



# The MacGuffin

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## Beauty Queen

It was not enough to play some chords on the guitar or do a couple of cartwheels like the other eight-year-olds. For the talent component of the Miss Towanda Beauty Pageant, I played a Beethoven sonatina on the piano and a Haydn fugue on the clarinet. To solidify the win, I also sang, performing the school-age favorite "I Know an Old Lady who Swallowed a Fly." For the piece, in which the Lady ingests—fatally—eight animals, I wore a poster board, upon which a gargantuan stomach had been drawn and punctured with small holes. With each line of lyrics, I hooked on a corresponding drawing, outfitted with a paperclip, to the belly that consumed all but my head, forearms, and feet. "I know an old lady who swallowed a spider"—I attached a spider; "...swallowed a bird"—I attached a bird. Ultimately, the animals all hung from my torso. I didn't act out the dead part. In retrospect, it would have been appropriate.

For half the summer, my father was the doctor at Camp Towanda in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, where kids slept in bunks and played Newcomb and wore work boots in the rain. My mother went along for the month, and with little to do in the infirmary, she hatched schemes such as the above. For the bathing suit portion of the contest, she sewed balloons—immense, inflated balloons—on to my red swimsuit, front and back. It was inconceivable that I would lose. It was inconceivable that I would emerge of right mind. I felt bad for the other girls who probably should have won, being normal and on their own.

When my name was called, the camp director presented the crown, cut from green construction paper and painted gold. She handed me a bouquet of wild Pennsylvania weeds and turned me by my shoulders to face the crowd, squeezing my bones with her fingers, pulsing with excitement. I held the weeds straight out in front of me, resting my forearms on a balloon sprouting from my ribs.

"Go ahead," she said into my ear, "take your walk."

The weird guy who was in charge of canoeing turned on the sound system and blasted the pageant song. "There she is..." the audience sang, yelling over the "America" part. I stood on the stage, unable to move my feet. "There she is...Miss *Towanda*."

"Go, go," the director said again, pushing on my spine.

The center aisle of the rec hall had been raised up like a fashion runway. Boys sat on the left, girls on the right, like a religious sect. I

looked for my parents, but the lights made it difficult to see. The losing contestants filled the stage behind me, crowding around in their unadulterated bathing suits, looking pretty happy and carefree despite their defeat. I was a shoo-in, and they knew it. I had whipped them with a display of nepotism, not to mention aid and assistance, that Camp Towanda hadn't before seen. I stood motionless, feeling the floor rumble with their jumping and dancing, with their holding of hands and swinging of arms, with the frivolity and camaraderie that did not include me. Me, the victor, the model of camper girl perfection, the paragon of beauty and skill. They were over it. They were done considering me in any way, in all ways.

I attempted an escape into the wings, but the camp director lunged and caught my arm. Remaining on the stage, ignored by the loser contestants, was a suboptimal option. I slipped free of her grip and walked toward the runway, assessing its height off the floor. I was confident that I could leap the three feet but would wait until I was parallel with the side door, which was left open for ventilation. My first thought was to seek refuge in the girls' bathroom across the lawn, but I sensed that it would be where the people would naturally look. It's where the people would think to converge in a hunt for an eight-year-old Miss Towanda Beauty Queen pocked with inflated balloons.

I stepped onto the runway. The younger kids sat in the front rows. I saw the girls from my bunk, the ones who nominated me for the contest. Thank you very much, girls from my bunk. Each age group put forth its own representative, so I had beaten not only other elementary schoolers and prepubescents, but a thirteen-year-old too. A veritable adolescent with training bras and underarm growth that I stared at when we changed in the lake house for swimming. A girl who actually wanted to talk to boys and had earrings and the pads from the drugstore that my mother kept in the linen closet and didn't tell me about, despite my inquiries, my thousands of inquiries. I had beaten a fellow camper who wore lip gloss.

The rec hall's side exit was in view, but not yet within leaping range. As always, it was propped open, manned by a counselor on each side. I would fit through the doorway, I assured myself atop the runway, even in my distended state. When I got to the row where the ten-year-old boys were sitting, the cheering welled. As I approached them, the middies, the ones on the end bolted up from their benches. They hollered and lurched toward me, tripping over each other to reach into the aisle, yelling at me and swatting. The middies tried to pop my balloons.

When my mother persisted in avoiding my questions about the pads in the boxes underneath the towels, I dissected one, determining that they were bandages for some kind of dreadful wound. I had no idea where or how the wound would manifest, but I concluded that

it was coming, given how prepared we were. My mother said that I had to wait until I was thirteen, and then she would tell me. I thought that I was going to have a horrific accident. My brother would get bar mitzvahed, and I was going to bleed to death.

Several of the middies' hands reached me and smacked the balloons. I felt the tug on my swimsuit. I felt the fabric drag down over my skin and pull away from my body, letting the air in, making a gap, uncovering me. I felt the elastic on the leg opening ride up and twist, and I was unable to reach over the balloons and readjust it. The boys' counselors grabbed them back by their shirts, but they fought it, stretching out the fabric like sails in taut wind, faces like creepy figureheads, teeth and tongues bared. They blocked the path ahead, clawing at the runway. The loser contestants had filled in behind me, a mob. Seeing one way out, I crouched down and slid sideways off the runway, its ragged edge cutting up my thighs and sending pops into the frenzied air. I squeezed through a row of girls to an unused exit, past laughing girls, shocked girls, helpless girls. The door was stuck shut. It needed a whole body to burst it open, but mine was swallowed up, rendered useless inside my mother's clever idea, my ostensible talent, my supreme distinction. I banged as hard as I could with just my fists, pommeling it until it gave way.

Outside on the lawn, I heard the camp director over the microphone.

"Let's settle down now, boys and girls," she said. "Settle down if you want ice cream."

Wails of disappointment rang out from the rec hall, the next emotional retching, now over dessert rather than me. It had gotten dark, summer dark, feeling like dawn, feeling out of sequence. I threw my crown onto the grass and ran away from the building, the thump of rubber keeping pace. From behind a tree, I looked back and saw my parents standing outside the door. I watched their arms flail and land on their hips, their spines bend forward, their chins jut. Ice cream dispersed, mouths busy, their words sailed out and rode the air.

"Ridiculous..."

"What you've done..."

"Fault..."

My mother cried and turned away. My father stomped down the hill, shouting my name. A glint of gold paint shot up from the lawn, calling out in the moonlight. From behind the tree, I watched it flicker, the last of the balloons bobbing on my back.

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Ace Boggess  
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Michael Brosnan  
Julie Bruck  
Abby Caplin  
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