

Earthly Things

The men came up from the pit, same time every day. The bell would ring, and the lift would rise and spill them back out onto the surface. On days when Margaret's brother was working, we'd walk to the mine after school and wait for him to come up with the rest. Bishop had himself a baby blue Chevrolet truck, and would give us a ride home in it so we didn't have to take the bus, which was crowded and smelled like puke.

Margaret checked her wristwatch. "I hope they come up before the rain starts."

The sky was full of grey clouds, and the land was grey, too—all mud and gravel. The air smelled of exhaust and earth. I dawdled around in a grassy patch by the road, pulling fleabane weeds up by their roots. I got a satisfaction from it, feeling the tug of release when the earth gave them up to me. Margaret leaned against the bed of Bishop's truck, away from the mud, so as not to get her shoes dirty. She'd gotten her hair cut the week before to look like Jackie Kennedy. I'd lied and told her it suited her. She was just so very round already, especially in the face, and the new hair made

her all that much rounder. But I could tell she really thought the style had made her over anew. She'd started caring about her appearance a lot more than she used to. I knew my insistence on pants and the same old saddle shoes I'd always worn bothered her, but I liked the things I was used to. I wore two braids, because that was easiest with how long my hair was. But Margaret had started going along with her mother every Sunday to get her hair set for the week.

"We're practically women, now," she'd told me. "It's time to start acting like it."

Well, she might have turned 16 already, but I hadn't yet, and so maybe that was why I didn't feel very much like a woman at all.

The bell rang, and the lift groaned mechanically. I saw their hardhats first, through the wire-grate doors, then their coal-blackened faces. They shut off their lamps and squinted at the daylight, emerging from the lift like moles. Most were weary and grim, their backs bent, faces weathered. The longer the men dug coal, the deeper it got into their skin, until no degree of soap could wash it off entirely. Bishop was young still, though—only 19. He was smirched now like the rest, but walked like he still had somewhere he wanted to go.

"Hi Daisy," he said. "Those for me?"

I'd forgotten I was holding a bundle of all the fleabane I'd picked. I threw them aside, looking down at my worn-in shoes. Bishop laughed.

"Don't you dare come near my new dress with all that coal on you!" said Margaret.

So, of course, Bishop chased her around the truck as if to grab her and dirty her while Margaret squealed and dodged and cursed him.

"You sit in the middle," said Margaret, because we all had to cram into the cab together. "I won't sit next to him."

Bishop rolled down the window while he drove and basked in the wind like a dog. Margaret complained that her hair would be ruined, but Bishop paid her no mind. “I love that smell when it’s just about to rain,” he said. “You know that smell, Daisy. It’s clean. Real clean.”

I was pressed between him and Margaret, thigh to thigh. Every time he shifted gears, his elbow moved against me. The driver’s seat was permanently black, but it was an old truck, anyhow. His hands on the wheel were strong. He had coal in his fingernails, in the crevices of his ear.

I looked straight ahead, out the windshield, and clutched the school books to my lap.

My mama and I lived down the street from Margaret, at the end of a row of boxy company homes. Mama worked late keeping books for the mine—it was the only way we could stay in our house after Daddy died—so I went to Margaret’s until dinner, most days. Sometimes I stayed for dinner, too, if I was invited. Mama was often too tired to cook, or else she had one of her headaches.

Margaret’s mom had left a plate of peanut butter sandwiches out for us on the kitchen table, and a note saying she was at the doctor’s. She was having another baby soon—an *oops* baby, my mama called it. Their place was clean as it could be, but everything in it was showing its age—cracked tile on the counters, shabby homemade curtains on the lone window over the sink, a noisy beast of a fridge. There was a pervading smell of dust and grease. Margaret’s mom did cross stitch as a hobby, and her little framed projects were up everywhere, crowding the wallpaper. The walls told you: *do not be afraid for I am with you*; or *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*; or *no one can serve two masters*; or *set your mind on things above, not on earthly things*; and more in that vein. Outside, the sky had finally let loose. The thin walls hardly kept out the drumming of it.

Bishop bent over the sink to get his head under the tap. He’d rolled down the top of his coveralls, so he was only in his undershirt. Unlike his hands and face, his arms were clean.

“Go take a bath,” said Margaret. “You’ll get coal everywhere.”

“I want to eat first,” said Bishop.

I opened my history book to the chapter we were on, but just ended up reading the same sentence over and over without ever comprehending it. Bishop sat at the table across from me and ate two sandwiches. His hair was all wet, dripping murky water down his neck, into his shirt collar. He reached across the table to jab at a photo of Teddy Roosevelt in my book.

“He’s my favorite president,” he said.

“I like Kennedy best,” said Margaret, as if we didn’t all know that already.

“He hasn’t even done anything yet,” said Bishop. “You only like him because he’s handsome.”

He shoved the last of his sandwich in his mouth after that, and got up and pulled off his boots one by one, then shimmied out of all his clothes except his boxer shorts. Margaret was saying something to me, paying her brother no mind, but I could only stare as Bishop pushed out onto the back porch and into the rain. I could see him through the door he’d left open, bent over to shake out his wet hair. He was washed clean that way, grinning and heedless.

He’d left a smudge of coal behind on the page of my book.

Later, when the rain had let up and I was leaving to walk home, I found him asleep on the couch in the living room, one long leg hitched up over the back of it. He looked pink and clean as a newborn, freshly unearthed from the grime. No one was around, and he seemed deep enough asleep, so I reached out one finger and ran it down the length of his straight nose. His eyelids fluttered, and he shifted and groaned, and I ran out the door and kept running all the way back home.

On the fourth of July that summer my Mama wasn’t feeling well, so she let me spend the day with Margaret and her family. I went along with them to a swimming hole with fish and a high rock

the kids jumped off of. It was crowded and noisy because of the holiday. Bishop had his days off, so he came along, too.

The air was thick and humid, the water glittering. It got deep in the middle—so deep it turned black down below my kicking feet. Margaret bemoaned that her mother wouldn't buy her a new bathing suit for the occasion. There were boys from our school there, like Robert Collier, who she was keen to impress. I tried to drag her into the water to swim, but she refused to risk getting her hair wet. She lounged on the rocks at the water's edge with only her feet in, fanning herself with a Seventeen magazine, hoping the boys might look her way to see her laid out like that, legs bare. She had curves I didn't yet. But the boys our age seemed more interested in jumping off the high rock, or sneaking Hamm's from their parents' blue coolers.

Since Margaret was such a bore, I got out and wandered around the edge of the water until I caught sight of Bishop back in the verdant trees. Everything got so green in the summer. He was down on his haunches amongst it all, digging around in the soft soil.

I stood over him and watched, waiting for him to say something to me. I got goosebumps, going from the water to the shade. My hair, which had gotten rather long, hung wet against my back.

"What are you doing?" I said, thinking maybe he hadn't noticed me there.

"Looking for bait," he said. "I was going to fish some."

He had an old mason jar nearby, with a single pinkish earthworm wriggling around in it.

I knelt down beside him and dug around in the wet earth. Margaret would never, but I didn't mind getting my hands dirty. So close to him, Bishop smelled like salt and laundry. I hadn't

really thought about my bathing suit, but now I couldn't stop thinking about it. He must have been able to see the whole unfinished shape of me.

"Here's one," I said, digging a worm from the earth. It squirmed in my cupped hands.

Bishop pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and dropped it into the jar. He had a canteen with him, too, and I held out my arm and said, "Can I have some water?"

He gave it to me, and I unscrewed the cap and drank and thought how his mouth had been there before mine. Some spilled down my chin, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand. Bishop took the canteen back and drank from it also, eyeing me while he did.

"Are you cold?" he said, because I'd started to shiver.

I shook my head. "Is it cold in the mines?"

He thought about it a minute. "It's cold, sure. And dark and damp. And there's no air at all. Not real air. Sometimes, if I think about being so far underground too hard, I start to feel faint." He smiled. "Don't tell anybody."

"I won't," I said. We'd stopped looking for worms. "I feel faint when I see blood. Or even when I think about it."

His eyes got bright. "That's no good for a woman. You have to deal with blood all the time."

I was too horrified to say anything.

He turned his face away and let out a sharp exhale, then rose up and brushed the dirt from his hands. "I shouldn't have said that."

I couldn't bear to look at him, so I watched the two worms writhe around in the jar. I thought Bishop would leave, but he lingered. My heart was beating like hummingbird wings.

"We should go back to where the people are at," he said.

I picked up the jar and followed him out of the trees. The wide, flat rocks were hot from the sun, and burned the soles of my feet. Bishop took the jar and wandered off without another word. I didn't see him again until hot dogs and macaroni salad at Margaret's, and then he hardly even looked at me.

I slept over that night. It was too hot to sleep, though, pressed against Margaret in her twin bed. I stared all night at the bare white ceiling, feeling strange in my body—like it didn't quite belong to me. Near dawn, the stairs creaked, and a door downstairs opened. I slipped out of bed and looked out Margaret's bedroom window. Bishop was just visible in the young light, sitting on the top porch step in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

I crept down the stairs, too, and went out back where he was. He turned at the sound of the door, but didn't say anything to me. He only smoked and watched me come down the steps to stand before him in the dewy grass. The promise of sunrise turned everything gold. The air smelled pure. My nightdress was thin and white. Bishop was already dressed in twill trousers, worn through at the knee.

"I can't sleep much later than three or four," he said. "My body won't adjust to it."

"I couldn't sleep either," I said. "It's too hot."

Bishop's eyes were on me, behind the screen of smoke. We stayed like that for a while, looking into each other's eyes, not speaking, barely breathing. The longer he looked at me, the more it made my skin feel tight, and my blood run fast. There was birdsong, and the distant mechanical thrum of the mine.

When he did move again, it was as if his body were a separate thing from his mind, locked in quiet battle with it. He leaned forward and brought the backs of his knuckles up to my shoulder.

They barely touched me at all, as soft as a butterfly kiss. Inchmeal, he skimmed those knuckles down the length of my arm. My blood rose up to meet his touch, so soft and slow, his eyes tracking the gradual path he made down to my wrist. Then he brought his hand to my ankle, to brush it up along my shin bone, up to the hem of my nightdress. When he got to my knee, he wrapped his whole big hand around it and gripped it hard. He was hurting me, but I only wanted him to keep doing it. I felt lightheaded, like when I stood up too fast. I couldn't get enough air. My blood sang in my ears.

His eyes on me were very dark, his breathing shallow.

Abruptly, he snatched his hand away and looked off at the sunrise.

"Go back inside," he said.

I ran through the kitchen, up the stairs, and curled back up in Margaret's bed, pulling the blankets all the way to my chin.

Margaret stirred. "Where'd you go?" she mumbled.

She was asleep again before I could find a way to answer. My body was alive in a way it hadn't ever been before—in a buzzy way, like I was filled up with bees. It stayed that way for days after. When I closed my eyes, I felt the ghost of his touch. I didn't want the bruise his hand had left round my knee to fade, but it did.

Over the sideboard at Margaret's, a cross stitch of her mother's in yellow and green said, *the grass withers, and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.*

It was only a few months later, the week after my birthday, that there was an accident at the mine. The horrible wail of the sirens drew everyone there to see who would come back up. Five men were crushed to death, we found out, including Bishop. He was too badly mangled for an open casket, for which I was grateful. I didn't want to see him that way.

They buried him on a clear day in October. The trees had only just started to turn the magnificent reds and golds of autumn. Bishop's grave was dug right under a half-turned sugar maple—the same kind he'd often climb as a kid, back before he quit school. Margaret had gotten a new black dress, and wore a pillbox hat with a veil. Even I wore a dress—one I'd borrowed from my mother. It hung off my shoulders and made me feel small. Margaret cried and cried, and her new baby brother squirmed and fussed in her mother's arms, but her parents were stoic. They had their trust in God, in the words the pastor read out from his bible.

I watched them lower Bishop into the ground, and wanted to scream at them to stop. It was wrong to bury him. It was too cold down there, too dark. He wouldn't feel the wind, or smell the imminent rain. But I only tossed my rose down into the hole with the rest, and watched them fill it in with dirt.