

BIRDWATCHING

"Sinning isn't too bad, as long as you're sorry for it," my granny had told me when I was a little girl. "It's when you feel alright about it when things get tricky."

My grandmother was German, and her way of thinking was new and controversial. She didn't go to church, and she highlighted and crossed things out in her Bible. In our small town of Aldridge, she was a witch--her bungalow sank into the swampy soil and frogs guarded her doorstep like soldiers. In the third grade I had once caught ten-year-old resident shitbag Max Friedman digging up her yard, searching for "witch tools."

In her pantry she kept jars of flowers and hard liquor; in her closet she hung up muumuus and fishnet stockings three sizes too small. Her house smelled like whiskey and lilac and thick perfume.

I always found myself in her house on the hottest days of the summer, when my hands buttered with sweat and my legs stung with nettle-bites. She'd give me cool cucumber soup and a thimble of beer and we'd fan ourselves with leaves ripped from old foreign books.

My mother was a skinny, worried lady. She did not like attention. At age forty-eight she dyed her thick brown hair gray and stopped wearing makeup, because that "was the natural flow of things." She did not get along with my granny, and every Thanksgiving there'd be an argument about something like gravy or table settings. Tension swung over the table, thick as cream, as matriarchy was passed around like a game of hot-potato.

By the time I turned thirteen, my mother and grandmother were not on speaking terms, and Thanksgiving dinners consisted of my mother and I silently handing each other bowls of

limp turkey slices and cold stuffing. Suddenly I missed the loud fights, my granny's spicy vegetable sauce. You never realize how lucky you used to be until your quiet wiry worried mother is wiping brown cranberry mush from her knit sweater.

I resorted to silent escapades to my grandmother's house in the middle of the day, when my mother was too absorbed in staring at the walls to ask me where I was going. I figured that since they weren't talking, I could have a little bit of fun while I was at it.

"What's your mother doing?" my granny'd ask.

"She's on a date with a guy named Raul, with a thick black mustache," I said during the first visit. I hadn't seen my grandmother in four months.

"What?"

"I don't like him, but Mama says I need a father to get raised up right."

"Where did she meet this, this--"

"Raul."

"Raul." My grandmother shook her head. "Where'd she meet him?"

"Alcoholics Anonymous," I said.

This went on for weeks, these lies to my granny, even when my mother stopped dying her hair because it had turned naturally stress-gray and she didn't ask what I wanted to eat or if my soap was running out or if I had made my bed. Sometimes I left early in the morning and returned in the evening, and my mother was still in the same spot as she had been when I left.

She liked to sit in a brown armchair in the corner of the living room, where she held a copy of *House Beautiful* between her knees and stared outside at the jasmine bushes for her birdwatching.

"Seven doves," she'd sigh on her way to bed every night. "Two finches, one bluejay."

I liked making up stories about Raul. I liked telling outrageous lies to my granny, certainly more than telling the truth.

Besides, my granny was crazy enough to believe me. I'd come in the house, and sometimes I couldn't even find her till I peeked through the back screen door and she was sitting in her garden, dirt up to her elbows, planting seeds in the saucy marsh dirt. Nothing ever grew, because (a.) my home state is not the ideal planting ground for tropical fruit and (b.) any seed would drown almost immediately because of the mud. How do you even tell the boring old truth to someone like that? How could I have disappointed my grandmother, who practically thrived on storytelling? Besides, she made up things too--like the stories she told about living with the circus and marrying six movie stars and saving the Peruvian Buffalo from extinction.

With every lie I told, my grandmother would tip her head back and laugh. "Boy oh boy," she'd say, "she finally took the stick from her ass."

Months passed, and I spent more time at my granny's shack than at home. I saw less and less of my mother, leaving earlier in the day and coming back later at night. She stopped leaving the house, and issues of *House Beautiful* piled up by the doorstep.

One morning I came downstairs and she was gone.

You never realize how lucky you used to be until you're sitting in a dark house all alone wishing your quiet wiry worried mother was there to wipe brown cranberry mush off of her sweater. My lies expanded, this time to the mailman and the neighbors and people I'd see at the store who wanted to know how my mother was.

"She's good," I said.

"Still making that killer peach cobbler?"

"You bet," I said.

I lied and lied and lied until my tongue became tired and I couldn't keep track of which lies I told anymore.

It was then that I decided to leave; I stuffed crumpled bills into my pockets and slipped out of town one night under a violet moon.

The brown little garden near my mother's bird window was colored in moonbeams. It was the saddest thing I'd ever seen.