

frit

“Do you kids know about the beat bot?”

Two fish bowl-eyed sisters bowed their heads and shook them. The smaller one, Marie, wore a cardboard birthday hat, string loose under her chin. The older one, Julia, had a tight ponytail down to her lower back. The man’s sparse eyebrows raised in exaggerated shock.

“Well whaddaya mean? Everyone knows about the beat bot.”

His gnarled hand reached for an iPad from the marble countertop. The girls stole side glances at each other as he tapped at the screen with furious urgency. They stuffed hands in pockets, then withdrew, rubbed left foot against right, right against left, perched on left leg, then right, then left again. When the doorbell rang they sidestepped to the door, slow enough not to offend. They heard racking coughs as they walked away.

Later that night, after Safeway chocolate ice cream cake and the opening of gifts (a hand-knitted scarf from Grandma, nail polishes in shades of red, and a Horses of the World coloring book), the girls giggled on their bed of foam pads and duvets. Once one wave of laughter stopped, one of them whispered, “beat bot” and set them both off again. They laughed till their sides hurt at their Grandpa’s mistaken way of saying “beat box.”

The girls awoke to an avalanche of metal clanging. They filed out of their room, Marie in the front and Julia in the back, and hid behind an antique cherry wood cabinet. Grandpa was emptying the silverware out of the dishwasher, dumping the basket two feet above the kitchen counter. They cupped their hands over their ears.

“Charles!” Grandma stood flustered in the kitchen, wrapping her black velvet robe tighter about her soft middle.

He shook the basket to let loose the remaining butter knives stuck in the plastic lattice. They clattered on the pile, setting off a chain reaction of silver chimes.

“Charlie,” her voice losing, as her hair, color and conviction.

He tossed the basket back in the dishwasher and gathered knives in his right fist, forks in his left. He worked with the deftness of a crazed spider.

“Do you have to do that so early in the morning?”

He ignored her, as if in a trance. When the last spoon was stacked in the drawer, he snapped out of it. He encircled her waist with his arm and kissed her on the cheek, Good Morning, Sweetie. As Dad would put it, “like night and day.” The gold crown on his molar gave off the same dirty glint as his wedding band.

“You think Grandpa smokes?” Marie asked, sprawled out on the carpet, staring out the window upside down.

Two girls were now three, joined by cousin Isabel staying the week, who was filing her nails and leaving purple dust on the carpet.

“Yeah, he smells,” said Marie.

“That’s just ‘cause he’s old,” said Isabel.

“But he smells like Aunt Fiona,” said Marie, referencing their smoker aunt.

“She’s old too.”

Marie, pouting, retrieved the exercise ball from the top shelf of the closet and bounced on it for solace. She resented that they were the same age.

“I hear he does dope,” said Julia.

“Says who?” said Isabel.

“Ryan.”

“Yeah right.”

“Honest! At Christmastime he said he found his paraphernalia lying around,” said Julia, who could not spell “paraphernalia.”

The room was filled with the squeak of rubber against skin as Marie bounced. Julia colored the spots of a pinto horse with a coffee-colored Crayola.

“Let’s see if he’s right,” Isabel said.

Marie’s eyebrows worried themselves.

“And do what?” she asked in a panicked octave.

Isabel smiled a feline smile.

“Bust him.”

“But we’d get busted,” said Marie.

“Not if he’s not here, dingus,” said Isabel.

That Saturday morning, the girls watched as Grandpa’s black Chevy Tahoe peeled out of the driveway. He would be repairing floors in his rental home two hours away, ignoring the fretting of his wife to pay someone else to do it.

The girls stepped into the Man Cave, a glorified shed containing his makeshift glass studio and a two-car garage packed with boxes of junk. The swing of the door kicked up sawdust from the floor and Julia coughed. Marie shushed her. Isabel shushed Marie.

The room featured a giant table littered with his latest cat-themed creation. It looked like a child’s rendering—a semicircle for the face, triangles for ears, buggy eyes, two dots for nostrils, and a hopeful and brainless smile. About thirty lay scattered like abandoned cookies in all colors of the rainbow. Julia grabbed two, covered her eyes with them, and made a face. The other two covered their mouths and laughed through their noses.

With the table and kiln in the way, only the path to the desk was clear. Marie and Julia peered over Isabel's shoulder as she reached out and grabbed the desk drawer handle.

"Wait," said Julia. "What if he took his stuff with him?"

"Oh, don't go wussing out now Jules," Isabel said.

"Yeah, what if it's not even here?" Marie said, hiding behind Julia.

"Both of you are wusses," Isabel said, yanking the handle so hard that the desk shook and a few marbles flew out.

The desktop computer screen no longer displayed the Windows XP screensaver, but a picture of a naked, orangey woman with terrifying breasts and a contorted face.

The girls turned away, cursed expressions hollowing their eyes, drying their lips, sucking the color from their skin. Julia took both Isabel and Marie's hands and led them out. They drifted like ghosts beside her. When they reached their room, they sat and stared at the threading of the carpet.

"Wanna see something?" Julia said.

The other two nodded. Their eyes hurt.

Julia led them to Grandma's bedroom. At the threshold, she held a finger to her lips. Isabel and Marie watched as Julia went to the antique vanity, opened the lid of one of several tiny clay and glass pots, and withdrew three cubes wrapped in foil. The girls were disappointed that it wasn't chocolate, and it tasted like imitation caramel.

Isabel's two brothers came to visit on her last night before she had to go home. They made a fire in the rocky pit by the creek (or "crick," as pronounced by the grandparents) to roast marshmallows. Julia turned hers rotisserie-style, going for an even browning on every square inch. Isabel's marshmallows caught on fire almost every time, earning rebuke from her brothers, who snatched the branch from her and blew out the flames. Marie let her sister toast hers.

It was past sundown. Grandma and the younger two girls headed inside for bed, but Julia stuck around with the boys. They threw marshmallows into the fire, watching them morph into charcoal briquettes.

“Can we pee in the fire, Grandpa?” one of the boys asked.

Julia understood that “we” did not include her. She left, and they didn’t notice. She looked back and saw the three of them standing in a triangle around the fire. Her grandfather oversaw this ritual with arms crossed, jowls cast in shadow, flames dancing like ribbons in his eyeglasses.

Inside, Julia ran into her grandmother, who was looking out at the fire with a sour expression. She pulled the curtain closed and sudsed the sink.