

Shoebox

by Kathy Fish

Their parents worry about them because they are so thin. Their mother fries steaks, untrimmed, in butter, mashes full cream into the potatoes. They cradle spoonfuls of food on their tongues and when their father says, "chew that up and swallow it," they do, but the feel of it sliding down their throats is an agony.

They don't want to grow big and strong, they want to be left alone. They want to walk out to the open field behind their house, talk low, pluck caterpillars from the milkweed. Soon, there will be monarch butterflies the size of their mother's hands.

They get a hold of their aunt's cigarettes. They learned to read last year so they pass the pack back and forth, reading the warning label. They try to smoke the cigarettes, but their lungs are small and rigid, like stones in their chests. They lie down in the prairie grass and clutch each other, imagine dying together under fat clouds.

Their aunt comes to watch them sometimes when their parents have to go into Osage. As soon as the car disappears down the long, gravel driveway, she turns to them and says, "Go. Be One with Nature." The aunt drinks Seven & Sevens and sits on the screened porch, one hand squirming like a puppy under the blanket on her lap. Some smell rises up out of the aunt they can't identify. They are careful not to get too close.

In town, there is a school and there are other children. They know this because the aunt has told them. They sit on the floor in the far corner of the porch, staring at the ham salad sandwiches she made for them.

"You two fit inside a shoebox when you were born," the aunt says. "This big." She holds her hands up.

They have heard the story, how their mother swaddled them tightly together in one receiving blanket and their father put them in the box and took a picture. He sent it into the local newspaper. The photo ran on the front page. After that, their mother did not speak to their father—or anyone—for one full month.

They want to hear more about the town, but are afraid to ask.

"You think I care if you eat those sandwiches? I do not. I'll stuff them down the disposal and not say a word," the aunt says.

The aunt has lupus. Her face is flat and round as a paper plate. A red rash sits on the bridge of her nose and across her cheeks like a pair of reading glasses. She regards them with her little eyes.

They read the Bible and the stories their mother types up for them. The children in the stories are forever naughty and forever in peril. In the end, the children repent and all is well. Still, God looms over their shoulders as they play, disappointed and angry.

They press their palms over a triangle of sunlight on the edge of the blanket. A truck rattles past on the road behind the stand of evergreen trees. Both girls turn their heads and listen hard.

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