

The Moth Cycle

When I was ten I became convinced that we turned into moths when we die. Having spent a summer's worth of extraordinarily hot nights camped out on our trailer's unattached, rickety front porch, I would fall asleep fixated on the dim purple light that continually buzzed with flashes of light and zaps followed shortly by an acrid burning smell. I'd wake to find toasted little corpses and wondered why, night after night, they never learned.

My mother worked nights so every morning I would race barefoot down a beaten dirt road to my best friend Jenny's trailer where we'd eat dry cocoa puffs out of spaghetti stained Cool Whip bowls and watch the Lifetime movie channel with her mother, Margie. Margie smoked Marlboro after Marlboro while she knitted lumpy, usually hot pink or white tea cozies that she couldn't give away but couldn't stop making. She seldom left her rocking chair that had a fake emerald ash tray hot glued to the left arm that had to be there, she told us, because she was afraid of having it near her magazines which were stacked by the hundreds throughout the confined space- they blocked all external light except for the sunlight's reflection off the glossy tops and onto the chrome ceiling. On top of the stacks were tins of buttons, baubles so faded and amorphous they were unidentifiable, and Jesus figurines as far as the eye could see. Margie would talk constantly, not necessarily to us- more often mumbling to the distance in uninterpretable phrases as her eyes, usually raised to the ceiling, wandered the world beyond her television.

But the Lifetime channel stopped at abruptly two in the afternoon when Margie would switch over to the only other channel allowed in her household: The Old-Time

Gospel Hour. Whenever Pastor Falwell came on the screen her attention snapped into focus and she knitted as if her life depended on it, her rhythm fueled by the sermon. During the summer Jenny and I learned to memorize the TV schedule quickly: reruns ran from two in the afternoon to seven at night then resumed at ten and ran until five in the morning with new broadcasts every Sunday; in the entire time I had known Jenny and Margie their TV had never once been turned off.

If we were unlucky enough to get caught there just before or during a sermon Margie forced us to sit quietly and watch, always following it up with a lecture about sin. She had a love for telling us terribly gruesome gossip in the trailer park, often information for too adult for our age in repeated attempts to scare us straight. She constantly threw words at us like morality and salvation that we shrugged off as soon as we were out of her line of sight. Jenny accidentally did it once where Margie could see and she got a blow upside the head so hard she couldn't hear for an hour afterwards.

One would never have guessed that that summer, just a few weeks prior, Jenny's mother had fed two cops that were looking for her ex-convict boyfriend drug-laced brownies to give him time to run. Travis was the first lasting boyfriend Margie had ever had. Whenever Margie got dumped again she would volunteer with the local church group to rehabilitate convicts that she said "just needed to find God's path." But God looked the other way when Travis would bag up meth on the fold out dining table three feet behind her. Jenny never wanted to go near him, but I was always curious. I peered over at the table enough times that one day Travis pulled me over and sat me on his lap.

I sat frozen as he walked me through his process; the bitter stench from his rotting teeth forced me to hold my breath as he whispered the instructions for checking purity of new product into my little ear. He handed me a razor then put his hand on top of mine and moved it with gentle precision and quick, tight movements until he leaned forward and back with a sigh and a small smile. He licked his finger, dipped it, brought it to my lips, and told me to take a taste. I didn't want to, but Travis shook me and told me to open my mouth. I was about to when two large moths flew from the ceiling directly into Travis's mound of meth. The movement startled me and out of habit I immediately swiped them off the table. Travis shrieked as his precious dust erupted into a cloud and he threw me so hard that I hit the fake wooden countertop opposite the table face-first. Warmth oozed over my face as I was jerked out of the trailer. I didn't even realize I was running until Jenny stopped me in front of my own trailer. She told me to wait and knocked on the door. Nothing happened so Jenny knocked again and again until the light just inside the door turned on.

"God damn it!" I heard Momma shout from the other side of the door. "Haven't I told you to never interrupt me when I'm working? How do I get it through your thick-" the door opened and my mother squelched a scream as she saw me and darted down the steps onto the porch, throwing the phone she worked on over her shoulder.

She ran me to our neighbor George's trailer and begged him to give us a ride to Virginia Baptist. George took one look at me and rushed us to his beaten, white and wood-paneled station wagon. Jenny sat beside him up front while my mother held me in the back seat. I was starting to get really sleepy. I remember my mother interrogating Jenny and catching a few silent glimpses between her and George, but I also remember the drifting

sensation I felt; the comfortable smell of pipe tobacco on the leather bench seats beckoned me to close my eyes.

“Keep her awake!” George shouted at my mother. George had served as an army medic in Vietnam. Anytime kids in the park had bumps or bruises we always ran over to his trailer for a diagnosis. He was a kind man with an endless supply of bandaids. He would always pull out his stethoscope and listen to our hearts, no matter the ailment, then pass the earbuds over and let us listen and ask what we thought. But sometimes we could hear George screaming from our trailer at night. It scared me the first few times, but Momma had explained that it was just George fighting off demons.

“Francesca, sweetie?” my mother cooed. “You have to stay with me. Can you stay awake for me? Frankie, can you hear me? Frankie!”

The last thing I remembered was Jenny’s face as she stood beside George in the waiting area. The resignation on her face has stuck with me, crystalline clear, for many years. It was the kind of look that foreshadows lives; something a ten year old shouldn’t know how to wear. But this was not the first time one of her mother’s boyfriends had put someone in the hospital and it definitely was not the last. George put his arm around her and then the steel grey doors closed on them and the world around me went black.

I woke up in the hospital four days later with forty-three stitches and a severe concussion. Momma wouldn’t let me look in a mirror until I was home, in between her changing the bandages. The scar ran from above my right-side hairline down my forehead, in between my eyes, and ending at the top of my nose. Jenny told me she thought it was cool, definitely bigger than her neighbor Mikey’s scar he was always bragging about. She

had stayed with us the entire time I was in the hospital and she came home with us afterwards. Momma didn't want to let her go back to Margie's but Jenny was insistent.

"Are you sure?" I asked her.

"Yeah, honey," Momma chimed in, "you can stay with us if you like. If you ever need to get away from your mom or whoever she brings home, you come here. Alright?"

"Yes, ma'am. But it's okay now, the cops got Travis; already back in jail," she said. She paused and looked down at the ground.

"And I don't like leaving her alone for too long." She looked at me.

"You know how she gets."

It was another week before my mother would let me play outside. The other kids that lived in the park crowded around our trailer waiting to catch a glimpse of me. It wasn't long before the new and scary became boring and mocked. In no time I was all but ignored, dubbed with the tastefully innovative "Scarface" and "Frankenstein".

I didn't care, everything was going fine until Margie tried to apologize.

Jenny and I played outside my trailer on the old porch when Margie walked up to us. I remember how incomplete she seemed, how small without her stacks of piously mounted Jesus figurines looking down upon her. She walked up to us without a word and yanked me off the porch by the front of my shirt, into the gruesome sunlight. The inspection lasted only a moment before she released me and lit a cigarette.

"Jesus forgives," she said, puffing a sickly cloud of smoke at me. My head spun and I felt dizzy as I coughed through it.

"You love Jesus don't you, Frankie?"

I looked over at Jenny who nodded fervently. Margie stared off into the trees as she spoke, turning back only to see my response before gazing back at the bramble.

"Then you forgive me, don't you?"

Her eyes flashed to me and the cigarette froze at her lips.

I looked back to Jenny. She shrugged.

"I-"

"Get the fuck away from my daughter."

Momma stepped out of the trailer barefoot, slamming the screen door behind her. It was disorienting to see her awake in daylight; her skin was pale and her eyes were big, too big. Her hair was pulled back haphazardly, tendrils plastered to her sweating forehead as she thrashed forward at Margie but tripped and fell off of the raised porch. I screamed and Jenny ran forward to pull her mother back.

"Look what you did to her!" Momma screamed. "Look at her face you bible-thumping bitch!" She almost made it to her feet, ready to throw a punch before George came running in between our trailers. He pulled her back away from Margie and Jenny, arms around Momma tightly as she flailed and fought, and maneuvered her into our trailer.

"God will never forgive you!" she screamed from the other side of the screen door before the latch on the solid door brought the world to a deafening silence. I looked back at Jenny, neither of knew what to say. Margie stood there, lip quivering before throwing her hands up above her.

"In His eyes, I am forgiven! In His eyes, I am loved!" Margie started laughing gently at first, but then she couldn't seem to stop. Giggling hysterically, she walked towards nothing

and no one; arms up triumphantly over her hunched, frail frame. Jenny tugged at her dress, trying to lead her back down the beaten path, but she walked onward into the thicket until I couldn't see them anymore.

George wouldn't let me into the trailer for a long time. He told me to go play at the river, promising to take me out on his boat if I minded him. I walked the paths along the water's edge for hours by myself, until sunburn began to hurt my face. When I got home the latch door was unlocked and Momma was asleep on the couch. George was sitting at our table mending a fishing lure with gentle precision.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

George nodded.

"She just needs some sleep."

Days went by and I didn't see Jenny. Whenever I ran over to their trailer no one answered. The pain in my face bothered me any time I went near someone holding a cigarette or wearing that cheap, strong perfume they sold at the Quik-E that most of the teenage girls in our park wore. Momma was one of the few adults in the park that didn't smoke so it was just easier to stay home. When we got back from the hospital I thought I would have enough pills to be out of pain forever, but after a week Momma said we ran out and the doctor wouldn't give us any more. Momma bought me ice cream that night, a rare treat that gave me a brain freeze that hurt so badly I almost passed out. That combined with the other pain in my face kept me awake all night. I was so exhausted and tired and angry about not seeing Jenny that for the first time in my life I broke my mother's rule and entered her room at night.

She didn't see me at first and I was very quiet opening and closing the fake wood sliding door. She was talking in a rushed, breathy tone and saying a lot of words I didn't understand.

"Momma?"

She turned, stunned silent, and stared at me for a beat, taking in the look on my face. In the dim light her eyes looked much bigger than usual again. I thought she was going to yell. I thought she would throw things at me, like she usually did when she couldn't stop talking but needed me to be quieter. Instead she did the last thing I expected. She looked down at the phone in her hands and slowly, thoughtfully, set it on the receiver.

"Come here, baby." She opened up her arms and I crawled into them. She smelled like hair dye and the green apple shampoo we got at the dollar store. She held me and sighed a deep, elongated breath. We were silent for several moments, just holding each other, before I spoke.

"Who were you talking to, Momma?"

"A man."

"What did he want?"

She pulled back and looked down at me, pausing for a moment while she searched my eyes.

"He wanted this," she said as she pulled me tighter.

"A hug?"

"He wanted to be close to someone."

"Did you want to?"

She waited a few beats before responding.

“No baby, I didn’t.”

I looked up at her but her big brown eyes were staring, troubled. I tried to follow her too-big eyes out the window, but the wire screen was covered in moths desperately clamoring to get inside my mother’s dimly lit room. Her lamps draped in plumb fabric and the several lit candles emanated a soft purple glow throughout the room that made me feel safe and whole within her arms. She had never done anything like that before and I still can’t describe the feeling that pulsed inside me, the overwhelming joy I felt in those precious moments.

My chest just tightened painfully. I tried to take a deep breath and looked up at the window. Just then a moth squirmed its way past a hole in the screen and flew straight at the only light in the trailer, a candle on the fold-out table. Its arid wings plumed instantly for a glorious, albeit brief, moment before it collapsed into a heap of quivering ember upon chipped, burn-covered table. It was right then that I remembered how my ten year old self used to see the beauty in these insects that kept crawling into our lives. I stared into the candle flame and then back at the other bugs, still bashing themselves against the outside screen; doing anything they could to get closer to that thing that would inevitably kill them. I looked over at Jenny who stared, unblinking, from the other side of the couch, her eyes looking into the distance beyond me. When I noticed a syringe was still hanging out of her arm I moved over and laid down beside her, releasing the tourniquet and gently pulling the

needle out. My heart was pounding erratically as I leaned my head against her shoulder and heard Pastor Falwell's sermons echo from somewhere in my mind. Small wisps of smoke rose from the ground where the little carcass landed.

My chest tightened again with a sharp burst of pain and I couldn't catch my breath. As I struggled to breathe I heard the Pastor's voice in my head telling us that if we followed the path of righteousness, strayed not into temptation, that we would find our heaven. But suddenly I knew that there was another step between life and death, an in-between place that everyone must go through to get to their light.

I wondered if I'd have moth wings.