

Oreos

“What’s on that tray out there?” I ask, pointing out the kitchen window to the back stoop, with its small set of stairs which lead to a vegetable patch and up into the woods. The woods in northern Iowa have the slough of glacial loess, the debris pushed up by giant ice sheets moving across the central U.S. ten thousand years ago, so this woods has large freestanding slabs of limestone that jut out of the hillside or lie at strange angles like the crude remnants of some haphazardly discarded toy dropped by a giant child. Deeply grooved grey-barked black walnut trees and smooth box elders tower over the tangles of wild black cap vines, bright red and yellow columbine blooms, and the tall mixture of grasses and undergrowth.

“Oh,” my father says, looking at the woods and then down to the level that my finger is pointing to at the top of the back stairs. “Well, can’t you tell?” he asks me. His face is still and serious, but his eyes are glossy and black, mischievously bright. “Whatta you think it is?” he challenges.

“I don’t know.” I reply, stalling for time. There’s something on the post at the corner of the stairs, something brown and clear piled in a four inch high mound. I don’t recognize it, but it doesn’t seem accidental.

“No, huh?” he prods, seeing if I’m quick enough to understand the mystery, but I only wrinkle my forehead, staring at the mound then glancing at my father to see if he will give me some clue. Finally, he laughs and tells me, “It’s grape jelly.”

“What?” I scoff. It’s the last thing I’d think of. I’m not sure I should believe him.

“Haven’t you heard of using grape jelly to attract oreos?” he says, smiling. “Your brother, he brought me a jar and put it out for my oreos,” he explains. His voice begins high and drops down as if it’s falling from the sky.

“What? No way!” I tell him. I know my brother is a joker, and I’ve fallen for more than one of his tricks. Once the whole family was out picking up walnuts for the forestry service, but my brother spent the day carefully placing this taxidermied baby skunk, that he bought somewhere, next to our gunny sacks and on side hills where one of us would find it and freak out.

“Okay,” he snips at me, turning away. He’s acting indignant, but he knows he’s got my attention. “Well, supposedly it attracts oreos. I’ve had a half a dozen or more come to the feeder. But you watch and tell me what you see.” he demands, walking away from me as he returns to pulling dishes out the dishwasher drainer and toweling them dry.

I wait by the window, not entirely sure what I’m waiting for. My thoughts drift to my husband in Arkansas. He is probably sitting at our dining room table eating breakfast and watching a pair of cardinals bully the other birds at the two cedar feeders hung from the trellis over our back porch. His view is crowded by the great green fullness of the oaks covered in early summer leaves, the long-needle loblolly pines and white pines standing like sentinels on the crest of the small rounded mountain we live on. Maybe he’d catch sight of a palliated woodpecker or a red-bellied sapsucker on the great blanched bone of dead pine that stands amid the slick-looking new oak leaves vibrant greenness and the dark green needed of the pines. On a clear morning you can peer through the trees and spy layers of milky blue veils hovering over the river valley. Through the veils you’ll see the tree covered humped backs of old worn-down mountains, the foothills of the Ouachitas where we live. My husband and I might both be drinking our morning coffee now and looking out the window at these two different lands, watching the bird feeders instead of televisions.

I observe the gray-tufted titmice, hopping juncos, and common black-throated sparrows peck through the hulls of black oil sunflower seeds looking for crumbs beneath the homemade two liter bird feeder which more often feeds the squirrels. I get lost watching the juncos frenzied hopping. They till the hulls with their beaks, flipping, and jabbing at these casings for tiny remnants of seed-meats. I check to see if there are any nubby spears of asparagus peaking out of the soil at the top of the backstairs, where my grandmother transferred the crowns of wild ditch asparagus several years ago. There are spears, but none are big enough to eat. The jelly is untouched by the juncos and sparrows, but then a flash of fire and a streak of black draw my attention.

“Da’, come here.” I chirp, my voice high and excited. The colorful streak has come to rest on the post near the grape jelly. “There’s one,” I exclaim, too captivated to turn and see if my father is looking. “It’s an oriole.”

“Just one?” He sniffs and rolls his eyes at me, but I can tell he’s pleased. “Well, watch, Sara,” he says standing near me and gazing out the window too.

The oriole is a male, bright orange and jet-colored, sleek bodied with a pale straw-colored beak. He hops on the edge of the margarine lid where the glob of grape jelly lays, turning and tilting his tiny head in jerky motions taking precaution not to eat before he’s sure it is safe. I slowly step back from the window, afraid he’ll see me and fly away.

He takes a small hop forward and jabs his beak into the jelly. My father laughs, a high-pitched breathy sounding chortle. “Look at that!” he says. “They love it. Oh, I’m surprised there’s only one. Ofen times they’ll be two or three, but they fight over it. Uff-dee! I don’t like to see ‘em fight. You don’ see more than one eat at a time, my oreos.” As he speaks he dries his hands on the towel, folding it into a long cylinder before hanging it on the bar across the oven door. His voice and face are joyfully animated. It’s as if he’s free from the kitchen, from chores, from the emotional reserve of Midwestern and Norwegian stoicism. We’re just two children watching the beautiful oriole and his pleasure in eating the grape jelly.

My mind flashes to a memory of the painting of an Eastern oriole, like the one we’re seeing, which my grandmother always had hanging in her entry way. My father has this painting now in nearly the same place — the entry way, hanging over the coat closet. It was painted by my father’s sister Elizabeth, who drank herself to death before she was fifty. I remember her dark hair and eyes, the way she hesitated before entering a room or a building, the way she often took flight from a place if there were too many people or the walls were too close. She was someone who could light up a space with her joking and her laughter or bring the thunderheads inside with her by saying a string of expletives that cut the air like thunder cracking the sky. “Liz was bright,” my father’d say, “So much promise, quick witted and artistic, but then she started to drink. Oh, and she drank so much. And when she drank she was just belligerent — said such hurtful things about me, about mother. She’d just attack us. It wasn’t any good for us or for her either. I finally had to tell her not to come to the house, when she was drunk like that.” There was pain, and some anger, in my father’s voice, but he’d always

end such talk with, “At least she was never like that with you kids. Anyhow it wasn’t her, just the booze talking.”

I don’t know about my brother and sister, but I know I never kept that rule. I never refused to let her in, as I was told I must do for my own safety. If Aunt Liz came over and tapped on the window or stood at the door because she knew Dad and Mom’s car was gone, then she came in too. I was a little afraid and guilty about disobeying my parents, but I was also fascinated. I thought she could tell me what my parents wouldn’t. The kid I was innocently thought that maybe I could convince her to stop drinking. At least, I might hear a new story about growing up with my dad, and sometimes I’d ask her to tell me why she called my father and grandmother such awful names.

We’d sit down at the kitchen table and her eyes would dart about the room, but always come back to the small cabinet above the stove where the hard liquor was stored. Sometimes she’d pace the room, stopping to peer into the living room or to look into cabinets, to pick up fragile tea cups or look into bowls in the dish cupboard and then put them back. She’d scan the countertops, fingering loose change and the plastic cover of my dad’s check ledger or open the fridge and give me a glass bottle of pop after offering me a beer or complaining if there weren’t any. Maybe she’d have a beer with her or take one from the fridge, but her eyes would always return to the doors of the small cabinet.

I won’t say I didn’t climb my mother’s white vinyl-covered stepstool with the olive green pattern on it that looked like weird flowers or maybe mushrooms on it, climbing up so I could stand on the counter and bring down a bottle or two. I won’t say I didn’t replace them carefully, turning the bottles so that they stood perfectly centered in the circle of dust, keeping the labels facing just as they were when I took them out, and turning the cap so that the strip of broken safety seal paper lined up. I won’t say I liked doing it, but I wanted my aunt to stay.

Some of those conversations are my most vivid and pleasant memories of her. She’d flash me a smile, strike a match to light her Camel, and take my small dimpled hand in her rough brown trembling one. Playing with my fingers, she’d tell me she loved me so much. “Yes,” she’d say. “I love your dad, too, honey,” and I’d beam up at her squeezing her fingers. “Even though he’s a real asshole,” she’d continue. I’d

wilt. She'd apologize, "No, no, I'm sorry. Look at me baby. He's only an asshole half the time." She'd laugh and try to get me to. "Okay, he's not so bad. No, I love him. But he's my brother so I can say what I want about him." She'd pause and remind me, "But I shouldn't say it around you. You kids don't need to hear that." Aunt Liz would name her other siblings, and her mom and dad and say she loved them too, but remind me that maybe I shouldn't tell them she said that. Sometimes she'd lay her head down on my hand on the kitchen table and cry and go on slurring her words until I wasn't sure what she was saying. Then she'd disappear out the backdoor into the onyx-colored night.

I fix my gaze on the oriole eating the grape jelly, even more firmly. I will him not to go, as I try to absorb all the tiny details of his coloring, the way he moves his eyes, how he eats, the color of the inside of his beak, and then he calls out. Dad and I both break into smiles and listen. I want to remember the voice, but I know I won't get it quite right. Somewhere nearby there are calls in response.

Dad continues filling me in, "Well, Matt said it would work. Oh, I don't know a few months ago he came by and put some out. Woof-dee!" He chuckles. "I thought he was crazy, but he goes, 'Just try it. You'll have oreos.' Says he has more oreos out at his place than he knows what to do with. Just got to watch out for the squirrels. Well, the wasps like it too, but they don't eat much so I don't mind. But if you see a squirrel, you let me know. Squirrel'll eat the whole thing."

"I gotta getta picture of him," I tell Dad, turning to run out of the room. My camera is in the coat closet in the front entrance. Aunt Liz's oriole painting is just above the door to the coat closet, and I pause to look up at it. The painting is of a male oriole with very bright orange coloring. He is perched on the branch of a flowering tree with a great pale pink blossom on it. The blossom is delicate and lovely, but dull next to the oriole with his striking colors. He's painted like a racecar, sleek and bright. I'd never noticed before, but he seems to be singing. His beak is slightly open and his head is tilted up to project his voice. Even the feathers about his throat seem slightly puffed out with the expansion of his song.

"Oh, there he goes. Sara'd you see it?" my father calls from the kitchen.

"No." I replied. My throat is tightening and my eyes begin to burn. "I missed it," I mumble as I return to the

kitchen focused on the absence of the bird. But my father is smiling, still looking out at the post, the grape jelly, the woods, the sky, and the quick movements of the juncos culling the seed remnants on the ground.

“Oh, well. There’ll be another one. Just watch.” Dad says, and I become still and calm, focusing on the glob of grape jelly where the bright orange bird has just been breakfasting. He disappeared so quickly, but Dad is right. Soon the oriole returns for another taste.

“It’s on-real, isn’t it?” Dad laughs, his eyes following every movement the male oriole makes. I go through a jar about every four days.” He pauses. Two bright winged orioles are reflected in his eye glasses as he watches the one oriole plunging his beak into the jelly. “It’s worth it,” he continues. “I love my oreos.”