

MAGGIE'S BLACKBERRIES

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My mom had taken me back to Maggie's blackberry bushes one warm afternoon when the berries had just begun to ripen. Maggie sat on her back porch and watched us wearily (even though she had been the one to invite us over.) My mom taught me how to pluck the berries off the bush without squishing them and staining my fingers purple or pricking myself on a thorn. She told me in a half whisper that when she was young Maggie had taught her the same thing.

Maggie had been a second mother to my mom. When my mother was a girl about my age she would often slip off to the house across the street where Maggie lived. It wasn't until later that my mom explained that she liked to escape her own house when her mom was going through one of her moods because her father was coming home late at night smelling of some other woman's perfume. Maggie's house was the perfect escape. The two of them would sit out on her porch on cool summer nights wrapped up in sweaters. They piled ripe berries that they had picked the afternoon before into their mouths. As Maggie's Labrador puppy, Ruthie, bounded about the yard, Maggie told my mom stories that she would later recount to me at bedtime. At the end of each story my mom would sigh and whisper to me that she could never tell a story the way Maggie could.

That afternoon, I asked my mom if Maggie would tell me one of her stories now. My mom looked up cautiously toward Maggie sitting on the porch with Ruthie, now slowed by arthritic legs, laying her head on her lap. My mom gently ruffled my shaggy blonde hair.

"She doesn't tell stories anymore, sweetie." And when I ask in my small, pleading voice *why*? She smiled, a long sad smile, and kept plucking berries to put into my plastic basket .

After a while my mom wandered over to go talk *adult talk*, as she called it, with Maggie. As she knelt down to sit next to Maggie on the steps, Ruthie picked her head up. I whistled under my breath and she limped over to watch me as I dug deeper in the berry bush. After I had made sure Maggie and my mom were deeply involved in their conversation, I held out a blackberry for Ruthie even though Maggie said it was bad for her digestion. Ruthie's pink slobbery tongue tickled my hand as she snatched the berry.

I glanced up to check on Maggie again before I gave Ruthie another berry. I saw my mom's arm wrap around Maggie's shoulder and Maggie lay her head down in her lap. I quickly glanced away, feeling as though I had invaded their privacy somehow.

I sat out in the yard for the rest of the afternoon afraid to look over at them again or even think about what I had seen. Instead I played a game with Ruthie, giving her a berry after I had eaten one myself. A few crows flew over and attempted to pluck some berries off the vine before Ruthie scared them off with her bark. I liked the crows, though, because they made a funny noise like a chicken clucking as they took the berries into their beaks.

After what felt like an eternity to me and my childish attention span, my mother, blurry eyed and attempting to hide her snuffling with awkward coughs, walked over to

me. She took my hand in one of hers and grabbed my berry bowl with the other and we walked out of Maggie's yard without saying a word. I was too afraid to look back to wave to Ruthie in fear that I would see Maggie.

For several weeks my mother spent her afternoons at Maggie's house, but she never took me along. When finally one evening my mother took me in her arms and told me through heavy tears that Maggie had moved on to a better place, I wanted to ask about the berry bushes and Ruthie. Who would care for them? But I worried that a question like that would bring my mom back to the yard on that afternoon. Someplace I knew she and I never want to go again. We would much rather remember that place when Ruthie still ran chasing after crows and the thick air held Maggie's stories.