

BULLHEADS

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On my parents' farm, the land rolls from one horizon to the other in long, graceful hills that in the summer are green with corn and in the winter stand fallow and brown against the low sky. Small creeks cut through the fields and pastures like creases in a palm. When I was a child, I liked to ride my bicycle down the gravel road, across the blacktop highway, and onto a dirt track that disappeared into one of these valleys, tree-lined and deep. Hereford cows drank there, swinging their tails. I never saw anyone else, and I came to think of myself as the sole occupant. Often, I'd fall asleep and wake in the shadows of evening, when the pink streamers on my bicycle appeared purple and the cicadas had started to buzz.

The day my mother forbade me to leave the yard, I stamped my feet and pouted until my father came home for dinner. He sat me on his knee and scratched my head with his big, rough fingers. He smelled like pig dust and the orange, gritty hand soap he used.

“So, I hear your mom wouldn’t let you go down to the creek today.”

I nodded solemnly.

“Do you know why she did that?” he asked. I shook my head, and he sighed and fell back into the old brown recliner. “Well, there are some bad people around, and one of their friends lives along that creek. Your mom and I think you should take a break from going there. At least for a while.”

My mother called us to dinner. My dad heaved us both out of the chair and scratched my head again before walking into the kitchen. My mother looked at us, and my dad nodded, signaling that he’d talked with me. The next day, after he’d gone to the farm, I ran out to the shed and hopped on my bike, pedaling quickly past the sight line of the windows, through the yard, and behind the big oak and the lilac and the swing set. Just as I reached the road, I heard a door slam and my mother shouting. I could have ridden away, but she would have caught me, by car if necessary. As it was, I made her walk across the grass, right up to my bicycle. I was that sort of child, always testing the rules. To what end, I don’t know. My mother always won.

Eventually, even when I had the chance to sneak away from the house, I didn’t. I’d listened to the news. Homes were being broken into and robbed. The thieves took guns and ammunition, cows and chickens, buckets, water hoses, rakes, shovels, potting soil, and whatever else was lying around. Sometimes they painted graffiti on the walls. People started disappearing—a man here, a wife and kids there, one and two at a time. Nobody knew if they had been kidnapped or had run away. They usually snuck out of their homes in a hurry, at night, with suitcases of clothes and toys for the kids. We read in the newspaper about the police searches. My parents had never locked their doors, but at night, my mother turned the dead-bolt and made my father check that it had caught. My room was upstairs, and I had nightmares about men in hoods and masks. I made plans for escape: busting the window with the desk chair and

climbing down the fire ladder rolled up under my bed. I could hide on the roof. Or jump to the ground and run to the ash tree that was easy to climb. Maybe I could have hidden. Or slept on the floor so that the bedcovers would have looked as if no one slept in them; the intruders wouldn’t know I was watching their feet and ankles and holding my breath. In my room, my parents hung a picture of a guardian angel guiding a child across a narrow bridge spanning a raging river. The message was clear. God looks out for the young and the reckless.



When I turned fifteen, I earned my driver’s license, the only girl in my class with a farm permit. It was a big joke. The few times I walked through a milo field, cutting down shatter cane and button weeds, my allergies flared up, and my eyes were red and swollen for a week. I don’t know why I didn’t help with the pigs or cattle. Perhaps because I was my father’s little girl, his only child, and he spoiled me. Or, he was afraid that when I inevitably did something wrong, he’d yell at me and then our relationship would be ruined. Instead, he spent what was, at the time, a great deal of money on a farmhand, a kid who’d graduated high school and then spent half a semester at college before returning home for good. My father paid him five dollars an hour and gave him half a butchered hog every six months.

That summer, before my sophomore year, I spent every evening driving my friends down gravel roads with sudden twists where the county crews who had long ago built them had wanted to avoid a wide stretch of creek or a nice shade tree. One road that we especially liked had a steep descent down a hill and a sudden upswing at the end like a roller coaster. There was a yellow yield sign with the word SLOW handwritten at the bottom, but whoever had done it had drawn the first two letters too big so that the O dwindled and the W was as small as a period. When we saw the sign, we’d

yell, "SLOW!" I'd hit the gas, and the old Plymouth Volare would throw gravel and hurtle down the hill, bottom out, and then fly up the other side. If anyone had been driving the other direction, we all would have been killed. On Fridays and Saturdays, I played designated driver, hauling my friends out to a pasture or a collapsed bridge where the junior and senior boys and some who were older and still hanging around would build bonfires with seed pallets and play music out of a truck stereo.

At 11:30, I'd push my drunken friends into the back seat, sometimes with guys, and watch them make out in the rear-view mirror while I drove back to town. The telephone poles would flash and disappear, and I'd think about how this was what it felt like to be grown-up. I was careful to throw any empty bottles in the dumpster behind the Dairy Queen and to drive home with the windows down. But cheap alcohol is pungent stuff. If my parents had stuck their heads inside the car—if they'd really taken the effort to check—they would have smelled vodka and Apple Pucker. But they didn't. Once, they sat me down and warned me about falling into the wrong crowd.

"We're not saying that's the case," my father said, taking over for my mother who I'd shut up with a wise-ass remark. If she opened her mouth again, she was likely to cry. "You're a smart kid," he continued. "It'd be a shame if you did something to compromise your future. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"Like get pregnant."

My father cringed.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said, which I knew meant that bright kids from good families didn't act as if high school was the highlight of our lives. We didn't screw around; we studied and kept up our grades, went to college, and made something of ourselves. My father wouldn't let me leave the house until I gave in.

"Yeah," I said, already backing out of the room. "I know."

It was easy to joke about trouble. I hadn't hit puberty until

eighth grade, and though I tried hard to catch up, I felt silly and naïve compared to everyone else, like I'd been denied admittance to an exclusive club. My friends did their best to help, convincing guys to talk to me at my locker at school and, once the summer parties began, mysteriously disappearing whenever a boy strayed in my direction. They advised me not to be shy, to announce my intentions. If I really wanted to have sex, all I needed to do was say so. The offers would come flying in. They'd point to a crew of guys that everyone knew because they still lived in town and worked as mechanics or construction workers or for the city.

"They'd be first in line," my friends said.

Our name for them was the Loaded Gun Gang: because they never got laid, if you hooked up with one, he'd go off like a loaded gun. I understood the insult only vaguely. Occasionally, one of the gang would get lonely enough to date a homely high school girl for a while, and we'd laugh at them. Eventually, they'd break up; six or seven years is a Grand Canyon of an age gap when you're a teenager. There was also the law, in case something unseemly happened. At one party, the Gang was sitting across the fire from us, and my friends bumped me in their direction. The biggest guy saw me. His head was big and block-shaped, so large that his hat was sized at the very last peg and even then, it sat high on his head, just waiting for a good wind to come along and blow it off. He grinned, and then his face did an eraser act, like an entire page of notes had been written on it and a teacher had wiped it clean before I could finish reading. He waved lamely.

"Oh shit," I said, "it's my dad's hired hand."

My friends laughed like hogs. On the farm, he was always slapping his hand atop his hat, mashing it down, or missing and then chasing after it. But, according to my father, what he lacked in grace or intelligence, he made up for with impenetrable affability. Jacob never yelled, stamped his feet, or cussed. When he was fixing a broken water pipe and dropped his screwdriver in the pit beneath the sow crates, he just sighed and shook his head. Then he found a

rubber glove and reached into the shit to fish out the tool. My father could barely contain his disbelief and admiration. My friends left me standing by myself. The idea was that I'd look lonely and he'd come over. When that didn't work, they stared at him and whispered to one another. Eventually, they told the other Loaded Guns that if Jacob didn't get his butt over there right away, they were going to tell everyone he was gay. He slid off the tailgate and lumbered around the fire. His own friends had been working on him as well.

"Hey," he said. "I think we're supposed to talk to each other."

He stood in front of me, entirely blocking out the flames and his friends and mine. I could feel them watching us.

"OK. So talk."

A gust of wind caught his hat, and he reached up and caught the brim before it tumbled into the fire. I was embarrassed and looked away. Dark had fallen, and the beer was starting to take effect. One boy was riding the spare tire in the back of a truck like a bull. A couple others were singing along with a country song and encouraging everyone to join them; they'd sing a few bars and then wave their ball caps and say, "C'mon, goddamn it. Get into it. This is our fucking anthem."

Jacob turned to see what I was looking at.

"Do you like that song?" he asked.

"No, not really. Do you?"

He shrugged.

"I'm not particular. If it came on the radio, I wouldn't change the channel."

"What if there was a better song on a different station?"

The words seemed to smack against his face like rain on a windshield. I waited for an answer, but he only squinted his eyes as if needing clarification.

I said, "The song. Would you flip through the dial looking for something better or listen to this one because it was on?"

Jacob puffed out his cheeks, took off his hat, and exhaled seriously. He didn't realize that I didn't care. I was just making small talk until someone rescued me.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he said finally.

"For God's sake, do you need me to draw you a picture? It's a simple question. If this song came on, would you listen to it or find something else?"

He returned the hat to his head.

"I guess I'd listen to it."

"Well, then," I said, "there you go."

I looked around for my friends but didn't see them. There was nothing to do but keeping talking to Jacob. Every few minutes, I'd check my watch, hoping that someone would rescue me, but no one did. When my curfew finally came, I patted him on the shoulder.

"Nice chatting with you," I said, "but I've got to get home. You know how my dad is."

Jacob chuckled and stuck out his hand as if to shake, but he changed his mind and instead repeated my gesture, patting me on the shoulder.

"See you around."

I tracked down my friends and pushed them into the back seat of my car. On the way home, one asked if I'd gotten a date, and I stomped on the gas, throwing all of them against the back of the car. I didn't let up on the accelerator until they begged me to slow down. By then, they'd forgotten about Jacob.



Though he worked for my father from seven in the morning until five in the afternoon, Jacob didn't eat with us. Meals were one of the few times my mother got to see my father, she claimed. At night, he fell asleep in his chair during the first or second sitcom. As a result, when he was awake, she didn't want any intrusions. My mom didn't mention that she hadn't wanted my father to hire Jacob in the first place, but it was commonly understood. His family had been involved with the group that scared everyone when I was a kid. Who knew what he'd seen? What if he was somehow screwed up and dangerous? When he began working on our farm, my parents

argued ferociously after I'd gone to bed, the fight growing so heated that for a few weeks, my father took to sleeping on the couch. As a compromise, Jacob ate lunch in the shade of the barn. He didn't seem to mind. He liked the solitude, my father said.

I had never given this arrangement much thought, but after the party, as the noon hour approached each day, I wondered how he filled the time. Surely he opened his truck door and listened to the stereo. Or read a book or a magazine. But when I looked out the window, he was lying on the ground, leaning against the big door frame where hay was loaded and unloaded. Nothing to read. No music. His truck was parked at the other end of the driveway. He was just sitting there.

My mother had once said, after my father went back to work, that she thought Jacob might be mentally handicapped. She'd laid a light emphasis on the phrase; those were the days when the word *retarded* had gone out of fashion.

"But," she'd added, bitterly, "he's a hard worker, and your father likes him, so I guess that's all that matters."

I wondered if my mother was right. My friends were always making fun of me because I tended to space out. We'd be sitting on the edge of a dirt road, and one of them would toss an empty beer can at me and say, "Hey, wake up." When I drove by myself, I rarely listened to the radio, but when I pulled up in front of a friend's house, I switched it on so that they wouldn't think I was weird. Secretly, I believed that anyone who didn't mind silence, who didn't need a radio or conversation or some other external stimulus, must have something better going on inside her head.

So, one day, after lunch, I scraped the bits of mashed potatoes and roast beef stuck to the plates into a bowl to take outside and dump in the field for the cats and dog. I didn't need to walk past the barn, but I did. Jacob was sitting against the doorway the same as he'd done since I started spying on him through the window. His plastic cooler was on the ground next to him. His hat covered his face, and he seemed to be napping. I stood there with my bowl, wondering if I should say something and wake him or just keep

walking. His chest rose and fell evenly. I cleared my throat, but he didn't move. I started for the field.

"Wait a second," he said.

I couldn't see his eyes and he couldn't see me.

"Are you going to look at me," I asked, "or just stare at the inside of your hat?"

"Oh, I can see you just fine."

"Yeah?" I stuck out my tongue.

He laughed inside his hat and then pushed himself up and tilted the brim away from his eyes. He squinted in the light. I felt dumb for sticking out my tongue. It was a childish thing to do. I should have flipped him off or mooned him—it's what my friends would have done. He didn't seem to know what to do, either. It had been easier when he couldn't see me, when he was talking to the inside of his hat.

"Cat got your tongue?" I said and cringed.

He smiled anyway.

"I enjoyed talking with you the other night. I wondered if you'd want to go fishing or something."

"Are you asking me on a date?" I tried to make the question sound lighthearted, but inside, my heart was thumping, and I wasn't sure if it was because I was flattered or terrified.

He shook his head.

"Just fishing."

Behind me, the door to the house banged shut.

"OK," I said, before my father reached us. "Where should we meet? Not here."

"Why not?"

I looked over my shoulder at the house. My father was sitting on the bench on the porch, lacing up his boots.

"Oh," Jacob said. "Right. We can meet at an intersection. Just name one."

We agreed on a place, and then I ran to the field to dump the scraps.

I did not tell my friends of the plan. When they called on the

Wednesday that Jacob planned to go fishing, I told them I wasn't feeling well. When I got off the phone, I told my mother I was going out with friends. I met Jacob at an intersection of gravel roads a few miles from my house. His pickup was parked in the ditch, and when he saw me, he flashed his lights and drove down the road that led to a one-lane bridge over a creek. The water there was deep and dark, too deep to wade across. Jacob stepped out of his truck carrying a tackle box, and he reached into the bed and pulled out two poles.

"Why'd you pick this spot?" I said. "It's got nothing but bullheads."

Bullheads are catfish with sharp barbs that will slice your hand neatly as a knife. They eat dead fish, crawfish, snails, and leeches, and almost always swallow the bait and the hook so that you have to cut the line. Jacob carried his gear past me to the bridge and sat down on the edge, his legs dangling over the water.

"Dear God in heaven," I said, rolling my eyes toward the sky. "He's actually going to fish here."

He laughed soft and low and then did not say anything else. Either I was going to sit there with him or I wasn't. I sat down. He unscrewed the jar of gizzards and stuck one onto my hook.

"I can do it myself," I said, scowling at him. "I've fished in every creek and pond around."

He looked at me, and I could see in his eyes that he was thinking of what to say. A little smile spread across his lips.

"I like bullheads," he said. "There's one in here that I catch almost every time that I come. He's probably a foot long and his fins are all beat to hell." He looked at my bait. "Are you going to throw that in the creek?"

I cast the line, and he baited his own hook and cast it. The gizzard splashed into the water and sunk out of sight. He fitted his pole handle into a knot that had been hollowed out of one of the thick planks we sat on. I looked around for a similar hole but couldn't find one, so I sat with the rod in both hands.

"I didn't tell anyone that I was meeting you," he said.

"Me either."

The tops of the trees rustled in the wind, but we didn't feel it on the bridge.

"And I didn't bring any beer," he said.

"Good. I don't want any."

I knew he was trying to tell me something—that he didn't see this as a date and wasn't going to try anything and that probably he felt a mix of emotions that arose from the fact that he was acting in a way that would have mystified his friends. He couldn't say that, of course.

Instead, he asked, "Where's your favorite place to fish?"

I wished that I didn't have to hold onto my pole. I tried sticking it in the gap between two boards, but it leaned dangerously over the bridge and would have fallen over the edge if I hadn't grabbed it.

"For bullheads?" I grinned, but when he didn't respond, I said, "Well, for bass, it's Wilson's pond, and for catfish it's a couple of places that I sort of keep to myself because everyone will go there. But, if we're talking about bullheads, then I guess this spot is pretty good."

He blushed, which made me feel good and also awkward, and so I looked away. Our lines ran loose and soft into the drop below the bridge. I shook mine a little and then reeled in the slack. We were sitting with one plank between us, maybe eight inches apart. The water below had not yet fully absorbed the summer heat, and so the air above it was cool and muggy. Mosquitoes landed on our arms. Once, we slapped at exactly the same time, and when we pulled our fingers away, they were bloody. We looked at each other's hands and laughed in way that made me feel dizzy. As the sun sank lower behind the trees, the air grew heavy and close and seemed to push all on one side of me. I tried to scoot away without him noticing, lifting one butt cheek and inching it away and then lifting the other. We went a long time without talking.

"So, are we going to catch anything or what?" I asked, and like

that, something took my bait. I didn't even have to set the hook. The tip of the reel bent back toward me as the fish swam beneath the bridge and then straightened out as it tried racing the other direction. I reeled in slowly, giving the fish less and less room to run. When finally I hauled it out of the creek, it hung panting and watching me with one eye and then the other as it twisted on the line.

"I'll be damned," Jacob said, pulling on a pair of gloves from the tackle box. He grabbed the fish and peered into its mouth. "He swallowed the hook again."

The fish did not thrash or twist. The gills opened and closed. Its fins were notched, and it had a long scar on one side. It seemed to train its eye on me like it was a cat with a mouse that I was going to take away. Jacob shook it a little. He was chuckling.

"You must be the dumbest fish on the planet." He cut the line and held out the bullhead toward me. "Did you want to say anything?"

I shook my head, and Jacob chuckled and tossed it back into the creek.

"I was talking to the fish."



We met again a week later to catch flatheads at one of the spots I thought no one else knew. Jacob had brought a little camp stove, and when we caught something big enough to eat, he filleted it and cooked it in a blackened frying pan that he had to hold continuously so it wouldn't slide off the burner. At dark, we went our separate ways. Instead of going home or finding my friends, I drove to an abandoned brick silo where we sometimes drank. It wasn't very tall, and the roof was gone. You could lie inside and look up at the sky and pretend that there was no earth, that the only things that existed were the rough concrete walls and the stars above. No fields or trees or city limits, just the universe and you. Other people had felt this way, too. The walls were filled with drawings in red

and yellow paint: circles and triangles and squares that overlapped, circles with lines radiating out like sunbeams. There were stranger things—UFOs and writing that did not mean anything in English and that did not resemble the Spanish or French taught at school and faces, yellow and glowing with passion as though they'd seen God, or red and terrified as though they'd seen and not liked it. The drawings had been made when I was a kid, by the people who'd stolen things and disappeared. When I lay on the floor, I imagined that the drawings were alive and sliding across the walls, staring at me. The idea, along with the view of the stars wheeling overhead and the earth moving beneath me, had a certain appeal.

For our third or fourth or fifth date—I can't remember—I made Jacob promise that we'd do something besides fish. Wet met at the intersection, he flashed his lights, and I followed his truck down a gravel road with washboard ruts where the water ran over it after a heavy rain. The fields on both sides were planted to corn tall enough that you couldn't see over it. At a break in the corn, a waterway crossed beneath the road through a culvert and emerged on the other side as a damp trickle in a boggy pasture. Jacob pulled into the ditch and sat in his truck, waiting for me to walk alongside his window. I took my time, unsure why we'd stopped or what he had planned.

I sauntered to his door and leaned on the front wheel well.

"Run out of gas?" I asked. "Or were you just struck by the beauty of this ditch?"

He laughed at my joke. He always laughed. Then he opened his door and stepped onto the hard-packed gravel.

"You'll see," he said, lifting his eyebrows suggestively. He walked around to the tailgate and hopped onto the bed with one step, the truck see-sawing on its shocks. He tapped the side, indicating that I should join him. I wanted to joke that I'd heard stories about what happened in the beds of pickup trucks, but I didn't have the guts. Whenever my friends did have sex in cars, they made sure that in the background was the sound of a cassette tape or a station with a

long playlist between commercials and news. They laughed about screwing to the voice of the weatherman. Jacob had worn his dress boots—merely a second pair of work shoes that he hadn't ruined in the hog pens—and jeans discolored from countless fishing trips. And he hadn't left on the radio.

I climbed into the truck bed and sat down Indian style across from him. He smiled and pulled a deck of cards out of his back pocket. He dealt each of us half the deck, and one by one, we flipped over our top cards in the game of War. My hands were sweaty, and I kept turning over more than one card at a time, fumbling, waiting for the moment when he'd show an ace and then unlace a boot and peel off a grey, sweaty sock and expect me to do the same. He tried making conversation, but I wasn't paying attention and he wasn't good at small talk.

At one point, he said, "So, do you like school?"

I didn't say anything, and he laid a hand over his cards, stopping the game. My eyes closed, and I cringed.

"Man," he said, "I hate school."

I opened my eyes. His normally unreadable face had changed, and I leaned away from it, back against the bed's side. He was staring at his hands.

"Everybody says just wait till you get to college, it'll be so much better than high school. But it's not. It's exactly the same except you don't get to go home at night. You can't make any money, you can't go fishing or hunting. There's music playing all the time, and pep rallies and parties and classes and study sessions and meetings." He was breathing hard. "And you have to wear red all the time. It's ugly. Every day, I wore red. It's a racket."

He quit talking but did not move his hand from the cards. I guessed that he wasn't going to make out with me. In the trees, the cicadas buzzed irregularly, out of rhythm. The sun was sinking behind the horizon, and a thick, humid world seemed to rise out of the bog and replace the dry summer day. A mosquito whined in my ear.

"I'm sorry," he said and swept the cards into a pile.

"For what?"

"I shouldn't have told you that stuff." He kept his eyes lowered. "You're smart. You shouldn't listen to me. Go to college."

"Yeah, you make it sound great."

He shook his head.

"It is great. Just not for me. I'm an idiot. Nobody likes me."

"But you're nice," I said weakly.

"I'm messed up. People aren't supposed to fish every night and sit on their porches by themselves. If we were meant to be alone all the time, there wouldn't be towns. Look at this," he said. "I brought you to a ditch in the middle of nowhere."

I grabbed his hands and pulled them onto my crossed ankles. I ducked my head so that I could see him under the brim of his hat.

"Listen," I said. "You're not messed up. I like to be alone, too. Sometimes I even go to this abandoned silo and lie inside, looking at the sky. All I do is watch the stars and think about stuff. What's weirder than that? Fishing? Playing cards in the middle of nowhere?"

I was grinning, trying to get him to relax, to lighten up.

"OK," I said, "maybe cards are kind of strange."

"It was just something to do," he said. "I didn't really think about it. I'm sorry. I didn't know it was bad."

"Who said it was bad? The word is *strange*." I squeezed his hands. "But that's OK. I'm strange, too. Hey, look at me."

He lifted his head. His eyes were half closed as if prepared to be hit in the face. It hurt me to see him that way, and I stuck out my tongue. I crossed my eyes and made goo goo sounds until he laughed.

"That's better," I said, and he laughed, and I squeezed his hands again. "Boy, you and I are a couple of odd ducks."

"Quack," he said.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and in the grainy dusk, he held my ankles. His hands were so large that he could wrap one

around each ankle and touch his thumb and fingers together. We didn't say anything for a long time, just smiled at each other, until he sat up and pointed. Out of the waterway had come hundreds of fireflies, surrounding us, moving silently in and out of the corn. Their small brown bodies and glowing abdomens floated past my face.

"They're beautiful," I whispered and reached for his hand, sliding my fingers into his, and holding tight as the lights flickered all around us.

"This is the real reason I brought you here," he said, and we kept holding hands until the mosquitoes grew unbearable.

Then we climbed out of the bed and drove away, he in his truck and I in my car.



A few days later, we hiked through a cow pasture and woods with thick, thorny undergrowth. I felt good. My footsteps were light and springy, and I was asking Jacob questions just to hear him talk. Whose land was this? Did he ever hunt here? Were there mushrooms in the spring? Could we get lost? If we did, did moss really grow on the north side of a tree? What if we couldn't find our way out again? I was being silly. We reached a creek bordered on one side by a wide slate shelf with the fossils of ancient clams encased in it.

"Back in dinosaur days," he said, "all of this used to be an ocean."

I threw my head back and laughed.

"Dinosaur days? What's that, some kind of festival? Harvest Days. Christmas Day. Dinosaur Day. Can't you just imagine, a bunch of stegosauruses walking down the street? The official Dinosaur Day parade. They'd have to take turns with the old-time tractors and fire trucks."

I traced the outline of a clam almost as big as my hand. Each line of its shell was distinct.

"This guy was huge," I said. "Think how big the shrimp must have been, and the bullheads. Would have made for some good fishing."

He laughed, but the sound struck me as nervous. I continued tracing the shell, sensing that he was looking at me and feeling a strange sort of compulsion, as if I could read his mind and knew that he wanted to kiss me. I was aware of how far we'd hiked off the road, and I imagined what his lips would feel like, his shoulders and arms.

But when I looked up, he had begun unrolling a seine, carefully and slowly so the net wouldn't twist or catch on sticks. I wondered if I'd imagined the magnetic sensation, if it had been *me* who wanted to kiss *him*. As we waded into the cold, muddy water, the current swirled between my legs and the mud sucked on my shoes. We lifted the net out of the water and picked out chub and crawfish, keeping some for bait and throwing the rest back. When our hands touched, I jerked backward and apologized, my face flushed. I could feel the effect this had. Jacob didn't look at me. In the water, we walked silently and when we lifted out the net, he gave instructions as if irritated and, at the same time, as if the slightest misstep might somehow send me running through the woods. I imagined throwing myself at him. When our hands touched again and when he shied away, I thought, you dope, just kiss me. We were wet and slimy, and I didn't care. My shirt was plastered against my breasts. I wasn't wearing a bra—when I'd driven away from home that afternoon, I had unclasped it and pulled it through a shirtsleeve. I'd done it without thinking, on impulse, and then when I pulled up behind his truck, I couldn't put the bra on again without taking off my shirt. I'd had no choice but to pretend like it was no big deal, to try to convince myself that I'd done it for comfort or because I didn't want to get the bra wet.

Now I was showing through my shirt, and he wouldn't look at me. I wanted him to look. I asked questions that popped into my head—how often he seined, what kind of fish he caught with

crawdads as bait—just so that he'd have to recognize that I was there. He answered like a robot. I felt my face turning red.

"For God's sake," I said, "let's talk about something besides fish."

He was tossing crawfish in a bucket, and I walked back into the water, to the deep spot where I could stand without my chest showing. He stopped what he was doing and stared at me.

"Are you peeing?"

"What?" I said. "No."

"Then why are you standing in the water?"

"Because I feel like it. You should try sometime—just cut loose and do whatever you want."

He threw a wiggling chub in my direction. It splashed into the creek and disappeared.

"There," he said.

I shook my head, the water swirling under my chin.

"Not good enough. Come into the water with me."

"And do what?"

I thought, he can't be this dumb. Surely I don't have to spell it out for him.

"Come in and find out," I said. When he didn't move, I added, "Or tell me something about yourself. Like, who was the first girl you ever had a crush on?"

Something nibbled at my leg, and I shivered. It might have been nothing, which is what I told myself because I didn't want to walk to lower water where my chest would be visible. I couldn't stand for him to not look at me.

"Angela," he said.

"Angela who?"

His attention had been captured by the dirt under his fingernails.

"I don't know. Angela."

He glanced at the tree branches and the graying sky beyond them and suggested we get going before we had to walk back in

the dark. He hadn't brought a light, he said. Then he held out his hand.

"You mean that you can't remember the whole name of the first girl you kissed?" I splashed water at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Let's get out of here before we get lost."

He sounded old and irritable and not at all like someone who I wanted to see me half-naked. But I didn't have much choice. It was too late not to feel like an idiot, so I walked straight ahead, both nipples showing through my shirt. He stared at the ground, and I hugged my arms over my chest while he rolled up the net.

"Can I help?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I'm a world-champion net roller," I said, but he didn't laugh. He finished with the seine and hefted it under one arm. With his other hand, he carried the bucket of bait.

"All right," he said, still not looking at me, and we set off through the woods, skirting between the dense undergrowth and along paths cut by deer. At the fence, he held the barbed wire while I crawled through. He dropped the net in the back of his truck.

"Did you bring a towel?" he said. "I didn't think about it. Your car is going to smell like fish."

My chin was tucked into my arms and I wouldn't look up. When I said, "It's OK," he probably didn't hear me. He kicked a rock and opened his truck door.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'll be seeing you."

On the way home, I cried so hard that I had to pull over. My parents were still up when I walked in the house—my father in his chair and my mother on her couch, the television talking at them. The smell of popcorn hung in the air. I had put my bra back on, but I was soaked. My eyes were puffy and red.

"Good lord," my mother said, "what happened to you?"

My dad struggled to push the footrest back into the chair so that he could sit up and reach the TV remote on the lamp table. The two of them looked at me and at one another.

"I went seining," I said.

My father glanced at the window behind the television set.

"In the dark?"

"It wasn't dark when we started. My friends thought it'd be fun."

"And what's the matter?" My mom's voice trembled. She knew that something was wrong. I stood there pitifully, wanting a hug and something warm to drink and knowing that I absolutely could not say what had happened.

"Just be nice to me," I said.

"Who was there?" my father asked and, like a judge, proceeded to name all of my girlfriends. I nodded and he made a harsh exhalation like a curse without words. "Your mother and I have heard stories about them," he said. "We didn't want to say anything. We figured you'd drift apart eventually. Hopefully this will be a learning experience. They're going down a bad road, and you don't want to be on it."

I nodded and sniffed my nose. My mother glanced at my father.

"This is part of growing up," she said. "You won't have the same friends forever. I'm just relieved that nothing bad happened." She stared at me, wanting confirmation, and I said that no, nothing had happened. I was just wet and sad. "Well," she said, "that's to be expected. But you've got to be careful. You've—"

I tuned out the rest of what she said. She was trying so earnestly, so hard to be a good mother who does not hide the truth from her child, who lays out the consequences of sex and the various pressures you'll face, all in this kindly, serious tone that makes you want to tell her something really dirty. You cannot shock me, your mother is implying; I have been there. I, too, have embarrassed

myself and been hurt. And you want to say, no, you haven't. You have no idea.



A week passed, and then another, without seeing Jacob. He met my father every morning for work and ate lunch in the barn outside of our house, but I did not look for him. I stayed away from the windows and timed my exits and entrances to the property around the moments when I knew he was with my father at the hog buildings or the feedlot or on a tractor somewhere in a field. At lunch and dinner, I listened closely to my father as he talked about his day. Had Jacob acted strangely? Did he mention me? Was he moody? My father never mentioned him unless there was a story that illustrated his weird calm.

"You cannot ruffle that boy's feathers," my father said.

They had been loading bales of alfalfa in a field, and as Jacob picked one up, a snake slithered out of the pressed hay and onto his foot. Jacob kicked it off. He put the bale on the wagon.

"Was that a *snake*?" my father said.

Jacob shrugged. My father wouldn't let it go.

"Did a snake just crawl down your leg?"

"I guess," Jacob said.

In telling this to my mother and me, my father shivered so hard he bumped against the table and shook the water glasses.

"*I guess?*" he said as if by repeating the words he could understand how Jacob could watch a snake crawl down his leg without moving a muscle. "I've never seen anything like it," my father said. "That guy, I swear, he's cool as a cucumber."

The next day when my father came inside for lunch, I slipped out to the barn. Jacob was sitting on the ground, leaning against the big frame of the doorway where hay was hauled in and out. The sun was hot, but in the shade, he seemed comfortable. His hat lay beside him next to his lunch cooler. He was eating a sandwich and

staring up at the top of the doorway and at the blue sky beyond. I thought he was smiling. I stood in the shade at the opposite end of the doorway and said hello. Immediately the smile disappeared and he tucked the sandwich back into the plastic baggie. He looked at me cautiously.

"I figured you were mad at me."

"Why would I be mad?"

"I thought you'd gone home the other night and found a bunch of leeches and blamed me. I pulled off at least six. One was as fat as my thumb." He held up his wide, thick thumb. "I held a cigarette lighter up to his head, and he blew it out. That's how big he was."

He was pleased with himself.

He said, "That was a joke."

"I know."

"You're not laughing."

His face was spread out hopefully. I couldn't tell if he was serious, if he really thought I'd be mad about a couple of leeches or if he was being nice, putting an awkward time behind us.

"Because it's a terrible joke," I said.

He held the sandwich bag toward me and asked if I wanted a bite. I told him no thanks. I needed to get back inside for lunch. My parents were waiting on me. His smile went away.

"I thought you were coming out to sit with me. I like talking with you. It's been a while."

"Sorry," I said, and his face dropped, not so much that anyone else would have noticed, but I did. "I guess you get lonely out here."

"Oh, not really." He took a bite of sandwich. I sighed and backed away. "Hey," he said.

"You want to go fishing again?"

"I'm kind of wore out on fishing. Can't we do something else?"

He didn't know. All he ever did was go fishing, and sometimes he bagged a deer if he could get access to a tree stand and he also hunted pheasant and quail, but none of those were in season. And I probably wouldn't be up for watching baseball and drinking beer,

which is the other thing that he did. His roommates liked race car driving, but he couldn't stand to watch it if the weather was nice and he could get out of the house, which is why he got out as much as he could.

"So, I don't really care what we do," he said, "so long as we're outside. You have any ideas?"

I thought about telling him that we could park out somewhere in the middle of nowhere and crawl into the back seat of my car, but my heart wasn't in it. I was like a sober person who'd been drunk and now couldn't quite understand what she'd been so wound up about.

"Let's just plan on meeting Friday night, and we'll see where the night takes us," I said. "Sound good?"

He shook his head.

"I think we should decide now what we'll do. No more surprises."

I felt the blood rushing to my face. Did he mean my breasts? What was so disgusting about them? Their size? The fact that I was so much younger than him? I was going to be a sophomore in the fall.

"What do you mean?" I said. "What surprises?"

"Oh," he said, glancing away, "you know."

"No, I don't."

He looked desperately toward the house, as if my father might suddenly walk onto the porch and call me to lunch. I moved in front of his face so that he couldn't avoid seeing me. My hands were jammed on my hips like I'd seen my friends do when shouting at their boyfriends. I didn't know what I was doing, though. Did I really want him to say that I grossed him out? That he had never once thought about me that way? He picked up his sandwich.

"Are you sure you don't want a bite?" he said. "It's got bacon." He wiggled it like he'd done with the bullhead. "Hey, there," he said in the high-pitched voice of a sandwich. "I sure am delicious. Wouldn't you like to eat me?"

"The sandwich sounds like a fag."

He thought I was being coy and laughed. He set the sandwich back in his lap.

"OK, you got me," he said. "So what should we do?"

I gritted my teeth and tried to think of the worst possible thing. Or place.

"What about that silo I told you about?" I grinned to myself and added, before he could say no, "Yeah, definitely. It's great. You'll see."

He shrugged.

"OK."

That afternoon, I went to the library and found microfiche of newspapers with stories about the people who had caused so much trouble when I was a kid, the ones who'd stolen and made those paintings in the silo and eventually disappeared. In the earliest articles, no one knew what to think. Later, it became clear the missing persons belonged to a group that believed government was bleeding the poor farmer with income taxes, that very soon there would be a new revolution, and the rural states would secede, and, if necessary, the poorest counties would secede from the states. A new order was going to be established. Jacob was mentioned, not directly, but other people with the same last name—cousins and aunts and uncles—were caught breaking into homes and stealing gasoline from farm tanks. They spent the night in jail, being interrogated by local police and the state bureau of investigation. Not long after, the cops caught up with the rest of the group in an abandoned house in the next county. They stormed the compound. Kids and women were huddled inside amid weapons caches. Dogs barked and dug at spots in the yard where bodies had been buried. The man who killed them was sentenced to life in prison. As he was led out of the courtroom, he claimed God had given him direct orders. He said that no structure of concrete and steel could hold him. Like Jesus, he would come again. Then they locked him up tight. His followers went home. Jacob and his mom and dad and the other followers went to bed that night and woke up in the morning, found

jobs, and didn't kill anyone. The rest of us chose to forget the whole thing ever happened.



No rain had fallen for weeks. The roads were hard and dry. Jacob followed the tail end of my dust cloud, and when I turned onto a narrow, weedy path, I stopped and waited so he wouldn't miss me. He pulled up in his truck, nosing my bumper to be funny, making my car inch forward, and I led him a little further down the road. The silo stood in the middle of a wheat field. The only way to reach it was to walk through the wheat that had turned golden and glowed in the low sun.

Jacob got out of his truck and leaned against the hood.

"It's a silo, all right," he said, but his tone sounded off, and when I sidled up to him, he didn't look at me.

I punched his arm.

"You've got to climb inside to see what's special about it."

I took his hand, and we waded into the wheat, holding our arms over the scratchy heads. Jacob kept falling back. I'd turn and urge him on, and he'd duck his head and trudge forward again; I knew pretty well then that the stories I'd heard about the place were true, and the stories about Jacob and the people he'd been with when he was a kid. It had all really happened, and he'd seen it.

The silo did not have a door, only square holes, each the size of a window in a car door, placed every five or six feet up and connected with a ladder that had rotted away. Crawling through the bottom hole was like stepping into a cave. The sun never shone into the bottom of the silo, and the air was thick and hot. Broken glass littered the floor. I looked back at Jacob, who was gauging the opening and looking at his shoulders.

I rolled my eyes.

"Don't kid yourself. You're not that big and strong."

But he couldn't step through as easily as I had. First, he tried

putting one leg in and pulling his upper body after it, but he didn't fit, and so he slid through headfirst. I kicked away the glass so he wouldn't cut himself. He was gasping and grunting and setting his hands down like hooves. Finally, I had to grab him by the armpits and pull until his feet dropped to the floor. I wasn't prepared for the shift in weight, and he fell on top of me. The bottom of my shirt was pushed up, and the stubble on his chin scratched my belly and made me ticklish. It was a good feeling, and when he tried to stand, I goofed and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him back down. And then I did something I hadn't planned: in the middle of all that stubble were two lips, and I kissed them. He rolled to the side, and I let his momentum carry us so that I was on top with him pinned beneath me. We lay like that a moment—I was laughing, and he was blinking and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. I kissed him again. My breasts pressed against his ribs, and he didn't push me away. I looked at him, and he widened his eyes. I didn't know what we were doing, but I liked the pressure on my breasts, the feeling of my pelvis against his, and so I did the only thing that seemed natural; I unbuttoned his shirt to his belly button and ran my hands on his chest. It was smooth. My hands were shaking. He didn't stop me. I fumbled with his belt buckle. Still, he didn't move. I dragged my hand across his crotch, gauging for size and shape and wondering if I was touching the wrong spot. I thought, any minute now, he'll tell me to quit. But he didn't, and I fumbled with his zipper. He was so silent that I giggled.

"Hey," I said, getting his zipper down and yanking open his fly, "*say something.*"

I touched his cotton underwear and waited for a groan, and when none came, I crawled forward and saw his face. He was staring at the wall, at the paintings, and his eyes were dull, like he was stoned. I waved at him. I thought he was messing around. I climbed off of him and said, "You're really freaking me out," trying to be funny about it. He lay on his back, his arms flat on the ground. His cheeks and chin were slack. I bent over him.

"Snap out of it," I said. "They're just drawings. Look, this one wants to say hi." I stood next to the yellow, ecstatic face. "Well, hello," I said in a deep voice. "How are you, Jacob. I'm Mr. Happy Sunshine. Don't I look happy? Don't you feel weird with your pants unzipped? I sure feel kind of weird about it."

But he didn't move. I wasn't even sure he was breathing. His eyes were open, and after what seemed like forever, he'd blink, and after another forever, he'd blink again. I wanted to shake him but was afraid that he might snap out of whatever daze he was in and start pushing and swinging his arms. Outside, the wheat bowed in the breeze, in the sunlight that shone through the top windows against the wall above but did not reach the floor. I backed against the wall and edged toward the window. If I crawled out, I'd be able to talk to him from a safe distance, or run and drive away. His chest was rising and falling, and at the sound of my feet kicking a piece of glass, he stirred a little.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and I said, "Nowhere," and slid toward the window. He lunged across the floor and grabbed my ankle. I tried to step on his fingers but only stumbled against the wall. His other hand took hold of my calf. He was on his knees, his shirt fallen open, his mouth closed and unsmiling. My breath was coming out in gulps.

"I thought you were sick," I said. "I was going to get a doctor."

He crawled toward me, bringing his hands up my legs and hips and butt, until his knees were flush against my toes, and he spoke into my bottom ribs.

"You knew what this place was." It wasn't a question. "I'll bet your dad told you, or you read about it at the library."

He kissed my stomach. I twisted away, but he wrapped one hand around my waist and held me in place. With the other hand, he unfastened my pants and slid them down to my knees.

"This is what you want," he said and grabbed my underwear and pulled so hard that it cut the back of my legs. He stood up and lifted me against the wall with one arm, using the other to

work at his briefs. I screamed and hit him in the face, but he only stared past me, concentrating, leaning his shoulder into my chest until I couldn't breathe. I felt him moving his hand in my crotch. I struggled, but it made no difference. I begged him to stop, but he kept fumbling and I cringed, waiting for what I knew would happen, trying to draw into myself so I wouldn't feel anything. There was nothing else to do. I tried praying but felt sick, and his hand kept moving.

Then he swore and dropped me. I scrambled for the window, and he knocked me down with the back of his hand. He buckled his pants while I lay sobbing. He buttoned his shirt and tucked it roughly into his jeans. I was crumpled on the floor, afraid to look, and he picked me up and held me against the wall again.

"You don't know anything," he said, and I nodded. "Quit crying," he said. "You think *this* is scary? I'll bet you've been planning this for weeks—you and your friends. Take him to the silo, get him all wussed out by the paintings, and then get his pants off. Was that it? Do you know what happened here?" He put his face against mine. "Do you?" He grabbed my hand and pulled on one finger after another. "I bet you like having these, don't you? What if you lost them?" He made a pistol out of his thumb and forefinger and shot mine away. I shook my head and closed my eyes. "Open them," he said, and I didn't. "I won't tell you again," he said, and I did. "Look at me."

I tried, but through the tears, his face was a blur. He swore and wiped his hand across my face. It didn't help. I didn't want to see.

"Open your eyes. That's not even the half of it. Do you know what a broomstick is for? You want me to tell you?"

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut. He swore again, softly, drawing the word out like a sigh.

"Some big shot you are—bring me to this place and then can't even look at it. This isn't even where the worst of it happened. They were just goofing around here."

He let go, and I crumpled to the floor. He walked to the window, studied it for a moment, and slid through head first. When he was out, he peered back in at me. "Are you coming?"

I buried my face in my hands and refused to look. I heard him mutter and the wheat brushing against his pants as he walked away. I listened for his truck engine—when he left, I'd run to my car. My face and stomach hurt, and the immediate future seemed to crowd around me—going home, facing my parents, explaining the bruises. Everyone in town would know. My picture would appear in the paper. There'd be a hearing, I'd testify, and his lawyer would ask if I did anything to encourage him, anything to lead him on, and my face would flush. I waited for the truck to start, but it didn't, and after a while the wheat swished again and Jacob darkened the window and looked at me.

"Hey." He spoke to me softly, like you would to an abandoned dog. "Are you OK?"

I didn't answer. He had one friend in the world, and he'd ruined her.

"Please," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that," he took a deep breath, "you surprised me. I got wound up." He inhaled raggedly and waited for me to speak. I pretended to be dead. He said, "Say something," and when I didn't, he started to climb through the window. I looked up and told him to go away. He stopped.

"Don't be mad at me." His voice came out as a whisper.

"You tried to r—" I choked on the word and felt my face turn red as tears ran down my cheeks.

He said, "I wouldn't have done that."

"You hit me."

"I know."

"Hard," I said and sat up and stared directly at him. He was hanging his head and kicking at the outside of the silo. He wouldn't even look at me. "Don't you know anything?" I said. "You can't do

that to girls. I should tell everyone and have you arrested. My dad will kill you."

"Please don't," he said.

"I'm going to do it."

He whimpered and tried to climb into the silo again, but I screamed. He stopped.

"I'll scream again," I said, and he backed away from the window. I made him back further away before I crawled out. The sun was setting behind the trees so that only soft light shone on the wheat, like light that had no source but emanated out of everything. The cicadas droned, and the sound was so loud by the road that you couldn't hear yourself think. When I got to my car, I got in and started it and rolled down the window. He was standing in the field. "You couldn't get it up, could you?" I said.

He jammed his hands in his pockets.

"I never wanted—"

"Say it," I said. "You couldn't get it up."

He shook his head.

"If you don't, I'll tell everyone you tried to rape me. They'll throw you in jail with guys bigger than you. Maybe with the guy who organized that whole group, the one who killed those people. I bet he'd love to see you again. Is that what you want?"

Jacob seemed to shrink. The wheat stood taller, reaching his chest, and he kicked at it.

"No," he said.

"Then say it," I barked, and he said it. I was shaking. "Louder." He did it. "Scream it." He looked at me and screamed.

The cicadas went quiet. There was only the sound of my car idling. Something seemed to drop out from beneath me, like I might pass out and fall through it. I shifted into drive and hit the gas, swerving around his truck, and onto the road. I kept checking my mirror for his lights, but they never came. I drove to a road nobody used and parked in the ditch. My arms were numb; the bones

in my legs had disintegrated. I don't know how long I sat there, but after a while I was scared that he'd find me, and so I drove again. I didn't want to go home. Already, I was planning what lie to tell, but I knew how the bruises looked, dark blue in the rearview mirror. So I kept driving. I spent the night in a city park the next county over. For five nights I slept in my car, waking at dawn and driving out to some forgotten dirt road and waiting for the sun to set, finding another place to sleep. You wouldn't believe how easy it is to hide. People were looking for me, and I stayed away for five days, until the bruises were gone. If I'd had more money, I could have stayed lost forever. No one looks on the back roads, in abandoned houses with no known owner, in deep, shaded creeks where no one fishes, in silos.