## What We Bury, What We Keep

I had the aboveground pool put in my backyard for Mae-Ann’s eleventh birthday. It was the type with five-foot white vinyl siding and a linoleum bottom printed with seahorses and clamshells. I had it installed near the barbeque grill and my wife’s vegetable garden. I stood on the back patio and drank an Arnold Palmer and watched the two men construct it. They were burly men, directly descendent from beef cattle, the type that I admired but could never aspire to.

The night before, I had told my wife that I’d ordered the pool, while Mae-Ann sat in the family room and watched cartoons. She was a round child with lots of freckles and stringy blond hair that hadn’t started growing in until she turned four. Though she hated spending any time outside (bugs, sun, mud, it all bothered her) she had persistently scabby knees and her palms were always dirty.

“She’ll love it,” I told my wife, Lou. “It’ll help her to get out more, lose some of that weight.”

“That’s baby fat,” Lou said. “She’ll lose it when she hits puberty.”

“We can invite the neighbors over for barbeques and block parties,” I said. I’ve never enjoyed company, but Lou had dreams of being a socialite. We would be the only family in Meridian to have a pool in our own backyard.

“She has a fair complexion, Archie,” Lou said. She frowned at me over her crossword. She loved puzzle books— Sudoku and word-finders, anything with an easy ending.

“The doctor is worried, about her ‘baby fat’. She needs to get out more. She can have friends over.”

“What do you know?” Lou asked. She concentrated on the clue for 36 across. The drink of Englishmen, three letters.

“Tea,” I said, looking over her shoulder.

Lou frowned and wrote the letters in the squares. “I just wish you’d talked to me first,” she said.

\*\*\*

When Mae-Ann came home from school that afternoon, I led her out to the backyard with a blindfold over her eyes.

“Where are we going, Dad?” she asked. Her voice was a high-pitched buzzing. I winced.

“You’ll see soon, Mae-bug,” I said, pulling her along as she stumbled through the kitchen and out into the yard.

“I’m missing *Power Rangers*.”

I stopped short of the tall white pool, and removed the bandanna from around Mae-Ann’s face. I wished my wife were here, to see this moment. Then she would know I was right. Mae-Ann looked up.

“Okay?” she said.

“It’s a pool,” I said. “You can go swimming all summer, whenever you want. And you can invite all the other kids over, too, if you want.”

“It looks like a cereal bowl,” Mae-Ann said. I laughed. I patted Mae-Ann on the back.

“I guess so,” I said. “Do you want to try it out?” Mae-Ann looked up at me. I met her eyes and realized that I’d never had a child stare at me pitifully before. She smiled.

“Sure,” she said. I smiled back at her.

“Let’s go put our bathing suits on,” I said.

A few minutes later, we stood in the grass again, barefoot. Mae-Ann wore a too-small purple bathing suit from last summer. I had made myself a vodka tonic, even though it was only three in the afternoon.

“You get in first,” Mae-Ann said. I laughed, drank a few swallows of vodka, set the cup in the grass and scooped Mae-Ann up in a princess carry. I threw her over my shoulder and climbed up the ladder, dropping both of us into the water below. When I burst from the surface, I saw Mae-Ann treading next to me, her feet kicking at the bottom that was a foot away, her hands reaching out for something to grab. I stood up and pulled her close to me.

“Isn’t this fun?” I asked, when we had both caught our breaths. Mae-Ann looked around herself, at the expanse of cool blue water.

“I guess,” Mae-Ann said. I smiled down at my daughter, but when I met her eyes, I knew that she was beginning to forgive me for things I hadn’t even said yet. I saw an apology written there, for the future Mae-Ann couldn’t help, which would spring up around us, as the years passed, like weeds in the tall grass. I let her go. She swam backwards, legs kicking, and grasped the edge of the pool.

When Lou came home, we were sitting side-by-side on the couch, watching *Pokémon*.

“How was the pool?” Lou asked. She set a bag of Clinique samples on the kitchen table. Lou worked as a beauty technician at a small hair salon. She made up people’s faces, taught them to hide pockmarks and wrinkles. I thought the whole thing was ironic.

“It was great,” I said. Mae-Ann looked up at her mother, standing in the doorway, and smiled. Lou shrugged and went back into the kitchen. I could hear the clash of pots and pans as she began cooking dinner.

\*\*\*\*

I liked cleaning the pool, adding chemicals, checking the filters. I liked the smell of the chlorine and the way the water glinted in the sun. Every afternoon, when I came home from work, I pulled Mae-Ann from the shadows of the house and swam with her in the cool, chlorinated water. She tolerated these afternoon excursions, and after a few days adapted to them, pulling on her bathing suit as soon as I stepped in the house, splashing me as I floated in an inner tube.

One afternoon I came home and she was already at the pool, wearing dirty jean shorts with flowers on them and a *Power Rangers* t-shirt, holding something in her hands.

“What cha got there, Mae-Bug?” I asked, craning to see what she held. She held up her palms to show me a baby mouse, curled under her heart line. It was gray and still and wet, its eyes open and blank against the sky.

“It drowned,” Mae-Ann said.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. That’s so sad.” I began a speech about the circle of life, how things begin and end in cycles, how everything must be born and so everything must die and this mouse was just one of those things. Mae-Ann didn’t look up from the corpse in her hand.

“Let’s bury it,” she said.

And so, in the dissipating heat of the summer evening, my daughter and I held a funeral rite for the mouse. We found a pack of Lou’s Winstons, dumped the cigarettes out into a red plastic cup, and wrapped the mouse with toilet paper. Embalmed in the box, we buried it under a poplar tree in the backyard.

“Do you want to say a few words?” I asked Mae-Ann, as we stood sweating in front of the mouse’s shallow grave.

“I didn’t know him too good,” Mae-Ann said, almost whispering. She began dumping dirt into the grave. I thought that I handled it all very well.

\*\*\*

I didn’t know how many animals typically drowned in an above ground pool, but as the summer storms entered Meridian and cast their waters down, there seemed to be more and more. Mice, frogs, chipmunks, turtles. Once or twice, small birds, sparrows and wrens, their reptilian feet curled under the softness of their feathers, their beaks open as if crying for air.

Each time we found a corpse, Mae-Ann would begin the burial ritual, which grew more and more complex as the summer waned. She took the bodies from the water and spread them flat on the concrete. She found old boxes and wrote phrases from the Bible on them in permanent marker. Mae-Ann chose the phrases by flipping through the gossamer pages until she stumbled on a line that sounded good, or at least that’s how it looked to me. “And if his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering unto the LORD be of the flock; male or female, he shall offer it without blemish,” or, “ I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.”

Mae-Ann then set the body in the box, wrapped in leaves and flowers and pretty berries from the bushes in their yard. She chose each offering carefully, and layered them over the corpse until it was hidden under the fruits. Then, we would bury the box. Mae-Ann chose a rock or a stick to use as a marker, and the grave would be finished. Then she stood over it, as if waiting for the soul of the little creature to rise, like a firefly, and ignite in the sky.

The cemetery under the poplar tree grew larger and larger, an array of small sticks and stones used to mark the graves in an abstract pattern, a scattering like a nebular cloud. A galaxy of palm-sized ghosts.

One afternoon, Lou came home early, as Mae-Ann and I were finishing up a grave in the back yard. She came out to where we were standing, lit a cigarette and tried to look over our shoulders.

“What are y’all up to?” she asked. “Gardening?”

I felt like a child caught with my hand in my mother’s purse. I said “Sort of,” right as Mae-Ann said “We’re burying a dead chipmunk that drowned in the pool.”

Lou looked from our daughter to me and back again. “Well that’s sweet,” she said. She kept her eyes on me and I tried to meet her gaze.

“There was only one this time,” Mae-Ann said. Sometimes, you do want to punch children.

“This time?” Lou asked.

“Normally there’s more,” Mae-Ann said. “But we bury them. So their ghosts will go to heaven.”

Lou made a long and loud noise under her breath. “Well that’s certainly an interesting way to spend your afternoon,” she said. She gave me a look that said *we’ll talk about this later*.

The storms became more and more frequent, filling my pool with algae and bacterial growth. After a week of consistent rain, I went out to find the pool surface painted with a thin layer of green slime, debris etching the surface. Mae-Ann was scooping out the bodies of mice and frogs and birds, laying them in rows over the pavement. I counted seven, eight, nine.

“Mae-Ann, stop, just stop,” I said. Mae-Ann looked up at me. In her hand lay a chipmunk, curled in a fetal position, its wet tail dripping between her fingers.

“I haven’t found them all yet,” she said. She placed the chipmunk in the row on the wet pavement and climbed back up the ladder, searching the tepid water for other bodies.

I looked at the rodents and frogs lined up on the cement. I checked my watch, and saw that I only had two hours until Lou would come home from work. I sighed, went to the garage, and found the net meant to pull leaves and twigs from the bottom of the pool.

“Let me help you,” I said, as Mae-Ann reached into the water to grab a floating frog.

I worked without ceremony, but Mae-Ann had a sense of ritual. She seemed to bless each animal with her hands before laying it on the concrete.

By the time Lou’s car pulled into the drive, all the animals were buried and I was scooping detritus from the surface.

“This doesn’t look too good,” Lou said, peering into the murky water. I exchanged a look with Mae-Ann, but neither of us said anything about the animals buried in the back of the yard.

“The storms did a number on the water quality,” I said, not looking at my wife.

“Well I hope it’s cleaned up for our get together this weekend,” Lou said. I scooped a pile of leaves from the bottom of the pool and flung them into the grass.

“Shit,” I said, leaning the net against the pool and wiping sweat from my eyes. “I almost forgot.”

“That’s a bad word,” Mae-Ann said. Then she went inside.

“She seems different,” Lou said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re different too,” Lou said. She peered into the water again, as if she could divine what was happening to her family, from the murk at the bottom of the pool.

\*\*\*

Lou came out to the yard and handed me a plate of homemade burger patties. I stood by the grill, the classic husband pose, with a spatula in one hand and a cup of bourbon and Mountain Dew in the other. I kissed my wife on the cheek and watched the coals as they shivered in the heat. Lou had spent the week setting up for this party. She checked and rechecked the weather reports, cleaned the house, made deviled eggs and potato salad, whipped cream for strawberry short cake and sliced carrots and cabbage for the coleslaw. Now, everything was arranged on a pristine tablecloth on the patio table. A collection of lawn chairs sat around the pool. A cooler stocked with beer and sodas sat sweltering in the shade.

“It looks over-cast,” Lou said. I looked up to the sky.

“It’s been worse,” I said. “Where’s Mae-Ann?”

“The report said thirty percent,” Lou said. “She’s refusing to come out until her friends get here.”

“I can go get her.”

“Just focus on the burgers, I don’t want people to have to wait forever to eat.”

Lou went back inside to check the weather report on the Internet. I downed the rest of my drink.

Lou had invited all the neighbors, everyone from her book group and Mae-Ann’s Sunday school class. She invited her friends from work, who were the wives of the men I went to the bar with. All in all, most of Meridian had received an invitation to the party, which Lou was calling a Summer Solstice party, although it was almost August. When she read the guest list to me, I sighed, and hid my anxiety under a chuckle.

“We’ll have quite the clean up, with that crowd,” I said. Lou frowned at me.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said. I shrugged. I knew she would. She always did. Planning, orchestrating, these were Lou’s strong suits. In her past life, I thought, she must have been the conductor of a large and powerful orchestra, or a train.

People began arriving fifteen minutes after the proposed start of the party. They brought their children, sunscreen, towels, saran-wrapped plates of watermelon slices and bowls of bean dip, chocolate Bundt cakes and bags of pork rinds and potato chips. Lou set everything on the table with serving spoons and paper plates. Children scurried around the patio, so that every now and then a parent would call out “no running.” I stood by the grill, drinking refills of bourbon and talking to whoever approached me. I grudgingly listened as Burt or Mike or Sean or whoever gave me advice on the proper way to flip the patties or add the cheese.

Mae-Ann had gathered a group of children around herself, some of the kids from her Bible camp or her class at school, I wasn’t sure. I knew that Lou’s main determination for throwing this party was to meet more of Mae-Ann’s people. I knew that she worried that she didn’t know her daughter, that as Mae-Ann grew she was turning into someone that neither of her parents could recognize.

Mae-Ann led the children to the poplar tree at the back of the yard. I turned to one of the men standing next to me, talking my ear off. “Hey, Burt,” I said. “Will you take over this for me, since you know so much about proper burger-flipping technique? Since you’re a Master Chef?” I was a little woozy, from the heat of the grill and the half-bottle of bourbon I’d drunk. I handed the spatula to Burt and followed my daughter into the yard.

“Our yard is filled with ghosts,” I heard Mae-Ann say to the children. They looked at her, wide-eyed, dripping chlorine into the grass. “This is where they’re buried. I can show you.”

“Mae-bug, what are you doing?” I asked her. She looked up at me and smiled.

“I’m showing them our ghosts, Dad,” she said.

“The burgers are almost ready, don’t you guys want to eat?” I asked the kids. They looked at Mae-Ann, and then at me.

“I wanna see the ghosts,” one boy said.

“We have cake,” I said. I wasn’t used to bargaining with ten-year-olds.

“I’ve never seen a ghost before,” a girl said. She had her hair in her mouth. I thought it probably tasted like pool water. In the distance, I heard thunder rumble in the sky.

“Let me go get a shovel, and help you,” I said. I left the children standing by the tree and went into the house. I poured the rest of the bourbon into my cup and skipped the Mountain Dew. I found several little plastic shovels, the kind used to build sand castles, and took them out to the kids.

“Are the burgers almost done?” Lou asked, as I passed her and some of the other mothers.

“Ask Burt,” I said.

“Are you drunk?” Lou asked. “Where are you going? You should be grilling. We’re the hosts.”

“It’s going to rain,” I said. I kept walking. I went back to the poplar tree and handed each kid a shovel.

“We’re going to have an archeological excavation,” I said. I sipped my drink. It thundered again.

“Everyone out of the pool,” I heard Lou shout. No one was in the pool. The kids looked at each other and at me apprehensively.

“This is how they found the mummies in Egypt,” I said. “You start, Mae-Bug.”

“I wanna see some ghosts,” the boy said again.

“Shut up Emery,” Mae-Ann said.

“I bet there aren’t any ghosts,” he said. “I bet you were lying.”

“They’re real,” Mae-Ann said.

“Prove it.” The sky rumbled and droplets began falling on the patio and sizzling on the grill. Parents began rushing plates and platters of food into the house. I drank and watched the kids.

Mae-Ann turned to the nearest grave and began digging, flinging dirt and debris over her shoulder. The other kids huddled around her, watching, until at last she reached the sodden cardboard box.

Lou came out and stood over my shoulder. “We need to get the children inside,” Lou said. “It’s raining.”

“They’re already wet,” I said.

“They’ll get struck by lightning.” Lou turned to the children. “Mae-Ann? What do you have? What are you doing?”

Mae-Ann had opened the box, and the children were watching as she brushed aside the dried flowers and leaves. A sick smell rose, and several of the children stepped back.

A tiny, half-decomposed chipmunk lay in the makeshift casket. The eyes were gone, and maggots protruded from the fur.

“Oh my *god*,” Lou said.

I stood up. “Okay kids, that’s enough show and tell for the afternoon. It’s time to go inside.” I finished my glass and felt dizzy. The alcohol was strong and the smell of the dead animals made me feel sick.

The kids left Mae-Ann, who sat looking at the corpse in the box. “It’s not a ghost,” she said.

“No honey, that’s not how it works,” I said. I held my hand out to my daughter, who took it and let me help her to her feet. Together, we wobbled inside. Though the rain was falling hard, the sun was still shining. When I was a child, my mother had told me that this meant that the Devil was beating his wife.

I looked out the window and saw Lou, standing by the poplar tree. With her shoulders hunched against the rain, and her face hidden by her hair, she looked like a mourner at a funeral. I rapped on the glass until Lou turned around. I waved her into the house.

With all the guests in our small living room, space was tight. People ate crowded on the couches and floor. The steam from their clothes fogged the windows and made the room feel even more claustrophobic. I found a half-empty bottle of whisky in the pantry and poured myself another glass. Lou came inside and looked at her living room, filled with wet bodies. She found me in the kitchen, leaning over the sink.

“Why did you let her?” she started to ask, but stopped. “How long?” She couldn’t finish any of her questions.

“You don’t really want to know,” I said. I felt my stomach shift and the world spin. I leaned into the counter for support. Mae-Ann came into the kitchen.

“Is daddy okay?” she asked.

“He doesn’t feel very good,” Lou said. “He will be just fine.”

“You should have told me,” Lou said to me, as I stood back from the sink and wavered. I looked into the living room, which was filled with most everyone I knew, and many people I didn’t, eating and talking and not paying any attention to their hosts. With the distance between them, and the way the haze of the alcohol made it appear that there were two or three rooms of people crowded on top of one another, I almost felt like I was staring into someone’s version of the afterlife.

Mae-Ann came up to me and took my hand. She walked me to the kitchen table and we sat down in opposing chairs.

“Go play with your friends, sweetie,” Lou said. I laid my head on the table. Mae-Ann ran her hand over my hair and earlobe. I felt the prickle of her fingers over the stubble on my jaw. I fell asleep with my head on the kitchen table, my daughter’s hands on my face.

\*\*\*

When I woke, the house was empty and the light had fallen out of the sky. Someone had laid a blanket over my shoulders. I could hear the creak of the house around me and the shatter of rain on the roof. In the living room, the television gurgled a sitcom, canned and colorful. I wondered if my wife would be able to forgive me. I heard footsteps down the stairs, into the living room. I heard the television cut out and a moment of silence before a jazz record began to play, Frank Sinatra, one of a collection that Lou had saved from college, back when record players were popular. She kept her records because she liked to feel the imperfections, the way time etched itself into the vinyl. As the music came into itself I stood from the kitchen table and stumbled into the living room. The alcohol had worn off but my legs still felt weak, as if I had spent a very long time at sea. I saw my wife sitting in the armchair; her head tilted back, the lines in her face clear in the dim light. Her eyes were closed and I went up to her, held out my hand and brushed her knuckles.

Lou opened her eyes.

“Dance with me,” I said. My wife stared at me for a minute. Then she took my hand and I lifted her up from the chair. We danced to the sweet crescendo of Sinatra, a slow and clumsy two-step over the carpet, my arms around her waist, her head on my shoulder. As the music quieted, I felt my wife crying, her shoulders shaking. I didn’t say anything, but held her close. We were a family that cried at jazz music and buried animals under poplar trees. I wondered how you could hope for something better, how you could want to fix the mistakes that made people who they were. The next song started, and I pushed my wife away from me, into a twirl, and for a moment we were caught like that, the space between us filled with all the ghosts that fill love.