Ceremony

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CEREMONY

Papaw puts a whole can of Coke on the ham before he bakes it. I sit right next to him when he pours it on. My shoes knock against the cabinet door with thud, thank, glud. Rubber bounces off wood and my legs go high like when I bang the funny part of my knee with a spoon handle.

“They slice ‘em up before you get ‘em, Lil. Coke goes right in. Very little work indeed.” He pours it on, fizzing and sliding down the pink back of the ham. I put my finger on and taste it. Salty and sweet, not like the sick and slimy taste of Mom’s raw chicken and Papaw doesn’t mind me tasting. A pig ain’t like no other animal and that’s the truth.

“Hand me the pineapple, Lil.” He holds a hand out and I give him the can. Papaw’s clothes don’t come in pieces. His tops and bottoms are sewn together with buttons up the middle. “Open it first.” He hands the can back to me and I push the ring down and pull it up. I try to be careful—always—but things get away from me and some of that sweet juice is lost on the floor below my legs.

“Durnit.” I am the only one that’s really worth a shit even when I make a mess. Papaw keeps me now that the school won’t and while my mom works until she has a headache and needs a sip and wants the TV on and me in my room. Door shut. Make me a present, Lil, and let’s keep it a surprise.

“Lil,” Papaw says, shaking his head at me. “Lil, we’ll have to get a rag.” Papaw’s lonely. All alone since God called Grandma back home again. We take the ham around the neighborhood to the ladies. We share. Sharing makes the lonely less so and the ham makes ladies happy. Always we take the ham around on Sundays when the ladies get back from church. But today is a Tuesday and Tuesdays don’t mean anything different from a Sunday to me or Papaw, not now, not this week, not since Papaw keeps me ‘cause the school won’t.

I suck on my finger where blood has mixed with a little of the sweet juice. I can’t remember if blood tastes like metal or if it’s the can lid that got a little inside me when I pulled it off.
"You're short, Papaw," I say because I'm taller with my butt on the counter and his feet still on the floor.

"Don't I know it." He pushes chunks of pineapple down into the ham with his fingers that aren't much longer than mine but twice as fat like if you pushed half a pencil up against half a hot dog, that's what our fingers look like together. But I am never quite the same, always taller, seeing as how I am two grades behind and they don't know what they're going to do with me but God has a plan. He has one for everybody and its best to wait and see what it will be.

My job is to carry the knife. Papaw carries the ham so I won't drop it. I drop the knife plenty but when I do I jump back, say Wooo and Papaw knows I'm okay.

"You're going to dull it, Lil."

"Ham's cut already, Papaw. You showed me that. I seen it."

Papaw stops walking. "What's the glory in going to a pretty lady's house and pulling a slab of ham off with your fingers? It's a thing called ceremony, Lil. Ceremony is what gets you places in life."

"Out of first grade?"

"Might could." He sets the ham down on a fence post. His hand sneaks up his pant leg to get at an itch. The highway runs right by us. Watch out for the highway, Lil. I remember. "There's ceremony in big ways. I been married in one and rested her soul in one. I went into the army with one and got out with one." He wiggled his leg inside his sewn together top and bottom. Eating all that ham, he won't fit in those things anymore. Then what's he going to do? Be out a wardrobe. "Birthing is a kind of ceremony but you ain't ready for that. Point is, there's little ceremonies too. The everyday kind, like cutting a ham that's done been cut for the sake of a lady, putting the toilet seat down after a pee, setting a spoon out at dinnertime when there ain't no soup." He pulls a piece of crackling off and sticks it in my mouth where it melts like serious candy, "plastic flowers, thank yous and Christmas trees."

He pops a piece of ham into his mouth and shakes his head. "Little piece from the end is tasty, Lil. Sweet Jesus." When
Papaw eats, his whole head moves with his teeth and I imagine that he chews his food the intended way. *Slow down, Lil, and chew your food. You'll choke to death.* I try to be like Papaw when I eat. Down the road a ways comes the first house and the one I hate the most. Papaw says to stick in there and we'll be on our way. There are 1 2 3 houses today. There are more than that but today is Tuesday.

“Have to treat them all the same, Lil. Can’t favor pretty ones over ugly ones. That’s the most important thing to know about women. As a female yourself, be good for you to know that kind of thing.” Ham and bacon and fried pork chops all come from the pig. I kick at the rocks along the road, careful not to lose two legs off the sidewalk when one goes down. Carry the knife tip down always. *Better to hurt what’s being fell into than what’s falling.* “That’s ceremony too, treating pretty and ugly the same.” Ugly is a word I try not to use. It’s a sharp rock more than a word and pretty isn’t for me yet, not until I can use a Tuesday in the right way and not like a Sunday.

“And we don’t know about you yet, Lil. You might be pretty, might not. But you’re better off knowing which you are, rather than being pretty and thinking you’re ugly or being ugly and thinking you’re pretty. Try to know for sure.” Papaw opens the gate and I scutter in ahead of him, dropping the knife in the grass.

“Wooo.” I jump back.

“Watch that knife around my pansies. You’re likely to send that blade down to the root again, Lil. You wrecked a whole patch of marigolds last month,” That Gladys says to me, not even looking right at me but already squatted down in her lawn, smoothing over the grass where my knife didn’t land. *That Gladys shouldn’t talk to you that way. You ain’t her child. You better thank the Lord for that, Lil.* “I see you bringing that dried up old ham around again.” That Gladys looks up at Papaw and just like his face was all chew, now it’s smile.

“Hand me the knife, Lil”

“You ain’t going to hand me a piece of ham in my front yard like we’re a bunch of grease monkeys on lunch. Come in the house.” That Gladys pulls herself up from the ground with a
noise like a squeaky door and I change That Gladys to Fat Gladys in my head.

"Now sit," Fat Gladys says when we go inside and points me to a chair in the corner. She brings a roll of paper towels from the kitchen and puts one in my lap.

"I ain't going to eat," I tell her. I don't eat with the ladies.

"You might need it anyhow," I hear Messy Child as she turns back toward Papaw on the couch. Her house smells like laundry sheets and I hear her legs rub together when she walks like dried up leaves scratching in the dirt. He sets the ham on the table in front of the couch and offers up a slice to Fat Gladys resting on the blade of the knife. "Mmmm. Mmmm. Mmmm." Fat Gladys chews just barely and I imagine that she's not chewing at all but just sucking on the ham. She's the kind of woman to have teeth running up and down her throat, making everything that comes out of her so nasty and mean.

"What you going to do with Lil? You going to just keep her out of school? That's a shame, you ask me. Child belongs in school with the other children. She'll not straighten out otherwise."

"Might just be what she needs to spend a little time with her Papaw. Right, Lil?" Papaw looks around to me but Fat Gladys' fat back blocks him. "I teach her plenty."

"I'd say her mother drank plenty when she was in the belly."

"My daughter," Papaw says. Mom works hard at the store. All day. Nights too. "Now Gladys." The hot dog fingers spread out on a fat leg and a fat hand pushes them away. "We known each other a long time. Let the girl alone."

"You still think you can be fresh with me." She makes a noise that must be a fat giggle and smooths her hands down her legs. She reaches for the ham and pulls it from the bone with her fingers. "A woman like that don't stop cause she's carrying a baby."

"Alright Gladys. You've had your say." Papaw sits back on the couch to where he can see me and he doesn't look packed full like he usually does, like his body was always too small to pack all of him inside and he was bursting at the seams of his own skin, looking for more room, for the body of a giant. He looks little and shrinked up—all loose skin and extra air.
We went to all the houses down along the highway where there was a woman who lived alone. Alone in the way of not having a husband or a boyfriend or a man who was there on a full time basis. We come around with the ham and cut off a few slices for each one of them. One to eat while we were there and another two or three for later, to eat on a biscuit or on a piece of toast with mayonnaise and a slice of tomato. It gets the two of them out of the house. Lord knows he could use the exercise with his britches as tight as they are.

“You don’t pay her mind,” Papaw says about Fat Gladys as soon as we leave her house. Every time we leave her house.


“That’s right.”

Lil is just a wisp of a thing. Can’t put any meat on her bones. I know if she’d settle, she’d thicken up a bit, but I can’t get her to settle. It’s a burden of the heart.

Summer was bad when we had to go to May’s because she kept her grandson all summer and he bit me four times. Peter was in my grade last year but I was taller and when he bit me, he left little moons on my arm, purple half moons with edges like the sharp side of a cut can. You never bit nobody, Lil. They call that boy normal. Shows what money will get you.

Papaw says I got to be faster to keep from getting bit but school started back and Peter went on while I stayed behind, got taller, beat all the boys at kickball and didn’t get bit. If he ever breaks your skin, Lil, if you ever see blood—that’s red, Lil, red—you tell your Papaw to get you to the doctor. Tell him I said. I had to leave the school though, because God has a plan and this world ain’t made for souls like mine. I’d be better off in a jungle somewhere. Running naked and wild. Purple half moons up and down my body. I would. Tuesday, Sunday, Monday, Thursday.

May cries when she sees us. She stands in the door of her house while tears well up in her eyes looking like her eyeballs are going to slide right out her head. I walk on tiptoes so I won’t step on them. We’d have to get them back in.

“Now May, what’s got you so worked up?” Papaw puts
the ham on the kitchen counter and we three sit at the table, me
with my feet up off the ground. There's already three cups of
Pepsi poured when we walk in the house. The cups are thick and
plastic and I bite into mine and leave marks all the way around
for Peter. Pepsi tastes like Coke poured through a rain cloud, it's
sadder and different.

"It's hard to make it through the days," May wipes her
eyes with a napkin crunched into one hand and with the other
she takes the knife from me and sets it behind her on the counter.
"I had my Peter here all summer to keep my mind busy. I miss
my Jacob now. All I got to think about."

She sounds like a kitty we had that cried in its sleep. I'd
put my nose up close to its nose and watch her eyes shiver and
breath in the little crying breaths. That kitty died and I was the
one to notice because I did that with our noses pushed together.
It's okay though. *God always has a plan, Lil.*

"You got ever thing to be thankful for, May."
"My kids is worthless. They hate me. Jacob loved me."
"We're here for the grandbabies," Papaw pulls the cup
from my mouth and looks at the edges where it's bit. "Nobody
gets anything right the first time." He puts the cup back in my
mouth.

"Peter is my angel now. I got to live another twenty years,
alone." May pushes her napkin into her chest and I pick my arms
up off the table so I won't crush the eyeballs when they go roll-
ing. I clang the ice against my teeth with no hands on the cup.
"Goodness, Lil," she whispers but this isn't church.

"We got to move on before my ham dries up," the cup
drops from my mouth and Papaw picks it up. He sets it upright.
"This'll be special for Lil when we come by."

May shakes her head and crosses her arms on her chest
that is so thin and barely there, her arms don't touch anything.
"My Tupperware," she says and I put my arms down because she
stopped crying. *Ruined.*

"Get the knife, Lil."
"Just run off," she says. "You hate me too." Her voice is
more like the scratch between Fat Gladys' legs than a kitten.
"We'll be back on Sunday," Papaw pats her back and her
head moves as he touches her.

My hands touch the floor before my feet but I pull myself up and take the knife from behind May’s head. “Gracious,” she says, turning around quickly like I am the kind to drop it on her head. You’ll hurt someone, Lil. You’ll hurt yourself.

We have a new house and where all of the houses we go to have old women in them, sagging and fat and full of air that blows sometimes sweet and sometimes bitter on my cheeks, we have a young one. Anna. A woman like my mother but with pink splotches all up and down the side of her face. She was born that way, Lil, don’t stare. Sometimes I have to move my face with my hands so I won’t look at her for too long and she asks me, Girl, why do you smack yourself like that? World’s going to bounce you around enough the way it is. Don’t take to hurting your own self. And then I sit quiet and still because she talks right to me, right into my eyes and it freezes me somehow. Keeps me still.

Her yard is nothing but grass and if you drop the knife, no one’s watching you.

“Anna, it’s me and Lil come with a bite of ham,” Papaw says into the screen door. He hits the metal with his fist that is full again, so full that I duck, scared he might bust right open.

She comes to the door and the side of her face that is all wrong is covered by a shadow. I think about being her and looking at myself in the kind of light that made me look like everyone else and I wish I was her, having something solid and wrong to cover up.

“The Odd Couple,” she calls us and Papaw laughs while I think this is obvious and not funny, maybe funny because she said it and in saying things that are real it can be funny because it’s not always that people say what’s real. I know that word though, odd. I know odd and weird and mean and stay the fuck still and not right.

“The house is a mess,” she says. “Let’s sit on the porch in this nice sunshine.”

“Like monkeys,” I remember everything.

“Lil,” Papaw puts the ham down on the ground and eases himself into a sit on the top step of the porch. He’s about to bust again.
“Monkeys eating ham on my porch?” Anna sits down next to Papaw. “Fine with me,” she says. “Long as I can clean it up with a hose.”

Papaw laughs and so do I. *Not so loud, Lil.* Maybe it’s me who is about to bust. Watch the way you look.

Papaw slides the knife down into the ham and pulls the piece out, laid flat on the knife blade. He offers it to Anna.

“How don’t we use our hands, William?” She puts a finger in front of her lips. “Our little secret that your ham is already cut.”

“It’s ceremony,” I tell her. My arms are above my head and I watch my hands so I won’t stare. I’ve been stared at. I’m the tallest one in my class. I’m *No fair* at recess.

“How’s that, Lil?” Anna holds the ham between her fingers. Papaw doesn’t eat but watches her and I don’t know how but he isn’t staring. He’s looking. He’s soft and his about to bustness is settled for the time.

“Pretty and ugly are the same.” I put my hands on my legs and look down there. I jump backwards down the steps. “And doing things that don’t make sense is ceremony. Papaw taught me.”

Papaw has his hand over his mouth, like he’s holding the words inside there. I jump up the steps and back down again. Eyes on hands. *You are going to hurt yourself, Lil.*

Anna has a *Story* and that is how she came to be here on the highway in our town. She doesn’t work or have a husband and that is part of her *Story.*

“Is the messes on her face part of her Story?” I have asked.

“No,” Papaw told me. “Just part of her life.” So I know that Life and Story are different. Tuesday and Sunday can be the same. Pretty and ugly are the same.

Papaw sits close to Anna. With the other ladies, there is a rhythm to the movement that I feel in my watching that they don’t think is watching but moving too much, close to hurting myself always. Papaw touches and they giggle, slap his hand, squeeze on him. Papaw teases and they giggle, slap his hand, squeeze on him. They cry but never over him. They tell him his ham is bad, but their fingers are greasy when we leave. Full bel-
lies and pink puffy cheeks. When Papaw reaches to touch Anna, his hand stops, falls dead beside him, and she notices. She tells him his ham is good. The best she’s ever had.

“Lil,” Anna picks the ham off herself, without waiting for Papaw’s knife. “Why don’t you stay with me the afternoon?”

“This house?” I ask. Most houses I am rushed into and out of. Papaw looks at me and I know there has been talking before this walk down the highway, that Anna’s words are his too. “Doing what?”

“I used to be a school teacher. Second grade, just like you.”

“I’m in first.”

“You’re smarter than that, Lil.”

When Anna talks to me it’s hard not to stare. I move my face to the side with my hands.

“Stop acting,” Papaw says. “Anna might could help you with your school problems.”

“We’ll try some writing today and some drawing,” Anna’s face holds me. I hop up the stairs, two feet at a time, to her. I kick a foot back to try and go back down again but I don’t want to.

“What did you like best about school? What was your favorite part?”

“The outside parts. I was better than everybody else.” I stand so still it’s not still at all but shaking. I don’t ever know what other people can see.

“Let’s see if we can’t get you to like the inside parts too. I know you’ll be a good speller. I can tell that about you.”

My hand comes up from holding onto my ankle and reaches to Anna’s face, to the messed up side. She jerks back, quick like a kitten, but she sits still when I touch her. Lil. My fingers run down her face and I hear my breathing. I go from top to bottom, just touching. I close my eyes because there is no difference between the messed up side and the perfect side if you are just touching.

“Damnit, Lil, Get your hand off her.” Papaw reaches up and has my arm back down at my side. I feel it a little bit. Sting.

Lil. You can’t go back, Lil. Why would you even want to? I’ll never understand you. Just let me go back for the kickball. I’m taller. What am I going to do? Momma’s forehead touches the table and
there are tiny puddles under her eyes. *What am I going to do?* Don’t be sad. Don’t be sad. I’ll squeeze my body so tight, I’ll squeeze it right out of me, Momma. The wrong. I’ll squeeze so tight.

“Relax, baby girl,” Anna’s hand pushes into my palm. Her thumb rubs the middle. “Breathe. Breathe.”

“We’d better go,” Papaw rubs his hands up and down his suit. He stands. “She needs a nap. A snack.”

I try to know that I am breathing but it’s hard to tell. Anna holds on to both my hands and she pushes her thumbs into my palms, rolling them in circles. *Breathe.* I know that if I breathe I’ll be crying too and that’s not tight enough. It has to be tighter to squeeze it all out.

“Let it go, baby girl.” It’s not just my hand now but my whole body. She pulls me into her, right up close to the messes on her face and I make them wet. My whole face is wet, not tight at all. “Go on,” she says and I can’t help it but I do.

I see Papaw. There is light coming from all around us. Where we have been warm all day, the cool starts to set in. We’ll catch cold, all three of us, even though the sun pushes in through Anna’s trees, a sun close to carrying us into night. I see Papaw, orange sticks of sun pushing into his eyes, closing them. Love. Let’s stay for a while. *I love you.* My arms are wet. My chest is wet. I’ve been all loose and crying. Let’s stay for a while.