For a bunch of people who saw one another on a pretty regular basis, you would think that Christmas wouldn’t be such a big deal.

Most of Lyla’s family lived in the Holler, with some outliers living in the more accessible towns just an hour or so out. Sure there was the occasional odd cousin that had “escaped the South” and hadn’t been seen in ages, but Lyla’s family was so very attached to one another that scarcely a week (if that long) went by without *somebody* dropping by Granny Barb’s house unannounced.

And taking how often they saw her into mind, you would think that certain folks could learn to let a little winter weight go.

*Have you seen Lyla lately—I don’t know what that woman’s been feedin’ her!*

*I guess now we know why she ain’t done got married yet…*

*Lyla’s getting a little thick… y’think she might be… you know… in the family way?*

What was so wrong with a girl putting on a little weight? It wasn’t like the rest of her family could stand shoulder to shoulder with each other. What was the point in picking on poor Lyla for having gotten a little chubby after coming back home?

“Can’t they just focus on stupid Carol Anne and her ugly baby?”

Lyla groused into her thick glistening cut of Christmas ham. Her chubby arms jiggled as she sawed through the greasy pink meat, her soft stomach brushing against the lip of the table as she leaned over the good plates. Without dabbing away the small splash of juice that had run its way down the corner of her mouth, Lyla went down for another bite. And then another.

“Well, not with the way you’re puttin’ on.” Cousin Faith snarked from the other side of the table, “Kinda hard to make everyone forget that extra fluff when you seem dead set to add to it, cuz.”

Lyla grumbled as she sawed open a biscuit and slathered it with butter. She had dared to venture outside of the dinner table exactly twice this evening. Once to politely mingle with the members of her extended family, only to be chased away by *constant* barrages and barbs about her weight, and then again to use the restroom and have to hear those kinds of comments behind her back.

“Take it easy there, Lyla Bean—I think we’re on our last batch!”

“Shut up, Faith.” Lyla barked back, “I’m not in the mood.”

“No cuz, I really think that’s all the biscuits.” Faith said in a somewhat more serious voice, “You done ate the last one!”

The bulky brunette looked into the wicker basket that she’d been plucking from ever since she sat down. Granny Barb had been topping it off here and there as it had gotten low, taking the opportunities to come over to check on her pouty granddaughter. She had made about four trips up until maybe thirty minutes ago…

There was no way that she’d eaten all of those biscuits by herself, had she?

“Jesus Christ, Faith there were like ten biscuits in that basket!” Lyla’s throat caught with mild panic, “Why didn’t you stop me?!”

“I mean, you were goin’ off on a real roll there—would *you* have been able to stop you?”

Lyla sunk sadly into the table, resting her elbows on the top and burying her round face in her hands. Beneath her sweater, Lyla’s chubby white belly pressed hard against the biggest pair of jeans that she had in the house. Now that her family’s low-key bullying wasn’t on the forefront of her mind, egging her on into making poor dietary decisions, she could suddenly feel how each and every one of those biscuits were stuffed into her stomach. On top of the ham, the corn, the potatoes, the serving or two of turkey that she’d nibbled on, those Hawaiian King rolls…

“Uh… no offense cuz, but you look like you could use a *big* cup of eggnog.” Cousin Faith’s face twisted in concern for her stuffed cousin, “Why don’t I go top that cocoa cup off with somethin’ a little stiffer?”

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Consciously, Lyla knew that she wasn’t the only one who had put on a little Winter weight.

But with the stress of her teaching job and keeping up with assignments, added into the fact that she felt like she was busting out of khakis left and right, it was getting harder to deny that maybe she’d gotten more than just a little plump since she’d moved back to the Holler.

A quiet New Year’s Resolution was made, and she was determined that she was going to try and shed some of this excess poundage that had crept up around her middle.

For every day in the new semester, a still-plump and increasingly cranky Mrs. Blackwell would still manage to greet her class.

“Good Morning, Ms. Blackwell.”

She had crossed the threshold of the classroom with some debris of what constituted a healthy breakfast still on her face. Some banana gook and a couple of crumbs from the orange, peanut-butter crackers that were going to be all of the carbs that she would allow herself until lunch. The obligatory first-week easiness was behind all of them. And with it, Mrs. Blackwell’s friendly outward expression had slowly faded into a somewhat stern, easily crossed authority figure that the rest of the students knew all too well.

Despite all of the effort that she was putting into this diet, Lyla was still much heavier than the woman who had returned to Daniel Morgan High School some months prior.

“Good morning, students.”

Lowering herself into the padded office chair behind her desk, Lyla settled down for what promised to be another long day of teaching while dealing with her own cravings.

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“I don’t know how you eat those teeny tiny lunches.”

Jo Anne had been picking at Lyla’s lunches ever since the lot of them came back from Winter Break. Even she and the other teachers hadn’t meant it as such, Lyla couldn’t help but to construe those kinds of remarks as subtle jabs at her weight. Which had increased by at least twenty pounds since everyone had seen her last in December.

How could it *not* have been a crack about her size?

“Well, it’s my New Year’s Resolution to trim down a little.” Lyla just barely managed to hide the scathe to her voice, “I think we *all* could stand a little bit of healthy eating now and again, couldn’t we?”

Her intention, and particular emphasis and wording, hadn’t been lost on everyone else at the table. It was clearly a touchy subject for the newest addition to their English department, and nobody really wanted to call her out for her tone. After all, who *wasn’t* a little sensitive about their weight after the holidays?

“Speak for yourself, honey—” Jolene happily fumbled with the still-warm edges of her Tupperware, “—I’ve got *loads* of holiday leftovers to work my way through!”

Ugh, the smells of everything that Lyla had been denying herself. Plump, juicy turkey. Succulent ham. Dinner rolls that *had* to have been baked fresh. Homemade vegetable soup in another cup, with cornbread in a baggy next to it. Her mouth was practically watering at the sight of such things after less than a week of denying herself the rich country food that had helped puff her up…

“Are you *still* working your way through that?” Vicky asked with a laugh, “You’re still gon’ be puttin’ on Winter Weight while the rest of us slim down for Summertime!”

“Does it look like I care?” the other English teacher snorted, “I’ve got fridge space to empty out!”

“I’ll ask again in six months when you’re the *size* of a fridge.”

This remark didn’t seem to stop Jolene from setting up her freshly microwaved meal. The whole break room bore the scent of her delicious home-cooked meal, and Lyla couldn’t bring herself to stop taking deep-chested breaths.

“We have a stressful job, okay—teaching sucks *most* of the time—not to mention bein’ stuck up in the Holler!” Jolene offered sagely, “Why would I want to deny myself one of the *best* parts about livin’ in the South?”

Lyla shifted uncomfortably in her seat as she stared down her own pathetic lunch. Another banana, a ham and cheese sandwich, and a glass of water from the tap.

“Amen to that…”

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Lyla’s dieting wasn’t any easier at home than it was at work.

Granny Barb was as supportive as she could have been, but (as she’d pointed out many times) that didn’t mean that she had to starve *herself* while whipping up healthier options for her granddaughter to eat. That rule also applied to anyone who happened to be visiting—and given just how often family members tended to drop by unannounced, one could only imagine the difficulty that family-sized servings heaped upon Lyla’s bite-sized willpower

The constant temptation of having all of this wonderful Southern food around her in the *rest* of the Holler wasn’t helping much either. Even the fast-food places that she passed every day on the way to work were starting to look good!

But she had done her best to stay strong. No junk food, hardly any sweets, and she’d been doing her hardest to say ‘no’ when it came to seconds. Even on the healthy stuff! The past week had been absolute murder on her poor little self, but she could *feel* the weight coming off!

At least… she thought that she could. Maybe. If she sucked in a little…

“What do you think, cuz?”

Lyla turned corner to pose. She felt the jiggle in her thighs as she stepped heavily on one foot, and the small delay caused by the slosh of her stomach. But stretching out against the doorway, maybe she could downplay some of that unsightly side pudge on the side and maybe slim down her arms a bit…

The persistently plumping brunette did her best to seem as nonchalant and confident as possible, despite the fact that she had been complaining to her cousin for the past thirty minutes or so how she felt like crap and how much she wanted a fucking cheeseburger.

Meanwhile Faith, tall and lanky as ever, cupped her chin contemplatively as she sat cross-legged on Lyla’s bed. She paused, squinted her deep brown eyes a bit, and finally passed her verdict.

“I wouldn’t kick you outta bed for eatin’ biscuits.”

“So I’ve lost some?” Lyla beamed, “Where, like… in my belly or more in my face?”

“Mostly from your chest.” Cousin Faith copped a feel on her cousin’s cleavage, “C’mon Lyla, you know that ain’t no one in our family gonna go on a diet without consequences!”

Lyla bellowed out a death knell and flopped down on her bed. Her whole body rippled with the impact of cushion to cushion as she brought her hands to her face in agony for about the third time that afternoon. Slowly her hands traveled down from her round cheeks to her (apparently) deprived breasts.

“This suuuuucks” she moaned, “I just wanna lose weight, and I’ve been *starving* myself for the past week!”

“That Christmas party really did you in, huh?”

“More like the realization that I ain’t nothin’ but a greedy guts who had to lie about where all the dang biscuits went.”

Lyla’s hands moved down to cup either side of her stomach as it flattened out into a plump canvas of lily-white plushness.

“Seriously, when did all this happen?!”

Lyla’s arms flopped back out to either side of her as she resigned to wallow in her own self pity for a little while longer. Even horizontal, her soft double chin had become more prominent with the rounding of her cheeks, just as the lip of her stomach was even still threatening to bulge over her khaki pants.

“’bout the time you moved home, I reckon.” Faith laid a sympathetic hand on Lyla’s soft tummy chub, “Movin’ back to the Holler, gettin’ to eat all that good ol’ Southern food…”

“Don’t remind me.”

In a dramatic fashion, Lyla threw a pillow over her face. This losing weight nonsense was going to be a lot harder than she thought…

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As the days and the weeks continued to roll by, Lyla saw minimal results in her weight loss journey.

Running on week four, almost a full month of dieting, and she had only managed to shed three pounds. This was despite rigorously watching what she ate, trading in sweet tea and soda for cups of water, and going up every staircase *twice* when she came across them. Sure, there were only three or four steps on each, but still! The fact that her efforts weren’t being rewarded stung more than any chafing thighs or grumbling tummy!

Well, almost as much.

As a consequence, Lyla’s mood had soured even more noticeably. In the workplace or at home, Lyla’s constant battle against her own appetite had left her grouchier than all get-out. And it was starting to affect her job performance.

“Ugh, these *kids*—”

Classroom horseplay and disrespect had gone up, more than likely in retaliation for what was seen as an increase in authoritarianism. And while she prided herself on being a fun teacher, her most recent batch of students for the semester would be hard-pressed to agree with her!

“What in the world am I going to *do*…?”

Rumors were being spread, in true high school fashion, that she was a mean old witch who would yell at her students and verbally harangue them. Abusive and mean without due cause. When there *was* plenty of cause to yell at her kids, and it was because all of her kids were *so fucking stupid!* None of them did their assignments, or their reading, and she had a *lesson plan* to keep up with and…

“UGGGHHH!”

Letting her head fall into her hands, Lyla groaned loudly to an empty classroom. She had to start taking her lunches in here, lest she be faced with the temptation of her co-workers’ decidedly less depressive lunches. Ones that were made by their loving husbands, probably. Or boyfriends. Definitely not by their grandmother, because they had a place to live of their own and weren’t mooching off of some old lady.

But here *she* was, squatting with her closest living relative, trapped in a dead-end job that she *thought* that she would have liked since this was her alma mater and all but *didn’t* because kids were just as horrible in one part of the South as they were in the other. Her classes’ test scores were already substantially lower than they had been this time last semester, and they were just so *rowdy* and *lazy* and all she wanted to do was her job and… and…

*“UGGGHGHHH!”*

Another groan. This time one more visceral.

As her hands slowly lowered from her face, Lyla half-expected to see the principal or an angry parent waiting for her just outside the threshold of her classroom door. Another little cherry on top of her shit sundae. But instead, there was only the vending machine.

The same vending machine that had been out there since her first semester, but had become increasingly more malevolent as this one had rolled on. The more that her diet hurt, the brighter the LEDs in that thing seemed to burn. The longer that her diet had stretched out, the more she found herself looking at it throughout the day.

Lyla often thought back to what Jolene had said in the teacher’s lounge, not long after they’d all returned from Winter Break:

*“We have a stressful job, okay—teaching sucks most of the time—not to mention bein’ stuck up in the Holler!”*

*“Why would I want to deny myself one of the best parts about livin’ in the South?”*

And *God* it was so true. She knew what she had to do to stop feeling like shit. And that was to give in to her innate desires and just start eating like regular again. But then, she’d start thinking back to Granny Barb’s Christmas party, and having sucked down probably more than twenty biscuits and heaping helpings of Christmas dinner before the first guest left.

And all of the delicious, calorie-rich meals that she’d stuffed herself with until she busted out of all of her pants.

And all of the cakes and pies and cookies that Granny Barb had let her eat when she first moved down here, in preparation for that stupid Pie competition.

Where was she going to wind up if she didn’t get her appetite under control?

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“Have a seat, Ms. Blackwell.”

The principal of the school was a short man. Stocky with a noticeable receding hairline. Dark brown hair that had started to gray over the ears, and a thick set of black glasses. In a lot of ways, he reminded Lyla of the principal that had been in charge of the school back when she was a student.

It probably helped that she was standing on the other end of the desk in anticipation of disciplinary action.

“Yes sir.”

Lyla’s wide hips and round bottom weren’t any larger than some of the other teachers (or even some students) in Daniel Morgan High. But in lowering her plump rump between the arms of her chair suddenly felt like a herculean task. Her saddlebags rubbed against the wooden support while her cheeks spilled out from the open space in the back. The whole thing creaked ominously, as if it hadn’t bore the brunt of Lord knows *how many* asses twice as fat as hers was. Like it might break any minute.

All the creaking certainly hadn’t helped to put her at ease, at any rate.

“We’ve been getting some complaints from students—”

Here it comes. The moment that she’d been dreading for a few weeks now. Such a stark change in personality was bound to get noticed in a small school like this.

“—and from the other teachers on staff…”

*Those two-faced sons of bitches*.

“About some troubling classroom behavior coming from you recently.”

Lyla took a deep breath, making a conscious effort to minimalize the little tug on the hem of her sweater. The last thing that she needed was to risk for her belly rising out from underneath her top. *That* certainly would have been embarrassing.

“Well, I…”

What was she supposed to tell him? That she was grumpy because she’d gotten *fat*, and that she was only acting out so much because she was on a *diet,* and that she was just walking around hangry all the time? It all sounded so immature when she laid it out like that, but there really wasn’t any other reason that she could think of…

Besides all of the other mounting pressures that came with being a teacher in an underfunded public school that catered to a group of kids who couldn’t have cared less about English 3 if they tried.

“I’m just going through a lot at home right now, I suppose.”

The principal steepled his fingers together and nodded with visible disapproval. She understood where he was coming from, in that she had delivered the same speech to countless other kids who had acted up in the past.

*We all have bad days.*

*We’ve all got a lot going on.*

*We can’t just act out because we’re stressed.*

*We’re living in a society.*

“Is there something that we can help you with, Lyla?” the principal asked with an outstretched hand, “I’m sure you know, but we’re all about community down here in the Holler.”

“I… I know, sir.” Lyla smiled, “I grew up here.”

“Well then you already know that.” He backpedaled a bit, “It’s just… well, I know that you left your last job due to issues with the staff and student body.”

*Primarily the student body*.

“And I just don’t want a repeat of those issues here.” her boss said to her with a small sigh, “We’ve been getting some pretty troubling reports from students about you raising your voice, and some antisocial behavior from your fellow teachers.”

Lyla shifted uncomfortably in her seat, making the poor thing squeak beneath her chubby buns.

“I’m going to need you to set aside whatever personal issues that you’re having when you come through the door.” He said sternly, “Your last semester went by with flying colors, the students loved you. So I know that you can do it; it’s just a matter of—”

*“Putting your issues aside.*” They both said it in unison.

“Exactly.” He nodded understandingly, “So… do we understand each other?”

“…yes sir.”

“Good!” he smiled from behind his mustache and put his hands flat on the desk in front of him, “Just try to buck up a little—and if you have any problems that you want to share with me, just know that you’re more than welcome to do so.”

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Cousin Faith had been Lyla’s sole confidante in the matter of getting called to the principal’s office as an adult and educator over her attitude. That’s what first cousins are for, after all.

After all, what was she supposed to tell Granny Barb? That she was getting in trouble at school and her performance was slipping? She’d never hear the end of it! And, just like Lyla, she knew the cause of all this trouble that she was getting into…

“So you’re gonna go back to eating like a normal person?”

Cousin Faith suckled the already well-worn straw of her Cook Out milkshake. She’d been the one to talk Lyla into breaking her diet for the first time in several weeks, and damned if she hadn’t been appreciative. That belly had been gurgling so loud that the neighbor kids could probably hear it! Her cousin needed a little treat for all of her hard work tryin’ to get slim…

“Emphasis on the word *normal*.” Lyla spat bitterly, trying not to look too eager to suck down her Reese’s Cup milkshake, “I ain’t gonna go back to whole-hoggin’ it like I used to be.”

“I know Granny’ll be happy about that at least.” Faith smiled, “Seein’ as how you won’t be such a bitch all the time.”

“I’m not a bitch.” Lyla snorted proudly, “I’m bitch*y.* There’s a difference.”

The two cousins shared a moment of silence as they sat in the parking lot, tongue-wrestling with their overly thick milkshakes. Lyla had known that she’d been alienating the folks around her for a while now, and the last thing that she wanted was to erupt over the one person who had stuck by her with just a minimal amount of jokes at her expense to show for it.

“…do you think we should spoon?”

“I-I’m sorry?” Lyla gulped

“The spoons—do you think we should use the spoons?” Cousin Faith asked, whipping out the prepackaged plastic silverware that the cashier had handed them with their milkshakes, “These things are dummy fuckin’ thick.”

“Just like me.” Lyla rolled her eyes

“Girl I’ll spoon you too, don’t tempt me.”

At any rate, Lyla was going to have to make some changes to her routine. At home and at work. She couldn’t afford to cut back meals if it was just going to make her angry and perform poorly at her job. Maybe she could cut back her active attempts at losing weight until the Summer months? They weren’t that far away…

Maybe she could just cut back a little. Try to eat *normally*. Some Southern food here, some healthier options there, maybe a little exercise…

Sure! She could do this!

“Oh hey, wanna try a bite’a mine?” Cousin Faith asked, holding out her dairy-covered spoon, “S’real good!”

She could definitely… definitely maybe do this.