

Channel 06

Erin Hunley

Red chile pork bit her tongue, warmed her belly, and it was time for her parents to leave. She watched her legs swing back and forth and side to side over the edge of the chair, their shadows merging with that of the dining table. She wished her feet could touch the floor; during dinner she had slowly shifted her body away from the back of the chair until her toes swept against the white linoleum below.

“We’ll be back around five tomorrow night, okay, Erin? You can ask grandpa to call us if you need. Okay?”

She hugged her parents in front of the open door, feeling her face against warm stomachs and soft cloth and thinking that maybe she was not really as scared to see them go as she had felt earlier. The moon would drift along the walls of her grandfather’s house, the car horns would fill the stillness with warm shouts, and the old lumpy couch would squish around the backs of her knees. Sleep would come and light would continue to shine from the cracked bathroom door.

Erin followed her grandfather into the backyard after they waved goodbye to the rattling green car that reminded her of a moth’s cocoon. Her grandfather went to work tending the grapes, the apricots, the plums, and she ran around the little patch of lawn. The white dog next door let her pet it through the chain link fence. Its snout poked out of the metal squares and licked and licked the air until Erin put her hand beside it and felt its warm drool. She thought of her dog. How he had stopped moving, how he had died on the floor and left behind tufts of brown fur that found their way onto dinner plates and sweaters. She pulled her hand away and went to stand with her grandfather by the raspberry bush.

The bathroom light did not shine from behind the door that night. The moon created shadows of grimace and beady eye, and their glare made Erin feel thin like gauze— she curled into herself and wadded her airy limbs together. Hours had passed since there had been any movement in the house, since her grandfather had trailed off down the hallway in his stained undershirt and boxers.

She did not want to disturb his sleep, so she turned on the TV instead. Bright sound swarmed over her face until she jammed her hand against the volume button, the green bars at the bottom of the screen blinking off one by one. Above, just returning from a commercial break, was a family on a farm. Sunlight kissed their faces and linen clothes. They rode horses and churned butter. Erin crawled back under her blanket on the couch and followed the arcs and bends of their movement with heavy eyes. She watched as two boys chopped wood with sharp axes, as one of the boy's hands slipped, as the TV blared a frame of metal blade colliding with skin and bone, as a silent mouth screamed.