

Avery Luft

Between The Cracks

There's this little boat dock that I pass by every morning on the bus to school. No one else notices the grey faded pier that's slowly sliding into the green pond surrounded by cattails and whistling grass. They notice the brown house behind it, where the door flaps open in thunderstorms, broken windows and sun-dried shingles. Kids whisper about the murder and hauntings and death that happened in those rooms, how everything was left: button-up shirts, coffee mugs, stained mattresses. I might be the only one who sees it; those rotting boards with moss growing between the cracks.

On my bus, I sit on the crowded outer-edge seat, one leg perfectly balanced in the aisle where all my weight is pooled. Maddie McKormick sits next to me in the middle, squished up next to this boy who crams himself onto the bug infested window, as if to get away from me. Flakes of little torn fly wings lay nestled in the sweating window cracks.

I have to look out the other window, across the seats. If I look over in my own row, Maddie will pinch me, hard and angry, on my exposed thigh. It's almost summer, and I have little pinprick fingernail bruises painted yellow and blue all over my legs. If my mom asks me, I usually say it's my cat's stone paws stepping over me at night, puddling marks under my skin. I'm not sure if she believes me, but either way she pretends to. She pretends our shelter clothes, Dollar Tree school supplies, and jagged homemade haircuts don't get me ruthlessly bullied in school. I think it saddens her. Or makes her feel guilty.

Every morning, I close my eyes and pretend to sleep until I feel the familiar twitched turning of the bus onto the gravel road, the bump and *Holy Shits!*, screamed from the back as if we didn't go over it every morning. My eyes razor open, peer over the ducked heads to catch a glimpse of it. Precarious and frayed, the dock almost looks blue against the soft background of curtain Spanish moss and frizzled weeds. The pond is small, and I wonder if there's ever been a boat at all, and where it would've fit. The old wooden house sits teetering behind it, a swaying door hung loosely on what I imagine are rusty hinges. I only get to look for about three seconds as we pass and the whole pond is swallowed up in coiling ferns and stubbed oak trees.

That morning, the sun poured into my eyes, so I focused on braiding the black seat belts that hung over the back of the row ahead of me. One piece of fabric over the other, fingers shaking, palms sweating, cuticles red and raw. Made the mistake of looking out the window where Maddie and her scrawny boyfriend were sucking face.

"Don't look," she hissed, digging her ragged nails into my thigh. I just winced and turned away. Diagonal from me were two girls, Katie and Sophea, whispering frantically back and forth to each other, loud enough that you could tell they were daring people to join in.

“Have you heard?” Katie said. “Max went to the haunted house the other day with his older brother Marco, and came back out traumatized!”

“You’re kidding!” Sophea squealed, gripping her friend's pale pink arms. I watched her fingers press indents into her skin, turning it white. I wondered if that spot was cold, without blood.

The words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Nothing actually happened at that house.”

They turned to me, Katie’s head reared back in disgust, eye twitching, as if I had spit on her. I wiped my mouth to make sure I hadn’t.

“How would you know?” Sophea spat. “You’ve never been in it.”

I wish I could’ve eaten the words back up, swallowed them down and let them simmer in the aloneness I always felt. The quiet when I got on the bus to a not-saved seat, the forced group projects at school no one wanted me in, the silent lunches I ate at the edge of the table for poor kids. There was no good reason to keep talking now, but the words came anyway.

“My mom told me,” I fiddled with a loose string on my shorts, eyes bouncing around the tiny speckled bruises. Like freckles almost. My mom told me lots of things about the little town she’d been in her whole life; nestled in the same run-down shack her dad lived in before us. The kids at school made fun of it, with the ripped screen door and rusting tin roof. They whispered behind me while I walked, my hands shoved in hand-me-downs, holes in the shoulder, rubber rolls rubbing off my feet with several pairs of socks to fit.

“Right. Your mommy told you,” Katie said, arms crossed. Her fingernails were painted, bubblegum pink. Had she done those at a sleepover? I curled my half-chewed, un-painted cuticles into my palm.

“Well, she would know...”

“You didn’t see the things Max saw. Dried blood and axes on the wall. Said the fridge was still running even!” She placed a stricken hand on her friend, clutching. “When he opened up the fridge, he said there were jars of real life organs! Like, hearts and brains and stuff!”

The bus twisted violently, and I knew we were turning down the street. Rigorous gravel bumps, then the gutted pothole, and the *Jesus Christs!*, erupting from the back. The two girls shrieked and tumbled over to the window. I leaned on my exposed left leg and strained my neck, eyes landing on the dock, half dipping into the algae frosted pond surface. The Florida breeze rippled the surface, duckweed growing in the corner. I didn't even look up at the house before we passed it.

“God how creepy,” Sophea shuddered, wrapping tangly arms around herself.

“I know right? I’d never want to go in there.”

It was coming up my throat without my permission. Hot and acidic, licking sweat beads off my upper lip, the words burning my tonsils. I don't know where it came from. The need to prove myself to them. "I would."

Katie glared at me. Sophea scoffed. But they eyed me carefully over their shoulders all the way to school. Even let me go first off the bus, laying their palm out with a friendly gesture I didn't recognize. Maddie shoving me into the row, cursing. Kids crammed and yelled for us to move faster, "*Get off!*" Sophea paused and flashed me a smile smothered in those expensive clear braces, teeth straighter than mine would ever be, and said, "After you."

I knew it was probably them being mean, but I didn't care. I stepped off the bus feeling like I had some sick version of two friends, which was better than no friends at all.

When I got on the bus after school, Katie and Sophea had saved me a seat. They waved their hands enthusiastically, scooting over so I could sit down. I focused on braiding the black hanging belts, unsure if I would ruin sitting there by talking. I didn't even have to put my leg out for balance.

"Your name's Eleane, right?" Sophea asked as we pulled away from school.

"Ellie." We had been in the same class since kindergarten. I knew their names just like their reputations in class. Loud, disruptive, but beloved. Flocks of friends to pick and choose from. Calligraphy covered sleepover invites I saw peeking over into their backpacks. Overflowing lunch tables and after school hangouts at the fleet of white picket-fenced houses I only saw through passing bus windows.

"Right, Ellie. Well, Max and his brother agreed to take us to the house today. You in?" She slapped my shoulder, shook me. "I mean, of course you're in. You said you would go, right?"

She was daring me to defy her. She was hoping I would say no. Or say yes. I couldn't really tell.

"I mean, yeah. I guess." Voice quivering, my fingers trembled around twisting the thick fabric seatbelts, the metal tongs clinking against each other when reaching the end.

"Great!" She grinned and turned over her shoulder to whisper to Katie.

We drove down the poorly made roads first. Gravel, pothole, screaming *Fuck!* and then the girls were standing up on the inside of the row.

"This isn't our stop," I began, but they hauled me up by my backpack straps and pushed me into the aisle. My feet moved without me, down the steps, onto the dirt road where I watched the yellow bus drive without me in it, around a bend, and vanish. Across the street, a tall boy with black hair leaned against a grey car, a lit cigarette resting between his lips. It looked like his mom's car, a Volvo. Dangling pink dice hung in the mirror.

"Marco!" Sophea yelled, and ran to the car door. Max leaned up next to his brother, obviously trying to mimic him. The girls paid no attention. They mumbled a quick "hey

Max,” and turned towards Marco. I could see his roots, clearly blonde, growing in. I wondered if he’d boxed dyed his hair to look cooler.

“Hey, y’all,” Marco took a long drag on the cigarette. “Get in. Let’s drive.”

My mom had drilled me not to get into strange cars with people I’d just met. Even if I’d been in class with Max and these girls since kindergarten. Even if the strange car was a grey Volvo with dangling pink dice. But there wasn’t saying no; no running down the slick gravel road, no walking home on the busy pavement where people drove too fast. And I was sure they wouldn’t agree to drive me home if I went back on my promise. I had to do it.

Five minutes later, we were parked behind some bushes, scrambling through the dense underbrush, waving away permeating mosquitoes and dodging sword-sized thorns. The five of us emerged on the other side, brown house ahead of us, the little blue dock towards our left. I sidestepped towards the jugged boards licking the water; wanting to smooth out the chipping splinters, run my hands against the willowy wooden stakes that were gently drowning in the mud, examine the water weeds growing on the far edge. I wanted to pay attention to the piece of the puzzle people overlooked.

“Where are you going?” Katie grabbed my arm, dragging me to the house. “That’s just a stupid pond. The house is where you’re going! You said you’d go in, right?” The door was cracked open, like someone had already gone in. I wondered if it stayed like that, slightly ajar, or if it had been Marco fleeing after seeing human hearts pressed in jam jars.

I’m not stupid. I knew that something bad was going to happen when I went in. They were going to sneak around back, jump through a window and scare me from another room. Or they’d already rigged up a trick to jump out at me. Marco would have the time to do that. He didn’t look like a student who was winning perfect attendance.

But I couldn’t run. And maybe if I’m honest, I wanted to go in. I wanted to see if the rumors were true: blood spatter on ceiling fans, broken mirrors with upside down crosses written in charcoal, the still running fridge. And maybe if I came out, unharmed and unscathed, they might save me a seat on the bus tomorrow.

“Don’t be shy,” Sophea said, fingers wrapped around the door, opening it. The hinges screamed, sending a flurry of moldy powder out. I looked behind me, one foot in the opening, at Max and Marco. Max looked worried, brow furrowed, but trying to play it off. He shifted nervously from foot to foot, casting uneasy glances at the girls who he obviously wanted to impress. Marco watched, disinterested, blowing a huffing breath of smoke out from yellow teeth.

“Go on,” Katie said, shoving me inside. “Have a look around! Don’t forget the kitchen!”

I stood in the living room. Ripped newspaper spread across the floor like carpet. A formerly white loveseat flipped on its side, a dirty couch overturned against the wall. I picked at my cuticles, tore off a long strip, and moved my feet around the room. No axes so far.

Down the hallway, I looked carefully at discolored pictures hung crooked and fractured on the walls. One had a family, standing on a freshly-painted dock. It looked like what could've been the dock outside, with attention and care. Silver nails and clean smooth boards. A mother, hands resting on the son's shoulder, father's hands; one around his wife and the other ruffling his daughter's hair. They looked complete, and it made me sad. I'd never had a family portrait; pictures made my mom too depressed. She would come home from her second job and lay sprawled on the couch, cigarette in one hand, telling me tales of the drunk that knocked her up and left town. I guess people started avoiding me before I was even born.

The bedroom was almost empty when I slowly creaked the door open. A metal bone bedframe sat upright in the corner, threatening to collapse. Looking closely at the walls, trying to see if the dark color was paint or blood. Rubbed my fingers through the filthy soot. I thought it was paint.

In the bathroom, the green porcelain tub was split down the middle. Golden faucet heads tarnished brown, the toilet I wouldn't dare open, medicine cabinet with a bottle of tums and stray band-aids. I flicked on the left handle, and the water came on, gurgling down the sink. So the water still worked. I wondered if the fridge was still running then.

I walked hastily over to the kitchen, impatient to get out and proudly exclaim that I had done it: walked through the haunted house and survived. I could be invited to Katie and Sophea's lunch table, people eager to hear my adventures and share cookies. I would have people fighting for a seat next to me on the bus, begging me to recount my journey. Maybe even be handed a curling invite for a sleepover, huge TV's aglow in their clean dens, the girls painting my nails bubblegum pink.

The kitchen had flowery wallpaper, blue buds swirling together. Fatigued white cabinets were falling off the metal joints, with spindly rat nests made of straw and mattress stuffing nestled inside. The large farm sink held dirty dishes; grim and greasy oil now morphed into the pots and pans. I picked up a glass, brought it to my eye like a telescope, squinted at the overflowing sink. It almost seemed like someone was just here, planning to return.

The fridge felt warm when I placed a flat palm against its silver door. I wrapped my slick fingers around the handle, and threw open the door. The smell of rot and decay hit my nose and I squeezed my eyes shut. Jesus Christ, Marco might've been right! Opening my eyes, all that remained were molding oranges and gone-bad swiss cheese, flimsy wrapper peeling on one corner. The fridge was full of rotting food, but no organs. I carefully picked up each jar to make sure. Just jam, just pickles, just garlic cloves. No brains or hearts or lungs.

I took a small jar of pickled something floating in a brown murky liquid, and slipped it into my front shorts pocket. Souvenir. Proof.

“I did it!” I yelped, throwing the door open and falling out into the sunlight, gulping heaps of air into my stale lungs. “I made it out!” Hands on my knees, heaving, before standing up straight to look around. Marco, Max, and the two girls were nowhere. I circled the house, waiting to see if they’d jump out of a waiting bush, scrambled through the bushes to see if the grey Volvo was still parked. It wasn’t.

I tumbled back through the bushes and stepped onto the sinking dock, finally able to sit quietly in the lonesome space I’d stared at through foggy bus windows. A place I wouldn’t have to convince my existence in. My mom would be wondering where I was now, worrying. But there wasn’t anywhere to go really. No place I could walk or drive to where I wouldn’t be embarrassingly me.

I wasn’t even angry that they had left me. I was only upset that they hadn’t bothered to see if I’d pull it off. That was almost worse; their palpable unfaithfulness that I could make it through. No one at school would believe me if I said I walked through the haunted house now. I could already see them, Katie and Sophea, pointing and doubled over in laughter.

“You? You went through the house? No fucking way. Don’t lie and say we took you. We’d never go anywhere with you.”

The pond was calm, algae covering the surface like a blanket, soft and safe. I ran my hands over the supple wood, pressing a finger down into it, the splinters folding in. Rotting. I wondered if the bus were to pass by now, if I’d look like a forlorn ghost sitting here, boot toes rippling the water, wide circles bouncing across the edges. I wondered if they’d even notice me, or skip right past to see the house.

My skin felt tight, stretched thin over my bones, itching. I took the small jar of something spoiled and turned it over in my hand, the smoothness of glass ripening against my palm. In a second, I was dropping it into the water, watching it fall quickly from air to water to mud, and sink where no one would ever touch it again.