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OUT OF NOWHERE

MILLY ALLEN

Before high school graduation, my grandparents invited me to their ranch near Jordan. The ranch was not an ideal escape, but it was an escape. I accepted the invitation, remembering the gallon-sized Western Family tubs of vanilla ice cream they kept in the freezer. My grandmother served scoops of them for dessert; you could have chocolate or caramel sauce, but not both.

I spent the two weeks leading up to the trip sorting and organizing my room, discarding everything I couldn't fit in my dorm room – old clothes, school papers, barely-used lotions and shower gels and bath salts from myriad gift sets. My mother wanted a craft room, and my room was the only place it could go. Each bag I tossed, each box labeled “DONATE,” my mother inspected. She was sentimental for someone who grew up on a ranch. Her hair was grey when I was little, but now it was white. She'd been the oldest child of three girls, but the last to marry and last to have a kid. Maybe that explained the sudden nostalgia hurricane; she found meaning in crayon drawings she forgot I made, in ugly Perler bead magnets from summer camp she previously refused to put on the fridge, in a Santa Claus paper plate I'd decorated with cotton balls glued to his beard.

“Remember when you made this, Jenny?” she asked, lifting up a dented castle made from a shoebox and toilet paper tubes. “You even made sure it could open up so you could play with it,” she said, touching the paste and cardstock hinges. “What a sweet little dollhouse.” I didn't correct her. I'd made it for the fairies, when I was thirteen – a bit old to still believe in them. I'd left it in my room, with an old Barbie kitchen bowl full of Doritos crumbs. They didn't come, and so I stopped believing.

Her sentimentality hindered the process, so I took to sorting through things when she was at work, and driving them to the dump or to the Goodwill in town before she got back to fix boxed potatoes au gratin for dinner.

I lived outside of Helena, in Montana City. Its name is misleading; it doesn't have its own zip code, but it does have three bars and a gas station. The ever-expanding subdivisions are easily navigated by bicycle.

I left my bike parked in the gravel bordering our driveway for easy access. To get to the gas station, I pedaled past several houses that had been on the market for over a year, the daycare I used to go to, and a car wash that only opened in the summer. Leaving my bike unlocked near the half-dead juniper bushes by one wall, I walked in to get a Butterfinger and an Arizona tea, to eat whenever I found a good place to do so. When I came out, I noticed a patch of bright pink flowers in the shade of a juniper bush.

The blossoms sat on short stems, close to the ground and to each other. When I prodded them, they were springy, like a mattress. I smiled; as a child, I would have imagined a fairy sleeping here, on its sweet, barely-scented bed.

I mounted my bike, and pedaled back past the car wash and daycare, and to another subdivision. I rode past their mailboxes, all stacked up on top of each other at the entrance to the subdivision – just like ours was. This land was a great shift from my subdivision, and better exercise, because of all the hills. After pedaling up a steep hill, I paused. Straddling my bike, I looked around me to see where I was. Behind the green house in front of me, there was a backyard with a weathered trampoline and a blue-grey shed the same color as the house.

My house.

The land was different, and I'd pedaled at least four miles to get here. I turned around and went back home, saving my treats for an evening in front of my computer.

After that bike ride, I spent as much time in town as I could, where I could go miles away from my house without ending up mere yards next to it. I parked my car in residential neighborhoods close to downtown to avoid paying for parking.

I walked back up to my car on a June evening, three days before I headed to Jordan. I'd already packed -- old clothes I didn't mind getting dusty, a couple "going to town" outfits, and six books. There were no movies I wanted to see – *Pirates of the Caribbean* lost its magic in the second film, and everything else was either a romantic comedy featuring a former Disney Channel star or a large studio's quasi-indie film, which were usually worse than actual indie films, and almost everything else closed at five. As I thought of going to Hastings to rent a movie or pick up a new book, I stubbed my toe against a crack in the sidewalk. I looked down to see the crack, pushed up by a tree root, smeared with blood.

I sat down and pulled my sandal off, and gingerly picked the large pieces of gravel and rock out of the wound. As I rummaged through my purse, hoping to find a packet of tissues or some fast food napkins to dab up the blood, I noticed a flash of color in the corner of my eye, a color I'd never seen before. I turned to look, ignoring the warm blood seeping out of my big toe.

I saw a fly; the nameless color was its wings, long and thin. It hovered over a patch of the fairy-bed flowers, flourishing in the shade of the tree and jostling each other on their springy stems. I looked at the thin, deer-bitten tree across from me; its leaves were still.

There was no wind.

Three days later, my toe still throbbing, my mother drove me to Jordan and stayed for a couple days before saying a quick and stiff goodbye to my grandparents – they were not only practical Montanans, but Scottish Presbyterians; emotional distance was the norm. My grandma was a Baird now, but her maiden name was Beattie. She said she married my grandfather because she didn't have to re-monogram her linens. It had to be at least half true.

Their fridge was decorated with more photos of cousins' weddings, shotgun and otherwise, but that was about all that had changed. My cousin Dan's wedding photo was the newest, seven months old. He married a girl in town called Alicia; she looks only slightly pregnant, but much happier than Dan. They'd tiled the kitchen floor in the seventies, the same time they'd installed the orange shag carpet. The carpet was still bright; Grandma vacuumed like some people went to church. It smelled like the two of them -- Grandpa's Old Spice, and Grandma's MiracleGro.

The first morning after my mother left, I woke up and made the bed, which I never did at home. I tucked the chenille bedspread, probably as old as my mother, into the corners as neatly as I could, and went to breakfast.

My grandparents did not drink coffee, just Lipton tea. I put the kettle on.

"Do you want a cup, Grandma?" I'd seen her high cheekbones in the photographs of her, up until the eighties, after she'd stopped bothering to dye her hair but before I was born. Now fat and saggy skin clouded the sharp lines.

My grandpa was already out working with Dan and another cousin, Jeff, who he hired for the summer. They were ten years older than me, but had about half as much what Grandma called "direction." They wouldn't be back until lunchtime. "Oh, no thanks. Want to make Rice Krispie treats later?" Grandma asked, spritzing MiracleGro on the houseplants that filled the sitting room. "Or maybe some chokecherry syrup or jam?"

I poured Cheerios into a white bowl. "Making jam sounds fun."

The chokecherries on the bush behind the grain elevator blinked, or so it seemed from how the sunlight reflected off their dark, shiny skin. The tiny pink flowers carpeted the ground underneath it. “Where did those come from?” I asked. I hadn’t been able to identify the flowers in books or through the Internet, but my grandma was pretty reliable.

“Oh, I don’t know; I think they might be weeds. They came out of nowhere. They’re hard to pull up -- I keep trying to dig them up, but those roots go right on to the center of the earth. At least they haven’t killed the tree yet. I think I’m gonna try salt next.” She stepped on top of the fairy-bed flowers, picking chokecherries and throwing them into an old coffee can with the label torn off. Avoiding the flowers, which I didn’t consider weeds, I joined her.

We didn’t make the jam until after “the men” were done with lunch. “It’ll make the house awful hot, and it won’t make a good break for them,” my grandma explained as she gutted and cut up a whole chicken in the sink. “Could you go feed the cats?” she asked, nodding at the scrap bucket – yet another labelless coffee can; I never knew where they got them because they never drank coffee, even when my mom was young.

I grabbed it and looked inside. “Will they eat potato peels?” I asked.

“They’ll eat what they eat,” she huffed, cracking the chicken’s breastbone as if for emphasis.

I dumped the scrap bucket into the cat’s food dish, near the walkway to their garage. The cat never came inside. She and her kittens heard, and came running.

My grandparents never named the cats. Like every cat before her, she was known as “the cat,” or if she made them angry, “that cat.” I petted the soft kittens while their mother ate. A few minutes later, Grandpa and my cousins pulled up to the house in the red Chevy truck. He called it the new truck; it was twenty years old.

“Thought she came fixed,” Grandpa said as he approached. His sweat-soaked brow and thick, cracked thumbnails were too real to have made it into that Thornton Wilder play. “We’ll take her in to do that in a bit, her and the couple’a the kittens we’ll keep. People used to drown kittens, you know – throw ‘em in a bag with a rock or some broken bricks and toss them in. I hated it. Always thought there was something disgusting with people who’d’a do that. ”

“They’re just cats,” Jeff said. He had even less direction than Dan, but a much bigger beer belly.

My grandpa frowned, taking his sweat-stained cowboy hat off to wipe his brow. “Get inside and wash your hands,” he commanded. We listened, entering through the garage and using the sink in

the mudroom.

After lunch, Jeff went straight to the old, blocky computer to play a sullen game of Minesweeper. Grandpa and Grandma went on their twice-monthly trip to Miles City, postponing the jelly making.

“We gotta move the trip up early, Ellen. Ashley Bruce needs some help fencing tomorrow – that wind took down ten yards of fence on her eastern border. All seven of those kids are younger than ten, so they aren’t much help.” Ashley Bruce’s husband, Bill, died a few months earlier, before calving season; my grandfather and three other ranchers in town divvied up her pregnant cattle to help her out.

They asked if we wanted to go; we all said no. The Walmart in Miles City was the same as the Walmart in Helena, and I wanted to read my book. Dan and Jeff had their own plans.

“Wanna shoot at some prairie dogs?” Jeff asked after Grandpa and Grandma left.

I tried to keep my face neutral. “No, not really.”

“Well, could you at least drive us?” he snapped, taking a chug of Bud Light. It had to be warm; he couldn’t keep it in the fridge. My grandparents didn’t allow alcohol on the ranch, partially because Dan and Jeff act like shitbags when they get drunk. He dangled the rest of the six pack from the empty loop.

“God, Jeff, she doesn’t have to drive, we’ll be fine,” Dan said. I looked at the beer in his hand, the six pack he was dangling by the empty loop. *When did Jeff hand it to him?* I looked back at Jeff, who still had a six pack. Christ.

“I’ll drive,” I said.

We took the old truck, pale green and rustier than the new truck, but still a Chevy. “Pavement Ends,” the sign said, and I slowed down as I hit the dirt road. After a couple miles, we turned off of it and back onto Grandpa’s ranchland. I waited in the driver’s seat as Dan and Jeff drunkenly fought over who would open the gate; they were each three beers in.

“I opened that gate for Grandpa this morning,” Jeff slurred.

“Yeah, but I opened all the gates all the other times *all* the other weeks,” Dan retorted, half-heartedly punching Jeff in the shoulder with his beer hand. It sloshed all over his lap, and the striped seats. *Grandpa will smell that.*

After Dan opened the gate and hopped back in, I drove over the rocky hills no one expects in Eastern Montana. “Stop here,” Dan said.

We got out of the truck. I stood on the other side of it from them, using it as a barrier between me and the prairie dog village. “I’m gonna go on a walk,” I said.

Jeff laughed. “Christ, they’re just prairie dogs.” Dan laughed, too. They started loading their guns, fighting over who had the better brand: Remington (Jeff) or Ruger (Dan). Dan was brand loyal; he even named his kid Ruger.

As they loaded their guns and drank more beer (they were four beers in now), I walked around to the cab to get my water bottle and hat. Feeling guilty, I tried to ignore the holes in the ground as I rummaged through the cab, my left leg sticking up for balance.

The bullet hit my calf at the same moment I heard the gunshot.

It couldn’t have been silent, but I do not remember any noise after the gunshot. I crumbled to the ground, on my stomach. I tried lifting my leg above my heart, but it burned and all I could think about was how cattle feel when we brand them. I tried asking Dan and Jeff to help, but my tongue throbbed, and so did my fingers, my scalp, my heart, my feet.

That nameless color flickered at the corner of my eye again, and I looked up. One of those strange flies fluttered its long, thin wings in a spider web. The web dangled from the underside of a dry bush, like a hammock; it was as long as my forearm. As I wondered why no spider came for the fly, it alit from the web and fluttered around it, bouncing up and down on the hammock before it took off. *A fairy hammock.*

I do not know where I read to do this; probably *National Geographic*, or a historic fiction piece like a Dear America diary. I forearm-crawled less than a yard to the bush, ripped the web from its dry branches and shoved the least debris-ridden part of it into the wound on my calf. It hurt so much that I couldn’t scream. As I looked back at the bright blood trail in the dirt, wondering if it really could all be mine, the wound darkened, and began to clot. I looked up to Dan and Jeff, astonished and drunk, and the fly on its stomach -- *its stomach?* -- on a branch of a dry bush.

Before I could look closely at it, they lifted me into the cab of the truck and drove over prairie dog villages, hills, and dirt roads. “Abrupt Edge,” said the yellow sign, and I braced myself for the jolt when the truck’s wheels hit the pothole-riddled pavement. We drove straight to Dr. Gene Johnston’s house, and it took both forever and no time at all.

The doctor answered the door. “Evie,” he called to his wife as he escorted me through his house to the office in back. “Call Glenn Baird. Got his oldest girl’s daughter here, with a gunshot wound.” My mother hadn’t been a girl for three decades.

“I don’t know if he’ll be home,” I said. “They went to Miles City.”

“I’ll try his car phone first,” Evie Johnston said. She dialed the number from memory; like my grandparents, their phone still had a cord.

The doctor glared at my cousins. “I’ll take her from here; you two don’t go anywhere until you’re sober. What caliber?”

“Just a .22,” Dan muttered, baseball cap in his hands.

The doctor left my cousins sitting in the front room. He pulled the spider web out of the hole with washed and gloved fingers, and inspected my leg. “Bullet is still in there, but it doesn’t look like it hit bone. You stick the web in there?” I nodded. “Good job. I can’t put you under general anesthetic,” he said. “But I can give you a local.”

Gene Johnston was a few years younger than my grandpa. He delivered my mother and her two sisters, and everyone else in town their age or younger. He vaccinated them, too. He treated my grandpa’s ingrown toenails; he prescribed EpiPens for my grandma’s bee allergy. And with steady hands, he helped me lay stomach-down on the exam table, cut open the left leg of my jeans and injected a local anesthetic behind my knee. While waiting for it to kick in, he called Evie into the room. “Why don’t you use this phone and call up Dick Glennfield,” he told her. “Didn’t want them to leave if they heard you call him from the house phone.” Dick Glennfield was in charge of Jordan’s five-person police force. “Dan Moffett and Jeff Rowe shot their little cousin in her calf while they were drunk,” she said. “No, no, not the little cousin, just Dan and Jeff were drunk.”

“I think you should probably look away while I clean you up,” Dr. Johnston said, pulling a tray of sterilized equipment near the table: gauze, iodine, scalpel, curette, kidney dishes, and tiny forceps – the kind TV doctors used to pinch arteries shut. I looked away, and saw one of the strange flies hovering above the flower box outside his office window. “Don’t know where those tiny pink ones came from,” he said. “Evie just replanted this year. She said she didn’t plant the pink ones, but she likes them. Thinks maybe some other seeds got mixed in with her new perennials.”

My grandparents brought me back home, but left Dan and Jeff in the jail overnight. They helped me to bed, and my grandmother brought me a bowl of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup and caramel sauce. I lay under the chenille bedspread in my room, looking at my pale face in the dresser mirror. My leg, cleaned and dressed, hurt as bad as it had when I’d been shot. As I reached towards the lamp to turn it off, one of the strange flies landed on my bottle of pain medication (the pharmacist, Dr. Johnston’s brother-in-law, re-opened for emergencies) on my side table, its elegant, nameless-colored wings striking in the lamplight. It could have been the shock, or the pain, but the fly had a face.