly that night. Actually, I just wanted to cut all of it off. Soon, he moved his hands lower, and I wished they were back in my hair. I shut my eyes and imagined I was somewhere else, anywhere else. He began to move the fabric of my dress up. Up past my ankles, up past my knees, and I pushed his hands off of me.

“You want to go to heaven, doncha Ethel?” I stayed silent and he trailed off. His voice broke the silence, “Then you’ll stay silent.”

I did what he said. I stayed silent, and quiet, and small. As his talons dug into my skin, I prayed that God would make him stop. Father John probably prayed that no one would interrupt him, and in that moment I wondered who God would answer. I soon realized it was not me, and I never talked to God again. He was not there.

I went home that night and scrubbed every inch of my body. It didn't feel like it was mine anymore. I wondered what Father John was doing with his wife while I tried scraping the guilt off that he left on my skin. When it was still there in the morning, I found out that guilt scars. Put there by the hands of man, only to taunt me for eternity. To remind me that God just watched, and waited while my prayers went unanswered. I looked in the mirror and didn't see me, I only saw a girl. That's all I was. I was just going to be a wife and a mother. I couldn't see myself as Ethel May. I began to see myself through the eyes of men. The male gaze would haunt me just as the scars would. They would follow me around, reminding me that I am nothing but a girl.

Everything Father John said was a lie and before I went to Church a week later, I kicked and screamed before I was finally dragged out of the house. I never told Dad or Florence what had happened, they wouldn't understand. I only looked down at my shoes for the entire service and was the first one out the door when it was over. I could feel Father John's American blue eyes on me, even though I never looked up. When we got out, Florence never asked why I was behaving weirdly, she just cared about not looking weird to the other wives of the Church. She couldn't care enough to ask me what was wrong. She loved to perform in front of the other wives. They all seemed to compete with each other, and I know Florence tried to flaunt everything but her failed daughter.

That night, Father went out to the bar as he usually did. I stayed outside and watched the fireflies emerge from the grass as the sky turned dark blue. Everything seemed to slow down at twilight. I began to grow impatient and curious just sitting in the grass. There was no point in going inside, either. I knew Florence would just be sitting there at the kitchen table, her hands folded and her stare blank.

I began to walk toward town. I had no intent or purpose as I moseyed down, and I came to find that the town was more alive than I had anticipated it to be. Folks were out drinking, talking, and laughing. I approached a bar and everyone's eyes fell on me as I entered. Men began to smirk and whistle at me, but I pretended not to hear them. I then caught the eyes of my father, sitting on the far side of the bar. I tried to walk toward him but I was suddenly grabbed at the hips by a man much larger than me. I tried to turn toward the door but even more men blocked it.

"You get your hands off of her!" my father yelled.

"Or what?" the man responded, tightening his grip.

My father rose off of his stool and approached. In a choreographed fashion, everyone cleared the way, creating an aisle for him to walk down as if this was a common occurrence. His rage in that moment reminded me of when he shot the pick-pocket in the heart. When he reached us, I could anticipate his fist from watching him hit my mother so many times, and I leaned to the right, dodging his signature drunk left-handed punch. He hit the man square in the left eye and the man didn't go down, but he let go of me, and I slipped out the door. The man tried to hit my father but in dodging it, the man hit a different drunk man. And so the bar fight began. One drunk man hit another, and another, and another. Pretty soon, guns were being pulled, chairs were being thrown, and glass bottles were being smashed.

I sat outside on the curb to reflect on my cause of the bar fight. Clearly flustered, my cheeks were red. It took me a few minutes to realize that there was an older man sitting next to me, and I didn't see him until he spoke.

"Howdy", he said.

"Hello."

"All'a that was you in there?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Well, that thar's impressive. I couldn't do that if I tried."

I laughed and tried to hide my embarrassment.

"I know your mom," he said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah?"

"Mhmm. I knew her when she was just your age."

"Was she as miserable as she is now?"

"No, no, she wuden like that at all."

"She wasn't?" I said, snickering.

"Your hatred for your mom is like that bar fight in there." I stayed silent, confused as to what he meant. "You hate her as she hated her mom. And her mom hated her mom before that. Ain't nothing different than one man pushing another man, and that man pushes another man. You hate your mom like she hates hers, and your daughter's gon' do the same to you. That beauty of yours is a curse. Your mom used to be pretty as a daisy, just like you. But you'll find out soon 'nuf that your beauty's gon' hurt you. You's is gonna be silent just like your mommy one day. You'll see. You'll look out, same way she does, and wish you were pure again. You'll see."

I remained quiet, just looking into the road. I thought about the truth in what he said. My dad then burst out of the bar door, stumbling and laughing.

"D'you see that in there, Ethel! You were great!"

"Let's go home, Dad," I said.

I lay in bed that night, thinking. My mom was a girl, just as I was. She was never evil by nature, but the world in which she was put made her that way. She was a hurt and used girl just as I was. We were the same, but I couldn't forgive her. That summer dizzily went by. Church on Sundays, Dad got drunk and hit Florence, and Florence sat at the kitchen table, hands folded with a blank stare. I followed my father into town a few times and watched the old man that I had talked to. He sat out on the curb every night, drinking from his whiskey bottle. The things he said lingered in my mind, so much so that every time I saw Florence, I saw myself.

On one of the nights, I couldn't sleep, I heard footsteps and the creak of floorboards pass my room. I assumed it was my father getting up to go back to the bar or get water from the well. When the door didn't slam as it usually does when he leaves, I sat up and got out of bed. I pulled back the curtain of my window and saw my mother's white nightgown glowing in the light of the crescent moon. She was barefoot, and walking slowly, like a ghost. Slowly, I laced up my boots and followed her, still in my nightgown.

She walked gracefully, like she was floating, with her palms turned upward toward the sky. I didn't recognize the path that she was taking, but she seemed to know exactly where she was headed. I could hear the rushing of the river that led through town grow louder as we approached it. She effortlessly moved through the willows until she reached the river. Without any hesitation, she went toward the river. She lifted her arms, with her palms facing upward like she was waiting for God to lift her up and into heaven. I stood on the rocky bank of the river and bent down to unlace my boots. Maybe she was testing me, I thought. I began to cling to this idea. Florence would never drown herself, she was too loyal to God and more importantly, her reputation. She was so evil that she would lure me into the water just to test me! How cruel! How could she want me to prove my absent love so badly?

"I'm not getting in!" I yelled. "I won't fall for it, Florence. You know I won't get in the water, just end your immature little test!" I stood panting on the rocks, waiting for her reaction. "I don't love you, Florence! I'm not coming in after you, Florence! Find someone else to save you!"

My voice trailed off as I said her name out loud for the first time. I didn't regret what I said, but my last words to her would linger in my mind until I was dead. She began to lift her head upward, toward God, but I knew she wasn't thinking of God. I hesitated on the bank and wondered if I should at least try to save my hopeless mother. Then I thought of life without her in the house. Dad wouldn't have her to take his anger out on, so he would settle for the next best. I remembered how the floor shook when her body hit the floor, I smelled the whiskey on my father's clothes, and I leapt into the water with my nightgown still on. I didn't expect the bitter cold of the river, especially in the summer. And the way my mother had no reaction to it made me believe that it was warm. I thrust and splashed through the current, expecting her to react, but she was still so angelic in her movement. Every time I swung my hand down and into the water, the cold spray launched into the air and glimmered in the moonlight.

In the summers when I bathed in this very river, I loved watching the little droplets of water fly into the air, and catch the light of the sun. It was mesmerizing. Now, in the image that was displayed before me, my mom looked more beautiful than she ever had. She didn't speed up, or get startled the same way any living being would react to being chased. She was not human in the way that she just continued to float effortlessly through the water. When I was close enough, I called out and begged her to take my arm, to turn around and at least look at me. I wanted to at least see her face to make sure it was still her. Maybe the devil was inside of her, and it was not actually my mother before me. Maybe I was hallucinating and she was actually just asleep in bed. Or maybe this was a nightmare that I would sigh about in relief and tell my father about in the morning. But it was my mother, and she was in the river, and I was in it with her. The next realization I had will never leave me - It was not the devil that was inches away from me, but instead, my own mother.

Once it registered to me that this was all real, I treaded the water faster. I yelled louder. I began to act as if she really was dying. I couldn't touch the bottom of the river anymore, and I

knew she couldn't either. But she remained at her pace and kept her composure. I wanted her to scream at me or hit me, but she just kept wading into the water. Her tranquility panicked me.

"Mom!" I desperately yelled. "Mommy please come back!" I didn't call her Florence in my moment of fear and panic. And when she didn't turn around or stop, I realized she had died a long time ago. This was just her liberation.

She walked further and further into the water, her body slowly disappearing as it entered the inky void, and I could already hear the knell of church bells. I suddenly tasted the sugar from our neighbor, Elizabeth's, funeral biscuits. I saw my father's silhouette in the distance and he was already packing up a wagon. I felt the rushing spring current trying to push me downstream, and I tried to remember how to swim. There was nothing to hold on to, no ground to stand on, and yet my mother remained in her stable, ethereal condition. In the reflection of the river, I saw that the moon was only in a waxing crescent, given that it was the second week of August. If it were me, I would choose to die under a full moon, it's more special that way. I guess she just couldn't wait.

As I saw her head gracefully go under the water, her silky brown hair flowing in the current and following her, I became silent and stiff. I knew that wherever her soul would go, I wouldn't be seeing her in God's Kingdom.

I didn't wait for her to come up and break the surface of the water and start gasping for air as she came to her senses. My mother was the type to finish what she started, and I knew she would. I stayed treading in the water, my mind at peace. Bubbles of confirmation came to the surface of the water, signaling the last remnants of her existence. I got out of the river with soaking wet clothes and dripping hair. I didn't care to put on my shoes and I walked home like I would on any other day. The thought of joining her when I was in the water didn't cross my mind, though I wish it had.

The river took my mother's body downstream to be someone else's problem. Her funeral was as desolate and quiet. The funeral biscuits tasted just as I imagined, and the bells had their same unsettling tone. Father John spoke about my mother as if he knew her. I glared into his ocean-blue eyes like I could almost see the devil hiding inside of him, but not once did he have the courage to look me in my eyes. After the service, I didn't talk to anyone except when I had to. The only thing I rehearsed saying was that I was not with her when she died. Yes, I was asleep that night and found out about her death in the morning. Of course, I'm devastated. She's in a better place now...she's in a better place now. I wish no one would ever say that when I die.

She's in a better place now.

It didn't take long for my father to pack up our things and go. He was a coward like that. He had an invisible reason for his urgency that only he could see. He told me only to bring the things that I valued most, and it took me packing my trunk halfway to realize that I already lost what I valued most. I only brought an extra dress, and the pair of boots that I hadn't worn the night my mom died. I left everything else behind. Father had already been packing the wagon, even before mother died. He was ready to leave. We were with a group of European immigrants who also had hopes of creating better lives in the North. There was no hope, no greener grass on

the other side. We didn't say goodbye to anyone, but there was no one of importance to say goodbye to. Father John set his beady blue eyes on me for the last time as we rode down the street. He looked nervous, like I had told everyone about what he did. I didn't tell a single soul, but I hoped that the fear that I did consumed him before hell did. Beside him, sat the old man outside the bar that I talked to. He looked up and watched me as I went, thinking something. What it was, I will never know.

I looked around at all the buildings that I had watched for my entire childhood, none of which now looked familiar. It was like I was seeing everything in a darker, more dull lens. I sat in the back of the wagon now, watching Independence get smaller and smaller until it disappeared and blended into the prairie. I was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied to be leaving. I felt nothing. Everytime I thought I had any sense of calm, one of the wagon wheels would hit another hole on the path, and I remembered that we were in a wagon. The American desert was cruel that way, in the way that it never let you forget you were stuck in it. We traveled for 15 miles, and arrived at our stop for the night just as the sun was setting. Everyone began unloading their things, conversing. The light from the sun cast a golden ray onto the campsite. The creek beside it, glimmered with gold and I wanted to admire it's beauty, but it hurt my eyes. I had no interest in talking. I mindlessly walked toward the creek, my feet dragging. I let myself fall into the river, tilted my head back to feel the refreshing cold on my skin. I felt at peace as I lay there, on the surface of the water.

"Ethel! Help me unload, will ya'!" My father yelled. My peace was gone.

When night fell and the golden sun dipped below the horizon, I sat by the fire with everyone else, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders. They laughed and talked, and I just sat. I stared into the fire's hot center, watching the flames go up in every which way. I felt numb. I imagined what it would look like for the people across from me to see me from the other side of the fire. They would see a pretty, young girl with yellow hair and big, brown eyes. She would look like she was sitting in the heat of the fire, even though she was just sitting on the other side of it. She would have a blank and dead look on her face. Her eyes drooping down, and her mouth with it. It would look like there wasn't a single thought in her brainless mind. She'd look dead, but just on the inside. Like she was plagued with some kind of disease that only attacks the mind. I soon got tired of my own thoughts and walked out into the prairie. I let the blanket fall off my shoulders as I walked, and I kept walking until I couldn't hear the laughter or the happiness radiating from the camp. I spread my blanket out on the ground, but the grass still poked through. I tilted my head to look up at the dots of light that filled the sky above me, and everything else fell away. I aid there for so long that the grass didn't bother me. The fire went out a while ago back at camp, and I still there, in the cold. I finally felt tranquil and at peace. I knew we wouldn't survive the journey to Colorado, or Oregon, or Montana, or California. I knew we were going to die, so I shut my eyes, and imagined a heaven on earth.