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Irreverence

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IRREVERENCE

Three brothers huddled near the aunt's furnace, making fun of their grandmother. They pulled out a piece of chalk and scratched their names into the floor. Above, the father walked from breadbox to refrigerator, with no clue as to the wretched things spoken in the basement.

It wasn't that they disliked their grandmother. In their brighter moments they thought of her as a gentle, befuddled moose, far from her natural habitat, her mouth full of leaves. At other times? We won't speak of them here. She simply made no sense to them, especially as the receptacle of so much affection. Had she ever forgotten to put vinegar on the father's fish? Was there ever a day when she looked more favorably on his left ear than his right? The father's love left no room for answers, as if any sign of trouble got in the way of devotion. And what of the way he looked at her? Well, let's just say they ran out of the house each time they saw it, especially because he'd never smiled at their own mother like that.

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Over time, the grandmother grew larger with love. Love pinned her to the sofa. Love made sure she didn't have to speak, or lift her knife and fork, or cut her meat. Love swelled her the way a tree given too much light, water, and fertilizer grows to improbable proportions, which in turn makes its leaves spot and fall as the flies hover about its trunk.

"A solar eclipse will blot out the sun," said Brother #1.

"The velvet curtain will rip in half in the sanctuary," said Brother #2.

"What about this," said Brother #3. "The moon will rise in blood?"

The brothers didn't shudder, nor did they throw themselves face down on the floor, banging with their fists. It had seemed like a good idea to strike out at the most hallowed thing they could think of: God's reaction to the moment of their grandmother's death. But it didn't give them the satisfaction they'd been dreaming of. They sat there, heads down, chastened by the footsteps above, and holding back the thing they feared most: that once she died—and she was certain to, any day now, though the dying had been taking years—they'd lose their father to grief.

When they looked down, a cold, clear drop of water rolled across the basement floor.

No curtain tore the night the grandmother died. No ash fell on the porch. The moon, when the brothers looked out the window, barely made it higher than the snowy rooftops before it set. But when the father came down to the kitchen the next morning to pour his cereal into a bowl, they were relieved to hear him talking about putting an extra story on the house. Maybe even building a maze in the backyard. Their lives would go on as usual, just as their mother had said they would. Still, they couldn't help but feel cheated out of something large, though they didn't quite know what it was.

During the funeral the choir sang badly as if they'd sung what they sang a thousand times. The father was fine and then he wasn't. When the brothers could no longer bear the sounds and sights around them, they lifted themselves out of their seats and swooped aloft, high above the mourners in the pews. They flew about the rafters, safe there, like mice with wings on their backs.

If they'd been paying attention to what they could see from those heights, they'd have seen that mothers deserved the chance to move, that if we loved them properly, with just the right degree of distance, we'd give them our blessing to go on to the next thing and forget us. Instead, they chose to refuse that little bit of knowledge. They landed back down in their seats, where they listened to the hymn the choir ruined, which they made fun of sometime later, before they stopped that kind of thing.