

A Family Trait

My uncles and their sons raise tobacco on the family farm. It is something of a birthright. Acres and acres of hilly land are cut into paths, fenced into fields, and eroded by a long shallow creek. They come into my great-grandmother Geneva's house sepia-toned and dirty, smelling like sweat and Backwoods cigars. Dark grimy lines settle into the cracks of their fingers and everything they touch is brown. Their clothes are stained with tobacco, just like my great-grandfather's hands before them. Tobacco brings in the money.

My Granny has black hair and Vivien Leigh green eyes. She was only fifteen when she lied about her age and eloped with an older man: my great-grandfather Johnny. They were in love. They were in love like very few people are nowadays. In my lifetime, their marriage is the only one I have ever known to last, and my great-grandfather died when I was three years old. The only thing I can remember about him was that I used to dig for butterscotch candy in his front coat pocket, and he used to pour his coffee into a saucer to sip it. They bought the farm and built a house. She raised five children who all had several and so on. They're still in love, and he's been dead for seventeen years. That makes me feel grimy. That's the grimmest thought I ever had.

My great-grandmother always yells at the boys for dirtying her couches and leaving brownish rings in her bathroom sink. She loves it though. My uncles and cousins are tall and broad-shouldered with balding heads and crooked grins, and they use the most creative combinations of curse words I have ever heard. They are back-row Catholics and expensive whiskey drinkers on Christmas with filthy mouths and filthy hands. They all have rotten tempers and tell stories as my great-grandfather did. I know she thinks the boys look just like him.

Their hands never lose those arching brown fingerprints. The tobacco has grown into their hands like it's grown into the fields. Over

time, the tobacco seeps into my family's pores and solidifies there, petrifies the skin, permeates the cracks and crevices, and makes a home for itself. It is a family trait no different from dimples. We are a part of the land, a part of the dirt.