

TW: Jesus?

“You know that grandmother’s house used to be haunted, and she had the Reverend sent in from downtown and -”

“Hush. **It’s not like any of that is real.**”

We sat in the back of the carriage. Annabella huffed at me, but I could not stand to hear her chatting any longer than I already had. Mother was quiet and peered out the window, staring longingly at the passing foliage.

“The road is bumpy here.” Annabella began again. “You’d ought to think that she lives in the middle of nowhere.”

“Oh, be *quiet*, Anna,” I couldn’t hide my annoyance, “the words from your mouth add to the heat in the air.”

Anna turned her head to look pointedly at me. Her jaw clenched and redness swelled in her cheeks. Mother still said nothing. We rode in silence. The foliage thinned. Mother watched the outside, as if she was searching for something.

Over the hill, our grandmother’s house revealed itself in the middle of a neat yet barren pasture. The grass around the house was yellow and cut down close to the soil. Our carriage stopped, Annabella shuffled awkwardly outside. I followed. We stood in the middle of what seemed to be a great desert, with not a tree to be seen within the mile.

Mother stood silently in front of the house. I had not seen our grandmother for a few years, yet the house looked the same: the stairs were crooked, the porch was bare of any furniture, and the paint peeled off of the siding. I watched Mother, feeling antsy in the heavy heat beneath the sun, for her to take action. She did nothing. She did not look at us.

“**Well, that took longer than I expected,**” Anna called out, “thank goodness we’ve arrived.”

Grandmother appeared from behind the front door. She also looked as if she did not change - as if she and the house had been frozen in time all along. Grandmother muttered something to Mother before she turned to give us a kiss goodbye. It felt misplaced, as if she had been given instructions, but I hugged her and said that I would see her in two weeks. I watched as Mother did the same to Annabella. I watched my sister’s face. I could not read her eyes.

“Anna, Trudy, come inside.” Grandmother’s voice cut sharply through the air. She turned to retreat as we hurried behind her with our luggage behind us.

“You may sit.” Grandmother said, gesturing to the dining room table. “I’ve made some **strawberry** tarts, you girls must be famished.”

Anna made a beeline for a chair. She grabbed a tart from its plate. I sat down beside her. I watched as she bit into the pastry and as the crumbs fell from her mouth. Unexpectedly, she retreated her mouth back from the tart as if it had just bitten her.

“What’s the matter?” Grandmother noticed her expression.

“Nothing, just -” Anna peered into the bite she had taken. “it tastes different than what I’d anticipated.”

“**You mean, you don’t like strawberry anymore?**” Grandmother said; her tone seemed to be that of anger rather than disappointment.

“No!” Anna said quickly. “I must be coming down with a cold. Trudy, why don’t you split one with me?”

She ripped the tart in half. I took the piece in between her fingers, yet I did not take a bite. I could smell the jam underneath my nose and it held a rancid odor. I looked up at Grandmother and she watched me intently. She smiled tightly and grabbed one, biting it and chewing thoughtfully before swallowing.

“They were made fresh.”

Anna and I looked at each other. Reluctantly, I placed my half onto my tongue. The taste overtook me. I fought back against my desire to spit it out. I swallowed quickly.

“It tastes normal, Anna, but if you’re unwell,” I suppressed a gag, “then I think that you should stray from sweets for now.”

The rest of the afternoon went by slowly. Anna and I played a game of **marbles** in the sitting room. Grandmother made light conversation yet kept a habit of peeking out the window every half hour. The window curtains had ornate **tapestry**: depictions of Jesus holding a lamb, of a lamb surrounded by halo, and of a lamb’s sacrifice.

Around 9 o’ clock, we heard voices outside. Grandmother stood quickly before opening the door. Men and women poured into the house. I stood in front of Annabella, confused. The group closed in on us quickly and chanted some foreign language. I stepped to the side, Anna held my arm tight. I glanced above the crowd and found Grandmother’s face; it was stoic, as if she had understood why these odd people were in her house. A bubbling fear in my belly took hold of me. Anna tugged me in a single direction and I followed, slipping through a small pocket in the crowd and out the front door.

We fled down the crooked porch steps and ran through the pasture. I looked back to see the crowd following us. I felt a panic rise deep from within me. Suddenly, I felt my ankle twist beneath me. I could hear Annabella's startled yelp as I fell. I felt her grasp on my arm disappear as my head collided with the dirt. The world disappeared behind my eyelids, and I swam in a sea of darkness.

When I opened my eyes again, I sat up with a gasp. I saw the face of Mother, staring at me from her seat in the carriage.

" - used to be haunted, and she had the Reverend sent in from downtown and -" Anna eyed me distantly. "Trudy, are you alright?"

I took a moment to steady my heartbeat. I looked at her and swallowed thickly. I must've had a bad dream.

"Worry not, Anna," I said thickly, trying to shake the feeling of impending doom and déjà vu, **"it's not like any of that is real."**