

## *Mill Creek*

There wasn't always a fence by the creek in grandma's backyard. When I was young we would chase the mallards over the slick stones with our jeans folded up, only staying away when the water was high. The cottonwoods towered overhead, white fuzz dancing in the breeze and itching my nose and eyes. All would be forgiven come fall when overnight their leaves would explode in a burst of yellow bright enough to compete with the sun.

Grandma's backyard was invisible from the street, a discovery waiting beyond the avocado kitchen. Raspberry bushes lined one side, then a wide expanse for chasing the pinecones that the squirrels would throw down. Up a hill to the main lawn cut out of an acre of garden. Tomatoes, sweet corn, apricot trees, plums, cherries, and oh the peaches. Pole beans, sweet peas, strawberries. Unless it was irrigation day and grandma needed help opening the sluice, you only wandered through the rows to harvest what you wanted to eat. Otherwise you'd have to weed, hot sun on your back and bugs sticking to the sweat at your hairline.

Sitting on the back porch in the one piece rocker, talking to grandma about your day with a bowl of still warm raspberries on your lap, the creek would beckon with sounds of cool. It must have flowed past the other houses in the neighborhood but only here did it command attention. Becky had seen it a hundred times when she came over to take us kids swimming at the neighborhood pool. She never played in it, being too old for splashing and squealing at the cold by then. Grandma would slip Becky some money, a little extra for the welcome break, and off we'd go.

At the pool Becky would pick a spot in the shade and drag over a deck chair. She never got in the water but the heat didn't seem to bother her. She'd sip a Pepsi from the machine and egg

us on in our games, yelling encouragement and ruling the winner in a close race. She didn't bring a magazine, didn't talk to the moms soaking up the sun. Being at the pool with Becky was better than coming with Grandma, lots better than mom. If we came with mom she'd make us all stay together in the shallow end. Grandma let us swim all we wanted but made us get out for more sunscreen every half hour. There'd be a slick of oily water around me in the pool that I hoped no one else noticed.

Summer nights after a long day swimming we'd eat a light dinner, corn on the cob and diced cold chicken. My sisters and I would sleep together in the great room, two on the nine foot orange velvet couch, someone else sprawled half under an afghan on the recliner. I never dreamed those nights, not like at home where I was scared to fall asleep. Sun and water made for sound slumber, accompanied by the sound of crickets echoing in the window wells.

They found the baby, lungs filled with water and eyes wide open, stuck in the grate where the creek went under the highway. The first I heard was hushed whispers over breakfast, grandma clamming up when she heard me stretching up the stairs in my summer pajamas, ruffled bloomers and a sleeveless gingham top. It was too hot for anything else, and by morning I'd already be itchy from heavy sweaty sleep. Mom turned over the newspaper as I sat before a glass of orange juice. At seven I didn't care much for the news but I usually looked at the pictures on the front page: a dog with his tongue out, firemen washing the truck, maybe the mayor cutting a big ribbon.

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Later the police came by, knocking on every door along the creek. Did anyone know who had been pregnant? Any visitors lately? There was one lady, Mrs. Gomez, but she was still pregnant out to there, trying to get down to the mailbox each afternoon and looking like it might do her in. No one said why they were so interested in a baby.

Rachel was six, just eleven months younger than me. She'd be the policeman, knocking at the pantry door. I was supposed to open it and be someone different each time. Mrs. Weatherwax the kindergarten teacher, Miss Shields who did storytime at the library. No matter who I pretended to be Rachel would accuse me of robbing a bank, dragging me off to jail by the elbow.

"You girls stop that. No one in this family is getting arrested," mom scolded when she figured out the game. She never cared what we played in the summer. This was her vacation too, a break from mothering and being a wife. Our dad stayed home except for the last week at Grandma's, a sign that the fun was just about to end.

Rachel and I ran outside to avoid further lecture, little Bonnie begging us to slow down. I held the door open for the baby so mom wouldn't yell, and we tumbled into the backyard.

Grandma's big straw hat was visible near the lettuce.

"Bonnie, you be Baby Moses and we'll find you in the creek." Rachel always had the best ideas. Bonnie grinned big at being included.

"Cassie, you be Moses' mama sending him down the river. I'll be the princess who finds the baby."

“You’re always the princess! You be the mama for once.”

“I’m the princess or I’m not playing. You and Bonnie will have to do something with just two people ‘less you listen to me.”

With mom grumpy inside I didn’t want to lose half our acting group so I gave up the fight. We headed down the hill to plot the action but didn’t get more than a few steps. Yellow police tape was tied to stakes all along the bank with footprints indented in all the mud. I stopped short, Bonnie ran right into me. Rachel yelled, ‘holy cow’ and ran to investigate.

We climbed under the tape fence and just stood at the edge of the creek. The water looked the same but somehow everything was different. Instead of feeling like we were behind the house, it seemed like we were far away, deep in a jungle somewhere.

“I don’t think we should be here,” I whispered. Bonnie pulled at the hem of my shirt, feeling the creepy crawlies just like me.

Rachel looked up the creek to the left, then slowly to the right, like she was studying it.

“Something happened back here.”

“I don’t want to get in trouble. The police are gonna come back and grandma’s gonna see us. Let’s play something else.” I was trying not to whine but my voice was getting higher and higher. Rachel was always the brave one, stupid brave sometimes, but I wished I wasn’t scared.

She stared at me for a minute before going back under the tape. Bonnie and I followed.

“The police were looking for a lady with a baby. Maybe they found a baby floating in the creek, just like Moses.”

“Don’t be stupid Rachel. No mama would let her baby swim in the creek. It’s too cold. Besides, a baby can’t swim.”

Bonnie was sucking her thumb now, looking ready to cry. She hated it when we’d fight.

“Then you tell me what you think is going on. It looks like tv back here!” Rachel stripped leaves off a branch while she talked, thinking.

Even though grandma was just over the hill pulling weeds and mom inside, it felt like we were the only people left on earth. I didn’t like it.

“I don’t know Rachel, let’s just ask mom. I want to go inside. I feel funny out here, don’t you?”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Unless you did something. That’s it! What did you do?”

Even though I knew I hadn’t done anything, Rachel’s accusation made me start to cry. This was all too weird. What was going on? Police and crime tape and grownups whispering about something. I was ready for summer to be over.

Rachel followed me inside. We were all sharing a room at grandma’s so I went into the bathroom. She tried to pursue me but I slammed the door fast and pulled out the drawers so she couldn’t get in.

“What are you hiding? What did you do? You know I’ll find out. I’m not leaving you alone until you TELL ME WHAT YOU DID.” Rachel started yelling and banging on the door but I ignored her as best I could.

I put the lid down on the toilet and sat right there on the fuzzy aqua cover. I needed to think.

My stomach hurt. I shook my head, trying to get the pictures out. Pictures I hadn’t seen but knew were real anyway. Becky Becky Becky Becky. Baby baby baby. Baby in the river. Dead baby. Becky Becky Becky.

Last summer we met Becky’s boyfriend Hank. He was dreamy and tan and getting ready to go on a mission. They bought me ice cream once all by myself, no Rachel or anything. I pretended we were all on a date. This year when I asked Becky about Hank she just started crying.

“Is he dead?” I whispered.

She only cried harder, rubbing her belly.

“He isn’t allowed to talk to me!” she wailed.

I didn’t know what to say. Hank seemed old enough to call someone all by himself.

“Is that cause he’s a missionary now? They can only talk to you at Christmas I think.”

Becky looked up at me then and reached out her arms. She hugged me and I felt her tears go inside my ear a little bit.

“He didn’t go on a mission honey. He’s at college and he’s not talking to me anymore.”

Becky’s sadness was coming through to me now and I started crying.

“He didn’t go on a mission? The prophet says he has to. Hank’s going to hell Becky. I’m glad he’s not talking to you!”

“Run on home and see if your grandma needs your help, ok? It’s her day for water and she might need you to lift the irrigation gate.” Becky wiped her tears, sniffed a little, and pushed me away.

“Hank’s no good Becky. I’ll find you someone better, I promise,” I called as I walked away.

Becky just stood there rubbing her stomach and looking sad.

I ran some water in the sink and splashed it on my face how I’d seen my mama do. I felt a little better. I opened the bathroom door and looked down the hall. No one around. I tiptoed to our room and looked inside. Empty. I crawled into bed, right in the middle, with the sheet up around me shoulders. I closed my eyes as tight as I could and lay perfectly still.

I could still see the light through my eyes though, so I put the pillow over my face. But then it got so hot from my breathing that I thought I might die, so I took it off again.

I could hear Bonnie and Rachel in the backyard, doing Ring Around the Rosie, Bonnie laughing like crazy when they’d fall down.

“Again! Again!” she’d giggle.

All I could think of was the baby. A tiny baby looking up at the sky, moving its little fingers back and forth like Bonnie used to when she first came home. The baby wondering what was going on as its head.

I couldn't say the words even in my head. I thought I would throw up.

"Heavenly Father help me," I prayed in a whisper. "I don't want to know about this. Take it away, take it away."

I squeezed my eyes shut harder, pushed my fingers in till I saw white lights. It hurt but my stomach stopped hurting for a minute.

"Where's your sister?" I heard Mama ask my sisters.

I froze, trying not to breathe.

"She got all mad and hid in the bathroom. She's probably in there crying still," said Rachel.

"You girls. Can't you play for once without fighting?"

Rachel ignored Mama like always and started singing about a popcorn tree.

I must've fell asleep because next thing I knew it was dark and I felt all shivery in my bed. I could hear Rachel and Bonnie in the bath. I got up and went upstairs.

Grandma sat at the kitchen table, shelling peas into a metal bowl and watching the darkness out the window.

"You ok little one?" she asked.



I nodded, afraid to talk.

“You know about what happened back there, don’t you?”

I nodded again, looking at the mole on her chin instead of her eyes.

“Awful thing. I can’t hardly stand to go near the water now. Thinking of that poor mama putting her baby in the creek.”

“Poor mama? What about the baby?”

“No mother wants to do that to her baby. I had eight of them myself, one who left back to heaven soon after she came to us. To hurt your baby like that? She wasn’t right in her head. You couldn’t. That’s a woman needs some help.”

I thought about Bonnie again, how my mama held her so close even when she cried. How she’d move her lips like she had something to say while she slept. Made us laugh and guess what she was dreaming about. I thought maybe Grandma was right. Maybe Becky did need help.

Soft, so soft it hardly felt like I was saying it out loud at all, I said, “I think. I think I might know something about the baby.”