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The Lightning Strike

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Author Bio

Katie is a junior with a double major in History and English. She hopes to someday actually be able to do something with her Humanities degrees, but that probably means eight more years of school. She loves books and writing of almost any kind and is very excited not only to be an editor but also a featured writer in The Mercury this year.

The Lightning Strike

Katie Quirin

Alice could see that damn tree as soon as her car began to crunch the gravel of the long drive leading to the plantation. It stood just behind the big brick house, on the same side as the pathway her rental car was now on. The aged look of her home tore her attention away from the tree. The once pristine home had changed in the ten or so years since she'd been back to Colbert County, Alabama. The white paint of the pillars that supported the overhang of the two-story house had begun to peel, having not been maintained since her father became sick three years ago. The blue shutters that framed the tall windows begged for a repainting as well. Some of the wooden boards that formed the wide, shaded porch that ran the length of the front of the house appeared to be a bit askew. The wide lawn was still cut crisply, but the flower gardens that lined the porch lacked the zest they had in her childhood. Momma was where she always was, though, always smiling in the wicker rocking chair on the front porch, a glass of sweet tea always within arm's reach.

"Well hi there, Suga!" Momma said as soon as Alice left her car.

"Hello Momma," Alice said with a smile. While she may have hated being back in this godforsaken town, Alice could never resist the love that radiated from her mother; she exuded the sweetness of the typical southern lady.

Beyond that, she didn't fit the stereotype. Momma never had the plump, soft, warm figure most others did. She had always had a tiny frame: her waist perfectly small, her fingers delicate, and her wrists small enough that Alice could put her fist around them since she was 11. Alice could remember her bones poking her in the hugs she gave every day with barely anything but skin covering them. Momma used to complain that she could never get a real figure, as she put it. Alice believed this was because, despite being raised by a woman that made hearty southern food like no other, Momma couldn't cook. She tried for many years to make her mother's recipes work, until around the time Alice was a teenager and she gave up. Thanksgiving and other family get-togethers were now at aunts' houses as Momma accepted her fate as a chef and Alice's daily meals consisted of the basic meals she could make without setting the smoke detector off: Kraft macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, soup and grilled cheese, and chicken breasts, among a few others.

“I’m just so happy you’re back to your home, Darlin’. Now let’s get you out of this dreadful heat. Where’s your things?” Momma was headed straight for the trunk of the car. She seemed to have lost an inch in height since the last time Alice saw her. Her skin seemed looser, her limbs more fragile. Alice was suddenly very aware of her mom’s sixty plus years.

“No, I got it, Momma.” Alice rushed to get there first. She pulled out her unassuming black, sturdy suitcase. The monotony of the suitcase reflected Alice’s appearance. Her thick, black-framed glasses hid her gray eyes. She continuously struggled to keep her frizzy, reddish-brown hair under control, especially in this southern humidity. She kept her clothing always neat, serious. Her jeans and white blouse reflected little originality.

Despite the age of the outside of the house, Alice saw that the home was exactly as it always had been as soon as she stepped inside. The framed pictures of her family were everywhere, on the mantle of the fireplace in the living room, covering the wall along the staircase. They dated back to her ancestors, who built the house in 1837. Alice glanced at the pictures that had surrounded her upbringing: her mother in her big, white, debutante dress, Alice hanging from one of the low-lying branches of the tree, her great-grandfather looking down from the large, gold frame over the fireplace, and the photographs of the house being built with the then young tree noticeable behind the not-finished walls. Pictures were added every year of the kids her two sisters kept having. Alice was the only one who didn’t jump right into baby-making after college. She wasn’t even close to being married yet at age thirty-two, a virtual sin in her family.

“It is so sweet of you to come back to live with me.” Momma’s smile consumed most of her face, almost jumping up and down with her excitement, like a small child on a birthday. “It would be too much for your sisters, them having families of their own and all. This big ol’ house needs some life in it.” Alice’s mother had been living alone for the past four months, ever since her father died. After pleading from her siblings, who lived relatively near and received frequent invasions from the lonely old women, Alice caved. She took a leave of absence from her journalist position in Philadelphia to spend two months with her mom. She was not thrilled to be back.

When Alice chose where to go to college, she left the South and never looked back. She tried to lose her thick southern accent as soon as possible, remove any reminders she could of her birth state. She felt that it was not where she belonged or who she was.

Time moved extraordinarily slowly during the first few weeks of Alice’s stay. Every minute seemed to take hours as Alice did whatever it

was her mother asked: to run her errands, take her to the movies, visit the youngest of the grandchildren, sit on the porch with her. She felt like she was fifteen again, no car and therefore no way to leave the plantation without being subject to Momma's every endearingly asked wish.

On the start of the second and final month in Alabama, Alice sat curled in a loveseat in the living room, reading one of the many books she had brought with her. She screamed as Momma suddenly opened the window directly behind her.

"Jesus, Momma!" she cried, trying to catch her startled breath.

"Oh hush. Why are you sitting inside when there is a perfectly good rocking chair right next to me out on this porch?"

"Because it's a million degrees out, that's why." It was noon on that July day, and already the temperature was past the 100 degree mark.

"You have let that northern chill get the best of you, I see. When you were young, we could never get you back inside. Where do you think all your freckles came from, Darlin'?" Alice's hand flew to her nose instinctively. She tried to keep the dots of discoloration splashed across the brim of her nose and her now flushing cheeks hidden under concealer. They were also sprawled across her shoulders, a result of spending entirely too much time in the southern sun as a child.

"Well I don't understand how you can handle it, Momma. It's not good for you, all that heat."

"Yes it is, and if you came back to your real home once in a while maybe you wouldn't be so silly!" Momma's eyebrows rose with each huffed phrase. She took any chance she could to remind Alice how very infrequent her visits were. "Hiding indoors on a fine day like this," Momma shook her head at Alice, hands on her tiny hips.

Alice rolled her eyes. "That porch roof is barely even providing any shade. I would much prefer to read my book in this lovely little thing called air conditioning, thank you very much."

"Well if shade is all you need," Momma said, ignoring the AC comment, "then go out back to your tree. Why, you haven't been out there once since you've been here. That was more your home than the house was when you were little. Climb up into the branches and read there, like you always used to. Enjoy the day," Momma commanded.

The big oak that stood just behind the house was huge. Its branches reached far across the yard and above the house, twisting through the air as it provided shade for much of the property. Alice's favorite limb protruded across the right side of the lawn. Its rough bark had scratched her child hands as she swung from the end of it, which curved toward the ground to a level that she could reach if she jumped. The thick base bore a large knot that mesmerized Alice as a child. The deformation was in a round

shape with a smooth thick band encircling a dark, gnarled inlet. She used to think that it was the tree's eye, glaring down at her as she played in its shadow. She would stare back at it, mostly confused because there was only one. Alice's father had nailed two-by-fours to the trunk after much pleading by a ten-year-old Alice so she could touch this strange part of the bark and explore the thick branches above.

"First of all, I'm not a child anymore, Momma, and I don't climb trees. Secondly, I can tell from looking out the windows that that tree is no good. The branches are completely overgrown and scratching the windows in the kitchen. It's probably decaying inside, and, if a big storm came, it could fall on the house." Alice now matched Momma's stance, her hands placed firmly on her own hips as she tried to use Momma's protective nature toward the house against the tree.

"Are you suggesting that I have it cut down? That tree is as old as this house! Your initials are still carved into the bark out there! It is as much a part of our family as all those picture frames." Momma hated being told that something about her precious family plantation was imperfect. She saw her family's history here as nothing but good, glossing over the bad in her mind, like the fact that slaves helped her great-great-grandfather build it.

"Well, maybe it shouldn't be." Alice stormed off, leaving Momma glaring at her through the still open window.

Alice first found out how deep her family's connection to the tree was when she was seventeen. She was in the local library going through microfilms of old newspapers when she found it. Her journalism teacher in high school had assigned a project to look into the history of a specific topic in local media. Proud of her family's long history in the area, Alice searched for old articles about the plantation. She expected to find information about the cotton grown there, or how it was one of the first in the area to use freed laborers. She was sadly mistaken.

Alice placed the microfilm into the reader like she had the others and scanned through the pages of the newspaper, one that the librarian had said pertained to her house. When the picture rolled onto the screen, she looked it at, confused by what exactly she was seeing. The headline contained the words "Bloomer Plantation" but what the hell is this picture, Alice thought.

It was of a man being lynched, a crowd of white men surrounding the tree, smiling for the camera. At first she thought it was some mistake and that the article about her home was further on in the paper, this picture connected to a different piece. When she finally registered where they

were, her stomach turned over in disgust.

The man hung from the tree that stood in her backyard. It wasn't as tall as she knew it, the branches not as thick, but she could see the knot. It was visible through a small part in the crowd, though lower on the tree than it was now. This was the tree that she spent hours playing around and in during the majority of her life. The one with her initials carved into the abrasive bark, next to that knot. She considered it her tree.

This isn't possible, she thought. Alice had heard of the lynchings that occurred in Alabama and throughout the South, but her kind, gentle family could not be connected to any of that horribleness, could they?

She forced herself to read the article. Alice learned that it happened in 1906, and that the African American man had refused to let a white man in the community skip out on a bill at his small convenience store. He was accused of breaking some portion of the Jim Crow laws. He had a wife and three kids.

Alice closed her eyes, refusing to continue, after learning that Charles Bloomer, her great-grandfather and owner of the plantation home in the early 1900s, had been a part of the lynch mob. He proposed his tree as a perfect setting. This was the man whose picture she saw every day hanging above the living room mantle. The one that always smiled down as her family opened presents on Christmas morning or sat up late talking. She had always thought of him as someone to watch over her, not as someone who would do this, offer up her tree for this. Alice turned away from the screen—the revulsion at her family's connection to this act and the involvement of her tree building inside her. How could I be a part of something so awful?

That's when her idea of her future changed. She didn't want this southern heritage, this family connection. Alice decided she would not go to her parents' alma mater, the University of Alabama, like she always planned. She was going to get the hell away from this town.

After the fight through the window, Alice stepped quietly through the house. Her frustrations with her family may be many, but she hated upsetting her mother, who, after all, probably had no idea about the murder. Alice had never even told her family what she had found, wanting to spare them from the knowledge she now held.

As the evening continued, the sky began to darken, but not because the sun was setting. Alice was in the kitchen making mac and cheese, a peace offering, when she heard the front door slam. Momma must be mad still, Alice thought. It's rare for her to slam the door.

"Goodness, that wind has sure picked up," Momma said as she

walked into the kitchen.

“Oh, is that what slammed the door?”

“Yes, Dear, there seems to be a storm brewin.”

Alice glanced out of the window above the kitchen sink. She could see dark clouds gathering overhead, the wind causing that tree’s branches to smack against the side of the house.

“Well, maybe you were right about the tree. We could trim the branches a bit,” Momma sighed.

Alice nodded, not really listening. She was staring at the spot of the tree, just below the knot, where she had carved her initials when she was thirteen. That life seemed so far away. She watched Momma as she sat down at the kitchen table, worrying about Momma all alone in this big house. Maybe it wouldn’t kill me to spend more time here, while she has it, Alice thought.

As Alice served their usual dinner, she could hear the grumbling thunder grow louder and closer. She could see the lightning flashes out of the corner of her eye. Why isn’t it raining yet, she wondered. The storm seems so close. At a lull in their conversation about what to do tomorrow, Alice glanced out the kitchen window just in time to see it happen.

Lightning struck the top of the tree. Alice watched as the branches slowly began to catch fire. She was frozen in place, staring out the window, horror-struck. Momma’s high-pitched scream brought her back to reality. She watched as her mom moved faster than she thought possible, running out the back door, phone in hand, screaming at the 9-1-1 operator. Alice moved from the table too, but slower, not truly processing what was happening. She followed Momma out the kitchen door, left ajar with her mother’s exit.

Alice didn’t make it far into the backyard when she stopped, captivated by what was in front of her. She stood still and watched as the crackling flames slowly began engulfing the highest branches, the fire moving down the tree. She felt like she couldn’t move even if she tried. Momma, however, was running in circles like she was the one on fire.

What if the fire reaches the house? Alice thought. What if the whole tree burns to the ground? No, it can’t just be gone. She was surprised at how she felt; her desire to somehow save the tree became overwhelming. At the thought of losing an object whose history had caused her repugnance at her southern heritage, she could only think of the day she carved her initials into the trunk. The small letters, AMB, sat adjacent to that dark eye that distinguished the tree. Her thirteen-year-old self had made a promise with the tree that one day she would live in the big, old house and her daughter could carve her initials into the tree too. She began to feel the heat of the flames reflected on her skin. For a second

she enjoyed the warmth; it tingled as it took away the chill of the wind. She couldn't focus on the tree or the destruction that was occurring. Instead, her thoughts flashed to Momma and this summer month spent with her. It's still mine—the tree, the family—Alice decided to herself, no matter what. That's when the sky finally opened. The rain came pouring down, washing over Alice and her tree, extinguishing the fire as it released the past.