A year before my birth, a small gathering was held in the backwoods of Missouri. In the late summer, hot days fade to hot nights. This night, however, a light breeze (which was a rare thing indeed) calmed the group sitting on the porch. The crickets sang back and forth in mating rituals, and frogs living in a pond close by croaked. The only sound they made was from Papa, telling a story as if they were in the other room. It became obvious to my dad (who is slow to understand anyone) where my mother got her ostentatious laugh and booming smile, both of which I, too, would inherit.

Uncle felt jealousy that he would contain for the rest of his life. As his papa leaned foreword, telling my mother the story, it became painfully obvious who the favorite will always be. He gnaws anxiously at his fingers, another thing I will inherit eventually. My uncle watched a large toad the size of his small hand hop onto the porch. He was the only one to notice; everyone else sat rigidly, watching Papa as his story reached the climax.

As Papa tells the story, he looks at her daughter, a beautiful woman of seventeen, soon to be engaged, and sees himself. Her eyes were lit the same way he knew his were. Her smile is wide, and seems to swallow her face, like he felt on his mouth. Papa trailed off at the best part of the story-something that my mom learned to do.

Mom looks at him with irritation and admiration. She urges his with impatience, a fault she will carry on for the rest of her life. Mom looks at her papa’s coffee-stained teeth, and loud brown eyes. She forgives him, in this moment, for abandoning her as a child. In this moment, she only cares about what could possibly come next in the story, that she already knew was more lie than truth.

A scream comes from the woods, and everyone is silent. Uncle drops his friend. Mom stands up. Papa forgets the story. As Mom and Papa run, my uncle grabs the flashlight on the table, and runs after them. They don’t speak. The laughter, the jealousy, and the forgiveness are all replaced by terror.

Mom prays: “Let us find this woman.”

Uncle prays: “Let me find this woman.”

Papa prays: “Let this woman be safe.”

In the first hour of searching, they didn’t call out; the fear struck down all sound. And it wasn’t the three humans in the dark wood either; the animals listened and searched for the woman, too, in their own way.

By the second hour, the fear was replaced with desperation. They called out for someone, though they didn’t know who. They called out for someone, though they didn’t know where.

In the third hour of searching, their desperation faded into determination. Their voices were hoarse, but they continued to call louder. They were screaming.

By the fourth hour of searching, their actions were routine. They’d forgotten the fear they felt when they heard the scream. Their voices whispers. They just walked, shined the flashlight around, moved on.

They walk to the small cabin, which illuminates a small clearing in the trees. Their disappointment is so strong that it takes the form of exhaustion. They each go to bed without conversation.

Before they fall asleep they think.

Mom curses: “Why couldn’t we find that poor woman?”

Uncle curses: “Why couldn’t we find that sad woman?”

Papa curses: “What was wrong with that woman?”

They were wrong in their assumption of the sound coming from a woman. It wasn’t until the next morning that they realized their mistake. Puma tracks circled the cabin. The animal even went as far as to walk up to the kitchen window.

Each in turn expressed gratitude for an unsuccessful hunt.