

I Knew You When I Was Young

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for Cecilia

I remember seeing you on Bristol Caldwell's porch. You were leaning against that rickety railing and drinking from a red plastic cup that had your name printed on the side in black marker. You were wearing stone-washed Levis cutoffs and a navy and white-striped bikini top with no straps. You had your hair pulled up in this big ratty bun that looked like it was sliding off your head, as though it were melting in the sun. And that's what I was thinking as I approached the steps to the porch, that your head was melting and there came this great urge to rush and scoop it up before it hit the ground.

I was with Brian Faraday and Mitchell Bishop and I knew you didn't like those guys because they played football and were obnoxious and got so drunk they lost themselves. I knew you had seen that before and that it scared you because those were the kinds of guys that raped people. They were already drunk that day we showed up five hours early to Bristol's party. I was drunk too. A little. And though I had uncaringly indulged I was regretting it now that I could see you. I loved the two idiots at my side but I did not want you to associate me with them, with their brand of belligerence, with their small-town small-mindedness. And we'd heard Brian use the word *nigger* before and we'd seen Bishop hit a guy in the nose because he did not like the way he dressed, or the way he talked about politics, or the music he listened to. But I'd known them even longer than I'd known you; I'd grown up with them—*them* mostly: Can you remember when I was taller than they? But they *were* bad guys. You were right to think that. In four years

time Bishop would beat up a homeless man and leave him for dead in a snowbank then six months later drop dead in the middle of a desert road in Mexico. And Brian—did we call him Brain? I think we called him Brain that year—a few weeks after Bishop’s funeral, he would use a bottle to kill a guy outside a bar because the man had hit on him in the bathroom. Brain said he’d been holding his dick at the time and that was what had infuriated him so. He told me this from one of those prison phone-booths. I went to visit him only one time: He was dressed in that orange jump suit they always have them wearing in the movies and his head had been shaved and I saw there a small swastika and that was all I could take. I knew it was for protection. I’d heard that was how things worked in places like that but it scared the hell out of me and I never went back. I was always a bad friend—

We crossed the finely manicured lawn of the Caldwell’s home to ascend the stairway and I could tell that you were not happy I’d brought who I’d brought. But there was none of that kind of thing yet, the violence, or, the kind of violence that knew how to inflict real damage, catastrophic damage. What could I say? Showing up like that, half drunk and we’d driven Bishop’s truck and should not have—no way—but you were smiling and I felt forgiven when I saw you lift your arms to greet us, or me, rather, because we hugged—your hair smelled like lavender that day but it was unlike the lavender I’d smelled before because you’d been outside all day and your skin was sunburned and I could smell that too—and you didn’t let go until you’d already acknowledged Bishop and Brain and they you. You leaned back on the railing—I’m sure we were all staring at your body—and asked us if we’d confused a.m. with p.m. But before Brain could say anything stupid Bristol’s face appeared on the other side of the

screen-door. She flexed and puffed her chest. Her beady accusatory eyes cut through us all and I remember thinking how if this were a cartoon torsos would be sliding off pairs of legs still firmly affixed to the floor.

“Why are you here right now? Why are you so goddamn early? You always come so goddamn—” but before she could finish Brain was pushing through the door. He hoisted Bristol onto a shoulder then used his freehand to remove his clothes. I watched them move through the kitchen, out a sliding-glass door and to the pool where Brain—completely nude by this point—launched himself and Bristol Caldwell into the water. I heard her yelp and then come out the water screaming: “At least put some fucking underwear on you degenerate piece of shit!” But there was laughter about her voice now and though that meant very little I did feel a certain kind of liberation from the guilt of having arrived to the party so early.

Bristol continued to yell while Brain—obviously still naked—performed exquisite gainers and double back-flips off the diving board. You and Bishop and I stayed out on the front porch and smoked those long thin cigarettes you always carried with you, and I remember over-acting the part of my sobriety with a willful calm I was sure you could see right through. The sun had turned your shoulders dark red and the freckles there stood out. I wanted a way to bring it up so that we could talk about your body in a benign manner that would allow me to stare without it seeming inappropriate but I couldn’t come up with an adequate excuse.

“So five hours early, huh?” You looked down at an imaginary wristwatch. “Did you hear where Bristol’s parents went?”

“Rehab right?” said Bishop. He was looking through the house and out the sliding glass door, inspecting something there. “Man Bristol has such nice tits. It’s too bad she’s such a bitch.”

“Canaries is what I heard.” I was using my most sober voice. “How long are they gonna be gone, can I just stay here? God that would be great— Are you staying here?”

“Yup.” You grinned with a slyness that made me think you had a lot of plans for Bristol’s place. “And they are paying me.”

“What? Like a fucking babysitter?” Facing us now, Bishop spoke out the side of his mouth. He looked so ridiculous with the tiny Virginia Slim hanging from his teeth, like that bulldog from the Loony Tunes cartoons: the one always chewing on a toothpick and cocking his bowler hat over an eye when it was time for a beat-down.

“A babysitter— That’s awesome. No we’re caretakers. Can’t you tell?”

“I can tell. Your flowers look great.” And when I said that I looked down at your breasts because I was drunk and it slipped.

“Oh however did you think of such a clever metaphor?”

“Hah!” yelled Bishop. He slapped me on the arm. “If anything can be made clear by my dear friend’s brilliance, it is that you—you missy—need something to drink.” Bishop pulled a pint of bourbon out the back pocket on his swim trunks, which were funny and huge with big neon Hawaiian flowers printed all over them. He uncapped the thing with his teeth and sucked down a mouthful before handing the bottle to you. I saw you flinch at the sight of it but still you took the bottle and drank from it. Your eyes squeezed shut, your throat moved over the liquor and I saw tiny bubbles forming in the corners of your mouth. You had these ruby red lips. I could remember them being like

that all the way back in the third grade when you'd showed up that first day in the middle of the year looking so bewildered and crying a lot, and I remember becoming friends that same day after giving you my Kool-Aid Squirt—a cherry flavored one that stained your lips—and it was ever since then I'd associated that color with the color of your mouth. I took a long slow drag off my cigarette and watched the tiny ember grow bright then dim and I took the bottle from you and tipped it back and when the whiskey touched my lips I did not let any in.

“So Bishop, you have the hots for Bristol?”

“What? No, I just like her tits.”

“Ah, so sweet. I don't understand how you're still a virgin.”

“What?”

It was funny. Bishop was six foot six inches, two-hundred and fifty pounds and you had him on the ropes with the mention of that one word. That damn word that was like an enemy in high-school –*virgin*. His eyes went soft and he had taken a step back and I knew him well enough to know he was about to shut down, which meant he'd get quiet and surly and very drunk. From that same giant pocket on his trunks, he produced a blue packet of loose tobacco and began rolling a cigarette.

“You want one of mine, Bish?”

“Nah,” he said. “Those skinny bitches of yours are like smoking Styrofoam.”

It got quiet and we stared at Bishop's massive hands working the tobacco into the paper. They seemed far too big for the job but I'd seen him do it hundreds of times—since the seventh grade, in fact, when it was we'd stolen our first of many boxes of Top

out his father's roll-top desk and then sat in an empty field trying for hours to figure out the mechanics of such a thing.

I was trying to think of something to say that might bring Bishop back from the funk I knew him about to enter but nothing came. And perhaps this was intentional as a part of me wanted to be alone with you. We had a few hours before people would start showing up—themselves hours early—and I needed to orchestrate things just right so that you would spend the night with me and not somebody else. And so it was I couldn't mask my delight when I saw Bishop move into the house—the bottle of bourbon and lighted cigarette in hand—and pass through the sliding glass door to where Brain and Bristol were fighting atop an inner tube half submerged in the water beneath their combined weight. He hadn't said anything and I took note of this so that I would remember later to check-in with him. But for now I had you alone and it was already quite hot for that part of the day so we stretched out on a couple of towels beneath the big oak tree in the front yard and sipped from a bottle of Johannesburg Riesling you'd taken from the Caldwell's cellar. It wasn't long before you'd caught up with me and I no longer had to hide my buzz.

“So we really don't seem to like each other's friends, huh?”

“I know,” I said. I stretched my arms out and positioned them beneath my head. I'd flipped off my shoes and was only wearing a pair of khaki cargo shorts now. I was whiter than white. My skin hadn't seen sun in months but I was only a little embarrassed as your skin was so red and burnt. “How'd that happen anyway? I didn't mind Bristol when we were young but she's such a bitch now.”

“You can't say that. I've known her forever!”

“Ah—but I have known you forever-er. I trump her.” I took a swallow from the bottle and passed it to you.

“It’s true you do trump her.”

“Do you think Bishop could trump her? I think he really needs a good trumping.”

“Bishop would stick his dick in a porcupine if it said ‘please’.”

“That’s undeniably true— He would not deny that. If he were here that is, which he’s not and I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

You rolled onto your stomach and looked me in the eyes. I could never look you in the eyes very long—how was it you could stand me?—though I always tried. Your irises flashed in the dappled sunlight sifting down through the scorched treetops high above us. A rush of memories came forward: It was embarrassing but when we were young I use to draw your eyes in my coloring-books and I remember there would be these whole coloring-books where just the eyes had been filled in and they were always the same green eyes—my mother must have thought that really creepy. The old gnarled limbs of the Caldwell’s oak creaked and I tried to match your gaze but even with the power of alcohol on my side I couldn’t. My eyes dropped instead to your mouth and I reached for your painted lips and kissed you for the first time. You put your tongue in my mouth and I put my hand in your hair and down fell that poorly sorted bun I’d earlier felt such an urge to rescue.

I could have pumped my fist in the air or dropped dead of a stroke I was so happy. Eight years it had taken to get here. I simply followed your lead because I didn’t know what I was doing. I lived in the country and played baseball in the spring and bucked hay

in the summer, but you— You had been kidnapped and witnessed your father's suicide and you'd been fucking for years, which I knew—even then—to mean you had survived something much worse than seeing your father's body go suddenly rigid and then sickeningly slack before falling lifeless to the floor. There was a spiritual impasse awaiting me at graduation—still a few months off—but you had been broken all this time— They'd pulled you apart and scattered your limbs; had you pieced yourself together all on your own, at seventeen?

By the time people started to arrive for the party the sun had gotten low in the sky and the shadows were long and eerie amidst the orange sunlight that seemed far too hot still. There was very little clothing going on. Girls in nothing but bikinis were arriving by the carload, and when the boys saw this there then appeared many bare-chested torsos reflecting a pale light. We moved back to the porch and smoked another of those long cigarettes and finished the bottle of wine. The house shuddered beneath the low boom of bass-heavy pop music, the kind from the eighties which had recently returned after having inexplicably discovered a new vogue. There were cases of beer piled on the countertops alongside boxes of cheap wine—the kind with little spigots attached to them—and cartons of off-brand cigarettes and several large bottles of gold and silver liquor that a crowd of very excited girls were pouring into a giant salad bowl already filled with cut fruit, mounds of sugar and enough electric-pink Kool-Aid powder to supply an orphanage. Dear God that jungle juice would make so many people sick that night.

I tried locating Bristol but couldn't find her amongst the tangle of people surging in and out the house, pool water already collecting on the floors. I was sure she would be panicking as it was clear by now this party was going to be a lot bigger than she had anticipated. I glanced at you and you had this little sideways grin and I could tell you were definitely buzzed. I smiled and your eyes narrowed and glistened a little as you took another drag off your cigarette and then stubbed it out. I knew then I could stop worrying about how best to keep you near me. Brain's voice boomed over the heads in the crowd and then came his naked body zigzagging through it. His huge face appeared with the quickness of a bull's. "Where the hell man— What have you boners been doing? Come fucking swim! There's a pool and it's fucking swim time, we're jumping off the roofs!"

"Roofs? Like plural— Roofs?"

"What? Yes! Roofs! Where's Bishop?"

"I thought he was with you."

"He was then he wasn't."

"You are still naked, how drunk are you?"

"Between very and a lot I would say a lot but soon to be very."

"It's like seven."

"Look at me! Look at this body, this beautiful rotund robustness— I can fucking handle it man."

He was right. Brain was huge. He was a middle linebacker, not as tall as Bishop but bigger, fatter.

"Come on man!"

He grabbed me and I turned and flashed you this what-can-I-do look and hoped that was enough to convey I'd come around as soon as this asshole needed to take a piss, though he'd probably just go in the pool. You had your hip cocked and your arms spread in the doorway and I blinked and held that image of your body in my mind as Brain hauled me away atop his shoulder. He carried me high above the crowd and to the pool where it was I finally realized what he was doing. With the flick of his arm he catapulted me into the water and then nearly jumped on my head. I went under and felt the rush of an immense volume of water displaced by Brain's beautiful rotund robustness. I was kind of drunk and it took me a long time to figure out in what direction *up* was. There was a moment when I swore I saw you down there with me, your distorted figure moving with the ripples on the surface and then sinking down, disintegrating then reintegrating. My eyes stung from the chlorine and maybe it was you standing over me at poolside but still I reached out to touch the colorful disruption. Then a huge hand appeared and grabbed my wrist, pulling me with remarkable ease up and out of the water. It was Bishop and I was glad to see his big bulldog's face complete with cigarette pressed between clinched teeth.

"Bish!" I exclaimed and squished his cheeks between my dripping hands. I was trying to off-set his weight with my own so that we'd both tumble into the water but there was no way, not when he was content to just stand there with me dangling from his fists.

I craned my neck and saw you standing nearby with a cup of that horrible pink jungle juice. You had a parasol stuck in the hair tucked behind your ear.

Bishop had lowered me and I felt the hot concrete sticking to my feet now. Seeing you both at that moment, each with a plastic cup of jungle juice bearing your name, I felt an incredible inflation in my chest, a gushing expansion filling me with a happy drunken

super-saccharine love-lust for all life. I felt so goddamn lucky to be here: All the happy drunken people laughing and dancing and swimming, people fighting or fucking or brooding, the scheming and posturing shit-and-piss of life, all of it singing the praises of God— You came up behind Bishop and put your hand on his shoulder. His head turned slowly to glimpse you and I saw it there in his eyes. He loved you.

But then who didn't back then? Or at least that's what I told myself—I'll be honest: I thought then to ask the three of us to join each other, to shirk off all the bullshit and just act out the love I knew there to be between us. But I was a happy drunk. And you didn't care for him did you? You didn't like what brooded in the dark spaces behind his eyes. You could look at people like that, peer through the façade, past the retina and into the nerve tract, delivering you at last to the truth that so often lay dormant at the back of the brain. I couldn't see it. Though I knew it to be there I couldn't see it. And I didn't know how to deal with it other than to pass him one more beer when he asked for it or smile when he would not or crack a joke when that didn't work or tear him off anyone dumb enough to get in his way when there were no longer any words to be said. It was a blindspot maintained consciously. Bishop shoved his drink into my hand and grinned, hooking his arm around my neck, and led me into the house. We slipped into the massive crowd of people gathered in the kitchen and I lost sight of you.

“What do you want to drink, buddy? We got a little of everything to choose from.”

I didn't want to drink anything. Not with Bishop. What I wanted was to find you and sneak away someplace I could relax with those ruby lips of yours. But I knew Bishop and he was being extra friendly because that was how he tested a situation before

deciding he'd abandon it. It was best to do whatever had to be done to appease him, so I smiled and indicated over the squawking din that I'd like a beer, any beer, didn't matter.

In the living room there were people dancing atop the couches and tabletops. Many had lighted cigarettes and there was the thickly sweet stink of marijuana too. A tiny kid with a mohawk—who I knew to be a freshman—was running through the room with a supersoaker and squirting people indiscriminantly. The powerful streams of water bounced off their faces or chests or crotches without any real reaction. And then a girl with platinum blond hair came up to Bishop and put her hands on his chest. I stood next to the massive bowl of neon jungle juice, dazed by its overwhelming stink of Kool-Aid powder and coconut rum, and stared in disbelief as the girl ran her fingers across the length of his shoulders. Her eyes were glassy and shot through with blood. Between her bright pink lips there was a cigarette turned the wrong way. “Oh my God,” she said. “Your chest is massive! Look at this shit, you're bigger than I am— Julie! Julie come here and look at this!”

I felt good for Bishop. I thought maybe he'd get laid finally. I ran my eyes up and down the girl without any real concern for inconspicuousness. She was wearing a yellow skirt that looked like it doubled for swimsuit bottoms and a white tanktop that had been soaked—probably by the little mohawked freshman—and you could see the purple lace bra underneath and her nipples were hard and poking through the material. Yes, this girl would do nicely. “A teddy bear!” I exclaimed, trying hard to distinguish myself over the thundering music. “Don't you just wanna hug him? Give him a hug, he needs a hug!”

The girl moved to embrace him and Bishop's shoulders bristled and I could tell I had made him uncomfortable. He turned and one huge eye glared at me. The girl said, "What school do you go to? I've not ever seen you ever around ever before—"

"I don't, I'm thirty-four!"

"Oh, eww!"

"That's right, now get the fuck out of my way." He pushed past her and to the refrigerator out of which he pulled two bottles of beer.

I stood there, shocked, not knowing what had just happened. Bishop returned and shoved a beer into my hand. "What the hell man? She was hot."

"What? That girl?"

"Yeah that girl. The one with the nipples grabbing your shit and telling her probably equally hot and equally drunk friend to join her in groping you!"

"Nah," he said.

I thought maybe Bishop was an idiot. That all this time I'd been walking around with a surly mentally handicapped giant without knowing it. "What do you mean, 'nah?'"

"I mean bitch probably has scabbies. Fuck it, let's drink!" He slammed the bottom of his bottle onto the rim of mine and a volcanic eruption of foam came blasting out of it. He tipped his back and I watched the entire thing go down in four gulps. "I'm getting another— Drink up man, I'll get us two."

He started for the fridge. I did what he said and drank from my beer but it was all foam after slamming it like he had, so I just stood there and waited for him to return. The party had grown to near capacity. Poor Bristol must have been shitting herself. I rolled onto my tiptoes and scoured the immediate area for any sign but did not locate her. I

started worrying about her and forgot all about Bishop, whom was expecting me to wait for him.

I pushed against a mass of bodies and managed to move the thing enough to exit the kitchen and enter the dining-room. The walls were perspiring and it was difficult moving to create a passageway as my hands kept sliding off the sweaty backs and arms and chests of the partiers. I wasn't wearing any shoes and my pool-drenched shorts had gone heavy and sick-feeling as they would not dry in the humidity. I struggled to gain traction, slipping and sliding over people's wet feet. My tongue felt thick as I was smothered into a bottleneck slowly inching its way into a hallway that exited the dining room and led to a family room where I knew there to be a billiards-table. I thought perhaps I'd find Bristol there but the way was so impenetrably blocked I doubted I would ever reach it.

But I bulled through. I thought of Brain—my colossal and boorish middle linebacker—and though I was half his size I squared my shoulders, found a low center of gravity and charged through the phalanx clogged in the hallway. It was a lucky thing it was so damn humid as the sweat, acting as a disgusting kind of lubricant, allowed me to slip through with relative ease. But this meant I had far too much momentum once I'd broken through to the otherside. I came stumbling out and, half-drunk, I tucked and rolled into a clumsy somersault, flipped end-over-end and slammed ass-first into a brick fireplace. I looked up. I was surprised to see so few people but elated they hadn't noticed me. There was a stereo closer to the other end of the room and it was blaring at a very high volume. Everyone was gathered around the pool-table; They were not playing pool but, rather, very engaged in something else going on there. I lifted myself off the floor

and checked for broken bones. I was all right but wished I'd had a couple more drinks in me before taking a tumble. From my feet now I could see what everyone was staring at. It was Bristol and she was dancing on the pool-table. Several boys were standing around and staring up at her, sipping slowly from red plastic cups, eyes transfixed. She was in her panties and her breasts were exposed. She moved awkwardly to whatever techno-hit blared from recessed speakers in the ceiling. It was not elegant and I could tell she was very drunk. Her eyes were open but only to slits and her mouth hung slack as she swayed to the throbbing rhythm. Some of the boys were sitting down, cups in their laps. This was not good.

I watched Bristol for a while, but it felt odd. I'd known her since the fifth grade when she was just a soft-spoken little girl in pigtails who liked playing four-square and jumping rope with Yvonne, the only black girl in our school. When she saw me, her eyes widened a bit and I felt sick to my stomach. But there was no recognition there and I knew then she was drunker than I'd thought. I didn't think before leaping onto the pool-table. I grabbed Bristol by the arm and tried yanking her off, screaming about what a fucking slut was— But then the gawkers were on me, more than I could guess at, hitting me in the head and pulling my arms away from Bristol's nakedness. It wasn't really an assault. Nobody punched me. It was more like being groped than beat on. I saw desperate faces, twisted and distorted expressions of horror as they struggled to free Bristol from my grip. And then Bristol lashed out at me, screaming something unintelligible. She said: "Fucking—just fucking—it's just nothing fucking dancing—motherfucking you goddamn prick you go self-righteous fuck your hole—" or something like that. And then several of the boys helped her onto the table where she resumed her clumsy display.

It was eerie how quickly they settled back into that slack-jawed glassy-eyed calm. It was bad sex, ungainly and embarrassing, but to look at them—empty grins, eyes communicating nothing, posture stooped—one might have thought her goddess. And, indeed, it was as though the sad display were a hypnotic transmission beguiling the mind to grasp what lay deeper inside a man, a more primordial and unthinking piece of him.

I wanted to tell you what was going on with your friend because I knew you'd have a better chance at reasoning with her. Plus—to be honest—I didn't care about any of it anymore. Not after having such an odd thing happen to me. I felt like I'd just been trounced by an angry mob of trolls whose filthy pagan rainedance I'd interrupted. She'd only listen to you.

I moved through the house again, only this time I moved *with* the crowd. I didn't know how long it took because I just let the thing have me. I was pressed against so many bodies, swallowed so much of their sweat, breathed so much of their breath and I felt very drunk. It occurred to me I was ashamed of myself. More so I was ashamed of being male. All these people, all the alcohol and commotion and extravagant noises, all of it just a sad version of that ancient dance we used to know so well. Sad too when you thought about the endpoint: that ten or fifteen second explosion followed by an emptiness and a cold sweat two naked bodies could not do away with. I was ashamed not because men were pathetic and so easily led around by their dicks nor because women were so much smarter than us and cruel about it and to each other—servants to the contests of attraction—but because I knew these things and could not offer you anything more. Sure I could infuse it all with the word *love*. Have it all change and mean so much by letting you know that I loved you—something I was sure you'd known for a long time now. But

I lacked the faith anything could fill the divide between two persons. Perhaps clinging so desperately to the idea of a mutual space—one I could share with you—would tear me into pieces, tiny fragments that would one day reassemble into something more, something greater than this thing that walked around by itself all day imagining how it might get its dick inside you. Did I have even that much faith?

I found you sitting at a table under the giant green umbrella near the pool. You were by yourself drinking more of that terrible jungle juice—or was it the same cup you were working on?—legs crossed, your long body stretched and baring your midriff with such ease and confidence. After witnessing the disgrace of Bristol’s wretched state I could have attributed all the light in the world to you and meant it. There amongst the gaggle of disfigured creatures piled in the swimming pool or jumping off roofs into the twilight waters below you shone bright enough to overwhelm the noxious gloom brooding in my gut. You were so lovely and though I knew how pathetic it was I had it in mind to conquer you and make you my own.

I came up cool and calm—as though I hadn’t been regretting existence—and put my hand on your knee as I dropped into the seat next to yours. It was still quite warm outside, nearly dark and the scent of lighted charcoal briquettes was heavy on the air. There were too many people in the pool and I was afraid someone was going to jump off the roof and kill one of the swimmers below. “There are too many people in that goddamn pool,” I said.

“Somebody’s gonna die, I’m sure. Smoke?”

“Uh, yes.” I thought about it for a second: A cigarette sounded better than anything I could imagine. The pack was all crumpled and jammed into that tiny pocket on the front of your shorts. “Your friend is very drunk.”

“My friend?”

“Bristol. Bristol is very drunk and dancing like an idiot for a bunch of horny boys I don’t recognize.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” You clicked the lighter and I leaned in with the tip of the cigarette. “Hey! Brain has clothes on.”

“Yup. Been like thirty minutes without having to shield my eyes from his creepy dog-dork.”

“Are you bragging about your circumcision again?”

“You know I like my men clipped.”

“Eww. Who’s that he’s talking too?”

“Connor McCulloch.”

They were standing near the smoldering barbecue, each with a drink in his hand. They seemed to be very involved in whatever they were conversing about. Brain’s face was fully animated; he swung his big hands in the air to illustrate something and then he burst out in laughter and so did Connor, his perfect teeth flashing in the low light.

“Man, Connor is svelt. Svelt!” I yelled it not really knowing what the word meant.

“Yup. He sure is.”

He was a year older than us and swam in the fall and ran track in the spring. Other than that I didn’t really know anything about him.

“He’s so hairless and smooth. I wanna touch him,” I said.

“He’d probably let you.”

From the rooftop someone screamed and then lept into the air. They fell, tucked their knees into their arms and crashed down into the water, ejecting a great geyser that shot high into the air. The flood lights had come on and the pool glowed in the eerie red light which cast a hallucinatory effect over the water, making it appear crimson. The windows of the house were lit-up like burning flames and the monotoned squawk of the partiers rushed out in steady streams to fill the night sky with a billion shards of conversation. I watched Brain. There was something about him—his mouth fixed in this stupid half-grin, his eyes wide in expectancy—something I’d never seen on him before: his arms wrapped around his chest, his finger fidgeting while his toes poked at something caught in the space between two slabs of cement. He almost looked demure.

“I’m telling you,” you said. “That pool is gonna overflow.”

“You got anything to drink?”

“Why yes I do my dear.”

I loved hearing that. You could have said anything after *my* and I would have gone euphoric: *my dear*, *my love*, *my simpleton*, *my slave*. You got half way up, turned and bent over—of course I stared; was that your pink and white striped panties I glimpsed through the open space in your shorts?—and snatched a cup off the table behind us.

“Here you go.” You handed me the cup and in the eerie light it looked like it was full of blood. “This one’s almost full.” Then you lifted your own cup, the one with your name on it and we both drank. I remember visiting your grave years later and seeing your

name carved into the limestone, the year of your birth, the year of your death and that little hash-mark between the two dates. I remember staring at that hash-mark and asking God to give me something each day—just a little something, anything—to remind me the hash-mark was all we got.

I looked over without thinking to and saw Bishop's square frame appear in the doorway to the kitchen. His body was wrapped in shadow but I knew it was him. He came lumbering toward us and my pulse leapt a little as I realized I'd forgotten all about him. Bristol too for that matter. Though I *had* mentioned it to you, I'd purposefully done it in a way you couldn't have taken seriously. That way you'd stay out here with me.

“Oh,” he said, visible now. “Should've known, I guess. Why didn't I think to look for your skank—”

I knew before I knew; or, the lizard-brain part of me knew before I knew— Why didn't I just sock him in his stupid fucking face? He wouldn't have *killed* me. Beat on me, yes. Thrown my broken body into the pool to drown, yes. But Mitchell Bishop was too big a coward to actually kill someone. Even when murder was all that was in his heart, he had to let something else actually do-the-job: The water, bleeding and red and full of misshapen demons, or the snowbank where they'd find that poor alcoholic with all the bones in his face smashed, his body trailing crimson rivulets in the snow, or how about Mexico where he'd flee to hide from himself only to rot beneath the scorching eye of the desert sun. I should have just socked him in his stupid fucking face—

“Ah— Hey buddy, no, you should have *seen* Bristol— She's in there on the fucking pool table stripping for a bunch zombies— I went in there to try to get her to put her damn clothes back on but the bitch just slapped me and I got pummeled by a bunch of

fucking children—I was actually hoping you'd been there 'cause no way that shit woulda happened with The Hulk backing me.”

“What?” You were angry. I didn't know if you were angry with *me* but you should have been. “You were serious? She's actually in there doing that!”

“That's what I told you.”

You didn't respond and I suppose that was because you knew how desperate for you I was. You just jumped out your chair and ran into the house where I lost sight of you again—did you imagine Brain, square your shoulders and bull through to the otherside?

Bishop took a deep breath and plopped into the empty seat next to me. He exhaled slowly as though considering this new arrangement then leaned over and picked up your cup and brought it to his lips. Something about that seemed very perverse to me—I didn't know.

“Who's that faggot talking to?”

“Uh, I don't know actually.”

“Well at least he's got some goddamn clothes on now.”

The test had failed and so Bishop's disposition had gone from forcibly nice to dejected and surly and he was very drunk—I snatched a few quick glimpses of his eyes and saw them rolling about in their sockets and it seemed to me he was even nodding off at times.

“Did you know Kevin Shields fucked your girl in the ass—”

Yes. I saw now his eyes were indeed shut and his voice was low and his words slurred so badly I could barely understand them. He was speaking from that dark part of

himself now, the unconscious fluttering of a bile duct lodged in a necrotic lobe at the back of his brain—I wished for you to appear.

“Yap—and Jarrod Foster— He fucked her at that park where we all use to play basketball all the time— That was like what? Eighth grade? And Ian McEwan— motherfucker with warts he used to brag about? She sucked that guy’s dick— Oh and most recently Sean Piff told me Alex Kramer got her—knocked’d’r up—like last summer or something—and she fucking aborted it, like a late term one— Had to leave the state to get that job did—”

I held it all in. Like holding my breath. But my cells burned and my passageways opened and everything rushed inside. All the things he’d said were like free-radicals released and whizzing around inside me, bashing into things and breaking them apart. Why God didn’t I just sock him in his stupid fucking face?

“You should be very proud buddy.” He threw the cup at someone walking by and then got up and wandered off very slowly, as though each step were an incredible feat.

He’s going to go pound on someone now, I thought. I peered out over the heads in the swimming pool and there were so many now—all silohetted in the crimson-darkness—I thought perhaps I’d slid into the fifth circle of hell where the boiling river Styx tormented man for his belligerence and anger. I heard a sharp cry like an eagle’s or some other bird of prey and a body came falling through the sky. The reveler went under the water and the added volume proved too much for the pool to contain. The pavement turned inky black as the water rushed over it and everyone cheered and called for more bodies to join the celebrants in the pool. Brain was cheering too. I saw him hopping up and down and swinging a fist in the air. Connor hooted through a cupped hand and then

put the other on Brain's bare back. He leaned in close and whispered something into Brain's ear. Brain came to a sudden stand-still and looked very closely at Connor's face. His teeth flashing, Connor smiled and then Brain did too. The two moved swiftly across the patio, passed the pool and then exited the gate at the far end of a garden that led to a small enclosed side-yard at the edge of the house. But none of this really registered because I really was scared of what Bishop might do: I would find him and I would talk him down and I would pass him a beer and crack a joke and make him laugh and all would be well and no one would be hurt.

I went back into the house and wrestled through the naked hordes until stopping at a threshold that divided the kitchen from the living room where it was I spotted Bishop, his immense shoulders slumped, his head looking very heavy as it swayed off-kilter atop his wide neck. But the back of him was all I'd see as he was already leaving out the front door. I felt the pressurized heat of the room, the thick sticky atmosphere laden with the sour stink of a billion breaths, leaving as though sucked out by the night. Or perhaps the figure of Bishop was like that of some massive star with such considerable gravitational pull, a star in nova collapsing in on itself and threatening to suck all light out of the world. Still, I was happy to see him go—

To tear up the world elsewhere, a dark, drunken and murderous thing in a half-ton Chevy pickup truck—

And that was it. I decided right then I didn't a fuck about him anymore. I didn't care. I'd known him since kindergarten, we'd played tee-ball together and our fathers had coached our little league teams and still hung out all the time. And I'd helped him to maintain when his mother went bat-shit insane and had to dry-out at that clinic in

California and—yes—he'd once punched a guy in the nose for having tripped me in the hallway at school—I remember him dragging me into the bathroom and cleaning the guy's blood off the new Nike shirt my parents couldn't afford—and he'd taught me to shoot and throw a football properly but it had all drawn to an end. The loop had closed and whatever path lay ahead was not going to be one I would ever consciously link to his.

I remember thinking it poetic that the last time I beheld him a friend he looked as though he were about to be crushed under the weight of his own fat head. It was all very fitting I thought.

I was finished with all that, so I spun around and spotted a guy—I made sure he was scrawnier than I—with a cup of something in his hands and snatched it from him and downed the thing. I went back to the punch bowl and dunked the cup under and then headed off to find you—

Were you angry with me? Had Bristol been gang-raped and beaten? Was I now this horrible villain complicit in the murder of your best friend? The alcohol swirled in me, turning my thoughts dark: I was going to lose everyone—

I scrambled for the billiards-room, past couples paired off and going at it in the hallway—it was getting to that part of the night—and in the bathroom off the hall I spotted a boy puking in the toilet and another in the sink and there was a girl wearing no shirt passed out in the bathtub. I was careful traversing the field of twisted limbs and entwining bodies but found beyond it only a few lonely stragglers quietly engaging one another in a game of pool. I scoured the area for any criminal evidence but found nothing. No torn panties, no gut-wrenching seminal stains, no blood-spatter on the walls, none of that.

I went upstairs to Bristol's bedroom—it was so much quieter up there—and peeked through the doorway. It was cracked only a little and I had to suck air and hold my breath and hope the hinges didn't squeal when I poked my head through. It was dark but the window above the headboard offered a silvery semblance of light. In the soft moonglow I saw it was a very tidy room, large and open with a big bay window at the back. It was laden with the sweet mingling scent of many perfumes. I remember thinking I didn't know Bristol at all.

Then I heard noises. Heavy breathing, a rustling of sheets and the soft slap of skin coming together and pulling apart. My insides recoiled and I thought I'd be sick but I took a breath—slow and silent—and tried to recall any story I'd heard that involved you going both-ways. My heart hurt and I really did think about how I was going to give money to those assholes in Salt Lake that wanted to keep people like you from getting married.

A head shot up. Obscured in shadow, the faceless visage seemed as solid and unmoving as stone. And then I heard a voice, a male voice—praise God! No wait—“Sheila you all right babe?” And then the girl named Sheila arced her body in a sickening way and puked on the carpet.

I imagine Bristol's carpet was probably white and that Sheila probably had drunk a lot of that jungle juice and that fruit and stomach acid probably reaked, but I had never been so happy to see someone puke.

The guy helped his woman heave some more onto the carpet, holding her hair high above her and placing a reassuring hand on her back which he then smoothed over

her in little circles. *That's a good girl*, I imagined him saying as I backed out of the room and into the foyer at the top of the stairs.

I knew where to find you now and it was a similar thing when I encountered the tiny ill-lit opening in the doorway to Bristol's parents' bedroom. It was at the end of a long hallway above the eastern end of the house and it was so quiet up there you wouldn't have known there was an out of control party downstairs if you hadn't seen it. You were near the big bed, stooped over Bristol—she looked asleep beneath the pile of blankets, her head propped up under an inordinate amount of small shiney pillows—and you had this very attentive look on your face as you ran your fingers through her sweaty hair, working out the tangles that had collected there. Near your feet was a silver bowl I was sure was full of that horrible pink vomit that was coming out of everyone. Bristol's eyelids fluttered and her lips moved to unstick themselves from her teeth as she motioned for the glass of water on the bedside table. A faint bit of moonlight played against a dreamcatcher strung high in the window above a small plush sofa. It cast little pieces of opal light against the opposing wall. The glimmering shapes spun slowly around the bedroom. They passed over you and flashed red against your sunburnt skin. Every so often they'd stop and hover there—interested perhaps—then dart off before coming round again to flash upon you.

I thought Bristol must have escaped savagery. I couldn't be sure. There was something about how contented she looked—she stared up at you as she drank from the glass and then closed her eyes again and whispered the words *I love you*—that communicated it, that things were right in her world, the world you'd secured. And then you bent in close and kissed Bristol on the mouth. There was nothing sexual about it but

you left your lips on hers for a long time and I didn't know if you were whispering something—*I love you too* maybe—or just savoring the intimacy shared between two dear friends— Hell, they were the same.

You lifted the phone off its cradle and dialed a number. You muttered a few words into the handset and then hung it up. You stood and gazed at Bristol for a while then switched off the lamp. The room went dark and I backed into the hallway.

You shut the door softly behind you. The worry I'd upset you flared in my gut, but then you appeared and the solemn expression on your face worked the ease the anxiety and I felt my lungs working again—all this sneaking and spying and shallow breathing had made me feel drunker than I really was, but now there was oxygen. "I want to get out of here," you said not happily but as a matter of fact.

What did we bring with us? A bottle of cooking sherry from the cupboard above the stove, clothes—who did we steal those from?—your purse with the cigarettes and what else? I think we had a blanket, that scratchy wool one from World War Two your grandfather had given to you to keep in the car in case of emergency—I still remember the contrast between the smooth flesh of your thighs and that horrible wool blanket, both pressed against me, gliding and grating and clinging to the perspiration on my skin so that I was sure I'd explode before I even got out of my pants, though that's not really how that night ended up was it?

You had this old beige corolla from the seventies that had been your father's before he blew a hole into his chest and I remember it was always so full of crap, just useless junk like newspapers and a flat spare tire and empty boxes of cigarettes, loose CD's that would never have played even if you'd had a CD player in the car, and there

was this big box of your clothes and another of food—things that wouldn't spoil like little snack crackers and trail mix and saltines—and there was a fire-extinguisher and books, at least a dozen unreadable books with broken spines stained black from uncapped oil bottles all stomped and crushed beneath a thousand passenger's heavy feet. You were always ready to go I suppose.

You were parked at the curb in front of the house. Bare footed and shirtless, I crossed the yard but then stopped abruptly. I told you I was worried about leaving the house for the partiers to destroy. I wriggled my toes in the cool grass and glanced back at the house: It was night by then and there was this odd halo there—indigo in color—wreathed in darkness on one side and burning bright as a conflagration on the other, the whole thing thundering and screeching like a bottle-rocket. You looked at me and said you'd taken care of it, so I got into your car—that stink of motor oil and phony pinetree—and slammed the door shut. A twinge of panic distorted your face as you turned the key and fired the engine, revving once before popping the clutch and speeding away. I knew then what you'd meant. I saw the bright lights flashing in the rearview mirror—blue and red ones—and immediately my thoughts turned to poor Brain and how he was about to be caught in such an embarrassing position, which—at the time—was hilarious as no part of me was yet aware that the shame of such a thing could prove itself so deadly and effectively end his life. You were laughing—a little frightened, I thought—and I won't say the tires were peeling out but I was definitely thrown back in my seat, a little frightened too. In the shrinking world of the rearview mirror I saw police cruisers coming to abrupt stops then diligent people in blue uniforms rushing out them—some moved to the front of the house while others wrapped around to either side. I turned and

gaped out the back window but before anything else could develop you cut hard at a dimly lit intersection and all the noise and flashing lights, the worry and wonder for so many things, drained into the night and was soon replaced by only the low-pitched straining of the Corolla's wasted engine. A comfortable silence settled down between us.

In the darkened cabin I had to squint to make out your face. The lights in the dashboard were mostly burnt out or had gone very dim and there was only the intermittent light of passing street lamps to see by. The stink of motor oil made me crave a cigarette so I reached into your purse and pulled out the pack of Virginia Slims. There was only one left. "Shit," I said and showed you what was left of our supply. "This is it."

"Yup," you said. "That's okay— You have it."

I pushed the button with the little smoking cigarette on it and waited. I rolled down my window and peered out at all the houses streaming past. The shapes blended together; colors flickered in a pattern I recognized but could never describe. The insides of the homes were dark by that hour, though each had its porchlight burning. A warm and inviting yellow light illuminating the way into every home. I wondered then why people did this. Did it deter crime? or signal lost love ones home? Was it meant to indicate the kindness of the people who lived there, the kind who would not hesitate to invite you in and give you a meal and a warm place to sleep? Or perhaps it was some lingering fear of the Old Testament God, the one who killed babies at Passover. The lighter popped out. I snatched it up and brought it to the tip of the cigarette but it did not catch. I put my finger onto the coil, expecting to be burned but the metal was cold.

"So that died too?" you said.

“I think so.”

“This thing is breaking apart piece by piece.”

“You gonna get something new when it does?”

“Nah. I’m just going to walk everywhere.”

I pictured you haunting the town in a white dress, your feet bare, your skin cold, never going anywhere just walking.

You wanted to wait for the cops to clear out the party before heading back to begin the grueling process of cleaning up. You parked a little ways up the hill from Bristol’s house so we could keep an eye on it while we passed the time making out in the front seat.

I had you on top of me breathing hard and kissing my neck while I worked you out of your top—I had to struggle for a while against that pesky swimsuit clasping. I kissed your mouth and tasted your saliva and ran my hands through your hair. Your mouth moved quickly and I worked to follow you while thinking maybe it would be best if you just devoured me. I put your breast in my mouth and licked your nipple until it grew hard and then softly pinched it. You moaned sweetly, lifting your head and grinding yourself against my waist: There was that explosive combination of flesh and wool. I wanted to see you in the light and so I lifted a hand and blindly felt for the dome switch. I located it and flipped it into all positions but nothing came. “That’s been gone a long time,” you whispered. You turned, looked down the hill and then came back, kissing me hard and biting my lip. “Lights,” you said. I worked my hand into the opening of your shorts and inched a finger into the scorching moistness there.

“What about lights?”

“Lights,” you said. “We still have time.”

You must have meant the police, that we still had time before we’d need to come off the hill and deal with the mess down there. I felt your fingernails tear into the flesh on my back—I wondered then how many people had felt exactly what I was feeling, how many people had sat here and had these same hands work their groin and rip their flesh? how many had had this same breath brush over their bare chest and set their heart ripping through them like a cyclone? how unique (though I had waited a lifetime for you) could this be? and how was it I called that love? I took my fingers out of you and I put my hands on your face. You stopped, your eyes spun with confusion. I thought to tell you that I loved you, hoped to say it the way I thought it should be said, but then your hand squeezed me hard and my mind evacuated and rather than say anything at all I drove myself inside you. You made a sound like I’d hurt you, like you were not expecting anything like this, and I thought to pull out of you but I could not help myself and I just kept going. And rather than say anything yourself you just put your mouth on mine and left it there for a long time and I remember feeling terrible about that because it was as if you figured this was how I said, *I love you*.

I opened my eyes for just a moment and saw a bright set of lights coming at us. They were big then grew to an enormous size of great intensity and a part of me—the stupid part of me, the drunken part, the part still clinging to the world—thought these belonged to the police, lights from the police coming at us, coming for us. And it wasn’t until the entire cabin of your father’s old busted Corolla was lit up so bright it blew out my vision that I realized this could not be the police.

The great intensity smashed into us and I remember hearing glass shattering and metal crunching and then your scaming: It was very loud, high-pitched but short like a whistle blown. The car spun round and I remember the headlights swinging through the front yards of nearby houses, the grass illuminated then going dark before flashing green again—it was a lot like those bits of light in Bristol’s parents’ bedroom, only everything was reversed. Then there was nothing.

When I woke up I was in the back seat. I couldn’t hear anything. Though I could see, I couldn’t really *see*: It was like those old-time motion-pictures they had at the carnivals by the docks, the ones with the eye-piece and the metal crank you used to make the pictures flip past; that’s what everything *looked* like. I felt myself lifting and I was out of the car. Great billowing clouds of smoke came from out the crushed front end of the Corolla. The windshield was gone and the tires had buckled under the frame, which had been pushed up the hill, hopped the curb and gone onto the sidewalk. A streetlamp had broken off and come crashing down onto the roof of the car, where it lay still. I only turned for a second to see what had hit us, because then I saw you laying in the grass out front that guy’s house whom would soon come rushing out to scream and cry and turn in circles. A little ways down the hill, situated perpendicular in the road, was a big truck with its front end crushed, and I thought maybe I recognized it but there was so much steam jetting out its smashed radiator that I could not identify it. No one stirred in the cabin, the thing lay perfectly still and I remember—in my ruined state—thinking it was this colossal smoldering dragon, content to slumber now within the halos the sodium-vapor lamps burnt onto the street.

And then I spotted you. You were on your back in the grass, your breasts exposed, legs all contorted and bleeding. The blood ran from holes in your legs and arms and stomach. Everywhere I looked, once I'd reached you—my breath gone, my head blank, my feet moving though I could not feel the ground beneath me—there seemed to be a hole leaking this horrible crimson stuff. Stuff I knew to be important but couldn't think why. I sat in the grass, put your head in my lap and held you like that, terrified because I didn't know what to do, because you were probably dying and there was nothing I knew to do to keep that from happening. I took your face in my hands and brought an ear close to your mouth but I could not hear anything. So I tried holding my breath and stared at your chest, waited for it to lift. And it did—you were breathing—and tears started rushing out my eyes and I held your head in my lap between my hands and inspected your face. I needed more signs of life. Your mouth had blood on it and your lips, the Kool-Aid-stained ones I'd stared at from across so many classrooms for so many years, were all shredded and bleeding badly but my god they were the same color. That same color. And your eyes—I took a finger and peeled back your eyelids because I remembered people doing that in medical dramas when they wanted to know if someone's brain was still working—were drained of that sharp piercing quality that could so effortlessly cut through the veils of this fallen world to reveal the miracles that lay just beyond. Unfocussed, glassy, foggy. It was like little white clouds had settled over them, and I couldn't *see* you at that point so I let the lids fall and held your head in my hands, held it very still in case there was something wrong with your neck.

I waited a long time. Still no one stirred in the truck down the hill. Perhaps whoever was in there was dead or had fled. I slipped into a space where nothing entered

or exited my mind, and eventually the hysterical man came out his house and cried and screamed in the grass. He didn't try to touch you. Or me. He just danced like a madman, like a shaman entranced and moving through worlds I could not see. I saw lights—blue and red ones—reflected off the wreckage of your father's car and thought to myself, *they're coming at last.*