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The Third Moon of Neptune

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Abstract

Some people claim to remember everything. When a conversation turns to “My Earliest Memories,” they can describe their bloody slide from the womb, the pain of first light and the doctor’s slap —hell, they can still smell Dad’s Burma shave at the moment of conception...

The Third Moon of Neptune

by Julie Cummings, English Grad

Some people claim to remember everything. When a conversation turns to “My Earliest Memories,” they can describe their bloody slide from the womb, the pain of first light and the doctor’s slap—hell, they can still smell Dad’s Burma shave at the moment of conception.

I, on the other hand, prefer to try to forget. Even so, I’ve got my memories, like snapshots from a Polaroid with a slow shutter. They’re fuzzy, awkward, maybe, but they produce that twinge of recognition and awe: *I remember that*. I can still taste that egg salad sandwich on its way back up at the 1971 Juliette Low picnic; and the way my legs, from the bottom of my skirt to the top of my knee socks, turned first red, then gray when the school bus somehow forgot me on a February morning. And good things, too—first communion, first date, first kiss . . . You get the idea. And the one thing I’ve never been allowed to forget, though in fact I don’t *remember* it: My grandmother died the day I was born.

And again this year, on July 22nd, before I am even fully awake, I know that it is “that day”. The dog days are here; the Iowa humidity lies thick in the air, and I have begun to feel its tension within the last week. Now, on schedule, the cake smell from the kitchen invades my bedroom. At the moment I open my eyes, my younger brother Ellis shouts in my ear. “Happy *death*day, Sis.”

It is from such displays of charm that Ellis has earned my nickname for him, L.S., Little Squirt. I sit up to take a swipe at his head, intending to do great bodily harm. But

he has dived behind the silver tube of his new telescope, which he pretends to have focused on my face at a distance of three feet. “Hey,” he says, “I can see the surface of the moon, craters and all.”

“You want that telescope annihilated and you along with it, just keep it up.”

“Ellis is a spoiled brat,” is how I greet my mother in the kitchen as I sit down to a bowl of Special K.

“That’s true,” she says. My mother can be brutally honest; tact isn’t her style. Neither, for that matter, is domesticity. She is not a woman who bakes cakes for no reason. My grade school friend Sheila, after spending a snow-bound weekend in our home, had whispered to me as she left, “Your mother doesn’t *look* like a mother.” I’d never really thought about it before, but she has always reminded me somewhat of a mermaid, without the fins. Her hair is blond, dropping in waves past her shoulders, and, at forty-two, she could still pose beside a pool and draw her share of wolf whistles. It is not that any one has ever doubted her competence at housewifery, though there is the occasional odd dish, such as crisp Jello. It is she, in fact, who is her worst critic. When she must rise to an occasion, be it Christmas, a birthday, or a bake sale at the church, her perfectionist streak surfaces and she usually ends up with a migraine. “This frosting’s too runny,” she says now, as she spreads chocolate icing over the bottom layer. “Was it last year it was so lumpy?”

“I don’t remember,” I say. She knows this is my last birthday at home—I enter a two-year Lutheran college in Oregon in the fall—yet, typically, ever the creature of habit, and ritual, and tradition, she is doing nothing different; the Party remains the Party: my father will take the afternoon off from work, and there will be the Happy Birthday to You, the cake and ice cream, the presents, the annual review of the Tillie’s Birthdays photo album, and the shooting of more pictures. And in the evening, of course, the Visit.

Wearing a pair of Grandpa’s old rubbers and walking

like a beached scuba diver, Ellis comes into the kitchen through the sliding glass doors from the dewy backyard.

"El, take those rubbers off. Don't wear them into the house."

Ellis lifts each foot indifferently, allowing the rubbers to slap the linoleum. "OK, Dorothy," he says. My brother stopped calling our parents "Mom" and "Dad" last year because it was, as he put it, "too affectionate." He took to calling them "Mother" and "Father" with feigned respect until two weeks ago, when he settled on "Dorothy" and "Jack" because that's your names, isn't it, and everybody else calls you that, so why can't I?"

My mother ignores this cheekiness, lost in her frosting. "Did you get your telescope set up for tonight?" she asks him.

"Yeah."

"What are you gazing at now, Galileo?" I say.

"The new moon."

"The new moon? I saw a full moon just the other night," I say. "How can there be a new moon already?"

"Not *the* Moon," Ellis replies in a don't-you-know-anything voice. "The *new* moon. Neptune's moon."

"Oh, does Neptune have a moon?" I say, with as little enthusiasm as possible.

"It's got *three*." He holds up his stubby fingers to count off the moons. "Triton, Nereid,"—now with only his middle finger raised—"and the new one. they just discovered it."

"Oh. I hope it rains." Then, rinsing my breakfast dishes in the sink, I am struck by a thought. "You mean it took the great scientific minds till 1981 to find the third moon of Neptune, and you think you're going to see it with that rinky-dink telescope? From the Sears catalog?"

"It's a 400X refractor," Ellis boasts.

"Kids, could you take your discussion into the other room," my mother says, massaging the nape of her neck. "I've got a *killer* headache."

Right on schedule. "You're such a little squirt," I tell my brother.

Just before the Party, the mailman brings a birthday

greeting from my semi-boyfriend, who's hitching around the country this summer. It's a postcard from Florida with oranges on it. Though I'm glad to hear from him, I'm sorry to be reminded of my friend Sheila, who went to Florida one July and never came back. She was run down by a Dodge while crossing a highway to a stand selling fresh-squeezed lemonade. I had wanted to attend the funeral with my parents—I'd never seen a dead person—but I was left with a babysitter and told by mother, "You're too young, Tillie. You'll understand later on."

This brown study ends with the opening bars of the Birthday Song. Everything goes according to tradition. My father takes pictures while we eat and as I open my gifts: luggage from my parents, to take me off to college; some books from two Lansing High friends—a dictionary and *The Joy of Sex*; and from Ellis, a small rodent in a cage.

The only thing missing is Grandpa. For as long as I can remember he'd sneak over in the middle of the Party, take my hands, and say, "Tillie, you look more like your mom's family with that round face and those dimples." Then, squinting into my eyes, he'd say, "But you got your grandma's soul. I can see it in there." And, humming what was supposed to be "Waltzing Matilda," but which usually came out more like some song from the Gay Nineties, or World War II or something, he'd waltz me around the living room, with my feet anchored to the tops of his Hush Puppies. We hadn't waltzed now for several years, ever since the time I grew five inches in six months, and I had actually been rather glad to see this tradition go—Grandpa stunk of tobacco and he always swung me around *after* cake and ice cream—but at this last party I miss Grandpa and his saying of recent years, "Nope, I ain't bustin' no blood vessel to dance, no matter *who's* day this is."

"I don't know why they call it 'Merry Meadows,' " my father tells Ellis and me as he parks the car in front of a three-story, red brick building in the old section of the city. It looks like an abandoned school house, with white-trimmed windows and a flag pole, flagless, out front. In any case, it is not aptly named, for not only are there no

meadows, merry or otherwise, there isn't even any *grass*. I do spot a weed or two sprouting through cracks in the concrete walks and staff parking lot; the only other scenery is a bizarre pattern of giant-cookie-cutter circles filled with pink gravel and a bush.

"I'll get Grandpa," my father says. "It won't take a minute." He and my mother have been to see Grandpa — Dad's father — twice a week since he was admitted to Merry Meadows in January. Ellis and I have never accompanied them because, simply, it has never been suggested. The one time I asked my mother if we were negligent in never making the trip, she said, "Your father doesn't want you to see Grandpa that way."

Typically, I have never heard a word about it from my father. Dad is as much a mystery to me as the grandmother I never knew, mostly, I suppose, because he seldom speaks, or at least what he says rarely sticks in my memory. Which isn't to say that my mother wears the pants in our family; I think if the Ryans have any source of strength, or a centripetal force keeping us from flying apart, it is in my father. I see him as a gentle man, of even temper, although his great love is hunting, and he will proudly hoist his quarry on returning home from a day out to show off the limp carcass of a deer, rabbit, or pheasant he has brought down with his rifle. He has the massive arms of a lumberjack, though for twenty-three years he's worked behind a desk.

"Now remember, Grandpa's on medication, so he may seem strange," my mother tells Ellis and me as final instructions. Grandpa had seemed strange enough last winter. One day I got home from school to find my father shouting at Grandpa in the living room. "I can't take off from work every afternoon. This is the third time this week, and last week you called every day."

Grandpa stood in a corner, shielding his eyes. "Those funny people, they won't go away," he said.

My father squeezed Grandpa's shoulders, trying to turn him. "Look, Dad, there's no funny people here — it's only the TV. It's *I Love Lucy*, for Christ's sake."

Grandpa went to Merry Meadows the next day.

The cemetery is a five mile drive on Highway 60. We pass nothing but fields of stunted corn, and after the obligatory mention of this year's drought, there is no conversation. Grandpa has said nothing at all since my father propped him between Ellis and me in the backseat. I watch him now as he stares straight ahead out the windshield. His glasses are held on his nose by an elastic band across the back of his head. I wonder how my face must look, seen through inch-thick lenses: like the moon, I decide, craters and all. Maybe this is why Grandpa seems to no longer know me. He holds his hands motionless, one on each thigh, and I see that his fingers are thin in a feminine, almost dainty, way—these are not the hands of a working man. Of course, he hasn't worked in years, since Grandma died and he moved into a spare bedroom in our home. I think he used to be a carpenter.

Now Ellis rolls down his window and is immediately told by my mother, clutching her harido, to close it. "It's too windy," she says, "and anyway the air conditioner's on."

"I just want to see Grandpa spit. Come on, Grandpa, spit!" Ellis leans back and bends Grandpa closer to the window. "Go ahead, spit!"

"El, Grandpa doesn't want to spit," my mother says. "Close the window."

"Just one spit. Spit a bullet, Grandpa!"

Grandpa manipulates a small lump in his cheek and with a little grunt spews a glob of brown juice just over the edge of the window and, apparently, down the side of the car.

Ellis pats his arm and returns him to an upright position. "See, you can still do it."

After this it is almost a relief when we pass under the golden arch of Memorial Lawn. It is in all ways a Protestant cemetery, the stones small and simple, bearing only the essentials, names and dates. The white marker for Matilda Swenson Ryan, 1912-1963, is almost the first grave one comes to at Memorial Lawn, and it seems to me that every year it has shifted closer to the cemetery entrance, as if there is a fear by someone, somewhere, that we will lose our way, seek out the wrong plot, or forget why we have even made this Visit at all.

And I *have* forgotten why we are here or, at any rate, why I am here, venerating the remains of a woman I never met, a woman I know only from her tombstone and a single photograph. It is an enlargement of the last picture Grandpa took of his wife, and it hung on his bedroom wall for as long as he lived with us. It shows a Ryan family reunion. My mother, pregnant with me, stands hand in hand with my father while just to their left is my grandmother, seated at a picnic table with one hand shading her eyes from the sun. The only feature distinguishable is her mouth, lips pressed tight, probably from squinting, in a little smile.

My father has placed the faded plastic bouquet in front of the marker, and we form a semi-circle and look at our toes as Grandpa begins his prayer. Surely I must have asked sometime in the past nineteen years, "Why do we go to the graveyard on my birthday?" But I remember no answer. I do remember asking how my grandmother died and being assured by my mother, on more than one occasion, that she went "peacefully." Grandpa ends with a hearty amen and turns to take my hands in a surprisingly firm grip. For a moment I think he is going to waltz me across the grass but, instead, he says to me, "I do miss you, Matilda. I do. I know you didn't mean it. You didn't mean to take too many. It was an accident. Could have happened to anyone. Medicine can do that—you just forget how much you've had, so you take some more. It was an accident, I always knew, because you wouldn't leave me without saying goodbye."

My mother and father escort Grandpa to the car where, beside the door with the brown stripe a horde of flies hangs in formation. Ellis twirls his finger next to his ear and whispers to me, "Grandpa's nuts." On the drive back to Merry Meadows no one says a word.

Ellis is kneeling behind a tripod, squinting into the lens of his telescope. I can see now that this telescope is bigger than his old one, but an observatory it isn't. Kamikaze moths circle the patio lights as I step over the yellow lightning-bug guts Ellis has smeared on the concrete. "Where's the Big Dipper?" I say.

It's a perfectly clear evening—no rain again—and the stars burn the night sky. "Over there." Ellis points with his left hand, never taking his eye from the lens. He is quiet for the next ten minutes, slightly shifting the position of his head, until at last he screams, "I see it! The third moon of Neptune! I see it! Come here, Sis!"

He pulls me to the telescope. "Careful. Don't bump it. Squint your eyes just so." I mock his face and kneel, then blink to adjust my eyes to the lens. What I see is a spot of brightness surrounded by a bunch of other various-sized bright spots. To me a star is a star is a comet is a planet is a planet's moon. But what the hell—why burst his balloon? Sure, in not too many years, he'll break open a physics text and learn that no, he really *didn't* see the third moon of Neptune through his Sears telescope on my birthday in the backyard on that perfectly clear July night. But he'll remember how he felt when he *thought* he saw it. And to spoil that memory for him would be cruel, sadistic, even for a big sister.

"I see it, too," I say. "It's beautiful."

And I leave him to shout in his pre-pubescent squeal, "Mom! Dad! Come here and look!" I walk back to the house and switch off the patio lights, the better for him to see the sky.

"Lucky Squirt."