

"American Daughter" by Bethany Catlin
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 Finalist story in the 2018 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
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American Daughter

by Bethany Catlin

It is Catlin family Thanksgiving, and the time has come for Feats of Strength. Wood is being chopped, Heavy Things are being lifted, a sawmill is being built in the backyard. Why? Because. To make things.

Ten pounds of mashed potatoes. The mashing is also a competition — my dad is victorious. But he is the oldest and wisest Catlin son: his skills are honed, refined, practiced. There are three sons and he is the biggest. Too bad he doesn't have a sawmill.

The children are playing Native Americans. It is not historically accurate, it is not culturally appropriate. They are too old for this. They do it anyway. They are making "soup" in a dent on a giant rock in the front yard. So far, the ingredients include mud, smushed berries picked off Grandma's decorative tree, a half-eaten Snickers bar contributed by a two-year-old, and something green. One of the children samples the soup. He is promptly shamed by his cousins — Indians do not eat soup. Only pretend.

The Wolf Pack comes barking and bawling down the drive, announcing their volatile and important presence to a passing car trawling through the dense Indiana woods. The "wolves" consist of a bumbling yellow dog tripping over his big bumbling paws, a confused and excitable poodle, and two squat white creatures — one of whom must stop briefly before lugging her corpulent belly the rest of the way down the driveway.

Dinner is announced and the children promptly abandon their muck and all Native American pretensions as the wolves revert to their lazy doggy selves, suddenly whiny and hopeful. The food is good. Grandpa made baked steaks from the venison Uncle Drew brought — a remnant of last winter's hunting stock. At dinner the people talk of love, of YouTube, of political theory and poor weather and whatever the word synecdoche means. It is a very Catlin family conversation.

Where did we come from? Who knows. Probably the woods.

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Sometimes one of us does a bit of wondering about this "where we came from" — usually it's Grandpa. He pulls out the books of George Catlin's paintings and looks at the pictures, and he thinks about history and the weight of things and the people that came before. George Catlin was a well-known American painter in the 1830s, the first white man to depict the Plains Indians in their native territory. He is the family claim to fame.

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"The very use of the word 'savage,' as it is applied in its general sense, I am inclined to believe is an abuse of the word, and the people to whom it is applied," he once wrote.

This quote took on a significance I can only describe as ancestral with my Grandpa and with his father, Great-Grandpa Dale, before him. Once, a white man talked down to a black man in a bar in front of Great-Grandpa Dale. In response, he took hold of a fistful of back skin in one hand, a fistful of neck skin in the other, hefted the offending man over his shoulder, and dumped him out on the concrete. Years later, his son, my grandpa, marched on Selma in defiance of the racial hatreds that reared their ugly heads in the small Midwestern towns and homes he knew.

But Great-Grandpa Dale used that very same move on his son when he missed his 10 o'clock curfew. Fathers teach their sons how to do the right thing, how to stand up against the morally wrong, and also how to get over stuff real quick.

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"Paigey, I wanna build the kids a cannon."

Aunt Paige looked up with long-suffering eyes to the long-suffering ceiling just above the long-suffering wall that once bore the hideous, absolutely unacceptable mounted head of the wild boar Uncle Matt killed a few years ago. Uncle Matt is the third Catlin son. She wondered why his ideal decoration scheme was dead things and weaponry.

"Huh."

"I've been blacksmithing some of the individual parts — I bet I can pull it off. We can set it off on the Fourth of July! No one will ever notice because of the fireworks. We'd shoot blanks, of course.

She wondered why their kids should ever have a cannon. She imagined telling her own five bright-eyed Catlin children that they could not have the cannon their father offered to build them.

She sighed.

"Be good."

"You're the best!" He scampered off to the cavern under the house where he kept his blacksmithing equipment and the exiled boar head. There was a sudden and particular lightness in his bearlike shoulders as he set off on this new and unreasonable adventure.

She married a strange man, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Later, in July, the little girls would dress up like fairy princesses and dance around while Daddy gave the family cannon its inaugural launch from careful concealment in the backyard Little Tykes playhouse. She knew none of her children would be hurt. They never are.

Dads. If she didn't love him, she would have to kill him.

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The only person who ever challenged Great-Grandpa Dale and won was his own mother, the woman known to everyone as Grandma Nona. She was fierce.

Her most ferocious quality was her mouth. Grandma Nona never, ever stopped talking. She was a bona fide gossip who never kept any secrets but her own. The home she shared with her husband Arthur kept tune to the soundtrack of her voice: the ups and downs, the rasps and coughs, the regular announcements of "Arthur you turn your hearing aid back on and listen to me right now!" My grandpa, her grandson, loved her dearly.

She was his Champion. "Dale! You are NOT gonna hit that boy!"

And he didn't. Not that time.

Grandma Nona declared my grandpa her favorite grandchild in short order — it must have been pretty disappointing for the other children but it worked out just swell for him. She talked and he listened, and they were inseparable.

Grandma Nona always had something to say. Whenever she ran out of things to say, she filled all silence and impending silence with platitudes and worn phrases that she would substantiate with the molasses of her thick Kentucky drawl and a particular leaning on the vowels that implied they carried the weight of the world. "Them that has, gets." She would say this and promptly nod. Yes, this was true. Unfortunate, really. My grandpa found himself declaring "them that has, gets" too.

Once, as an adult, he needed to dash to the kitchen in the middle of one of her monologues. He asked to excuse himself for a moment, and in response she said she would just keep talking while he was gone, if he didn't mind, because the sound of her own voice helped ease the ringing in her ears. Tinnitus.

He kept listening from the other room as he ran the water and started chopping vegetables. She talked to the wall, to the chair. She told them about her childhood in Kentucky. She told them about her husband — he enlisted in the army at the age of 16 and fought in the trenches of World War I a month later.

Grandpa found more things to do in the kitchen. Perhaps the counter needed to be wiped.

Grandma Nona explained to the furniture that her husband was beaten with a buggy whip within an inch of his life because he got the neighbor's horse sick — he gave it the wrong feed. "That's why he ran away. He showed up at the enlistment officer's booth, told the officer he wanted to enlist. 'How old are you?' officer asks him. 'Sixteen,' he says. 'Go take a walk around the block and come back eighteen,' officer tells him. And then he does just that. He fought in every major battle in that war, you know." And the furniture doesn't, but my Grandpa does, now.

And she told the furniture why she and her mother ran away from Kentucky; she told the chair and she told the walls that her father was her grandfather too. And my grandpa thought about where things come from, and he wished that the furniture had kept that secret.

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Once during a family gathering, I was bad.

Dad cooked up his well-loved biscuits and gravy, and I would not eat it. We were gridlocked. Two identical, unwavering wills. I was four and I knew everything. He was thirty-four and he knew everything. Neither could budge — it was the principle of the thing.

"Bethany, you have to eat at least one biscuit before you can be excused."

"No."

Everyone else at the table had long since finished. The discomfort of conflict had passed, leaving only intense speculation: who would walk away from this victorious?

"I made this special for everyone to eat. They liked it! Mom, did you like it?"

Mom was tired of this argument. "Yes, come on Bethany."

Aunt Becky piped in, "It's really good! I liked it."

My older sister was perfect and well-behaved. Her smug face peered out from behind an empty plate. God, she was the worst. She made things worse for both of us. Especially me.

"Look, even your sister cleaned her plate."

What a monster.

Thinking he had me logically convinced, he leaned back. "Just eat one biscuit."

I sat up straight, looked him directly in the eye, and delivered my verdict. "It tastes like dog spit."

My mom had to leave. Laughing at badness is not good for children.

"Bethany. We will sit here until you eat a biscuit. Because you have to eat. And until you know better, I will know better for you."

And he did.

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Dad is on the phone, in my ear, and he is trying to think of a Catlin family love affair. I am trying to drink my coffee black.

"This tastes like ass."

He laughs. "Hey. I thought we said you could only swear if you did it in that Scottish accent, like William Wallace."

"Oh but I'm in college now. Comes with the territory. Not to mention the fact that you and mom swear — what a discovery that was."

"Hey, when you're old enough you become privy to the family secrets."

"Except for the fact that we don't have any! While my prof was explaining this assignment, I kept trying to think of one example of scandal in our family to write about and I can't think of anything. Everyone is still happily on their first marriage, everyone is still speaking to one another, everyone has a job."

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He thinks for a minute. "Huh. I think I had a cousin who was having some marital issues a while ago. Kurt? Yeah, Kurt."

My dad thinks that someone he hasn't talked to for ten years might have had a disagreement with his wife maybe. The length requirement is ten pages. This will not do.

"I could write about that cannon Uncle Matt built last year for the cousins, or about that one time Uncle Drew ripped the muscle off his arm during Feats of Strength. Those aren't secrets though. They're just bizarre Catlin stories. I don't know."

"You're gonna need better, huh. Listen...maybe your story isn't in affairs or kids out of wedlock. But there's a lot to this family — hey, why don't you call your grandpa and ask him about Grandma Nona?"

"Who's that?"

"She was his grandma."

"Why?"

"Because. I'll let him tell it, it's more of his story to tell anyway. That's the thing — there's some stuff in this family that just doesn't get talked about. It's not carefully hidden away, it just isn't our story to tell. Generation to generation, it's complicated how things are handed down."

"Okay."

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Grandma Nona survived her husband and moved to a retirement home in Illinois in the 1990s. Shortly after her arrival, she was practically running the place. Her room became a social hub — she banished quiet and loneliness once and for all the second she set foot in the door.

One day Grandma Nona didn't come downstairs, didn't lord her overwhelming yet magnetic presence over the breakfast hall, didn't announce the day's drama (real or invented) at top volume over coffee. A nurse was dispatched.

Grandma Nona was found murdered in her own room. She was ninety years old. A local panhandler had found that her open-door policy applied to him too — after bumming money off her several times, one day he raped her and cut her throat with a pair of scissors. There is no why.

He was mentally handicapped, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome. He was caught days later, and he is living out a life sentence somewhere out of state. My grandpa's brother Joel visited him in prison once. It was the good Christian thing to do. He didn't get any answers — I don't think the guy spoke a word to him.

We wish she didn't come the way she came. We wish she didn't go the way she went.

I wonder if "if wishes were fishes" was one of Grandma Nona's sayings. I don't know. We never met.

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All of my grandparents, uncles, and aunts are college-educated. Not one of them is divorced. Most have at least one Masters' degree. One climbed a substantial chunk of Mt. Everest, one graduated from the Naval Academy at the top of his class, one adopted a child from Guatemala, one raised five beautiful children while working as a top level executive.

We do not know if this is our story to tell, but we are telling it.

Where did we come from?

Probably the woods.