

OHIO AUNTS

My wife hunches over the aquamarine sprawl of the Ohio road map. Red dots tell her where every Sohio gas station is located. "Take a right," she sings out. I swing our Volkswagon off interstate 71 and aim for Exit 42. Washington Street. My rear-view mirror fills up with the glass and steel shafts of downtown Columbus. So we are here. Sarah and Amy are whining in the back seat. They want to go potty again. They are spelling aloud all the Sohio signs as they flit by the windshield like giant red lollipops. My wife thinks she recognizes Washington Street. "Cherry. We want Cherry," she says, her eyes skimming the row of old mansions that now house Mansonic lodges, funeral parlors, Black Muslim temples. My brain aches from breathing inside the truck fume zone for nine hours. I can still smell the Goodyear factories that line I76, each one going flat out, tires stacked behind cyclone fences like black doughnuts. Youngstown, Akron. Dots on the map that translate into columns of black smoke, workers falling into vats of molten rubber, Caterpillar grader tires ten feet high. Now the hard plastic knobs of the steering wheel have put dents in my hands. My eyeballs try to push past my lids just as my wife calls out "Cherry!" and smiles. We really are here. She knows her way now, recognizes the locust trees, the hawthorne hedge, and then the crenelated tower capped by a cone of blue slate: the Bocker house. My wife has not seen it in years. I have only heard about it. But is anyone home? Her four virgin aunts are known to drop everything and rent a Winnebago or a Sioux. Drift through the country trolling for neices, nephews, cousins. We pull into the driveway and see the rear end of a Winnebago the size of a lone Pullman car shunted to a siding. Our Volkswagon folds out its wings. We spill out, shouting the names of my wife's Ohio aunts: Margie! Carol! Aggie! Sarah! The Winnebago's door unseals itself with a pneumatic hiss. Carol's head emerges. She sees the blonde heads of my daughters in the sun. Attempts to move her girth past the threshold head-on and becomes stuck. Aunt Margie pushes from behind, shouts for Three-in-One Oil and then all four aunts pile out like a circus act. Lover barks, whimpers, fawns at my feet. My daughters go wild with delight.

We are sitting around the white kitchen table, our faces dimly reflected in the white porcelain top. I think of their ages again: Sarah 91, Aggie 86, Margie 52, Carol 47. Still here, in Columbus. Still living in the house Grandpa Bocker built in 1921. My head continues to throb from the remembered blasts of truck horns. But I am smiling. Their lives are a wonder. None ever married. They have taken care of each other for more years that I have been alive. Were there any courtships? Surely they have their disagreements, the inevitable tensions. But now Margie offers me some iced tea. Aggie suggests a Budweiser. I ask for an aspirin and set off a hidden alarm: medicine. Guest needs help. Carol rushes towards the half-bath off the kitchen. She forgets her frame. Dives for the open door. Carol is stuck. Margie forces her new Prince racquet between Carol's arm and the door jamb. Starts prying. Carol pops out, grabs the Bufferin bottle from Aggie who was in there first. Carol's strides make the juice glasses tremble on the porcelain. I swallow the Bufferin tablet, hose it down with Ohio apple cider. A sudden thud from upstairs. Someone has fallen. We all leap up from the table. Aunt Sarah's bedroom is on the third floor. Carol bolts for the stairs but becomes wedged between the chestnut newel post and the invalid elevator chair parked at the bottom of the staircase. I squeeze past her, take the steps two at a time. My brain lobes are bouncing inside my skull like small loaves of bread.

The basement is exactly the same as when Grandpa Bocker lined the storeroom with wicker baskets of Cortlands, Ida Reds, Ohio Macs. Sarah and Amy run behind the oil burner to hide. Galvanized heating vents octopus out of the burner and I think: someone is hiding inside that white plaster, holding up the ground floor like Atlas. My wife, tracking her daughters, peeks behind the oil burner and finds her six-year old self, blue Navy suit smudged be coal dust. Carol shows me the height record Grandpa Bocker penciled on a wooden strut of the old coal bin: Carol Nov 1937 4' 3" Margie Aug 1934 4'1". Margie shows me where she sits to watch Buckeye football games as she pounds chestnuts against the cement floor. With Grandpa Bocker's ballpeen hammer. A photo of Woody Hayes is still taped to the coal bin. Suddenly we hear a thud. Someone has fallen on the kitchen floor over our heads. Aunt Aggie? I leap towards the stairs. Rang my head on the old beam

over the back door landing. As I crumple against the dishwasher I hear Margie screaming that Aggie is caught in the dishwasher. My wife can't pull Amy free. Amy is somewhere inside the oil burner.

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The supper dishes are not completely clean. Tiny pieces of Aunt Aggie stick to my plate like dried egg. Margie is piling rope coils of spaghetti on my plate. "Have some more, Professor!" she shouts happily. She loves the bustle, the noise of the children. Margie holds up a Purina Treat. "Lover!" she cries. And Lover leaps up on her hind legs, walks around the table, paws held high. Her head goes past my left elbow. Her tail swings against my fork. Lover snaps the biscuit off the tip of her nose and patters around the table again. Sarah and Amy go crazy. "Lover!" they shout, waving imaginary Purina treats in the air. Lover rears up. Tap dances past my chair, toenails clicking across the linoleum. "Lover!" sings out Margie. "Be a Professor!" Lover trots over, paws dangling like twin dead mice. She accepts the hornrim glasses Margie places on her snout. Carol opened a James Beard cookbook and spreads it out on the table's edge. Lover holds down the pages with her paws. Her eyes, enlarged by the lenses of the hornrims, begin to cross. A page tries to rise but Lover slaps it down with her left paw. Now she is mumbling something. I can't hear her. I put my fork down and listen: it seems important. "Quiet!" I am shouting. "She's saying something!"

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Margie serves dessert in the living room. The tray she carries makes each slab of orange Jello wobble inside its Waterford champagne glass. Lover circles the living room on her hind legs looking for a Purina Treat. Carol breaks one in half, sets it on Lover's nose. The doorbell rings. Father Tom Bocker is here. He is the priest who married us. He is only a bit heavier, but the fine stalks of red hair on his head have been thinned by an invisible reaper. He has just returned from a four day retreat. On the fourth day there was a Charismatic Prayer Service. He heard people speak in tongues. Row after row of priests praying aloud, stretching out their hands, gesturing at the roof, at the red tabernacular light winking at them from high above the altar. Some priests falling back into the pews, some shouting. He was amazed. "Yet Saint Paul tells us to pray constantly," Father Tom says, eyes gleaming, looking at us for a spark, perhaps a link. "But this is what the Protestants do," says Carol. "What we need is the old mass back," Margie adds. "People would come. I know." Carol flips her fingers and Lover swallows the Purina Treat she has been balancing patiently. Father Tom is excited, waves his arms. "Amazing. You could hear voices, lost languages. Saint Paul. He's the key!" Will Father Tom speak in tongues right here, in front of us, with all these orange slabs quivering? Carol rushes from the room, mounts the stairs. She wants to show Father Tom an article in the Columbus Messenger. But Father Tom is tired, his head sags against the red wingback chair Grandpa Bocker re-upholstered in 1939. Part of him is still in that dim chapel, holding his candle high. Lobbing prayers into the dark air. His eyes begin to dim, focus on the paisley pattern of the wallpaper over my head. "Saint Paul" he mutters. His words start to dribble from his lips, take flight from his chin like butterflies moulting. "Paul. Paul. Bubba. Bubba." The words fly around our chairs, land on the marble mantelpiece, prance around the edge of the rose-colored Tiffany lamp. Suddenly a sound upstairs. Someone has fallen. I dash for the stairs, banging my shins on the footrest of the invalid chairlift. The corpse of Aunt Sarah is sitting in the invalid chair, smiling. "Never mind her," I shout back to Father Tom who is running with his eyes closed. He is chanting "Bubba bubba bubba bubba." We fly past Aunt Sarah taking the steps three at a time. Lover is behind Father Tom, still on her hind legs, taking the steps one at a time, paws held high. She has her hornrims on. I burst into Carol's bedroom on the second floor. Over the years Carol has been piling up bundles of magazines with titles like Modern Romance, Modern Screen, and Hollywood! until they have caressed the pink stucco of her ceiling. Pillars of magazines rise over my head. A temple of love, swaying from tremors. I run down the aisles shouting, "Aunt Carol! Answer me!" I see a flash of her blue dress, then a patch of her thigh the size of a plucked turkey. "Aunt Carol!" Two columns of magazines have fallen on her. A third trembles menacingly over my head. Father Tom and I grab one leg each and pull. "Watch that column," I say, and then spot the cover of an old Modern Screen. Kim Novak is fingering the cleft in Kirk Douglas's chin. She can't be a day older than 27. I seize the magazine and turn quickly to page 17. "Kim. Kim," I sob, my heart nearly breaking. Carol's voice picks its way through the slabs of spilled magazines. "I think I heard a Protestant." Lover bursts through the open door, breathing hard from the climb. But paws still aloft. "Bubba!" cries Lover.

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That night I wake up in Grandpa Bocker's bed. The same bed he died in, surrounded by his sisters, his five daughters. My wife is asleep beside me, head buried under a beige woolen blanket. The moonlight streaming through the lace curtains touches the mirror over an oak dresser. I tiptoe to the bathroom. As I pass the tiny gleam of the nightlight stuck in a socket on the chestnut wallboard I see my feet take shape, then dissolve into blackness. I open the bathroom door. A dim throb of florescence throws shadows on the tiled floor, on the porcelain bathtub held off the floor by four lion paws squeezing balls, on the swollen white lip of the sink. I suck in my breath: Grandpa Bocker sits, chin on his hands, the oval wooden seat holding him like a boiled egg in a cup. A keel of spinal knobs gently stretches the delicate white skin of his back. Thin beams of moonlight manage to pierce the glazed glass of the window to pick out two small moles on his left shoulder. "Grandfather," I whisper, and back slowly out the door. I close it gently behind me. It is nearly dawn. I hear a whining sound. An electric hum. Aunt Sarah is coming down the staircase in her invalid chairlift. She smiles at me in the dark, then her chair turns the corner, drops out of sight behind the cherry spindles of the banister. I wave, but she does not see me. I hear the front door open and then shut. She will walk two miles to the Cathedral downtown to attend the 6:30 mass. And then walk back.

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I wake up in Grandpa Bocker's bed. Sunlight comes through the curtains. I hear the voices of my children downstairs. I smell coffee. Everyone is up. Lover barks hello as I walk into the kitchen. I see that everyone has eaten. Aunt Aggie waits at the stove, hefting a bowl of pancake mix on her hip like a milkmaid lugging a crock of fresh milk. Margie is playing tennis. She is the captain of her team. Aunt Carol is at the B&O Railroad office downtown, typing letters on the same B&O stationery that arrives at our house each Christmas. My children are playing with Lover. They know how to make her rear up on her hind legs. They balance the horn-rims on her snout and cry "Professor, think!" I eat eleven pancakes and ask if I can take Lover for a walk. Aunt Aggie frowns. "Only Margie walks her. She's afraid of the leach breaking." Of losing Lover in the maze of streets surrounding Columbus, of green fenders rising out of the street to bat Lover over cedar stockade fencing, of ticks that drop unseen from the locust trees. But I am insistent. I test the chain leash, double the handle around my wrist. Ask Aunt Aggie to pull it. She is dubious, but lets us go. We wave goodbye. Sarah and Amy walk point position. Lover pants against the length of the chain. I am happy. I watch my daughters dart along the curb, pick dandelions, sniff at trees. I have three dogs, and only one leash. I whistle at my two unleashed dogs. Warn them of cars. Tell them to heel. I watch the houses glide by on my left. Tudor. Some with towers, mimic crossbow slits. Oak doors. Lawns that slope to the sidewalk. The whole street must have been built within a few years of the Bocker house. A green Cadillac turns the corner, tears at the corner of my eye like a hook. "Sarah! Amy!" I call. They heel, whimpering. Lover leans into the leash, rises against the pull, paws clawing air. Two links bend, split open like secrets. The green fender looms in the street: a moving tower of death. "Lover!" I scream. "Lover, come back!"

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My daughters are gone. They have fled back to the house, Lover's blood on their knees, their shins. I walk slowly in the center of the sidewalk carrying Lover. I am trying to put one foot in the exact center of each slab of sidewalk. I can feel warm wetness exploring my crotch. Now I am placing a tiny ruby on every other cement slab. I walk down the Bocker driveway and up the steps of the back porch. I shift Lover's weight to my left hip. Ring the bell with my right hand. The drops fall in one place now, so I make silent bombing patterns on the welcome mat. The door opens. Aunt Margie is home from tennis. Her tennis shorts are still sweaty, smudged on the side where we took a fall. She plays spirited tennis, I note, and say "I'm sorry, Margie." She looks onto my eyes and slowly closes the door and locks it.

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I gently place Lover on the welcome mat and walk up the driveway towards the front of the house. My shoes make crunching sounds in the white gravel. It is nearly dark. I can see lights coming on in the living room. I reach the front door and ring the bell. Silence. I walk across the porch to look in the dining room window. Someone is eating in the kitchen. Now I see everyone at the table: my wife, Amy, Sarah, Margie, Carol, and Aggie. Aunt Sarah is not there. Somehow Lover got in the back door. She is walking around the table on

her hind legs. My daughters are laughing, waving Purina Treats. I rap on the window but no one can hear me over the laughter of the children. I hear the electric hum of the invalid chair. It's coming down the staircase I can see Aunt Sarah gliding to the bottom. She steps out of the chair, walks to the front door. She unlocks the front door and steps onto the porch. She is dressed for the 6:30 mass. The door locks behind her. "Aunt Sarah," I call. But she doesn't hear me. She shuffles down the slate walk, hat on an angle, handbag swinging. Sarah is obviously confused. She thinks this half-dark is early morning. The Cathedral will be locked. She is walking into downtown Columbus alone. Into the night. "Aunt Sarah!" I call louder. My pants legs are beginning to stick to my thighs but I trot after her anyway. She walks more quickly than I would have believed. She is turning the corner at Cherry. Or did she cross to Redford? I sprint down Cherry. Stop. Double back. She must be on Washington Street by now. I cut through Redford and spot her hat flitting like a moth under a street-light. Two shadowy figures are following her. I see her stagger, thrown to the sidewalk. One of the shadows tugs at her handbag. "Aunt Sarah!" I am running straight into my shouts. I am at her side. The shadows have fled. She is on her back, the blue gingham dress hiked above her knees. Mugged at 91, I reflected as I stoop to help her up. The two shadows are back. Now a third. "Gotcha!" one shadow snarls. I am wrestled to the ground. The second shadow whispers "Bastard. She can't be a day younger than 91." The third shadow dangles handcuffs in front of me like gifts of silver. I can say nothing. My blood stained pants are a dead giveaway.

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Wilhelm Bocker is sitting inside the tower of his new house. Only the slate roof over his head is unfinished. The tower pleases him. He likes to peer through out the crossbow slits at the yellow ditch he named Cherry Street. Through the north slit he can see the city of Columbus rising up over the cornfields. Through the east slit he watches the workers come each day to splash Cherry Street with tar, then seal the yellow earth with concrete. A model T rattles by, backfiring. He ponders the sharp edge of the automobile's fender, the gleaming hooks of the bumper. His older sister, Sarah, walks out the front door and heads toward the Cathedral. "Be careful, Sissy," he call through the crossbow slit. She is wearing a blue gingham dress a little too snappy for his taste. And she swings her handbag like child.

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I am on Cherry street. The blood on my pants has dried, scabbed, and fallen away. I walk up the slate steps to the front door of the Bocker house. The handle turns, opens. Aunt Sarah must have forgotten this too. I walk into the kitchen but no one is there. I look out the back window and see that the Winnebago is gone. So is my Volkswagon. The living room couch and all the chairs are shrouded by sheets. I sit down in the invalid chairlift. In the dark I begin to play the Professor. I reach up with my paw. Adjust my hornrims. Press the button that says "START." I rise slowly. The living room drops gently into the blackness in front of me. As I pass the first bend in the stairway I find I am praying constantly.