

Kate Pritchett

The Girl and the Wooden Frame

There is a wooden frame. Behind the glass, my cousin wears a faded purple dress—our moms would always buy us handmade clothing. My cousin’s light brown hair is frayed out like branches on a tree and she is wearing no shoes. She is running, one foot hovering in space. Her dress billows as she attempts to resist the strength of the wind, and it makes the printed flowers look as though they are growing wild on the grass beneath her.

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There is a wooden frame, except it is set against a wall in the log cabin. My cousin is around the same age as she is in the wooden frame. Maybe five. Maybe six. I gaze up from my spot on the floor and see she is lying in her quilt, with Bun Bun pressed alongside her flushed cheek. I am in a sleeping bag, but it is sprawled wide open so that her mom can run her fingers up and down my back. She makes designs, and I spend my time deciphering what they could be instead of drifting off to sleep. I think they are usually hearts or that she is spelling my name. Sometimes, though, the end of the “e” in “Marie” extends too far and then I imagine it to be a snake. I listen to the sputter and hiss of burning logs. My eyes soon get droopy, but I am jerked awake when I hear the crack of her knees as she rises from the floor to join my uncle in bed. I quickly shut my eyes as she comes around to wrap me in covers. They are already warm from where she was sitting, and the remnant heat makes it easier for me to doze off.

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We pull into the lot for the Ventura County Fair. My cousin shrieks and her toes wiggle uncontrollably. My aunt turns around, with a finger to her mouth to quiet her, and I notice how naked that hand looks without her pretty ring. My eyes trail the Ferris Wheel that spins in all its brilliance, and I hit my head against the car window once we come to a stop.

We pass by Bank-A-Shot, Bean-Bag-Toss, and a dunk tank. My cousin and I grasp hands and run for the House of Mirrors. We become bigger and smaller, fatter and slimmer, but I start speeding through the rooms. Uncle Rick used to put me on his shoulders so that we looked like a giant totem pole, but he is not here to do that.

My cousin spots cotton candy. She stomps her feet in frustration, sending clouds of dirt to land on my white socks. My dad puts a hand on my aunt's shoulder: "I'll get it Annie. Please, don't worry about it."

Berry-Go-Round! My cousin and I plop into a strawberry. *Thump. Thud.* I turn the wheel first. I suddenly see my aunt nudge her head into the crook of my mom's neck. My mom's hands cradle my aunt, as her body gently rises up and down. *Is she crying?* My effort on the wheel wanes and I instead use my hands to lift me higher off the seat to see. My cousin takes over. We whirl around and around and around. My mom and aunt become hazy—a painting of colors and streaks. I put my head against the black wall of the strawberry and close my eyes. *One, two, three, four, five. If Uncle Rick were here, my youngest cousin could sit on his lap, and that would be six—then all of us could have a partner for the Ferris Wheel.*

I pretend I am sick when I stumble off the ride. We were saving the Ferris Wheel for last, but I don't want anyone to have to ride alone. I slow my pace behind everyone as

we make our way out of the fair. My parents are holding hands. My cousin and aunt are holding hands. I ball mine up into tight fists, let out a deep, quivering sigh, and for some reason I just start crying.

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Walking through the sliding glass door of my aunt's mobile home, the wooden frame is in the foreground and my cousin is seated on the couch. Her hair is no longer light, but is the shade of a block of dark chocolate. She is not wearing a dress but she *is* barefoot. She smiles and I bounce onto the couch next to her. The warmth of a fireplace does not permeate the room as it did in times past, but I have always felt an affection radiating from her. She works with kids, and rightfully so. I wonder if when she is playing with them she ever pictures us, like the time there was a zip line across her yard that we used to fly across. When I would land, my feet would squish into the spongy grass and mud would come up between my toes. Her little brother was too small and would cry that he could not reach. They moved out before he was tall enough to try.

Morris saunters past my leg and his tail brushes me like I am a floor and he is a broom. I try to pat his head and he *meows* when I instead graze the tip of his ears. We laugh at this imbalance—he won't let me pet his head when I let him *sleep* on mine. Our moms are outside talking in the cold because they want to talk in secrecy and have nowhere else to go. They do not talk of handmade dresses anymore. I don't know what they talk about, but whenever I glance over at them, they are laughing.

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When I climb in my own bed, devoid of fingernail drawings and rosy cheeks, I wonder though: what did the child in the frame think at the time of separation? At that

age, *what* is inside is just as important as *who* is inside. How did they decide who would take the wooden frame? Was Bun Bun ever forgotten? I push such inquiries aside. I guess there's no point in answering them now.

I place the CD my cousin has made me into the player. I reflect that a home is not made from *what* is inside, but made from *who* is inside. There are no longer logs, no firewood, no sleeping bag bed. The photo in the wooden frame is simply a memory of what once was. It is comforting to know, however, that if everything were somehow destroyed—like in a fire we once watched devouring foliage and houses on a hill— that she would still be here.