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Curse of the Ninth

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Sugar

She asks me if I am happy he is gone. I ask her if she remembers me sitting vigil over angel hair spaghetti like a museum exhibit about the nuclear family. Cramming raw, masticated broccoli down my throat in order to be excused from the table. I think of Sunday mornings and large fingers probing beneath the skin of a grapefruit, of Father's Day when I scrubbed a kiss from my virgin lips with toilet paper after escaping from the oak table. The place where I became an electric fence, untouchable. Where I used to sit across from the man with hungry eyes, who wouldn't waste anything, even going so far as to lick crumbs from his collared polo. During dinner, as I listened to him scrape his knife against the floral trim of his plate, I used to wonder how far he was willing to go to devour me completely, too.

As a little girl, I would cry at the head of the table, the closest chair to the door, teardrops maiming the pages of my homework packets. He would coil like a snake, teeth bared, poised to strike. I liked to taste the saline tears from my Cupid's bow and roll eraser shavings between my fingers. He liked to groan at the wet paper and rip my pencil from my cramping hands. *If you just stopped crying, this would be over sooner.*

Some days, when my mother would come home from work, he would push his mouth onto hers. And I. Would watch. And freeze in tandem with her. In a dream one night, he appeared as a snapping turtle. I woke up feeling a chunk of skin missing. There, at the kitchen table, I learned how to play dead, hiding my face in the rims of ceramic cups, anything to dodge the iron-jawed man. Even the dumbest of mutts can learn a trick or two. This is a skill I haven't forgotten.

And now he's gone, nestled in a little house atop sand dunes, which is more than I think he deserves, sometimes. We eat in separate kitchens at separate tables, sharing nothing but the moon. On particularly quiet nights,

I trace the grain of the wood table, picking out crumbs with my fingernail. How many times can this surface be scrubbed before I can sit here without fear of filth? How many showers will I have to take until I rid the stickiness of grapefruit juice from my skin? I swear I can still hear him slurping pulp from a spoon, legs spread wide under the kitchen table. I can see the tangy nectar drip from the corner of his mouth and onto his shirt. I feel him nudge my arm, asking for more sugar.

She asks me if I am happy he is gone. I lick toilet paper from my lips. I think about what “yes” will taste like.