

The Daughters

by Myfanwy Collins

Their mother never teaches them to wipe front to back or to brush their teeth before bed. One of the daughters goes for weeks without washing her hair until the teacher complains she smells of their father's cigarette smoke.

Their mother does teach them that if they wear their underpants two days in a row they will get sick.

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The daughters take baths together and wash each other's backs. One, one, one in a line and then turn when each back is done. Turn and turn until their backs are rubbed raw.

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The daughters learn to clean the dishes with a dish rag, not a sponge. They learn that it is okay to keep butter out so that their toast tastes rancid, even when they cover it in cinnamon.

And they learn that it is fine to have multiple bottles of condiments open in the fridge. Once they count four bottles of ketchup in different stages of use with a skin of red oozing beneath each cap. There is always a scab on top of the plastic mustard container.

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Their father cleans their ears with an unraveled paper clip. If one is not handy, then he uses the cap of a Bic pen. He squishes one of the daughters next to him on the couch, folds her head down over his lap. He digs at her ear wax while he watches the hockey game.

The daughters are not fond of this practice but do not complain. They lie across their father's lap and listen to the aching scratchiness of the metal against cartilage. Every so often their father forgets what he's doing and digs too deeply and the daughters flinch.

Stay still, he warns. I could slip and hurt you.

When he is done and the daughters are free to go the inside of their ears tingle red. The sounds of the world seem muted to them, seem dense.

