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## The Muck Sisters

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# The Muck Sisters

The muck sisters of Wiles Road are mighty fierce. Or so they say. They being the kids we see at school who cling to clean and have a lot to say about those like us who live in the muck. Who think we're odd 'cause we follow our own way. It's not our fault we know how things are in the wild, that we know how to survive. We see the night howlers and many-eyed monsters that come out of the dark. Sitting up straight and using your fork isn't gonna save you. You can't use fancy language with a beast. Kinda scary, but Mama has a shotgun and we all have the family baseball bat. Ours has some nails sticking out of it, makes it real scary. It can't hit a baseball anymore unless you wanna hear a pop. They also say you can spot us playing in the mud and after that we bathe in the swamp water nearest to the mangroves. They're not wrong, the oldest muck sister going extra times too, often under the light of the moon. Normally we'd be begging her to take us with her but right now all we're concerned with is why she been so clean lately. This question drained the fun out of July.

These last couple of days all of us are pretty bored. My youngest sissy, Lily, marches around our trailer not knowing how to contain herself. Her reddish hair is unkempt and wild, and her bangs stick to her forehead from the July heat. When we play in the muck you can barely tell the dirt apart from her freckles. Her arms lay all jumbled at her sides. She's twelve now and when summer ends she's gotta go to school. No more gym wrestling or mud-wrangling at recess; she's gonna have to sit still for a while in middle school. I bet she's gonna hate it. Today she been asking me all about the hallways. Our elementary school is set up in a clump of trailers, similar to ours, with a class in each one. Middle school's when you get the buildings. Since I'm fourteen

now, I'll show her all the ropes. I tell her that school people are different from us; their clothes don't have wrinkles and they don't eat free lunches at the school either. There's some things we gotta do to avoid getting gawked at, or worse, pitied. That's what I tell her.

Don't get lost, our oldest sister Tilly says, laughing. Tilly's seventeen and looks for a different type of mischief. She's still a muck sister though, no matter how hard she tries to hide it. Even she's stuck in the trailer. Right now she's glued to her hand mirror fixing up her hair, waiting for her boyfriend. Trevor don't get out of work until late. He pumps gas down by the two-way intersection of 34 and 495 that's about a twenty minute drive away. Twenty minutes before the dirt road goes into pavement and we're met with the highway. Tilly gets real moody when she waits, starts telling us she can't wait to get out. She says she got proof that lots of people wanna get out of the trailer park too, to the nicer apartments where the paved roads are, far from the swamp.

There's fewer muck families living in our town than there used to be; most of us live in one clump, in the Sunny Grove trailer park. But the shrinking numbers don't scare me. Mama tells us stories of the ones who lived deep in the Florida swamplands. Said they even ate wild boars. She smiles when she tells us this. Mama's old but she's still as wild as us. Her senses are still sharp, too. She raises chickens outside of the trailer for eggs and meat, not afraid that their clucks could attract a wild beast. That's our Mama, but Tilly never seems impressed; she doesn't want to be anything like her or us. She wants to be like Trevor, nice and cushy. Now with Trevor she's gone almost all the time. He takes her from us, I swear. Worst part is he's a secret; Mama don't know a thing.

Ever since Tilly's been working she's been like this. It started with her complaining about work she's been doing around the yard. Now she's waitressing at that rundown Gator Grill Diner. The only one Mama usually brings us to, since it's the closest one to home. Most days Tilly walks there and back. Only a ten minute walk! Mama says, though sometimes the way Tilly huffs and puffs makes it seem like an hour away. That's another thing with Trevor, he got a car. Makes her eyes all glowy like she's real hot stuff dating some guy outside the Sunny Grove trailer park. Trevor lives in one of those New Palm apartments with his brother, even has cable, Tilly tells us. Lily and I watch her as she jams lipstick on her lips, slaps it on thick.

Nice Crayola, I say.

Shut it, Milly, Tilly hisses with her mouth still closed.

Just 'cause he don't wear muck makes her wanna dress up. Now Tilly smells like vanilla.

Quiet! Mama's voice roars through the trailer. Come get! she says. We get out and stretch our necks to where Mama is, behind the trailer. Close to the woods, holding a shotgun in her mighty hands.

What's wrong? I ask, scratching my head. Mama puts a thick finger to her lips. Then I hear it, some rustling the leaves. Some squealing too. Mama gets her shotgun ready, she waits. I hold my breath. She cranes her ear further down into the forest. We wait for the beast. My mind goes wild, in my head I see a wild boar, then a crocodile, a giant cockroach, no, two giant cockroaches—

Just a pig, she snorts. Lily, get that crate! Mama hands me the gun to put back and rolls up her sleeves, Mama's ready to tussle. We sprint as fast as we can to get the crate and run back into the trees cheering. There's a dart of movement in the leaves. We see its little pink legs scuffle, seeking cover, but Mama's already pounced. I swear if we lived in the mountains Mama would be wrestling bears. Makes me wonder how bear meat tastes.

Mama got the pig good. Wrestled it to the ground. It tried screeching real loud for help but there ain't no other pigs around. Sorry piggy, just Mama, Lily and me and we're all drooling. Now Mama's got the pig between her legs. She had to pin that piece of pork real good before getting it in the crate.

We're gonna have a real feast soon! Mama bellows. Mama hacks spit and rubs her hands.

We're getting meat real soon, real meat, wild meat. We just have to wait until it gets a little bigger, Mama says, gotta fatten her up. Until then we nash on the corn and fish sticks. Globbs of the stuff dries on our faces, which we scrape off with our fingernails, real good. You can't scratch too hard. Then you bleed. Got to just get right under the corn and peel it off. 'Course you could also eat neat, but what's the fun in that? When I see corn, I go at it. I know that once school starts I can no longer eat as I please, Lily's gonna learn that lesson too.

Mama takes the crate the pig's in and drags it to the chicken pen. We hang on the pen's sides watching as Mama kicks the crate over, sending the pig sprawling out. The chickens go wild and cluck this way and that. Mama looks to the empty feed bin, all dusty in the corner of the pen.

Someone's got to feed this thing, she says. And it ain't gonna be me.

Me neither, I got things to do, Tilly says. Lily and I almost forgot that she's there. She's filing her nails now, they come to little red arches. They don't even have dirt on them. Mama looks her straight in the eye and Tilly returns the stare. Makes me wanna yell traitor. But what good is that going to do? Besides Lily's looking at me, wants to know what comes next. Come on, I say. With sharp shoulders Tilly follows us out to the pen with her shoulders down.

Lily and I break the job in half; Tilly can't contribute much with her arms crossed. We take out a quarter and flip it. I call Washington, I say. My little sissy huffs but accepts; she is younger after all. We flip it into the sky. Washington stares at us from the ground.

Darn. I grunt. Lily smiles, revealing a corn chunk wedged between her front teeth. I take the bag of chicken feed from the shed. It's heavy, almost as heavy as Lily. I drag that thing into the pen. The pig's still squealing away, much louder than even the baby chicks. I open the top and spray it into the bin. Most of it makes the feed pen, some spills over the side like rain. The pig's looking at me. Now eat, I say. She just keeps on staring. Fine then, I huff. I pick up the feed bag and drag it away again, all sweaty. I smell all grainy now. When I come back Tilly's already in the trailer, now that Mama's away. She wouldn't've been much help, I say to Lily, might've broken a nail. Lily shrugs, her eyes now on the pen.

Recently it's been Lily's turn to feed the pig. The coin keeps landing on tails, except I don't think she minds it, she might even like it. Every day she wades out there a little longer. Just her and that pig. Throw it, Tilly and I say. She can't hear past the oinks. If I look out the window I still see her out there, petting that pig now. She comes in smelling like pig. Thinking about the pig makes me hungry. I just wanna have a piece. It's a shame you gotta kill the whole thing before you can have just a tiny bite. The pig keeps oinking. Lily says it's a girl and her name is Betsy.

We keep feeding it chicken feed. Seems to do the job. I see that Lily brought out a water bucket. I couldn't tell whether it's fresh water or not. Betsy the pig seems to like it, she been slurping it up. I bring the chicken feed down. She plops her chin up, her feet scuffle toward me. I could almost swear she's been tamed. Betsy oinks once before eating the whole darn thing in front of me. No manners. I grin. Mama don't go out and feed her, says that's our job. Says we got to learn our way around animals. She doesn't think collecting eggs is enough, she wants us to see how our dinner eats. As our dinner keeps slurping at the water, I can't help but snort.

My older sis is out with Trevor again. It's been two weeks and Betsy's been fattening up nicely. Lily still takes long with the pig though. She comes in talking about Betsy, making her sound real high and mighty. She even begs me to give her my turns, she just wants to get out of her house chores. I shake my head. It's my turn and besides, Betsy would know I skipped. When I walk in the pen you can tell Betsy knows me. She points her snout right in my face. Here you go, little fella. Betsy's wild whiskers tickle up against the palm of my hand real funny like. It's getting hard now to pour out the feed. She moves too fast, and then she's on me snorting and wheezing. She keeps going for my hand. Oink Oink. Pig's real funny, I can't help but chuckle.

I'm washing my face when Tilly comes back home. She slams the door shut since it's only evening and there's no sense in sneaking. At this hour, Mama's out getting dinner ready. The way Tilly smells makes me think she ate already.

Hey, Milly, she says and hangs up her purse. She makes sure it's not tangled with anything. I know she's heading out again tonight. I look at the denim skirt she has on. She looks kinda nice. I sniff the air, she's got on that vanilla perfume again. But that's not all, then she goes and hands me her french fries she got from Wendy's, they're cold but salty and I shove them in my mouth quick.

How's Trevor? I ask between globs. Tilly beams.

Real nice, she says, he treated. My munching slows and she can see I'm impressed. She pulls out her pinky. The left one. Says I better not let this spoil my appetite. I take out my pinky and wrap it around hers; it's a deal.

At dinner Tilly doesn't say a thing. Mama gives us corn, no fishsticks. Tilly takes some corn, plays around with most of it, picking it out kernel by kernel. I can tell Mama's watching. She only grunts once. Lily and I nash most of it, just a bit left of the tip. I'm grateful for the fries, or I might even eat the cob. Tilly looks from Lily to me and snorts. Says we look like animals. We oink back. We spend the rest of the evening in the trailer. We press our faces to the trailer's windows facing the chicken pen. We try oinking to get a rise out of Betsy, though she knows it's us and oinks back anyway. Y'all are getting soft for that, pig, Tilly says from her bed. I could say a lot of things, like how she's gone soft for Trevor. We all know it. Even Betsy.

Lily's little pointer finger traces some lines in the glass. It'd be funner out there, Lily says. It'd be funner with Bets. It would. I wink. I see Lily's eyes light up and it makes me excited. We could play with Bets all night even, Lily says, her voice rising. We can go—

No. I shush her. We can play with Betsy as long as we're the only ones awake, I whisper. Lily eyes Tilly who is in bed flipping through a clothing catalog. She sees us staring and lets out the fakest yawn I've ever seen. We all know she's going to be waiting up for Trevor, like I said before, she's gone soft for him. But we're gonna out-wait her.

We see the orangey sky fade into indigo and Mama goes to bed. We almost do too. But we stay up, keeping an eye on our boots. We wait until late into the night when Tilly disappears. Don't want her to rat, can't even let her know that we're up. She'd never leave if we were awake. We cover our faces with a blanket, our clothes still on from before. In the dark she can't see our smiling faces in the midst of Mama's snores.

We hear some weight on the floor boards, and then a slight creak as light shines through the our blankets real quick then disappears. We hear an engine

grunt and gravel move. Then silence. We wait a bit before peeling the covers off.

She's gone! Lily says. We run to the window and pull the curtains back. We can see Trevor's rusted pick-up truck jumble out the swamp until it's swallowed up by some trees. Our boots get yanked back on. Lily and I slip through the muck and the dark walking in the darn tall grass. There's no killers out here, right? Lily asks.

Only us, I say, and the wild. We get to the pig pen and see that all of the chickens are heaped in one corner asleep but Betsy's still up and snorting. Wish you'd been out here earlier, she seems to say. Lily pouts playfully, crossing her arms. Betsy races up to the pen, pressing her snout to the wire. I open up the latch and we go in. We all play tag until Lily explodes in a yawn. Darn it, she says. She plants a wet kiss on Betsy's ear. Our trailer's lights are still off which means our sneaking has been a success. When we return home Tilly's bed is still empty. Mama won't know and Tilly'll be back again in the morning.

Ever since then Lily and I have been sneaking back to take a peek at Betsy whenever we can, which is hard since we don't know exactly when Tilly will be sneaking out. We have to lie in bed and wait an hour for the growl of Trevor's truck. It's been about a month of this sneaking and I can't lie, I like it. Ever since then Trevor's been getting Tilly some gifts, small things like charms that can be worn under clothing like a pinky ring that you can only see when she eats. Anything she can hide she wears. Often I catch Tilly staring at me, staring at Lily. She doesn't know that I found the "For Hire" section of the newspaper crinkled under her bed all circled up, and none of the jobs are around our trailer. It was buried in the little notes Trevor writes to her. Makes me want to gag, but me and Lily find them funny from time to time. When I was alone I took out the newspaper and smoothed out the crinkles. SECRETARY FOR HIRE is circled and underlined. The date of the interview's already passed, August 3rd, 1987. Maybe that was when Tilly was at work? Did she miss it? I hoped so. I took the paper and stashed it in my pants pocket, hoping that she wouldn't get any more ideas, that she'd stay here forever, with Lily and me.

Mama keeps looking at Betsy. Any day now, she says to us. Mama starts buying things. She got onions, peppers, next thing I know I see long fresh carrots. Mama's going to be cooking up a stew. A Betsy stew. Poor Bets, she's fattened up nice since we got her. She's still silly though, shouldn't be gaining all that weight, just makes her look more delicious. When Mama calls Betsy Pork Chop I get hungry half the time. Other times I just feed the gal and I can't think of her feeding me.

Lily and I hear bangs. Copper bangs. Pots and pans. You know what that means, Mama found out about Trevor. I gulp wanting to hide, but Lily's with me so I just say it's gonna be okay.

I work, too! Tilly screams from the trailer. I stay up, too! I can hear that her throat is sore. I can also hear Mama cussing.

You ain't gonna be seeing no smart mouth priss! Mama roars. Not in my house! Mama storms out of the trailer. Huffs and puffs out. That's when I see it, paper is crumpled in her fist, one of Trevor's notes. Mama spits at the ground and marches into her truck. I can hear Tilly howl before stepping outside. We watch Mama and then we watch Tilly. I can't tell whose face is redder. Makes me want to hug Lily close. Instead we both slip back further. I can see that they're both tired. I want to yell at them both to stop it and say sorry, but then I'd be looking for another home too.

Mama snorts. She sees that we're watching. It doesn't hold Mama back. Ain't putting up with that priss no more, she says to us. That's bull, she says, shaking her head. Tilly retreats in the trailer and Mama goes marching again, this time to the car, drives off, who knows where. I repeat what I've just told Lily, that everything's gonna be okay.

Next day Tilly's gone. Dead gone. All her clothes are gone, even her lipstick she crammed in a trash bag somewhere. When Mama's at work, only Lily and I can hear the screaming silence inside the trailer. We spend most days with Betsy now, holding her closer than ever before. Never leave us, Bets! Lily cries.

When Mama comes back home we crowd around her like animals. Mama starts sharpening her knives, real sharp. I take Lily aside and whisper through a hot breath. Those are her carving knives. She nods. We look at the ax that's been taken from the shed. It's a hacker, that's for sure. Gonna be a clean cut. Sissy and I go to pet Betsy. We call her Bets sometimes. She doesn't oink too loud anymore. She's quiet like she knows what's coming. That she's gonna get hacked. Makes me sad. I want to be with Betsy forever. Lily starts to sniffle. Poor Lily's already getting sad. It's okay, I say again. We can play with Bets again tonight. She's not gone yet.

It's nighttime and Lily and I run to Bets again since we don't know if we're going to see her tomorrow. We splash in the water tubs lined up by the pen. Betsy cheers and slowly trots out to see us. She missed us after all. She's huffing all heavy now, sassy that we made her get some exercise. I'm going to miss her, darn it. I pout. Lily looks at me. We look at our fourth sister, Betsy. Can't explain it much but she been looking kinda tired lately. Even as we play with her, Betsy doesn't even want to get mud on her face. She lifts that hairy chin



of hers up every time she flops around. It's like this place has started eating at her or something.

You know it ain't right, Milly. She's a muck sister, too. Before you know it, Lily is already at the gate, lifting that rusty old latch up from the fence. She jumps up on the rickety thing and leans back swinging it open. I stare in shock but my body doesn't disagree, even if this is gonna get us spanked.

Now we're both in front of the open pen. We stare at Betsy and she stares back. Nothing to hear but the howlers and crickets. Come on, get! I say. Betsy trots out real self-assured, she wastes no time breaking free, at a speed that doesn't match her fat belly, she sprints. Betsy, Betsy, we echo. Go, Bets, go! we holler. We run with her past the pens, past the trailers, into the woods. Faster and faster, our muddied boots keep up. She bolts through the muck, away from Mama's reach and we swear she's laughing. Betsy goes real quick right into the thicket. Lily and I stand back, watching her get smaller and smaller, till she disappears into the darkness. We can't help jumping up and down in excitement. She's a fast one! We grin. The night sky almost swallows us whole. Makes us wild. Betsy hollers in the night.