

## Birthright

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There is a little girl and she is told that she looks like her dead grandmother. This little girl does not know how to pray, for her mother does not believe in God, and so the girl sends wishes into the night sky instead, for things that she thinks her grandmother might like.

*May the Colts lose*, she wishes, because she has heard that her grandmother liked football and was loyal, always loyal, to the Baltimore Colts, her hometown team, and never to the Indianapolis Colts. Loyalty meant fidelity to place.

*May the dictionary grow ever fatter*, she wishes, for she has learned that her grandmother loved Scrabble and knew exotic words like qat and xu. Her grandmother will need more of these words as she draws tiles for a never-ending game in eternity. Eternity, it should be noted, is not Heaven. Heaven does not exist, just as God does not exist, for if God is real, the girl's mother explains, then He is a wicked and cruel God for infecting swimming pools with polio in the 1950s. The girl's mother does not believe in Resurrection, either, so she does not see the gift in her own recovery long ago, in Salk and his bitter pink inoculation that reanimated her limbs. Her Mother does not see God in that vaccine.

This little girl cannot believe in God, but she does believe in Ghosts because she reads *Nancy Drew* and she watches *Scooby Doo*. She believes in Ghosts as characters in a plot who will be debunked in the end when masks are lifted and there, underneath, exists a real person with motives and a face that is wrinkled and fleshy and naked and exposed. On the nights when her grandmother shows up, sitting on the end of the bed in dreams or in reality—it doesn't really matter because it is always late and dark and dream-like—the little girl believes she is speaking with a Ghost. And since Ghosts are real, she is, in point of fact, speaking with her grandmother.

One day, the girl's mother is visited at home by a Witch, or a neighbor, who drinks Lipton tea and eats chutney cheese on slices of thin bread and who tells the

mother that her little girl is an Old Soul. After, the little girl believes in reincarnation, not in an eternity in the stars or an everlasting peace, but in a room where you go and wait for the living to figure it all out and to finally send your soul to sleep.

Her grandmother has a lot to say when she visits at night, but she is silent, no words coming from her moving mouth, and so the girl has to interpret what her grandmother needs. Redemption. Resolution. It becomes clear that the girl with the strawberry blond curls, who looks so much like her auburn-haired grandmother, is her Grandmother Reincarnate. So, truthfully, the girl is talking to herself. And what does she have to say?

*Save me.*

The little girl, sitting up straight in bed, cocks her head. *From what?*

*From myself.*

She is here on Earth, the little girl now understands, to fix something, and that belief is bolstered every time her father looks at her, dew-eyed, and says, "Today, you look like my mother."

It is, then, the little girl's job to figure out what has been broken. In this version, Original Sin is particular to the soul that you inhale and inherit when you first gasp to life outside of the womb. Not a universal wickedness, you see, but a specific one, your own unique cross to bear.

This Sin, which is the little girls to fix, often whispers to her in the dishwater light of dawn, in the smell of leaves mulching back to earth each fall, in the gloaming at the end of the day. It could be mistaken for nostalgia, or melancholy, or the blues. But she understands it for what it truly is. Inheritance.