

Empty Houses

He's ten. Soon everybody will be here, he'll see their headlights on the wall. His birthday is the only time he gets to stay up until midnight. Mom and Dad make it special, like his own personal New Year's. You're only eleven for twenty-four hours, Dad says. After that you're eleven and one day, eleven and two days. You're never just eleven again.

But tonight is different. His uncle's SUV doesn't bounce into the driveway, riling with cousins. He sees a police car stop outside their house.

An unseen man murmurs with Dad in the living room while Mom sits with him in the kitchen, cemented to her chair. He feels like she's there to stop him from leaving the table, not to be his company. She asks him twice if he likes the cake. He eats a bite.

By midnight, when he turns eleven, the cake is in the fridge and he's in his bed, bitter at Mom and Dad. In the dark he squats beside the wall vent and listens to them

in their room. He heard them moving in the sheets once, so now he only listens when they fight.

Mom says: ...from us. Not from Rick's kids. And not at school. God forbid.

Dad says: They won't know at school.

Adam, he has the same last name. Welby is not a common name.

I don't want him to hear it just yet. I mean it's my dad. It's up to me.

This is not just up to you.

I just don't want to...He loves his grandpa.

Silence flows into the vent. Grandpa: big caveman arms and a hole in his nose where he had cancer. He bought him a Spiderman watch for the As on his report card.

Mom says: Thank God we only had one.

Dad says: One what? One kid? What does that mean?

Only one we have to explain it to.

That's not what you mean.

Well, Mom says, doesn't that kind of thing skip a generation? I don't know. I'm tired.

Silence again.

If I'm glad about anything, it's that your mom isn't around for this, Mom says. You don't think she knew?

Dad sighs and flips back the covers.

Adam, I'm sorry.

I don't want to talk anymore.

We don't have to talk...

Dad goes down the hall and lands on the couch. He thinks Mom will cry but she doesn't.

He's twelve. The school year is almost over when he finally learns something. He's running out on the track in gym class, sweating rivers under a hard sun. His legs haven't yet gained the length that will make him a cross country prospect in high school, but he stays in the pack by sheer desire, by ignorance of pain.

Around the black asphalt the boys curve like pinballs, the bleachers glaring at their right. The leader's foot goes into a rut. He twists and falls. His scream sounds overdone.

He manages to slow while the others, slaves to momentum, leap the injured kid and stop. The gym teacher, a sub, rushes forward to help. Hard white glimpses of bone break the skin on the boy's calf, like something trying to eat its way out of him. His agonized face is already oiled with tears.

The sub yells for somebody to get the school nurse. The other boys fly, determined to be first. Not him. A sudden hardness like his classmate's secret bones materializes in his shorts. He feels heat down there like a blush. He sits in the bleachers with his hands in his pockets to balloon out the waistband, hiding himself.

Nobody sees him until the sub comes back; the kid has been handed to an ambulance.

The sub asks if he's sick. He doesn't say yes. Just stares at his feet until he's soft again. Then he looks up and sees the figure of his grandpa across the field, the man he hasn't seen in a year, or asked about.

He's twelve, still. He's in the last three picked for kickball—even though, he thinks, he's okay at it. The first team's captain points at him and says, I don't want him on mine. He'll stab me when I'm not looking.

The rest of the class laughs. He grins as if he's in on the joke. The teacher shouts them quiet and calls off the game; they'll sit in the gym for thirty minutes instead. Nobody talks. Somehow it's his fault.

In class, during free read, he goes up to the teacher and asks, Do you know what my grandpa did?

His teacher is young, in her twenties. You shouldn't bring that up at school, she whispers, as if he's taunting her.

I want to know, he says, hurt. Can you tell me?

Her sternness fails: Oh.

So they're walking down the beige and daisy-yellow hallway, the teacher's face gone to chalk, her hand needlessly fastened on his forearm. The teacher confers with the school counselor and leaves. The counselor has lots of fragile glass things on her desk.

Have you asked Mom or Dad about Grandpa? she says. They would talk to you. They love you.

He has an answer primed like a rocket: I don't want to keep asking. It's my right to know.

She swallows, uneasy in a way that few adults, he thinks, would show around him.

You're a pretty mature young man, I'd say. You know what that means?

Yes.

Do you watch the news?

Sometimes.

Well, your grandpa was on the news a while back.

(He remembers the TV war between his parents—Mom on, Dad off, for a month after Grandpa was gone).

Why?

He hurt people.

On purpose?

Yes—a loaded pause—he hurt, um, several of them. I'm sorry.

Why are *you* sorry? he says. I'm related to him.

None of this is because of you, she tells him quickly.

She calls Mom. Mom and Dad are angry, but not too much; they seem almost relieved. Dad sits him on the couch and gives him the rest of the story like a cold

bath: Grandpa's in jail. No, he won't get out. You weren't supposed to know. Jesus, I can't get over this lady telling a kid—but he is. Yes. Eight. That the cops know of. I don't know why. I guess because he wanted to. He wasn't the old fella we thought he was.

We can stop there—Mom looks like she's been poisoned—That's enough for him to know why people talk.

Hugs and tears. It feels like the three of them are in jail with Grandpa. There'll be a trial, Dad says. You'll hear things. But then it's over. Like getting your tonsils out.

He's thirteen. There is no trial. His grandpa pleads; the families speak at the courthouse. He works a paper route because the TV news isn't played at home. In the photos his grandpa has a haggard elephant's face above a lumpy orange jumpsuit. He's not Grandpa, he's George Thurston Welby, 63.

Stopping in the cold-nosed wind, he peers at the killer's features for signs of himself. The same dark blond eyebrows bridge his forehead. They both have a mouth built for laughing, seldom used. He remembers Mom's words in the vent and wonders what other things are downstream in his blood.

At school they study heredity, copy Aa and Bb. He reads farther in the library, books teachers don't touch, they're too hard for kids. He sees how everything about you is stamped in your molecules. He quits the paper route.