

## What Crests the Hill

She tells her grandpa there's nothing on the other side of the hill, and grandpa just looks out the window and scowls.

"Mia, dear, one day it will come over that little rise just there." He raises a bony finger and points at the hill, swelling into the early morning sky like a pregnant belly. "And that'll be the end of it," he says.

Mia sits across from him at the small kitchen table, two steaming mugs untouched between them, and looks at the hill.

The house sits in a small valley with a dense forest on either side and a wide-open lawn to the East that becomes a wide-open meadow that becomes a steep grassy hill about quarter mile off. The sun seeps over it like liquid fire, making the grass white and shiny.

"What's going to come over the hill, gramps?" asks Mia. She read somewhere once that it's better to humor dementia patients than to try and correct them over every delusion or misremembrance. Her grandpa isn't diagnosed, but he's talking about the end of the world cresting the hill in his backyard. She doesn't need a doctor to tell her his state of his mind.

Grandpa just stares.

"Who's to say?" he mumbles. "When you feel a storm brewing, can't say if it's rain, thunder, snow, or hail. It's a storm and that's the long and short of it."

"Okay."

He turns to look at her.

"You think I'm a demented fool, don't you?" Mia cocks her head and thinks for a moment.

"I don't think you're a fool," she says. Grandpa barks a laugh.

"You've got your mother's tact," he says, and cracks first one set of fingers, then the other. Mia thinks of a large creature walking through the forest, snapping branches underfoot.

"Mom's going to come visit next week, actually," she says, but mostly because she can't think of anything else to say.

“To gloat over my waning health?” he asks, and grins with all ten of his teeth. Mia opens her mouth, closes it, opens it again. She shrugs.

“Maybe,” she says finally, and feels a little bad about it. Her mother isn’t a good person, but she’s still her mother. It feels like rocks in her mouth to impugn her character, even a little.

Her grandpa’s face softens.

“Have you seen her of late?” he asks. Mia smiles. When gramps is uncomfortable, or trying to be charitable, his speech becomes heightened, as if he’s in a Victorian novel.

“As of late? No. I’ve talked with her a couple times, though,” says Mia, and takes a sip of her coffee. Grandpa makes an “mmm” sound.

“Wasn’t she going to visit me last week?” he asks. Mia nods.

“And the week before,” she says.

“And the week before that one, too,” he says, then turns to look out at the hill. Backlit by the rising sun, the top of the hill is brilliant, shining, blazing. The incline is steeped in shadow black as space. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“For what?” asks Mia. Grandpa shrugs.

“Just...” he starts, then shrugs again.

They sit in silence for a time, listening to the birds and the morning as it stretches and yawns.

“Once, when she was a girl...” grandpa says. His mouth works, as if the words behind his teeth are too big, and need some chewing before they can get out. Mia wraps her hands around her mug and tries to suck its warmth into her chest through her fingers. Outside, a bird chirps and a woodpecker interrogates a tree. She can see the hill in her peripheral vision. “Once, when she was a girl,” he starts over. “She came to me with this box.” He puts his hands about a foot apart to demonstrate its size. “She said, ‘daddy, daddy, guess what’s in this box!’ I don’t remember what I said, but she kept saying ‘no, guess again!’ Finally, I gave up and told her to open it.” Once again, he looks out across his lawn, and squints his eyes. Mia looks, but it’s just a lawn, it’s just a hill. The sun hurts her eyes.

“So she opened it. And inside it...inside there was a snake. Medium size, big enough that it was almost overflowing. Black as soot. And in its mouth was the front half of a chipmunk. I could see its back legs and tail sticking out. The thing...it was still kicking a little.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mia says, and pushes her seat back a little, recoiling from the story.

“That’s not the worst of it,” he says. “The snake was choking. Bit off more than it could chew, and you could see it was struggling to breathe, trying to spit out and swallow the ‘munk all at once.” He pauses and a handkerchief appears in his hand and he dabs at his forehead. “And she was laughing. Just holding the box up close and just laughing at these two animals dying together. She thought it was hysterical. ‘They’re dying!’ she said, again and again. She was laughing so hard, that’s all she could get out. Full body laughs. She was laughing so hard she was shaking.”

“Jesus Christ...” Mia says again, quieter this time. She looks out the window.

A hand, ten feet across, grips the top of the hill, long fingers with black nails spilling over the side like rotten water. Mia inhales sharply.

“She was never right,” grandpa is saying. She looks at him and sees that he’s looking at the hill. He doesn’t look surprised or scared. He looks tired.

They watch together as the hand tenses in the grass and the End of It pulls itself up to its full height and blocks out the sun.