Life is slow in the South—and for someplace tucked away as the Holler, it could come to a crawl.

The hot Summer days were sweltering, and grabbed you by the throat. That wet heat that hugged tightly and left you sticky with sweat was as good of a reason as any to stay inside for the remainder of the Summer. After all, she wasn’t a kid anymore. A gal her age heading down to the swimmin’ hole might have been alright if she’d been passing through, but a new teacher getting caught skinny dipping in the lake would have caused a mighty big fuss…

But then again, Cousin Faith had always been able to talk her into all sorts of the dumbest of things.

“I swear this used to be a lot easier…”

“Yeah and we used to be a lot littler—now hush up, we’re almost there!”

The A/C had gone out at Granny Barb’s house. Apparently, something had blown the unit and it was going to take *hours* to fix. Lyla hadn’t seen much reason in sticking around just to stew in her own juices. Cousin Faith had always been something of a troublemaker, even when they were both just little girls, but she never would have guessed that one little text message could have brought her all the way back out here.

“You sure that nobody’s gonna see us?”

“Did anybody ever see us when we were kids?”

“Well, that one time—”

“*That one time Kyle Gramling stole your clothes when you were twelve—*I remember.” Cousin Faith’s eyeroll was audible, “But that was then and this is now! Ain’t nobody gonna come all the way out here if they got a lick of sense to ‘em.”

*Or a functioning Air Conditioning unit…*

As far away from the rest of the world as the Holler was, their old Swimming Hole was even further than that. On old unbought land, nobody had ever paid much mind to them using it because nobody had ever paid much to owning it. That being said, nobody was there to keep it up after Old Lady Carhill died, which meant that the eight years or so that had passed meant that nobody was taking care of their little private oasis.

The brush scraped against Lyla’s thick, exposed thighs as she wriggled her way through the unkept trail. Her flip flops scraped against the wet dirt and slipped over the grass with every other step, her bright green eyes wincing as she felt the thorny bushes cut into her supple white thighs. Her tight denim shorts frayed and split threads with every piercing, needling stab of that old country brush—her little whimpers the only thing sounding over the rustling green with their every step.

“That city livin’ done made you soft, girl.” Cousin Faith snorted, “I ain’t remember you whimperin’ an’ whinin’ the last time we came out here.”

“Last time we came here was ‘fore graduation!” Lyla huffed, “I was still scabbed up from the week before!”

“Well, we’re almost there so quit your cryin’—don’t wanna get us caught now, do ya?”

Parting the last bits of greenery that got between her and the Hole, Lyla would comment inwardly about how little it seemed to have changed since she was a little girl. Right down to the old tire swing that swung from a rope on a low-hanging branch on the willow tree growing off the shore. Almost like it had been plucked out of her memory!

“Hue-*wee*!” Faith threw her head back and placed her hands on her hips, “S’been a *while* since we been out here, ain’t it?”

“I’ll say.” Lyla laughed, “It feels like forever…”

When Lyla looked over to her cousin, only to find her already working at stripping down to her birthday suit, Lyla instinctively covered her eyes.

“Faith!” she squeaked, “We ain’t been here ten minutes an’ you’re already—”

“Well hell, I *said* we was goin’ skinny-dipping!” Cousin Faith tittered in every sense of the word, “Unless you *wanna* get them clothes wet, you better strip down too!”

Lyla grumbled—she wasn’t exactly in the *mood* to strip. Not with how much *some* things had changed since the last time she was at this hole…

“Aw shoot, don’t be shy.” Cousin Faith turned around dramatically, flashing the thicket that they’d crawled through with her pert, perky chest, “Here, I’ll give you some *privacy*~”

Lyla furrowed her brow and took a few steps backwards, easing herself behind the nearest tree. Fumbling with the button on her dukes the whole way there, she finally found some freedom after she’d snapped the clasp through. No sooner than the button being undone was her belly ready to roll back out; her thick middle was just about as tired of all this hot chafing denim as the rest of her was.

Her thick thighs had ate up the crotch on the poor things—pulling the denim from between her crack was almost as rewarding as the brief relief that came with the cool breeze across her sweaty ass and thighs. The fabric had been worn thin at the thighs, and was still warm to the touch…

“Look at that full moon!”

“Shut *up,* Faith!” Lyla barked back, “I ain’t gonna ask again!”

Lyla shuffled awkwardly into the thicket, where she would (hopefully) be safe from the teasing of her cousin. After all, she wasn’t exactly in the best shape these days, and she was already sensitive enough about the weight she’d put on since she’d moved in with Granny Barb. Her thick belly had been squished tight into her shorts all day, and the angry red marks that had been pressed into her chubby gut were already making her self conscious…

Lyla emerged from the brush full-figured, well-fed and completely naked. Her clothes had been gathered into a neat little pile by the tree she’d changed behind. Her thickness jiggled ever so slightly with every step back into the clearing, much to the amusement of her younger cousin.

“Well God Dang, Cousin Lyla!” Faith hollered, “Livin’ with Granny Barb done did you good!”

“Sh-Shut up!” Lyla squeaked again, her face burning bright pink, “I put on a little weight, okay?”

“A little? Shoot, you done got *thicc* on me cuz!”

Faith was happy as a pig in slop to grab a handful of Lyla’s belly chub as it hung down in a porcine little pot belly. She could palm it like a basketball without much trouble or mind to it, and was only dissuaded by the thickset brunette’s incessant swatting. Even then, the boisterous blonde’s amusement with the matter meant that she switched from groping to poking—not much better, considering that the poor country mouse had been well aware of every pound and inch that she’d put on since she’d come home.

“You might be ready to send off to slaughter, soon!”

“Har har.” Lyla rolled her eyes and crossed her thick little arms over her belly, “Did you call me out here to look at my thickness, or did you wanna *swim*?”

Cousin Faith rolled her eyes as she took a few cautionary strokes backwards. Taking her motion as an invitation to make an aplomb in the pool, Lyla made a dash for the old tire swing. Grabbing the bottom half of the old black rubber, Lyla got a jiggly, running head start towards the crystal clear waters of the Holler’s biggest Swimming Hole before she propelled herself up and outwards…

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“You oughta be more careful n’that, Lyla Bean.”

Granny Barb’s gentle tut-tutting of their shenanigans brought back plenty of memories from when she was a little girl. While her parents had never been particularly watchful or disciplinary over what she did during her spare time as a child (having grown up knowing full and well that there was fuck-all to do in the Holler) Granny Barb had always tried to push Lyla and her cousins towards making more intelligent, usually sedentary options.

“Imagine if one’a your new students saw you splashin’ around in that hole and went and told their parents!”

A big *plop* of mashed potatoes on the plate in front of her, with an impact so strong that it shook the table. Granny Barb’s thick upper arm still trembled in an echo of the action while she reeled it back in to gather another spoonful for her granddaughter.

“Then you’da been that new teacher and all the boys would have done talked about your hoo-haa.”

“Granny, ain’t nobody talkin’ about my hoo-ha.” Lyla snickered as she readied her spoon, “It was just me and Cousin Faith havin’ some fun—honest!”

When Lyla had come home sopping wet and still giggling from her first skinny-dip in the better part of a decade, Granny Barb had already known that something had done occurred. When she started feeling around for something that she thought that she’d lost, Lyla had screwed up and admitted that she had been down to the old Swimming Hole. And Lord, that had been all Granny Barb needed to start needling her granddaughter about what she was using her time for.

After all—*she* knew better than anyone what folks did down there, and for how long they’d been doing it!

“Well, you gotta be careful about what you do ‘round here.” The old woman warned as she plopped a heaping helping of chicken onto the plate, “You know how fast word travels in a teeny-tiny town like this. And what with that Facebook and everything, you never *know* when someone’s—”

Lyla rolled her eyes and just sort of rolled with the lecture. There was no use fighting it. Granny Barb meant well, but Lyla had always found it easier to tolerate the scolding if her mouth was full.

The country cooking styles of her grandmother had been her sole relief from the listless life of the Holler. Her year off from teaching and moving back home had been made that much more bearable when she could indulge herself on creamy chicken dishes, thick steaks, and all the home-made fixin’s that a girl could dream of. She hadn’t eaten this well since she was a kid—and that wasn’t counting Granny Barb’s fixation on whipping up desserts every other night.

Lyla did what she could to resist the siren song of stuffing herself on good old-fashioned country cooking, but there really *was* fuck-all to do ‘round these parts other than eat, get pregnant, or do drugs. Sure she had lots of family she could visit, but she’d already *caught up* with pretty much everyone that mattered! She’d been home a year—that’s more than enough time for everyone to have welcomed the prodigal granddaughter home…

And besides, when she *did* go see them, what did they want to do? That’s right, eat.

No wonder the people in her family were so gosh-darned big.

Although, it wasn’t like Lyla could say much about the matter. Not with the way she’d expanded since she’d done come home and moved in with Granny Barb. With all the stress-eating she’d been doing (on top of maybe having indulged herself a little too much during that year off from teaching) Lyla felt like a balloon these days. Everything was getting tighter around her tummy these days, and none of her pants were fitting quite right. And the closer she got to her first day on the job, the more she seemed to eat. And the more she seemed to eat…

Well, Cousin Faith may or may not have had a point when she’d told Lyla she’d been getting a little thick around the middle.

 “…anyway, I suggest you eat up.” Granny Barb had continued her tirade even while Lyla’s mind had gone and floated elsewhere, “You ain’t got many days left of layin’ around this house—now that it’s fit to lay in!”

The large woman laughed at the expense of their now-functioning air conditioner.

“I guess I’m just a little worried about you is all. I’m still your Granny, even if you are all grown up.”

“I know you mean well, Granny, but there’s nothin’ to worry about!” Lyla declared confidently as she started sawing into the plump, juicy chicken breast, “I’ve still got a few days left of Summer vacation—you won’t have to worry about me until *after* I start teaching!”

The two of them shared a small, pleasant moment between granddaughter and grandmother, not knowing just how far events would veer out of their control…

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Daniel Morgan High School had changed a lot since Lyla was on the other side of the teacher’s desk.

The halls were painted to be bright and cheerful colors, to contrast with the chalky off-white that she remembered from her four years going from class to class. Obviously, most of the names and faces had changed too—there was only a teacher or two left from the eight years that had passed since Lyla was a student.

All of the children looked so young, but in them she could see the same sorts of kids that she grew up with. Ones from well-to-do families, rough kids from the wrong side of the tracks, and shy little studious kids that she saw a little bit of herself in…

“Good morning, class!” she said triumphantly in front of the whiteboard

*“Good morning, Ms. Blackwell.”*

Just as cold and lifeless of a greeting as it had always been. Oh, the memories.

Lyla had taught in the city for a while, and the kids there didn’t do things like this. At least, not readily. Greeting their teacher each morning was something that was seen as more than a little old fashioned—but *this* teacher was bringing back the classics. After all, they still did it for everyone else in this school! It was kind of nice to start things off feeling acknowledged by her kids!

“I hope y’all had a great Summer vacation!” Lyla prattled on cheerfully, using her best teacher voice, “Who here’s upset we had to come back to school?”

Pretty much every one of their lanky, adolescent arms shot up in unison. Those that hadn’t were either not paying attention or slowly and sheepishly complied.

“Well, me too—so I tell you what, I’m going to let y’all have an easy first day (heck, first *mornin’*) back while we play a little icebreaker…”

Lyla could do this. She could do this! Those little snots out in the city had been pretty rough on her, sure. But these kids were home-grown country boys and girls. They knew how to respect their elders, and she could relate to them. After all, she was a Holler Kid too!

But just in case, she’d brought a little feel-better (slash) good luck snack from Granny Barb to keep in her top drawer. While her Granny had insisted on baking her an entire pie to take with her, Lyla had opted for just a simple slice to keep in her top drawer. A little reminder of home, and also a little flavor bomb to help her get through the day if things got a little too hot to handle!

Whether these first few periods went great or if it all went south… she’d still have a few slices of cherry pie!

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“Ugh, you are so lucky”

Mrs. Johnson—Jo Anne, to the other teachers—had been integral in introducing Lyla to the rest of the English department. A veteran teacher for more than ten years, having spent three of them at Daniel Morgan, she was about the best person to take Lyla under her wing and show her around.

During their lunch period, Lyla’s first step had naturally been to find her in the teacher’s lounge. Given that she’d already taken the tour by the principal, and that there were only so many minutes in the day that a teacher got to well and truly socialize with other adults, where else was a girl like her supposed to go?

“Is she really though?” another teacher said with a small laugh, “Imagine having that thing staring at you from the other side of the door. Just callin’ out to you throughout the day.”

Unlike some of the other women who taught at Daniel Morgan High School, the woman opining on the matter of the vending machines that seemed to loom in the hallways was rather heavyset. Not that Lyla was much of one to judge someone for that kind of thing.

“It’s just a vending machine, Vicky—Christ.”

“I’m sure that Lyla doesn’t have your *complicated* history with junk food—ain’t that right, girl?”

In the midst of all this discussion, Lyla had been piling her plate high with food from the little lunch box that Granny Barb had packed for her that morning. Meats, bean soup, and corn bread would have been enough to fill up any teacher after a long hard day at work—the slice of cheesecake was just icing on the proverbial cake.

“I think I’ll be able to control myself.” Lyla said with a little laugh, “After all, it’s just *food*.”

The group of teachers laughed accordingly, with Lyla indulging a little too heartily in her lunch…

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“Food’s ready!”

In the South, particularly in the more rural areas like the Holler, eating is one of the most communal activities that people can engage in. Every family gathering bigger than three people may as well have been a catered event; someone always (*always*) made a big fuss and whipped up something yummy in the kitchen just for the occasion.

“Y’all go head and grab a chair!”

When Lyla had come back to the Holler some time last year, all pretty much anyone wanted to do was feed her. Something that she was grateful for, considering that she’d spent the better part of four years far away from home and all of her family’s recipes. But even for relatives who lived in town and were just dropping by for a visit, like cousins Faith and Carol Anne often did, Granny Barb would never miss an opportunity to go overboard.

“Or in Carol Anne’s case, y’all might wanna grab two!”

“Hardy har har, y’old bat.”

The sound of chair legs scraping against hardwood floors sounded the arrival of the guests and Lyla to the dinner table. Full, corn-fed bottoms lowered into the same uncushioned seats that had bore witness to hundreds (perhaps *thousands*) of family dinners and holiday gatherings, with one set in particular wiggling in excitement of what tonight’s menu had in store.

“Granny Barb’s fried chicken!” the round woman announced proudly as she lowered a dressy container of the stuff in front of three yapping mouths, “That ol’ carpetbagger from Kentucky ain’t got nothin’ on these legs.”

Meals like this so very rarely came around. If Carol Anne hadn’t been pregnant, Granny Barb might not have ever made something as labor-intensive as fried chicken for four. But Lyla was sure happy that her cousin had decided to drop by—if for nothing else, the fact that there would almost certainly be leftovers…

“Lord knows he wishes he did.” Lyla smacked her lips, leaning forward and into the inaugural first serving, “Dibs on the white meat.”

“Only white meat to spare ‘round here is the sides of Carol Anne’s butt hanging over the chair.”

The portly, pregnant, and temperamental brunette stuck her tongue out at her younger sister.

Lyla put little thought in to the continuing feud of her two closest cousins. They’d been fighting since they were old enough to speak, and Lyla had never been particularly interested in picking sides. But legs and thighs? She could pick those all day…

She piled her plate *high* with chicken. Granny Barb had erred on the side of being a good hostess, and decided to cook two birds for the occasion. And that meant that Lyla didn’t have to hold back and make sure that her cousins had eaten plenty before grabbing what she wanted.

Mashed potatoes, homemade macaroni pie, and two pieces of cornbread had been loaded up onto her plate before anyone had worked up the nerve to say much of anything about it—right around the time she started reaching for piece number three.

“Were you gonna save some for the rest of us?” Cousin Carole Anne pulled the rustic wicker basket away from her, “Look at you, loadin’ that plate up—you sure I’m the only one expecting ‘round here?”

It was Lyla’s turn to stick out her tongue.

Whatever weight she had put on since the school year began was immaterial. After all, working a desk job was bound to set her up with some unwanted calories and a lack of exercise to burn them off. The fact of the matter was that Lyla only had so many hours in a day between grading papers, making assignments, and adjusting her lesson plan. How was anyone going to deny her a little comfort food to help ease the thankless job of teaching?

“Now there’s plenty for everybody, stop all the fussin’ an’ the fightin’.”

Granny Barb had always been quick to swoop in and make sure that nobody felt bad about grabbing big portions.

“I tell you what, you’ll get the first slice of pie after dinner’s over and done with. Sound fair?”

“No.” Lyla managed through a mouthful of chicken and potatoes. The three of them laughed.

“Cousin Lyla I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you’re gonna be Blue Ribbon ready iffin’ you keep eatin’ like this!”

“Says the woman who’s about a trimester ahead of herself.” Cousin Faith nudged her sister with a thigh, “Don’t you listen to her, cuz.”

Cousin Faith’s endorsement hadn’t meant much to Lyla in the first place. She definitely wouldn’t have slowed down on a night like this. After all, how often did she really get to *enjoy* Granny Barb’s fried chicken?

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Lyla was not enjoying the fried chicken anymore.

Laying in bed, stuffed into her jammies and rounding out long the button hem of her top, Lyla was having the worst night of her poor little life. All that grease and fat was coming back on her, giving her heartburn out the yin-yang and chicken burps to match! Hot and sweaty, even with the covers cast aside, poor Lyla was panting hard and clutching her distended stomach as she tried in vain to get herself to some semblance of sleep.

“ooogh…”

Her tight brown brow furrowed as she winced in pain. She hadn’t felt this gross in quite some time—certainly not since before she’d come home.

“I need somethin’ to drink…”

Lyla rocked herself out of bed, pot belly sloshing thickly as the pads of her feet and toes touched the hardwood. Floorboards cold to the skin, she felt a shiver run up her spine as she felt the weight of her still-distended gut settle in this new vertical orientation.

Running a hand up and down her swollen paunch, Lyla toddled uneasily out of the bedroom. The squeak of the stiff old door hinges was enough to make her flinch, but not enough to make her stop. Her footsteps thick and plodding, she lead herself belly-first into the kitchen in search of something to help settle her aching stomach…

“I gotta stop eatin’ so much right before bed…”

She said out loud, thick and husky, as she plodded towards the fridge.

Pulling one door to, grabbing it by the handle and propping it out with a steadily thickening hip, Lyla’s sleepy eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden brightness that came with the open refrigerator doors.

“Muh…”

From what she could see, there wasn’t anything that wouldn’t exacerbate her problem. Orange Juice and Apple Juice, some sweet tea might be nice, but in the back of her mind she knew what she needed…

“Ahh, the good stuff.”

Grabbing the jug by the handle, Lyla snaked her cute little fingers underneath the white plastic and twisted off the cap. Raising the opening to her mouth as the cap hit the floor, cold wet milk started to flow into her mouth from the carton.

A nice glass of milk had always helped her sleep well—especially after nights over at Granny Barb’s.

“Ahh…”

She lay a hand on the small shelf created by her bulging stomach. Patting it gently with one hand, Lyla placed the carton back in the fridge and took a quarter-step backwards on instinct as she told herself that she was done in the fridge.

“Well good mornin’ Lyla Bean.” The voice of her Granny Barb caused her to whip around slowly, “Havin’ trouble stayin’ in bed?”

“For once.” Lyla let the fridge door close as she took a full step forward, “Whatchu doin’ up so early?”

“Oh hun, I never get no sleep.” Granny Barb rolled her eyes, “You’ll see what I mean when you get to be my age.”

“Shoot—I don’t think I’ll ever live *that* long.”

The two of them shared a laugh. A hushed one, like they were worried about waking up someone else in the house, knowing full and well that they were the only two there. Little talks like this in the early morning were always so odd—something about the witching hour made it all seem so immaterial, and difficult to explain.

Lyla didn’t have to be at work for another five hours, and Granny Barb wouldn’t normally have woken up for at least another three. Giving her enough time to start on breakfast for her granddaughter with enough to spare to prepare a modest lunch. The both of them being up at three in the morning was such an oddity in their own respective senses, never mind the fact that it had happened together.

“What would you say to a little slice of cheesecake, huh?” Granny Barb suggested wickedly, “A little somethin’ to help us sleep?”

“Oh I don’t know, Granny…” Lyla tentatively pressed down on her full stomach, “I’m not sure I’ve got any room left after that dinner you made us.”

“Oh come on, you ain’t gonna be sleepy for a little bit anyhow.” Granny Barb clicked her tongue, “It’ll knock you right out—trust me!”

Her grandmother’s stomach wobbled with the small amount of laughter that she offered as a show of expertise.

“Well… what the hell.” Lyla smacked her lips hungrily as she sat down at the head end of the table, “Plate me up a slice of cheesecake, Granny Barb.”

“That’s my girl.”

The two of them sat in the dark for a while, eating cheesecake and drinking hot chocolate. Lyla tried to go easy on the sweets, given her purportedly full stomach. But it was all she could do to resist the siren song of Granny Barb’s homemade cheesecake…

Sure enough, after little more than thirty minutes, Lyla’s eyelids were heavy and she was well on her way back to sleep, right there in the middle of the kitchen.

Three slices in and two cups of cocoa down.

“G’night Granny Barb…” she burped, waddling belly-first down the hallway, “Y’mind lettin’ me sleep in a little tomorrow mornin’?”