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Something Wicked

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South Lyon High School

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Something Wicked

Flannery O'Connor once said that the South is Christ-haunted. Lord, how I wish that weren't true. Whether or not you believe in Him is one matter, His presence is another thing entirely. I don't believe in God, but I can sure feel him everywhere I go. My mama was a devout Catholic, went to church every Sunday, and sometimes Wednesdays if she volunteered for Bible Study. I was sixteen when she got pregnant. She claimed God had gifted her, a woman far past her prime, with a holy miracle. Daddy didn't say much about this, just smiled wryly and accepted the handshakes and congratulations. Mama was as big as a planet, round and distended, her swollen belly tenting her sagging linen dresses. It was summer, hot and heavy, when she finally went into labor. I sat in the backyard, reading Hemmingway and swatting mosquitos, when I heard her screaming from the house. She had her baby in the bedroom at 11:32 AM, staining the frayed sheets with blood and birth fluids. I cradled the fuzzy, wrinkled infant in a towel as Mama named it after her great-aunt and clutched her rosary to her chest, lips moving feverishly in silent prayer. Daddy came home from the auto shop later that night, smelling like cigars and grease, and held his daughter with a worship I had only seen before in church.

Marceline Grace Covey was a pretty baby if there ever was one. Within a month her hair was fine and gold- thread in the sunlight- just like Mama's. Tiny hands and chubby wrists grabbed soft at offered gifts, with pale fingernails like half-moon petals. Mama took her to church every Sunday, where she would sit quietly in the pews, only making happy gurgling noises when she deemed the timing was appropriate. She never cried, never fussed, always had a pleasant little pucker on her lips. We patted her head and called her Marcie. The priest who baptized her cupped her rosy cheeks and proclaimed her a miracle from God, a little angel to walk among us. He smeared a crucifix in stinking oil across her forehead, where it glistened until it started congealing. Mama dressed her in jumpers with inexpensive lacy sleeves, and Daddy took her for walks in the neighborhood when the weather wasn't too bad. I

stayed at home and read, or wandered the back roads when I got too restless. It was around this time that I met Aberdeen LaMotte.

Aberdeen lived half a mile down the road. Her rundown house was set far back in a clotty field, the scraggly grass dotted with hens and locusts. In the far corner of the lot was a faded barn, buckling under decades of rain and heat. Kids used to whisper in the dusty safety of hot August softball fields, claiming that Aberdeen was a witch, that she kept her victims strung up in that old, broken silo. As Mama and Daddy rolled Marcie down the macadam in her wobbly little carriage, I would tiptoe into Aberdeen's yard and creep through the grass, twisting my ankles in pits and tripping over clods of dirt, to sit in the sticky shadow of the barn. The shed, of course, was empty- no bodies in sight- but I still went to great lengths to avoid Aberdeen as I napped or read in the shade. I was half afraid she would steal me away, cook me into stew, if she caught me wandering around her property.

As the summer grew hotter, I spent more time sweating in the peace of the barn. It was one of these afternoons when Aberdeen emerged from her crooked little house in a swirl of silk and cocoa skin, bearing two glasses of sweet tea and a plate of coconut macaroons. She, of course, had always known when I'd been around, but she had grown to like the indirect companionship and felt no reason to stop me from visiting. We sat together on an increasingly regular basis, the colorful fabric of her muumuu fluttering in the humid breeze. Aberdeen was a self-proclaimed vodoun queen, her walls lined with salts, charms, and half made *gris-gris*; sometimes she would brew herbs in a flaking pot on the kitchen stove, and the whole house would smell like jimson weed and honey for days. She would tell me stories while she stirred away with a warped wooden spoon, beads of sweat rolling down her walnut temples like pearls on velvet. I listened to tales about her ancestors practicing vodoun in the dirty slave barracks of plantations, and how half the Louisiana Creole must have learned to make *wanga* from her great-great-grandmamma.

Aberdeen was a curiosity in town, an exotic creature that wandered in from the swamps. She always wore brightly colored silks that clashed against the drab dresses housewives deemed their uniform. A strand of wooden beads hung around her slender neck with a permanent presence. Her skin was a flawless expanse of coffee satin, marred only by white raised dots across her cheekbones. Women would gather in clusters at supermarkets and church lots, whispering how she must be a witch to have markings like that. I never found anything wrong with the constellation-like pattern; it was inexplicably fascinating. It was as if someone had fused tiny shells to her skin, following the contours of her bone structure. Aberdeen never told what they were. She never told a lot, for that matter. She didn't teach me any of her vodoun rituals, and I didn't ask to learn them. I was happy being a spectator. I liked Aberdeen's kitchen, even if the constant heat of the stove sometimes made it hotter inside than it was outside. God, did I love Aberdeen. She was the opposite of my own Mama- there were rumors that Aberdeen could never step foot in a church, lest the Devil take her soul - yet I looked upon her as a mother all the same. Aberdeen never told me her age. She didn't look more than thirty, but whenever I estimated she would just laugh, a throaty sound low in her chest, and tell me that I was a terrible guesser.

As summer wore to a hot, sticky close, Mama started to notice my absence from home, and pulled me back into the familiar rut of prayer meetings and stale orange juice. No one in the South made a whole lot of money after the economy started pushing daisies, but we got by alright. Daddy began working night shifts at the garage as summer faded to autumn, and Mama took in other people's clothes to mend, raking in a couple dollars a night with her little seamstress shop running out of our living room. Marcie had just passed the three month mark when school started up. All of a sudden I was jammed in a building with one hundred eighteen other teenagers that emerged from the shadows of farms, smelling like livestock and dirt, and the days passed in a blur of defaced desks and body odor. I arrived home every day at 3:12 PM sharp after walking the mile or so from school. Mama was always

sitting in front of the decrepit old TV, a gossip show chattering on or a priest shouting hallelujahs to a cheering studio audience as she hammered away at the sewing machine. Marcie would be sitting on her lap, babbling and shaking a rubber rattle. Daddy was normally asleep on the couch, resting up before his next shift at the auto shop. Fall and winter progressed uneventfully, the passage in time marked only by the slowly shrinking drops of mercury in the battered, fractured thermostat. Temperatures once dropped to a mild forty degrees, and Marcie was bundled around in her flannel jumpsuit for the whole month of January. My birthday came and went on February second. Mama didn't bring it up so neither did I. We wouldn't have been able to afford a celebration anyhow. I passed my midterms with decent grades; Daddy gave me a pat on the head and hung my report card on the refrigerator. It dangled there, dusty and disintegrating, until April, when it was thrown away to make room for the crayon scribbles Marcie did on the backs of unpaid bills.

As summer crept closer, I began wandering off to Aberdeen's again, seeking refuge from the sun and the perpetual smell of my Daddy's cigarettes. In May school ended, and Aberdeen set up a cot in the kitchen corner where I napped when the heat made me drowsy. As Marcie's birthday grew closer, the air got hotter, and my mother's religious fervor reached its peak. *Lenora Mae*, she would call over the clamor of church bells and sewing needles, *did you say your prayers yet today?* I always reassured her that yes, I had, even if it wasn't always true. Prayer was never as significant to me as it was to most sinners in the South; I was more interested in watching the world go by, reflected in the cracked lens of Daddy's old reading glasses. I always thought it was such a poetic thing- a distorted image of a bird in flight, set to a cicada-like litany of "*Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name...*"

On June twenty first, Marcie became one year old. Mama made a yellow cake from a Betty Crocker box and mixed cherry Kool-Aid in a plastic pitcher. All four of us sat on a ratty blanket in the backyard, slapping mosquitos and staining the grass scarlet when our cups tipped over. That night, Marcie was making little sleeping-baby noises from her crib in Mama and Daddy's room, and I tried to

tune out the sound of bad-quality game shows. Eventually, though, there were the soft sounds of aging bodies settling down for the night, and all became quiet. I heard Mama get out of bed, drawing her silky robe around her thinning body to check on Marcie. I could make out the distinct, puckered sound of thin lips pressing a kiss to a round cheek, then Mama crawled back in bed with the muffled rustle of stirring sheets. I pulled the comforter over my head, rolled over, and slept.

The next morning I awoke to the scream of *THAT IS NOT MY BABY* and I lay shaking in my bed as Daddy tried to soothe Mama with quiet *hush-hush* noises. I crept across the hallway and Daddy was clutching Mama in his arms, crushing her to his chest, as she wailed and screamed and tugged his nightshirt until it tore. Tears streamed down her withering cheeks and I choked back a tide of nausea. Marcie laid peacefully in her crib, tiny baby hands reaching up and making grabby motions at the water-stained ceiling. I looked down at the little thing. It looked like Marcie. I picked it up and settled it against my shoulder. It cooed in my ear, its roaming fingers tangling in the long brown hair I had neglected to brush. The weight of its body was familiar in my arms, but the scent of mud and swamp grass was not. I held Marcie up, away from my body, and had a good once-over. Same thread-fine hair, same round arms and plump ankles. The eyes, though. The eyes were wrong. They looked bright as always, but they held too many years, too much contempt, for such an infantile face. As I shifted towards the window to see in better light, a flash of dark mossy green cut through the blue like a snake in water, soft and sinister in a place it didn't belong. I placed the thing back in the crib, revulsion tying up my guts and making the blood rush in my ears. *It's okay, Mama, I said, it's Marcie, it's fine.* No way did I believe my own words, but I was afraid. Of Mama, of the baby, maybe of both. I didn't want to dwell on it- I was better off hiding under the blankets from the things that go bump in the night. Maybe it was just a growing-up thing; maybe Marcie would have green eyes like Daddy and I when she was older, and not blue like Mama's. Maybe I was imagining it. Mama broke free of Daddy and loomed over

the crib, her blond hair hanging like a stringy curtain. *Where is my baby?* she asked, voice like the fever drum of thunder. Terror worming in my insides and stomach crawling up my throat, I left.

Aberdeen seemed to have been expecting me when I arrived. She was already dressed, a plate of teacakes on the table and the kettle whistling over the pattering flame of the derelict gas stove. She let me in without a word, fingering the wooden beads that circled, snare-like, around her throat. She asked what the matter was, and I only told her *Mama thinks Marcie's been replaced* before she hurried to change the conversation, leaving me sitting on the counter with a mug of steaming tea and the taste of fear in my mouth like old pennies. I passed the day at Aberdeen's, grinding salts with a mortar and pestle when I couldn't stop my hands from shaking, and laying restless on my cot when the heat was too much to bear. Radishes and onions hung like bloated planets over my head, nebulous in their woven netting. Aberdeen gave me an herbal mixture she swore would cure anything and bowl of succotash to wash out the taste of sulfur and nettles. At her insistent urging, I left for home as the sun started its downward slope across the afternoon sky. The clouds were bruising pink with dusk when I was greeted at home by the county Sheriff's car and Daddy's quivering hands.

Mama had snapped. Daddy thought he had convinced her that everything was okay, that nothing was wrong with Marcie. So he was perfectly happy when Mama said she was going to church, to do some praying and some thinking. He sat and waited at home, the football game on television rumbling in the background as he dozed on the couch. When he woke up at lunchtime and Mama had yet to come home, he headed down to the chapel to get her himself. He was met by the priest and the police. Mama had put her baby face-down in the holy water to drown and was dangling from the rafters in the afternoon sun, rays of dusty light illuminating her hair where it fell soft across the noose. Marcie was gurgling happily, hair slick and eyelashes sparkling with heavy drops of blessed dew, splashing her little fists in the baptismal fountain.

I don't believe in Christ, but I could feel his heavy eyes haunting me as Marcie dozed, damp and foreign, in my aching, trembling arms.