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From June to September

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From June to September

A few years after my grandfather's death, my grandmother stopped living with us. She moved into a small white house with chalky aluminum siding and a carport that attracted wasps. A door led off from her bedroom to a covered concrete porch. She could settle in for the evening and listen to the Drysdale boy catch hell from his mother or watch the thin asparagus stalks rise from the lumpy lawn.

With this independence came a newfound loneliness, so she began to date. Joe was in his eighties, a checkered derby he cocked to one side, and a light jacket he wore even in the heat of summer. He bought my grandmother a small black and white TV and they would watch the local news at the kitchen table while sharing mugs of coffee. Sometimes she'd fry him an egg.

Joe wouldn't go fishing like my grandfather, but he'd take us to flea markets and buy us treasure: boxes of old buttons, whetstones, horseshoe magnets. One time at McCain's supermarket he bought me a bag of three comics. I must have been ten or eleven. I'm not sure how I grew the balls to ask for a Playboy magazine, but he laughed in his yellow way, shuffled around the store, finally told me to wait out by the car. The heat of late June rose from the pavement, and I felt waves of warmth rolling off the engine. When the glass door flashed, Joe came limping out, a small brown paper bag folded under one arm. When we got in the car he slid it across the vinyl seat. JUGS, the title said in great big letters. He let me look at it all the way home and when we pulled into the driveway I asked if it was mine to keep.

“I think maybe you should let me hang onto this,” he said and slipped it back into the paper bag and shut it in his glove box. I never saw the thing again.

Mostly he and my grandmother were sweet to each other, but she was in her fifties and even my parents, though they thought him harmless, were bothered by his age. So the TV stayed put, but Joe moved south to Florida to live with a distant daughter.

Several months passed before we met Gene. An eagle tattoo rippled across one forearm, and the Mack truck he drove all over the south took over half the yard when he'd stay for the night. Like Joe, he'd also sit at the kitchen table and watch the small TV. He looked like Robert Shaw from Jaws and the muscles of his forearms twisted and flexed when he grabbed at things. His cigarettes would burn to little nubs, smoke tendrils rising between the rough knuckles of his hand. Gene never bought us anything. Told us to put our toys away in an oily cardboard box. Tiny, our Grandmother's beagle, was banished to the backyard, tethered with clothesline to a big steel spring Gene screwed into the ground. When we looked out our grandmother's bedroom window, we could smell the vinegar of the curtains, see Tiny cock his head toward the house. If we went out back, Gene would stand in the breezeway smoking. He'd crush out his cigarette and say, “Don't you rile up that dog.” His words were flat and straight as a yardstick.

It was strange to see my grandmother in another man's lap, her lips bright red, clip on earrings dangling from her earlobes. “I'm taking your mother out for a dance,” he'd say when my father came for us after his shift. All the way home my father said nothing, the muscles of his jaw twisted and flexed as if he worked up a spit.

When Gene swung south through Arkansas to pick up a load of chickens, my father and uncle put their foot down. They changed the locks on my grandmother's doors, and

my uncle started mowing her grass. The kitchen was stifling with the windows painted shut. We sat in the breezeway drinking iced tea, the plastic straps of the lawn chairs digging into the backs of our thighs. My grandmother let the wasps build their nests, let Tiny back into the house. When we stayed over those last few days of September, we'd hear my grandmother's soft weeping at night, Tiny's nails clicking across the kitchen linoleum, the silence as he nosed at her closed bedroom door.

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