

“Blackberries”

By

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Eli’s lips are chapped and cracked and bleeding from all the lies he tells and if I’m not careful mine will end up that way, too. That’s why I’m always careful, and I can tell when it’s a lie because the truth tastes like the pitted cherries that my grandpa used to bring us when he would come and visit, but a lie tastes like the bitter blackberries that my brother stole from the patch by the road when they weren’t even ripe yet. That night he called me to his room and showed me how he had filled the basket of his shirt with green, green berries and I was only going to eat one but somehow I couldn’t stop and they were sour and bitter and the next day my stomach hurt so much that Momma had to get down the bottle of Pepto Bismol to make it go away.

I never ate a blackberry again.

Eli eats blackberries often, and he tells me that they’re tasty. Eli’s real name is Elliot after his low-down, good-for-nothing father, but Eli wants to at least be good-for-something so he tells everyone to call him Eli. Once, I asked him why his momma would marry a low-down, good-for-nothing in the first place and he said, “Chsshaw, chsshaw, you don’t know anything, do you? My momma never married nobody!” And that was the end of it, even though I didn’t understand.

Even though she never married, though, Eli’s momma makes the best blackberry pie that you ever ate. At least, that’s what everyone tells me because I don’t eat blackberries – can’t stand the sight of them. Every time I come over for dinner, after we clear away our dishes and when I am wiping my face with my napkin, she will say, “Who wants blackberry pie? Do you want blackberry pie?” and when I say no she will act hurt but then she will swat me over the head with a dish towel and say, “Ahhh, ahhh, you are too good for my pie, now aren’t you?”

I don’t want Eli’s momma to think that I am too good for her pie but I cannot eat blackberries. Cherries I can eat, sweet cherries that stain my lips red so they almost look like Eli’s, like they’re bleeding. Cherries that my grandpa used to bring with the pits punched out and nothing left but cherry skin and cherry flesh. Cherry pie, I want to tell Eli’s momma to make, a cherry pie I would gobble up right before your eyes.

Once, I asked Eli why his momma makes blackberry pie and not cherry pie and Eli just laughed and said, “Chsshaw, girl. You know my momma can’t afford no cherries!” and I wanted to tell

him that my grandpa would bring some but then I remembered that I haven't seen my grandpa in a long time and I don't know when he's coming back. So instead I asked him another question – I asked him why he would be named after a low-down, good-for-nothing in the first place, and it was the first time I ever saw Eli angry. He got a mean look in his eye and pushed me off the porch where we were sitting and I landed in the dust with an OOMPF to hear him say, “Chsshaw, girl, you really don't know nothing, don't know when to stop that little cherry tongue of yours.”

After that I just sat in the dirt for a while and stared at a line of ants that were marching towards the kitchen, probably to eat Eli's momma's blackberry pie. I didn't say anything and Eli didn't say anything, not til I got up to leave and then he said, “Wait, girl, don't leave. I'm sorry, it's just – chsshaw – you don't know when to shut up!”

I didn't look back and on my way home I passed by a blackberry bush with the berries all fat and inviting and I wanted to show him – show him what, I didn't know, maybe that I didn't have a cherry tongue. So I ate one blackberry, then two, then four. I ate until I couldn't reach any blackberries anymore and then I sat down in the dirt and I cried.

When I got home, I looked in the mirror and saw that my face was stained from the tears and my dress was stained from the dirt and my fingers and tongue were stained from the berries, blueish-black like a bruise and I wanted to laugh 'til I saw my lips, which were stained red, red like cherries or truth or blood and they were chapped and cracked and bleeding.

I looked away.