

The end of the Miller family line tore the town asunder, an argument that cast the two as either ill-fated good ol' boys or simian inbreeds. A decade later, the lone matriarch no longer minded recalling the events that led to the staunching of her family bloodline. The story was all she had to offer those who sat in her living room, lent her a slice of their time. It was just her, after all. She'd finally accepted that the stone slabs of loss and iron laid upon her chest weren't a heaviness that would hasten her journey to the hereafter. She might go on for decades more. The details were petty and simple, even after the staining of tragedy and misfortune.

She'd been making her famous vanilla wafer banana pudding for the church social later that day. It was a fundraiser for the next county over that the heavens saw fit to drown. Her 10-year-old pug sat on the braided kitchen rug behind her, meticulously working an invisible irritation with its tongue. Joe Jr. was laid out on the couch watching t.v. or playing a game on his iPad, or both. Joe Sr. had spat on the sidewalk 14 years ago and Joe Jr. was formed from the froth. At least that's what the townspeople said, though she knew better. He was knotted rope with flecks of amber, compact and coiled, waiting. She was admiring of his form, still incredulous she had made his teeth, his fingernails, the wrinkles that traversed his knuckles. The ones that came before, the gone ones, were mingled with him. She believed that from each of her lost babies the Lord grabbed the best parts and saved them, melted them together to make Joe Jr. And he was beautiful.

Shoot! Joe Jr., did you get into the wafers? Her accent was somewhere between Arkansas and Florida, straddling a pebbled riverbed, dipping a toe into a hot spring.

Joe Jr., on his side now, looked up from his game. A suppressed smile. To smile any larger would reveal a milk tooth that caused him a certain amount of embarrassment. The last school picture that was full toothed was from first grade. By the next year, he'd picked a smooth orange from the Tree of Knowledge, the sweet pulp sealed his lips shut, the dark tooth hidden forever.

You never said those were off limits, he replied. You left them on the counter, to tempt me.

Joe Sr. walked in from the back, casting a shadow on the living room carpet as he paused to make sense of his wife's exasperation. He'd been working on the back porch, hammering in a loose nail that peeked over the lip of the fourth stair. He'd paused to pet the calico cat that wobbly darted to and fro, hopeful to catch his attention. The cat had a neurological impediment brought upon it by a shovel to its head when it was a kitten, by the hand of their neighbor. It made it seem drunk, kept it from leaping too high. Joe Sr. picked the cat up and placed it in its perch he'd outfitted with a ramp.

Joe Sr. took his time studying the scene. He reveled in comfortable silence, peaceful home surroundings and abhorred any display of laziness. Seeing his son, who looked so much like him, in repose on a Saturday morning set him to aching.

Alright young blood, get on up Joe Sr. said, popping Joe Jr. on his foot. Let's get Ma some backup cookies.

I just ate a couple, it's not a big deal, Joe Jr. said. Are they even that necessary?

It's banana wafer pudding, she replied. Without the wafers it's just banana pudding. The crunch is important.

She looked out the window as they got into the truck. Joe Sr. grabbed the side of the truck's mirror to hoist himself up. The wheels were taller than she was, a Floridian indulgence. Joe Jr. rolled down the window, jutted his arm out. He gave her a little wave, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. It was indicative of the man he would have become, had he risen to his full form.

They drove out to the Silver Springs Park pit, where the mud was abundant after the frequent summer sun showers. Joe Sr. let his son take the wheel, careen through the fields of mud, the tires spitting the wet dirt into black rainbows. If the windows had been down, and if there'd

been a passerby, they would've heard laughter up until when the Joes got stuck. The sludge was thick and glued the doors shut between narrow hills of dirt. Joe Jr. slammed his foot on the accelerator to loosen the stick. The exhaust pipe couldn't cough out the mud, and tasteless and scentless fumes retraced their steps back into the truck's cabin.

Alright young blood, scooch out the window and get the tire loose, said Joe Sr.

Joe Jr. did as he was told, folding in half, a switchblade, to squeeze out the window that yielded a crack of space. He found a knotted oak branch not too far away, the perfect lever. He wedged it in the space under the front tire, stood off to the side, pushed down on the branch. Joe Sr. punched down on the gas pedal. The exhaust pipe gagged on the mud, Joe Sr. began to feel a weariness he pushed through.

Joe Jr. stepped to the front to survey the scene. The silent weariness overtook Joe Sr. He saw two of his son. He felt a sickness traveling up his throat. His leg went slack, the heaviness of his work boot bore down on the accelerator. The truck jumped to, gave not a second thought as it pressed Joe Jr. into the mud, sinking him back into the earth.

The pit, and Silver Springs in its entirety, was closed after the men were extracted from the sludge. The townsfolk were furious, as the Silver Spring's woods and waterways was theirs and they were proud of it. A fabled place where people used to travel from all corners of the South in order to take in the real live mermaid performances, held in the fresh water springs. The women sparkled from underneath the water and waved as manatees and fish continued about their watery business. When the urge for breath proved too much, the mermaids swam to hoses for air. Children, enchanted, would place their hands upon the viewing glass, and the mermaids would flirt their fins against the other side. A communion. The park proper had been closed for decades, but the town still gathered there and felt its shine.

They protested. They unloaded their guns into the “Off Limits” signs that peppered the spongy ground. People dumped and lit their trash in the pit, the smoke could be seen from the porch of the Miller woman’s house. Some ventured closer, pelted their home with eggs from her own coop. The women snubbed her at the stores, whispered unkindness. Others were full hearted, chastised their kin for doing harm unto a woman untethered. The treatment continued to fester for years, though it abated when something else caught the collective attentions of the struggling town. The woman continued to make her way, would talk about the event if called upon. She never had the heart to share that after waiting for some time for her men, she went ahead and used the nilla wafers that were left for the pudding. There were plenty.