

# BATTLE CREEK

**Ann Stewart**

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I think of it now as a late valentine to Muffy, my first love, but that day, as I and my pack of friends chased her down and dragged her to the sewer drain, the only emotion I knew was rage—stripped bare and feeling its way in some unmentionable dark. I see that dark surrounding Aaron, expressionless as he turns my makeup mirror to glance at his face, exploded vessels risen now and spread over his mouth like a macabre shade of lipstick. I see myself naked and cold under its weight as he prepares to go.

He zips a suitcase shut on the bed. It is my suitcase, because he doesn't have one. In it, he throws clothes, deodorant and toothbrush, his *Halo* games. The Xbox he will undoubtedly return for, so I do not remind him now. He touches his bloated lip, pressing it over and over.

“Does it hurt?”

“It hurts when I push on it.”

“Well don't push on it.”

“I like to push on it.”

He pulls the suitcase off the bed with a whooshing noise. I am fiddling mindlessly with the ankle bracelet. It reminds me of the arthritis, before it went into remission. Aaron waves. His brown eyes bludgeon me. I want desperately to run over and put my arms around him. But he opens the door and nudges the cat away with his foot, saying *stay put*, and I think he is talking to me.

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It was late March, just days before my grandmother died. A slow thaw had descended on the Cereal City. Bailey Park's surface was strewn with cigarette butts and brown bottles, and it had taken on a spongy, bog-like consistency. The park was a sort of land bridge over which we traversed on our way to W.K. Kellogg Junior High, our downtown middle school, in the days when the walk to school, not the drive, was the locus of our morning social gatherings. As high school juniors, we arrived at Battle Creek Central only by car, namely a 1988 Toyota Camry driven by Jennifer Goldman, my best friend. Only those with no friends, and thus no connections with a licensed driver, still walked over the sad, soggy space that Melissa Bryson, our leader, had fittingly dubbed “Bumley Park.”

This waning Michigan winter, Marisa Snow, who was usually called Muffy, had no such connections. We spied her on her way to a forensics club meeting on a Saturday: I, Jen, Miss, and the fourth member of our pack, Maria Rodrigues, who we and the general population of Central knew as Rio. Muffy was tiny but quick and would prove to be a voracious kicker. She darted in the opposite direction when she saw us coming through the park, but Miss's long spidery legs soon caught up with her, ensnaring the hood of her heavy black cloak with one outstretched hand. Stringy, pale, and tinny-voiced, Miss would never strike anyone on first glance as the leader of a group of venomous bullies, but the sophomores of Battle Creek Central knew better. She was as mean as a cornered raccoon and had a tongue that bit like teeth.

Miss snapped Muffy into the waiting clutches of Jen and Rio, who had come wild-eyed and panting right behind, ponytails wagging, thirsty for the wet feel of fists on flesh. *Come on Pootie you gimpy little bitch*, Miss called out to me, because I had of course fallen way behind, struggling to run against the bitter refusal of my uncooperative joints. The winter damp had aggravated my rheumatoid arthritis, the bane of my teenage existence, and my ankles were swollen to the size of baseballs. When I finally caught up to the pack, I heard Rio telling Jen through an errant mouthful of her own dark hair, as she attempted to put Muffy in a headlock, *We might not get hauled in if only Pootie wasn't so pokey...* The three of them had managed to immobilize her arms and head, but now had to contend with her feet, which dug hard and fast into the stinking muddy grass.

The drain that I had designated was just north of the park, in a less-traveled block of Sherman Road, nestled against a curb. Shortly after we had moved to Battle Creek (my mother, my sister Beatrice, and myself), I had discovered that such grates could be removed. Bea and I were exploring our new neighborhood when we saw a family of ducks on their way from the river being driven out of the middle of the street by a passing truck. The mother led her babies over the grate in a panic, and they slipped into its vents and disappeared. Bea, who was next at the time, screamed when they plunged. The frantic mother duck circled and squawked, calling for the children she could not see, the little voices still drifting up from the river of waste below. Hoping to soothe my distraught

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sister, I had run around the block looking for passersby to help. Twenty minutes later, I met Jen Goldman and her brother Sam, whose smile always sucked the clouds out of the sky.

Holding Muffy in position over the fast-running sewage would be easier than getting her to the grate. First of all, it was clotted with a winter's worth of decaying plant matter. My weak wrists and arms being less than helpful for subduing a squirming Muffy, it fell to me to clear the cold muck away. I began by trying to shove it aside with my sneaker, already black with mud from the park. By the time Jen and I were able, amid audible grunting, to lift the grate from its place, drag it up the side of the curb, and drop it clanging on the sidewalk, my hands were frozen and Jen's curls were soaked with sweat. Rio and Miss had no choice but to pin Muffy to the wet pavement. She began to scream for help, potentially attracting the ever-hovering police. Miss answered her cries with a barrage of forceful slaps, which caused a gurgle of blood to spring from her nose. Rio's white knuckles clutched a fistful of her hair.

"Keep it up dyke bitch," Miss growled. "Rio, see if you can get my knife out of my pocket..." It was a classic Miss bluff, and for a moment Muffy was shocked into silence. But when the smell of sewage wafted up, rich and acrid, our victim's voice (*my victim's voice*) again echoed through the misty air, this time as a despairing, wheezy howl. Jen caught my eye, her breathing ragged and her head shaking.

"Pootie," she said, quietly, so only I could hear. "Forget this. We're gonna get hauled in. We gave her a good scare, now let's jet..."

Under the usual circumstances, I was on the sidelines at such events—a toady, there to mutter supportive comments like *Yeah bitch!* and *That's right!* while the girls dealt out their lacerating brand of education. But there existed in me, at age seventeen, a drafty little hole, which during certain moments would widen to a yawning chasm and bluster forth a gale-force rage. Within that anger, the girl I should have been (the pretty and small and liked by one and all) spun around in the tornado and became just a blur, and I turned into someone mythic and unrecognizable: a monstrous doppelgänger. The seconds after Jen suggested we abandon the plan, *my plan*, was one of these moments.

The sewer had been my idea, and this was *my enemy*. When I'd described the plan, Miss and Rio had looked at me as if they saw me for the first time. The four of us were gathered at Rio's cousin Ricky's on Cherry Street, just a couple of blocks from the YMCA, where I often told my mother I was. (This way, it almost wasn't a lie.) Ricky was what I would call a boyfriend, though had anyone asked at the time I would have denied it. He was as beautiful, dangerous, and entertaining as a circus tiger, with sad eyes that never changed expression, even when he gave in to his paranoia, diving behind the couch at the sound of a knock or the ring of the doorbell. Jen had lost her virginity to him in the eighth grade (he was a senior at the time) and had been trying to get us together since Sam left home that fall. Sam was a friend of Ricky's, too, though like most of Ricky's friends, had grown bored of him. Lonely, Ricky had taken to inviting us over to watch this game or that, giving us beer, feeding us salad, and making us laugh with his imitations of others in the Rodrigues family. He'd seemed as animated by my plan as the girls did (though his eyes remained sad—always). On the way home, walking in zig-zag fashion down Calhoun Street, Miss had thrown an arm around me.

So I could not, would not, suffer my plan to be upended. I swept over to where Miss and Rio held Muffy awkwardly against the cold street and swung my foot as far behind me as I could, then brought it forward with a mighty thrust, embedding the toe of my sneaker in Muffy's abdomen with a calamitous crunch. A hot shard of pain traveled up my foot and pierced my ankle. Muffy emitted a sound like a furnace shutting down.

"Now get into the sewer with the rest of the shit..."

The name Pootie was a variation of Pattie, itself a nickname (for Patricia) that I had been trying since the sixth grade to shed in favor of the more feminine Trish. I had earned Pootie that afternoon with Jen, Bea, and Sam, at fourteen, after allowing myself to be dangled over the swirling sewer, baseball cap in hand, Sam holding one leg and Jen and Bea holding the other, my arms and face being flecked with the foulest grime imaginable (some of it landing, I recall, in my mouth) as I scooped the brood of terrified ducklings out of their smelly trap. As we stood there years later, suspending Muffy the same way, that act of kindness to my wailing sister suffered a diabolical reversal. The moment of weakness that had led me to give in to the irrational tenderness of Bea, who was heavier at age ten than I was at fourteen, who was unable to stomach even a boxing match, much less the horror movies I was never allowed to rent, would make me an equal among my merciless pack. Muffy's wails and pleas sounded distant as foghorns coming up from the depths, the ends of her hair and her quaint cloak possibly dipped in filth. Her hands were busy holding her purple skirt over her panties. Miss and I held a single lace-up boot while Jen and Rio clutched her by the other calf, all of us huffing and puffing and stifling fits of laughter that would have sent Muffy splashing into the rancid river below.

The many times I had pictured her bare legs, I imagined them to be as covered with freckles as her arms. I envisioned them coated with wispy auburn hairs, like the ones I saw along the back of her neck when she wore her hair up in that ridiculous knot of ornate braids. Not so. Her legs were as smooth shaven and stark white as my own.

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I have fantasized about apologizing to Muffy at our ten-year reunion, seen myself approaching her and seen her turning, perhaps arm-in-arm with a new lover, surprised, discombobulated, but pleased to see me, as when I walked into Advanced English for the first time. *I just wanted to say I'm sorry. You know, for everything. You know what I mean. I'm sorry for putting you through, you know, all that...* (Even in my fantasies I stammer, unable to avoid pointing out to the other person what they know—what I should not have to say.) Then I would hug her, tightly, and bury my face in her hair, and smell it again, and remember with pain and with pleasure. She would break away from me and maybe smile and perhaps hold my hand or pat my shoulder and say she has already forgiven me.

I see Rio, Miss, and Jen there, maybe, apologizing too, and that disturbs the fantasy, like my mother's presence in a sex dream. My apology must be separate, because it is different. I am not merely apologizing for tripping her in the hallway, for calling her "carpet munch," for flinging pennies at the back of her head during a pep rally.

But I am afraid. Just look at me, trying to be a poet, still in school—I, who hated school.

Aaron has been by while I've been at class. He has taken the Xbox. His smell, he has left—a mix of oniony night sweat (he eats the Vidalias like apples), smoke (he does not, but the casino patrons do), and a body spray (horrid) now gone from the sink. He also appears to have poured out the vodka that was in the freezer. A Post-it note on the makeup mirror says *Im okay Hope U R 2...* God, the gap between one love and the next is excruciating.

I decide I will not attend the reunion. Not with a tether on my ankle like a badge, and not even if, by mercy of the court, it is removed ahead of schedule.

Poetry and poverty are almost the same word, Aaron always says.

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There were only two openly gay juniors in the Battle Creek Central class of 1997. Muffy was one. The other was Eric Ames, a younger member of a prominent black family who owned a local restaurant. I sat with him at lunch whenever Miss skipped school, which was often. (Jen and Rio had a different lunch period.) Eric hung out with the drama club kids, mostly the girls, and he was very outspoken. He could appreciate a jibe if it was good (*What's a gay horse say Eric? Haaayyyyyy...*), and would humiliate or outdo his abuser if it was bad (*Pillow biter—well that is such a new one and so original. Would you like to hear one about your mama that everyone's heard before?*).

Marisa Snow was also outspoken, though not intentionally funny. She had the gall to want her sexuality to be taken seriously—granted dignity, even. A tall order, since she insisted on wearing that garment like a witch's cloak, in addition to other random seventeenth-century baubles and accessories. Eric knew her from drama, but she was also a member of a *Magic: The Gathering* card game club and part of the forensics team (two strikes). Worse still: instead of answering jibes with sarcasm and equal vulgarity, she corrected those who taunted her, like an exacting piano teacher with a knuckle-rapping ruler.

It was this attitude that had earned Marisa her nickname. When Miss called her a "muff diver" in P.E., inciting howls of laughter from the entire class, she had only scowled and informed her tormenters that the act was called "cunnilingus" and the body part was termed "vulva."

"A muff," she said, "is an item that keeps your hands warm in winter."

*"Ewww that's how you keep your hands warm?"*

Henceforth not only was she called "Muffy," her hands were universally avoided in the halls of Battle Creek Central. I heard the story second-hand from Jen, who clutched her sides and rolled around on her mother's carpet, repeating... *v...vulva... cu...cun...cunnilingus*, tears oozing from the corners of her eyes. I was excused from taking P.E. because of my condition, so once again I had missed out on one of Miss's triumphs—one that, given my relationship to Muffy as time wore on, I would have particularly enjoyed viewing.

I had classes with Muffy myself, which I outwardly endured and secretly devoured. Psychology, Ancient History, Advanced English. In these classes, Muffy was constantly raising her hand, even when the teacher hadn't asked a question. She spoke like an adult, often starting the teacher down a long road of explanation that drew sighs and hisses from the many students who spent every class staring longingly at the clock, six times a day, five out of every seven days they lived.

"Mr. Roberts, that's preposterous," she said, unprompted, during a lecture on the Trojan War early in the semester. "Why would Menelaus take her back? It's as if the war was pointless! It's as if it had nothing to do with Helen's affair with Paris at all but was just an excuse..."

"Well it's more complicated than that, Marisa, you see..."

The truth was, I found ancient myth—and particularly ancient war as depicted by Homer—enthraling. Mr. Roberts' delivery, furthermore, was very theatrical. He swayed back and forth from toe to heel, his arms crossed in front of his chest, the drama heightened by his in-depth probes into the personalities of each figure. It was like

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a tabloid saga—the romances, the gruesome deaths, the quirks and hang-ups. What a treat to read of Clytemnestra's revenge against Agamemnon for throwing their daughter into the sea: how she and her lover tossed a net over him as he bathed and then stabbed him full of holes. I identified with Achilles, angry and indignant. And

Muffy was exactly right. Helen was a scapegoat.

My obsession with Muffy as a possible target began in Advanced English. I had been placed in this class, which focused on the American classics, by my bottle-blonde, overly made-up guidance counselor Mrs. Lattimore, with whom some meddlesome English teachers had conspired about my potential. I generally claimed to understand nothing important about the books we read. The fact that I loved *Huckleberry Finn* and *My Antonia* and *The Great Gatsby*—that I read them with rapturous ferocity, making excuses to my friends so I could continue reading instead of driving around with Jen looking for boys or sipping hawked booze in the loft above Miss's parents' garage—did not mean I wanted to be asked any probing questions about them in class. I just wanted to read them, answer the rote vocabulary and comprehension questions on every quiz, and be left alone. But Mrs. Lattimore had insisted I needed the challenge.

I never talked to my friends about my grades, though I often listened to their frustrations about theirs. Jen received an allowance for clothes shopping and movies as long as she managed a C average. Due to absences, Rio and Miss straddled a particularly thin border between repeating their courses and doing just enough to depart from them forever. Miss's parents initially yelled at her about the problem, but were often too occupied with her autistic brother to dwell on the subject. Rio's parents left her alone in such matters. Several Rodrigues adults hadn't finished high school and had found a way to survive. They seemed to believe in Rio's ability to do the same.

I, on the other hand, had maintained an A average as a freshman. My junior year I had increasingly gotten Bs, thanks to Chemistry, which I found frustrating, and Economics, which I found stultifying. My mother didn't hide her disappointment, but deferred the lecture to my stepfather, Mike, a middle school principal. "It's not that these are bad grades," he told me. "They just seem beneath your potential, that's all. We're just a little confused." My mother even suggested that I quit my job shelving at Willard Library, which I protested. It was peaceful, unobtrusive work that allowed me to unwind among the dusty shelves. Thankfully my stepfather agreed with me, and the idea was scrapped.

It was important to me to keep my good grades a secret. My mode of operation was to leave the envelope that came for each marking period sealed until I got home. Junior year, though, I began to open them up on the spot, checking for Bs so I might prepare for the inevitable questions. I opened each envelope on my lap, pulling out the sheet just enough to glance at the information, then quickly replacing it before stuffing the whole thing deep within a textbook.

For a boy to have good grades was permissible. Handsome, athletic types like Trevor Winchell and Dave McAdams retained their popularity despite their academic excellence. But absolutely no popular or pretty girls got all As—at least none who would reveal such a thing. There was widespread suspicion about the dolphin-like swim team captain Laura Greenwood, and whispers circulated around Chelsea Meier and Latisha Adams, two other homecoming court candidates. But I believed no one suspected me. The attention of every boy in the school (black, white, or brown) hung in the balance.

At the end of the first marking term for Advanced English, Mrs. Brown handed us back our papers and our report cards at the same time, meaning I had to hide not one, but two documents. Though the class was heavily populated by the requisite nerds, there was also a smattering of popular kids, among them Chelsea, Trevor, and Dave. Dave in particular interested me. Despite Jen's constant encouragement, I wasn't falling for Ricky. He was gentle and funny and certainly cute, but I pitied him. Introspective and soft-spoken, Dave was unlike Ricky or the obnoxious, sex-driven popular boys, who I generally despised. He was close with a boy named Drew Jenson, who lived in the house behind ours. The more I saw Dave, the more my girl's heart filled with a poison familiar to me from Sam.

I hadn't expected my paper on *Of Mice and Men* to get an A. The goal of studying literature as we were was still cloudy in my mind. When I saw the letter, in red ink, at the top of the page, my instinct was to slide the paper onto my lap and quickly fold it in half. But in doing this, I dropped the open envelope that contained my report card on the floor. Before I could retrieve it, Muffy, who sat in front of me and was already no friend of mine, snatched it up. She knew I ran with Miss, the originator of her despised nickname, and with Jen, who regularly tripped her in the hallways, and with Rio worst of all—beautiful raven-haired, full-lipped Rio, who contemptuously ignored her.

Muffy had smiled when I'd walked into class the first day. *You're in Advanced now?* she'd asked excitedly when I sat down. My response of *What of it, dork?* hadn't earned me much favor. So instead of returning the envelope, she removed the report card and saw a row of six As. She registered the same look of surprise as that first day, minus the smile. We looked in each other's eyes for a moment, and when I sensed she was about to speak, I bared my teeth. She quickly turned around in her chair, silent, and I thought a crisis had been averted.

It occurred to me the next day that I'd thought too quickly. Latisha, always chatty and nice, congratulated me in the hall. Then Drew, who hardly ever spoke to me, gave my long hair a tug and whispered *Somebody's a nerd* in my ear. I seethed all day, deducing that that confounded lesbian had told Chelsea during group work in class, and Chelsea had no doubt told Dave, among others. At lunch I ranted at Eric, who had heard about my grades from

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Muffy herself.

“Who does that bitch think she is? Opening your report card,” said Miss, not absent that day. “I hope you burned that envelope. Lord knows what’s on them hands...”

“It’s none of her business what grades I get. That’s personal, right?” I had a vision of Muffy in her witch costume, burning at the stake.

“So you got all As. What are you so mad about?” Eric said. Miss and I answered with a resounding *shhhhhhh*.

“What? I wish I got good grades. I could get some money. You should be happy.” Instead Miss and I plotted my revenge. She didn’t comment on the fact of my grades until we parted ways for fourth period.

“I used to get all As,” she said. “In junior high.” Then she swung her hips as hard as she could against mine, shoving me into the wall. “Dork!” she exclaimed, and ran off to class.

A few days later, I saw Dave walking down the hallway, hand-in-hand with Trevor Winchell’s blond sister Tori. Like that it was over, the revving of love interrupted by the groaning halt of reality. That night, lying on my back on top of the covers until dark, I heard boys’ laughter drifting up like an odor from the Jensions’ property: Drew and Dave playing a game of one-on-one on the driveway. Bea knocked, and I begged her to scram, but she whined until I allowed her to come in. I felt sorry for her. Her only friend was Courtney, Mike’s daughter, who was in the seventh grade. Courtney stayed with us every weekend, and I regarded her as a pest. She always left a coating of hairspray residue on the sink, and she was constantly clogging up the phone line. But she let Bea tag along with her and her little friends, because Bea promised not to tell on her for things like sneaking out at night to see her pimply little boyfriend, or putting on eye makeup and changing into a miniskirt once she got to school.

Bea sat on my bed and turned on the light.

“Turn that off.”

“It’s dark!”

“Turn that off.” She did.

“Are you crying?”

“What do you want?”

“Are you thinking about Grandma?”

“Well I wasn’t, but now I am.”

We began to snuffle. Bea crawled into bed with me. Her shoulder was soft.

“Do you think there’s a heaven?”

“She’s not dead yet.”

“Don’t be depressed Pootie.”

“Don’t call me that.”

We slept.

It was ludicrous, of course, for me to be blaming Muffy for destroying my chances with Dave. But I see now that the rage that besieged me that night and many nights after was fueled not by this trifle, but by jealousy and admiration—love—for Muffy Snow. This girl understood secrets I did not about the literature I loved. She accepted who she was without concession. She had thick, lovely mounds of hair. She had delicate, feminine little hands. She was smarter than me. However high my grades, she knew more. She did not belong in the cesspool that was high school, because she was an adult.

I slept with Ricky, for little reason other than to have something new to talk about with Jen. She’d tired of the subject of Muffy, and wanted to talk about boys—in particular a new one named Chad, who went to Lakeview and who she claimed had a huge penis (they all did), but also Ricky, for whom she had a lingering fondness. True, she would happily throw a foot in front of Muffy and send her diving to the tiles while socializing between classes. But she did it without emotion, and only to watch me string a garland of curses in Muffy’s direction afterward. My swearing amused her. I elaborated upon common obscenities (*Suck a bucket of dicks*), or creatively skirted the school’s rules against profanity, turning ass into ass-inine or using Spanish terms like *pinga* or *puta*. She also enjoyed hearing me talk frankly about sex, and since I knew no other way to talk about it, we had these conversations often, most of them filled with lies.

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The truth was, it had been many months since I had last had sex, and although my feelings for Ricky were lukewarm compared to what I had felt for Sam, they seemed easier. He didn't mind that I laughed during the act, perhaps because he knew I laughed not at him but at myself. I spent much of the time, whether underneath or on top of him, looking at and thinking about my own body, its curves and inconsistencies. I rather liked, I found, the hang of my breasts and their shape, though one was noticeably bigger than the other. I liked the way my skin felt. Ricky's body was well-made enough: lean and hairy and tattooed. But mainly I liked the way mine looked against it. I wondered daily, while I planted an acid stare on the back of Muffy's pale, fuzzy little neck, what her body looked like naked. Whether her belly and breasts were like mine. Whether her flesh jiggled like mine did.

With Sam sex had been frightening, not to mention painful, because he was the first. But even when the pain was no longer a factor, I became a blithering network of nerves each time I knew we were going to make love. Fortunately, Sam had a fake I.D. and always bought me a forty-ounce bottle of Mickey's malt liquor when we met. Halfway through it, I would be pleasantly warmed and relaxed enough to eat dinner with him and then slide into his lumpy, boy-scented bed, where he would be brutal and chaotic. When the act commenced, I felt a cold, quick sensation that I couldn't quite name, like Emily Dickinson coming across the narrow fellow in the grass, with a *tighter breathing/And Zero at the Bone*. I always bled a little. After, Sam would curl into a damp clump against me and become utterly silent.

He liked to cook: chili, spaghetti and meatballs, potato latkes, homemade pizza. Our times together in the Goldmans' kitchen were more joyful than those in the bedroom. I ate great troughs of the food he cooked, though less than he by far. He marveled that I was so thin, and I would think of poor Bea, a vegan who picked at her food and yet had only managed to lose ten pounds in the past three years. If Jen was home, we all played rummy after dinner and watched slasher films in the red-painted rec room. If Jen was out with Miss or Rio or both, Sam and I went to his room and had strenuous, sweaty intercourse. Their mother kept entirely to herself. Their father lived in Lansing. If Mrs. Goldman knew Sam and Jen fornicated and drank alcohol in her home, she did not say so. On the way out the door, my hair wet and my clothes disheveled and smelling of Sam, I would stop in the living room to say hello without hesitation. Mrs. Goldman would look up momentarily from an *Allure* or *Elle* and ask how my grandmother's health was. I would reply that it was not good, not good at all, and she would say *Oh you poor lamb* and return to her magazine.

I'd last seen Sam over Christmas break, when he came home from Western Michigan University in nearby Kalamazoo. He was stubbly and his hair had gone wildly curly, but his smile still skewered me. I saw him only at a party thrown for him at his friend Seth's apartment, and we never got a chance to be alone together. Wherever the two of us were, Jen was also. Sam drank an incredible amount of hard liquor, in all varieties, and he kept sliding out of his chair to the floor like spilled sauce, cards in hand, as we played rummy around the kitchen table. At intervals, the 250-pound Seth would tug him upright by the back of his shirt.

Sam bristled at my questions about college, and my impression was that not all was well. In turn, I shirked on his questions about Grandma, who I had spent the day with at a hospice, mostly reading while she slept a gurgling, cavernous sleep. The conversation Sam and I had was therefore restricted to the Cowboys and Steelers, *The X-Files*, and the latest rumor circulating the neighborhood, which was that the recently divorced Mrs. Meier, fourth grade teacher and mother of Chelsea, was having an affair with Mrs. Lattimore's husband, who everyone knew to be a womanizer and who hadn't shared his wife's bed in years. (This was confirmed emphatically by Miss, whose mother cleaned for both households.) I spent the night at Jen's. Sam never came home, and I sensed that something had shaken loose from him.

Perhaps I felt more at ease with Ricky because I had managed to get myself on the birth control pill. All it had taken was complaining to my mother that my menstrual cramps were unbearable (which they could be, so that wasn't really a lie). There was never any discussion of sex, and no accusations. Only a brief, unpleasant visit to the doctor. Miss was jealous that it was so easy. Her own parents had not only adamantly refused, they had begun listening in on her phone conversations with boys soon after she made the request. When her boyfriend Teddy, already on their forbidden list (understandably, for he was quite a stoner), implied a certain activity during one conversation, Miss had been locked in her room at night for a month.

Jen, on the other hand, was never punished for anything. The first time she was caught with alcohol was on her sixteenth birthday. She was granted the privilege of driving her mother's old car soon after just the same. After my part in the birthday incident, my mother burst into tears and slammed her fists repeatedly into the kitchen cupboards. I was forbidden thence from riding in any car other than an adult's (I reasoned that Jen's Camry counted, since it belonged to Mrs. Goldman, and so that wasn't a lie either), and from staying out later than eleven o'clock unless it was at the Goldmans' house. (My mother did not know Sam had been a lover.) My mother liked Jen—so much more sophisticated than my old country friends. I cared more that Jen had been my friend back when most of my classmates were reluctant to start a friendship with me, the handicapped kid. Whenever we got into trouble together, which was steadily more frequent, my mother blamed Miss and Rio exclusively. Whether it was because they were the daughters of purported drug dealers and a local cleaning lady, I can only guess. Needless to say, Ricky's name was not mentioned to her. Ever.

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Later on, after the sewer battle was over, I went to Ricky's so we could make love, possibly for the last time before I was confined forever or sent away. I watched him eat a delicious-looking salad topped with walnuts and some sort of white, crumbly cheese, and wondered what Muffy's mother had said when her daughter returned home too early from her forensics meeting speckled with sewage, bruised, and maybe even bleeding. How does

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a mother attempt to heal such despair? Did she cover her daughter's purple, muck-flecked face with kisses? Did she cradle her head against her breasts and rock slowly? Did she run her a hot bath with bubbles? Did she wash her thick pile of hair, thoroughly massaging her scalp and rubbing her temples in tiny, methodical circles? How long did the girl bleed? How heavy was her head?

Ricky jumped at the sound of the telephone ringing and stopped short like a spooked cat, ears twitching, fork in hand until the noise stopped and the answering machine came on. *Rick*, it said, *Are you there? Pick up pick up pick up...*

Later, I had an orgasm—something I hadn't experienced since I was a child under the bathtub faucet. It was, as Miss Dickinson would say, a *Whip lash/Unbraiding in the Sun*.

The next day, the girls and I chose to make up a story rather than gracefully await our fates. We sat on beanbag chairs in the Brysons' garage loft, flipping edgily through magazines and practicing voices of indignation at being accused of such a horror. *What a liar Marisa Snow is! She's starved for attention! We were at Lakeview Square Mall!*

Miss instructed us to be specific.

"Rio, you tried on jeans at Express, but you didn't like them. They didn't fit right..." she said.

"Are you saying I'm fat, ho?"

"Shut up bitch. Pootie you did what? Shopped the back sales racks at Hudson's?" She laughed. "Pootie's mom said hit the BOGOOOOOO..."

"Of course. And I found a hot tank top with skulls on it. Pink with white skulls..."

"No, white with pink skulls! Because it had somebody's lipstick on it..."

"Yeah and so I couldn't get the hoodie—the gray one, not the black one, because I couldn't get it half off."

"It would be the tank top you would get half off on, dummy," Jen interrupted.

"Shut up Jew. Only your mom would ask about that," Miss said. "And where were you? bebe? You tried on six things..." Here she proceeded to make a list of possible garments, none of which sounded like anything Jen would wear. Jen frowned.

"And where did you go?" she asked Miss. "To the Gap? Like everyone goes into yours?"

I was certain our stories were ridiculous and would be regarded as such. We would be caught, and I would be punished. I dreaded living in the country again—the long lonely roads, the impenetrable dark of the nights. I dreaded living with my father, whose face bore the confused and erased look of an amnesiac at every visit. To him I was more and more a stranger. He clung to his memory of me as a little tomboy, helping him clean bluegills and riding with him on his snowmobile. He did not recognize the sullen, lip-glossed nail-chewer who appeared before him once a month, garish hoops wobbling under my ears with every silent nod and shake. I wondered if my mother would hit me. She never had, but I sensed on many occasions that she wanted to, instead opting to slam a door or bang any nearby hard surface. My stepfather would shake his head. He would remain calm, but would cut me nonetheless with a well-placed threat. I wondered, as I listened to Jen and Miss bicker over whether Jen would be caught dead trying on this or that, what it would be. *You are not the girl we know*, I imagined him telling me. *You are not our daughter*.

We waited out the day, then went home. I made Spanish rice, portobello mushrooms, and green beans, which my family complimented as they ate. I was trying to help Bea by cooking things within vegan limits. After dinner, Mike made popcorn, and we all watched the football game. The phone call, painfully expected, never came. Later, Bea and I stayed up and watched MTV together on the couch, gossiping about Courtney. I predicted (correctly) that she would be more like me in high school than Bea.

"Pootie, I wish you were more like you," Bea said.

The next week in school, Muffy looked downward at all times. Her cloak was gone. If there were bruises, they weren't visible or severe enough to evoke questions from anyone who might care about her. I spoke with Eric, who had begun bringing his own homemade lunch in a paper bag. He had also begun, randomly and inexplicably, to speak in a mock British accent.

"Hey have you talked to Muffy? Muffy Snow?"

"You mean Marisa, luv?"

"Yeah have you talked to her?"

"Of course, wankah! She's in *A Doll's House* with me, the saucy minx."

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“Did she say anything about me?”

“Like what, wankah?”

“She didn’t tell you that I did anything?”

Eric slitted his eyes and smacked his gums. “Now what did you thugs do? Thug life!”

The night before, I had torn a page out of an old copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets. (My mother collected antique books, many of which I had secretly defaced.) I had folded up Sonnet 23 (*As an unperfect actor on the stage/Who with his fear is put besides his part,/Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,/Whose strength’s abundance weakens his own heart...*) and brought it to school with me. Before leaving that day, I slid it into the vents of Muffy’s locker. That night and every night, I hid in my room and read, ignoring the calls of the girls asking *Have you heard anything? Has she told anyone yet?*

Spring break came and went. Miss went with Rio to Texas, where they spent part of the week with Rio’s aunts in Brownsville and part (unbeknownst to the Brysons) in South Padre Island. Jen went with her mother and second cousin to Daytona Beach. Our family trip to Fort Myers was cancelled, due to my grandmother’s condition. It was windy and gray that week, and my grandmother was fading fast. Suddenly the event at the sewer seemed like a cold draft that whispers through window cracks and dies away just as fast. That Easter Sunday, my grandmother died of cancer.

• • •

I have thought that the present is always disappearing and the future under construction, while the past is as vivid and knowable as the words in a book. But I see now that this is simply not true. The past is in fact like the future, always being molded and caulked together.

Bea comes to stay with me for a weekend after I tell her that Aaron has left. She looks beautiful but pale—there are veins visible under her eyes. She has been working for Kellogg’s and living alone in the apartment complex near Felpausch in Battle Creek, across from the field where the local baseball team, the Battle Cats, plays each summer. Rio and Miss often bought drugs from a fellow who lived there, but I do not tell Bea this. Drugs horrify her. The ankle bracelet horrifies her. I am making homemade Asian dumplings, since we cannot go out. Bea has relaxed her vegan sensibilities and now eats seafood. She helps close the wraps by crimping the edges with a fork.

“You didn’t make these too spicy, did you?”

“It’s good for you.”

“Are you messing with me?”

After dinner, Bea and I sit cuddled on the couch, and I force her to watch one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, which she pretends to hate, on DVD. I miss Aaron, but recall how much I’ve missed the warmth of my sister’s body, too. I have written poems about the soft sound of her breathing, so I know when she has fallen asleep without looking at her. When she leaves I will cry more than when Aaron left. I will cry against the flesh of my arms, moaning like a ghost in the bed I have left unmade three days in a row.

Since I no longer drink, I am run through in the night with memories like the sewer incident. I am open and spilling like a duck crushed in the middle of the road. The sharp crunch of my hand bones on Muffy’s teeth and the look of fear on her face—the last look she ever gave me. The puncture noise of Aaron’s lip as the pint glass hit it. The haiku he screamed at me:

*Damn it. That is it.  
This time you’re going to jail.  
You are such a cunt.*

• • •

When my grandmother died, Bea was helpless. Her crying was beyond a wail—it was a screech. The blood vessels in her face broke, peppering the orbits of her eyes and her cheeks with purple dots. She didn’t eat or shower and was kept out of school. Courtney was commissioned to collect her homework. Bea wore the outfit that she had worn on Sunday the entire week—the same socks as well. My mother was stronger, but distant and distracted. Normally, she would never have allowed one of her daughters to forego washing her hair until it hung in twisted strings from her scalp. She refused to let Mike help with the funeral arrangements, filling the days with much bustling and ordering and calling and signing and check-writing. In this we were alike. I went to school every day without missing a class, then went to the library for work or went home and did my homework industriously. At night, I went to Ricky’s, kissing and pawing and copulating, but talking little. The girls I avoided, speaking only to Jen when necessary. Mrs. Goldman had offered to host a small reception following the burial.



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By the day of the memorial, I had been without sleep for three days—not from my own grief, but from staying up with Bea’s. I had stopped trying to ignore her howls, which my exhausted mother slept through, and had begun sleeping with her in her tiny twin bed. She thrashed and cried and snored, mucus gathering in her nose and the back of her throat. Her breath and sweat were acidic, redolent of burning fat.

At the funeral, the air in the church was stifling. My grandmother’s mourners piled in and spilled out into the vestibule. In the midst of the service, Bea began to sway back and forth in the pew. She finally keeled forward, smashing into the carpet in front of us in a lump. For the remainder of the funeral, I sat on the cement front steps with Bea’s face buried in the lap of my skirt. My mother appeared and offered to take my place, then my father, and later, Mike. I refused all three times. Exhausted, I skipped the burial altogether and slept through the reception. By the time I awoke in the Goldmans’ guest room, the food was nearly gone, along with the guests, and the sunlight had all but buried itself under the earth, leaving only a purple trace behind.

That night I dialed Muffy’s number. The girls and I had crank called her many times before the sewer incident. Usually Miss was the ringleader. She would pretend to be a salesperson or a surveyor and then drop her victim into a surreal abyss.

“Okay sir. First of all what is your city of residence?”

“Battle Creek, Michigan.”

“Thank you. And your zip code please?”

“49017.”

“Very good. And your sexual orientation?”

“I beg your pardon?”

I was surprised Muffy allowed herself to be a victim of these stunts. I expected her to give the phony salesperson a lecture, or to provide clear, concise answers to questions like *When was your last yeast infection?* and *Would your call your mother a) obese, b) a crack whore, or c) a dirty obese crack whore?* Either that, I thought, or to slam down the phone at the start. But no, she stayed on the line until she tired of being abused. Then she would sigh and finally hang up. When we would call right back she often, inscrutably, picked up again.

It was late. I took the cordless phone to bed with me and pressed it to my ear in the dark. When her mother answered our crank calls, we would hang up and try again later. But when it happened this time, I asked Mrs. Snow if I could talk to Marisa. When she asked who was calling, I said “Trish.” Muffy picked up, breathless, and I said nothing. Just lay there listening to her repeat *Hello? Is anybody there?* like an echo. Then something strange.

“Is it you?”

I shivered underneath my covers, and the speed of my breathing increased.

“I hear you. I hear you breathing.”

How did I know that tone of voice? It seemed so terribly familiar.

“Talk to me.”

I wondered if she could hear my heart drumming. At least five minutes of silence passed between us, heavy and deep. Muffy finally spoke again.

“Goodnight,” she said, and hung up.

That week in school some other strangenesses occurred. Eric asked me, out of nowhere, to the junior prom. I hadn’t given the event a thought. The catalogues had begun featuring billowy, sparkling dresses, but none of our gang took much interest. Yet there was a tension in the school hallways, something almost beneath awareness, like a loose tooth.

“You don’t have to go to the prom with me because you feel sorry for me.”

“What do you mean, butt-nut?”

I shrugged.

“Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Pootie,” Eric said, and put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re the hottest dude I know.”

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“Oh eat me.”

“So that means you’ll go?”

“Well I can’t go with Ricky.”

“Why would you want to?”

“True.” I started laughing, because Eric had a small milk moustache. His lip looked like a negative of Hitler’s.

“So you’ll go?”

“Yes already! Jeez.”

“Hey I have to have a solid answer from you otherwise I can’t win the bet.”

“You’re a giant tool.”

Miss had not been at school all day, but suddenly, like a blip, she appeared onscreen. She was essentially in pajamas: hot pink sweatpants and a matching hoodie. Her eyes looked oddly dull without her mascara. She nodded at Eric and then faced me, straddling the bench with her hands tucked into her front pockets.

“Sup.”

“Were you here today?”

“Did you talk to Jen?” Miss’s voice was hushed.

“No. I can’t get her attention.” As a matter of fact, it seemed as though Jen was ignoring me. In the car, she had blasted the stereo—Cypress Hill—and spoken not a word. Nor had she stopped to chat as usual between classes, instead powering down the center of the hall. I attributed this to my grandmother’s death, not to mention my bizarre behavior in missing nearly the entire funeral.

Miss leaned in and gave a sideways glance to Eric, who stared pointedly at her, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses like binoculars. She ignored him. “Did you cheat on Ricky?”

I laughed, almost choking on a rubbery school nacho. The idea that Ricky and I had any exclusive contract was ludicrous to me. Still, I said, “What? No.”

“Pootie, Jen thinks you cheated on Ricky and she’s kind of pissed.”

“Ricky’s paranoid. He’s just imagining things.”

“Jen says you did.” Miss looked at me with her head cocked. “Do you know what she’s talking about?”

“No.” I felt the anger widening in me, and turned to face Miss.

“You didn’t do it with Sam at your grandma’s funeral?” Miss’s dreamy tone suggested she knew I had not. “Because that’s what Jen is telling everybody.”

The cafeteria seemed to turn red all around me. The other tables with their haphazard cliques of wilted teenagers. The wheeled garbage bins. The blue and gold of the brick wall painted with a mural featuring our mascot, the bearcat. All hazed over crimson like the budding trees in front of the church where my grandmother was memorialized. I turned back around to face Eric, who was shaking his head.

“Oh no she didn’t,” he said.

“I told her to cut you a break,” Miss went on. “I said you were sad about your grandma and all that. Shoot. Who cares about Ricky anyway? He’s a loser.”

“I didn’t do it with Sam.” My voice was raised.

Eric looked around us. “Chill out, butt-nut. There’s people about.”

“Well I don’t know Pootie. That’s what Jen said. I’m not mad. Rio’s not even mad.”

“Rio heard about this?”

Just when I felt myself breaking open, it occurred to me that it had been a while since I had been the butt of one of their pranks. The wind flew out of me, and I had to stifle a laugh.

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“Okay fine I did it,” I said. “I did it with Sam at the funeral.”

“No kidding?”

“Yes. Anal. In the graveyard in fact.”

Miss and Eric both threw their heads back at the same time, guffawing.

“Girl you are crazy,” Miss said.

“You need to be put away,” Eric said through his fingers.

When the day finally ended, I had to catch up with Jen on her way to her car. She had left without collecting me. It was raining, and I had to struggle against stiff knees while fumbling with an umbrella in an attempt to gain on her. By the time we got to the car, I was out of breath. Jen was more impatient than usual about the slow process of leaving the parking lot, letting out audible puffs of frustrated air and pulling at her curls. I opened the window and unleashed every curse I had within me at Laura Greenwood and a couple of her friends, who were walking in front of us as Jen tried to move forward in the queue of cars. Jen did not laugh at this, nor cheer up in any way. Once we were finally on the road, I decided to ask Jen whether she was angry at me. She got right to the point.

“Miss told me you were laughing about it, too. Anal in the graveyard—very fucking funny...”

“Settle down already.”

Jen was clutching the steering wheel tightly at ten and two, rather than resting her hand in her lap and driving with one thumb as usual. She almost never swore. She was truly angry. Nervous and confused, I defended myself against the accusation.

True, Sam had insisted on tucking me into the guestroom bed. He had undressed me too, but just to my slip and camisole. He told me what sitting shiva was—that when Jewish people lost a close relative they didn’t get dressed up or eat their own food, but instead, for one week, stayed in, and people dropped by with dishes they had prepared. I told him Bea had been sitting shiva. When I was under the covers, he leaned down and kissed me on the neck, whispering my nickname before pulling away. Then he left the room and did not return.

I slept like the dead in that guestroom. At one point, I woke to my father sitting on the bed and smiling down at me. He held my wrist gently, as if feeling my pulse.

“Go back to sleep, baby,” he told me, and that was all I wanted to do. “I left you some money in your jacket pocket. Go buy yourself a milkshake, okay?”

As he kissed my forehead, it occurred to me that he thought not only that I was still twelve years old, but that this was the late fifties. When I slept again, I dreamt of Sam making me a milkshake in my old kitchen in the country. When I tried to drink it, it simply wouldn’t move up the straw. I awoke later to my mother weeping over me and stroking my hair. The sound of her crying was low, almost secretive. When I fell asleep again, Muffy invaded my dreams, as she had done many a night. I stood facing her in Sam’s rank bedroom, trying not to breathe. By the time I got up, everyone had left. Only the tofu remained. As we packed up and went home at last, I found a hundred-dollar bill in the pocket of my pullover.

There was no chance that Sam had snuck in and ravished me in my sleep. With Ricky that might have been possible, for he was as odorless and soft as a shadow. But Sam had never failed to leave my body upheaved. Whenever we had made love, I walked away with a phantom pounding between my legs and a coating of Sam on my skin like paraffin.

Jen was shaking her head. “I saw him...”

“When? How? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw him naked in his room! Walking around!”

I agreed this was strange, but the fact remained: “I was in the guestroom.”

“Oh yeah one room over. Why would he be walking around naked Pootie, huh? Why?”

“I have no idea. Maybe Sam’s going crazy. Did you ever think of that?”

Jen slammed on the brakes, sending me flying forward against the dashboard.

“Get out of my car,” she said. A car behind us was honking angrily.

“Jen!”

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“Get out of my car before I kick your cripple ass out!”

Having seen her do this to a previous boyfriend, I decided not to test her. I grabbed my book bag and slid out into the rain. After she drove away, leaving me alone on Calhoun Street, I realized my umbrella was still in the car.

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Without Jen to drive me to and from school, I had to rely on Ricky, who picked me up and dropped me off a couple of blocks away from home. He seemed to be the only one who didn't care about my supposed infidelity. The girls left me largely alone, but I kept my eyes open just the same. I had once seen Miss pull a girl's head down to meet her knee with terrible force, giving the poor thing a knob on her head like a rhinoceros horn. I'd seen Jen rip a girl's earrings out. My only hope was that Sam would clear things up with Jen and all this would soon be over. On Friday, Rio approached me suddenly in the hall. I braced myself, but she only wanted to inform me that Ricky would not be by to pick me up. He thought someone named Reggie was looking for him and was afraid to leave the house. I asked Rio whether or not I should bother asking Jen for a ride. She shrugged.

“Do what you want. I'm going over to DaShaun's right now.” (DaShaun, her boyfriend, had graduated the previous year.) It didn't look hopeful, and it was raining again. I sighed.

“Come on Pootie, quit being so mopey,” Rio said. “I'm gonna start calling you Pittie.”

I laughed in spite of myself as she walked away. Of all of us, Rio seemed to adhere most closely to the notion that all things were negotiable.

Walking home on the soggy sidewalks, I found myself tailing Muffy. She wore a long black vinyl raincoat with the hood over her head. Though she never looked behind her, I kept my distance. She lived on McKinley Street, not far from Sir Pizza, where a host of Battle Creek Central students typically met after football games. Her house was ranch-style, white, with a screened-in porch. I hid behind a neighbor's hedges and watched her step inside the porch, wiping her feet. She fumbled in her messenger bag, apparently for a key, and then struggled to unlock the door, finally pushing it open with her whole body and disappearing inside. I waited there for a while, trying to catch a glimpse of her in the windows. Lights were on, but Muffy seemed to have dissolved into the house. It started to get late, so I began walking home.

Bea and I were doing our homework in front of the TV when my mother came in from work. She normally greeted us warmly and joked about how we could possibly concentrate with the TV blaring in front of us, but today she just hung up her coat and walked, arms crossed, into the kitchen. Bea and I exchanged puzzled looks. We listened to the sound of high heels pacing back and forth on linoleum for a few minutes, and then my mother walked up to us, her arms still crossed and her eyes dark.

“Bea will you go upstairs for a minute?”

“Why?”

“Don't talk back to me. Just do it.”

Bea's lip quivered, and she slammed her book shut and ran out of the room. My mother's eyes stayed fixed on me. I tried to think what I had done, particularly since I hadn't had a crew to get in proper trouble with for a week. Then I remembered, with a jolt, the sewer.

“Do you have something you want to tell me?” my mother asked.

I tried to recall our excuses. *I had gone to the Gap—no Hudson's... and why had I not bought anything? Or had I?*

My mind was gruel.

“No. What?” Deny! It was the only way.

“You know very well, so stop it.” Her hands fell to her sides and seemed to twitch.

“Know what?”

“Just help me understand. What do you see in someone like that?”

I was confused by the question. Now my mind was searching for the reasons why I loved Muffy. She was a role-game-playing, cloak-wearing, pretentious geek. She was pretty. She was a stomachache. She was a rebel. She thought she was somebody all right.

The bewildered look I must have worn angered my mother. Her voice boomed.

“Is that the sort of person you want to be with? Rick Rodrigues?”

BATTLE CREEK  
Ann Stewart

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Despite the consequences that would surely follow, I laughed. The way my mother's cheeks flared, the fast movements of her eyes—all were ridiculous. I couldn't stop.

"Do you think this is funny? Do you think dating a drug dealer is funny?"

She took two bounding steps toward me, and I stood up, balling my fists, ready. But she stopped short and pointed a finger in my face. I was not laughing anymore.

"You are absolutely not under any circumstances allowed to see Rick Rodrigues. Do you understand me?"

My mother was practically stuttering, which was not funny but pathetic. I ground my teeth together and envisioned punching her and telling her to open her eyes, for once, or I'd close them both in a way she didn't like...

"Do you understand me?"

As I turned and walked away, set for Bea's bedroom, she clutched my arm before I could get past her. I couldn't wrench my arm from her grip. She clamped her other hand other around my chin and cheeks like a vise.

"Answer me."

My jaw wouldn't move above her hand, but I did my best to mutter a terrible curse at her—the second-worst words that can be uttered to a parent. With my forearm, I dealt her a powerful shove that sent her tumbling into her beloved Boston fern. I yelled the worst words and then ran as fast as I could through the dining room and up the stairs to Bea's room. I would barricade myself there until Mike came home.

What my mother didn't understand was that boys, or men, like Ricky were the only kind I had any chance with. Ones like Dave and Drew would never have risked their reputations to go steady with the school crippled girl, and those who aspired to such reputations knew to avoid the same. Ricky did, in fact, have a dresser drawer full of marijuana, which he sold periodically to friends, co-workers, and former friends and co-workers, but he was hardly a drug kingpin. He wasn't violent, and he had nice teeth. That, I felt, was plenty for me to ask for. And that, more than anything, was the reason I fell crying onto my sister's bed.

"Pootie, boys like you. All the boys in my class think you're pretty..."

"Oh great. I'm glad the eighth-graders can see my secret beauty." I buried my face into an unmade bundle of bedspread. It smelled like Bea's foot lotion. Mint and medicine.

"Everybody thinks you're pretty."

This I interpreted to mean our parents. The issue was always fuel for Bea's whining. She felt I got away with more because I was thinner and had fewer skin problems, rather than because our parents were afraid of my temper. The truth was, I was pretty, though I did not know it at the time. I had a lovely, creamy complexion (which I saw as pasty) and long, caramel-streaked, shiny hair (which I saw as brassy and greasy). I was slender but not gawky. Though I wasn't exactly tall, I had a long, graceful neck. But when I looked in the mirror, I generally loathed what I saw.

Bea asked about Ricky, whom she imagined as a sort of action-movie villain.

"He's been in jail."

"I'm not going to marry him, Bea."

"Isn't he like twenty?"

"So?"

"Does he go to college?"

"No."

"Does he have a job?"

I heard the garage door open below. "Mind your own damn business."

I was forbidden from socializing with Miss and Rio and especially Ricky for the remainder of the school year, perhaps longer. I was allowed to keep company with Jen only in the presence of her mother, and never later than seven o'clock. (My mother was unaware that my friends had cast me out, but I did not give her the satisfaction of that knowledge now.) My mother would drive me to school and the library, and Mike would pick me up. I couldn't leave the house without adult supervision. I was to break up with him over the phone in the presence of my mother and Mike. At the time, Ricky did not seem to grasp what was happening.

BATTLE CREEK  
Ann Stewart

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“Pootie I told you I’m not mad about Sam,” he said. “Your grandma just died and you weren’t thinking. All is forgiven. Come over tonight.”

“No I can’t. And I didn’t... you know. Ask him, will you?”

“Fine I’ll ask him. Are you coming over or not?”

“I can’t. I told you I can’t see you anymore.”

“Oh. Well call me tomorrow then.”

“I can’t.”

“Are you going to need a ride tomorrow? Because my cousin wants to borrow the car.”

“No I don’t need a ride. I can’t get a ride from you ever again. I can’t call you. I can’t see you.” I looked at my mother and Mike standing over me as I said this. My mother’s jugular pumped against her necklace. Mike kept swallowing, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

Ricky was drinking something. The sound of the ice tinkling in the glass made me thirsty. “Okay well just call me when you need a ride, but not too early, okay? Call me the night before,” he said. “And stop by later, will you please? I’m bored.”

“I can’t.”

“Bye honey.”

My only chance at a social life was to join an academic club. (I couldn’t play sports, and I had no real hobbies.) I had heard that the Spanish club might be arranging a trip to Mexico. Although the club was overseen by Mrs. Connor, who had such a droning voice and bad sinuses that she managed to rob the Spanish language of its passion whenever she spoke it, there was an advantage to joining: I knew almost no one in the club. Most of its six members were what Miss would call dorks, but none were dorky enough to be one of her victims. None of them was a neighbor or the offspring of a teacher, and so none of them would accidentally or indirectly inform my parents if I were to skip a meeting. When I let Mrs. Connor know I was joining, she came alive like a jumping bean and welcomed me on the spot.

Meetings were Wednesday nights. The first order of business was the planning of a great Cinco de Mayo party that would be both cultural lesson and fundraiser. There would be a piñata, salsa dancing, a PowerPoint presentation on the history of Mexico, and a menu of traditional Mexican foods. It would take place at Darcy Strothers’ house, an enormous mansion with two cement Labradors on the front porch, located on Capital Drive across from the Y. I had walked past it many times but never knew the girl who lived there. I volunteered to make rice and a chicken dish with garlic and jalapeños that Sam had taught me. Most of the other kids at the meeting seemed dumbfounded by my presence. At one point I was forced to throw dagger eyes at Darcy, who kept staring at me.

The *Magic* kids met in the cafeteria the same night. Even Darcy and the other Spanish geeks sneered at them as they passed the door of Mrs. Connor’s classroom. I situated myself as far out of sight of the doorway as I could, expecting Muffy to pass at any second. Finally I heard her voice, high and lilting and almost relaxed, become louder and louder and then softer and softer again. I’d never known her to sound so at ease.

The next meeting, Mrs. Connor told us, would be switched to Saturday. We would assemble at the school and head out for lunch in her minivan. Then we would pick out green, red, and white decorations for the party and plant fliers and posters all over town. We were supposed to ask all our friends and all our friends’ parents to attend and donate. It sounded like a lost cause to me.

I did not tell my parents that the second meeting had been switched. Instead, I said that the Saturday trip was an additional thing, and that we would still be meeting on the regular day. That Wednesday after school, I plodded toward Henry’s Ice Cream Shop on Calhoun and bought a bag of M&Ms. I sat at one of the booths and ate them one by one. Then I walked to Muffy’s.

The sky was a pinkish silver color, and the smell of singed cornflakes permeated the air. Muffy’s house was dark. I entered the screened-in porch, which was unlocked. In a wicker chair with an orange-striped cushion near the door to the outside, I sat and I waited. Within a few minutes, I could hear her voice drawing near. She was talking to herself, but I could not understand her. When she opened the screen door, I placed my foot in front of her and held my breath. Although the pain of her legs colliding with my ankle was terrible, the trip succeeded, and her body fell to the floor of the porch with a clatter. I jumped up triumphantly and stood over her.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, doing a sort of end zone dance. “Totally rocked you. Woo!”

Muffy rolled over and stared up at me in horror. “What are you doing in my house, you troglodyte? Get out of here now or I’m calling the police.”

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Before she could move I pounced on her, straddling her pelvis. Instead of trying to push me away, she covered her face with her arms.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she said. “I swear my mother is coming home any minute...”

I grabbed her wrists and pinned them beside her head, amazed at how easy it was. Muffy wriggled and twisted under me, dragging the heels of her boots on the rug beneath us.

“What are you going to do, spit on me?”

“Maybe.” I was grinning uncontrollably now. I had never been more excited.

Muffy redoubled her efforts, and the pressure on my own wrists and hands became painful. I leaned over and held her arms down with all my weight, bringing my face close to hers. That smell—a combination of her shampoo and hard, iron-laden water—engulfed me, mixed in with sweat and a heady waft of fear. I licked my lips and pressed my mouth against hers.

At first she struggled against me, clamping her teeth shut as I attempted to snake the tip of my tongue between them. When I pulled my face away, she let out a gust of air. Her face was deep red. Seeing her mouth open, I came down again and kissed her in deep, searching strokes. Her body went limp under me. When I ran out of breath I broke from her, smile still tattooed on my mouth. Muffy sniffled. “You look like the Cheshire cat.”

“You’re a robo-geek.”

I placed my lips on the side of her neck and began gentle suction, slowly moving my arms along hers, down over her shoulders to her breasts. I had never touched breasts other than my own. She wasn’t wearing a bra, although my mother would have said she could use one. At first, she just let her arms drift to her sides, but then suddenly she pushed me away.

“Don’t,” she said. “My mother. She’s coming home. She’ll see us. Please.”

The thought of being caught filled me with horror. Quickly I jumped up, and Muffy slowly rose to her feet and dusted off her clothes. She was wearing a typically odd outfit: a black knit dress over a long-sleeved purple T-shirt and striped tights. “Just come inside. We can talk in my room, okay?”

Muffy’s house was clean, but full of mysterious junk. Her mother collected large and interesting trash: ceramic bunnies and frogs, cracked birdbaths, gaudy hip-high candlesticks, upholstered chairs, glass sculptures, giant lamps. She supervised the greenskeepers at Leila Arboretum, and on the weekends cared for the gardens of various wealthy families in Lakeview. The house itself was a jungle, even more vast and variegated than my mother’s collection of plants, but ironically it was also more unkempt, with dead fronds and wilted blossoms crowding together in clumps. A spotted cat darted out, and Muffy scooped it up and kissed its whiskers before it writhed out of her grasp. She told me her mother knew she was gay, but wouldn’t allow her to date. Her father lived in Indiana and was rarely heard from. Her older brother went to Michigan State and studied journalism. So as long as her mother wasn’t around, and I could escape mine, I could have her to myself.

I had often dreamt of Muffy’s room. In reality, it was small, about half the size of mine, and very messy. Nailed to each wall were cast-iron baskets with red candles in them, well-burnt. No dresser or shelves, just her bed, a well-worn quilt, a desk strewn with more candles, a pair of long gloves, a purple top hat, a portable CD player, a kitten flip calendar, high stacks of papers and books and CDs, and various accessories: barrettes, ribbons, bracelets. Clothing and comics and books covered the floor. A small lithograph on the wall featured Alice confronting the smoking caterpillar. A full-length mirror resting against the wall was nearly covered with writing in black and purple marker. A picture of the cat was tucked in a corner, and on the corner of the frame hung a dilapidated hand puppet with a skull for a head.

Muffy’s stockings, I discovered, did not go all the way up. Halfway up her thigh, beneath the skirt of the dress, was dewy bare flesh. When I took off her panties—plain red cotton—she pushed me away and demanded, still suspicious, that I take off some clothes, too. So I removed my tank top, which I was wearing inside out anyway (the school had banned it because it depicted an Uzi in gold glitter), and pulled my shorts down over my sneakers. She nodded, as if to give me the go-ahead, and leaned on her hands against the door. However, when I stepped forward, we both heard the sound of her mother arriving. I couldn’t help laughing as we wriggled back into our clothes. Muffy begged me to be quiet and told me to leave out of the window.

I still recall some of the things that were written on Muffy’s mirror. Together they make a decent poem:

*forgotten knots wrapped secretly inside your boots  
vine-encumbered  
labyrinth of nighted silence  
smells like passion  
things I want: chameleon skin, cat’s inner ear mechanism, snake tongue*

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*some fierce thing replete with too much rage  
in the supreme horror of that second I forgot what horrified me and the burst of black memory  
vanished in a chaos of echoing images*

• • •

My mother tells me Muffy resides in Ann Arbor and works at an LGBT resource center. She lives with a girlfriend and is doing well. Ricky is still in prison but should be out in time for a new niece's christening. My mother sent him a book of Robert Bly poems, and he wrote her immediately asking for more. Today she will send him Wendell Berry.

Now that Aaron has returned, I see the ways in which he is too young for me. We do not communicate. And yet I am happy he is home, talking to the TV and to the cat. When he talks, his large hands gesture in ways completely unrelated to what he is saying. He is constantly falling asleep with his computer open on his lap.

The Huron Valley LGBT Resource Center is on Packard Road in Ann Arbor. I know the city well enough, having lived in neighboring Ypsilanti as a student at Eastern. I feel this is a sign of some sort. A tenuous and strained communication between God and myself.

• • •

The Cinco de Mayo party could be called a success. In the end, Darcy's parents—a Kellogg's executive and an assistant principal—donated most of the money for a trip to Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta the following winter break. I was battered with compliments on the rice and chicken dish, including one from Darcy, who chucked me on the arm and said *You're all right!* My mother and Mike were pleased that I had taken part, and Bea laughed for what seemed like the first time in weeks when Courtney broke the piñata. Courtney sulked through most of the festivities, especially the PowerPoint presentation, but by the end was enjoying herself. I noticed that she referred to me as her sister when she introduced herself to the other kids, and I felt proud. I found myself wishing Bea could approach one of the kids she didn't know and talk to them the same way. Instead she clung to me and nibbled on tortilla chips the entire time.

Muffy and I skipped the next meetings of the Spanish and *Magic* clubs. We spent three hours together in her room, kissing nude on the bed until we became uncomfortably excited, at which time she opened a book of H.P. Lovecraft stories and began reading them aloud. Her body was softer than mine. Though I was taller than she was, our hips lined up. Her breasts were larger and less firm, with bigger areolas. Her feet and hands were perfect like a doll's. Resting my head on her shoulder as she read, I reached for her pendant, mistaking it for the Star of David.

"You're Jewish?" I interrupted.

"It's a pentagram, goofball." So it was.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I pray to the goddess of nature."

"For real?"

"Yes for real."

"I believe in God, but I think I love my family more than God. And I think that's supposed to be a sin."

"That's why I don't worship 'God.' Why worship something that tells you it's wrong to love your family? Only a male god would compete for your love."

"Are you going to prom?"

"Prom is a materialistic celebration of patriarchal culture."

"Would you go with me if I asked?" I was laughing.

"Stop teasing me." Muffy frowned. "That's not nice."

"You could wear a tux."

"You're a jerk."



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She went back to reading. Beneath the lull of her voice, I tried to conjure a memory of my grandmother, but there were so few. The sound of her rickety old blender. The smell of flour. The feel of the plastic beads we would use to make Christmas ornaments between my fingers.

I felt between Muffy's legs, and soon the book fell to the floor.

•

To be on the safe side, we both made sure to attend the following week's meetings. A large part of our excitement and joy seemed to come from knowing we shared a secret. We passed each other in the hallway without speaking, and yet something would pass between us—a spell that vibrated us both. We glanced and smiled during our classes together, too quick for others' eyes to catch. When she passed papers back to me in English, I made a point of touching her fingers.

That weekend, Miss and Teddy were pulled over for speeding on I-94. The police found marijuana and open intoxicants in Teddy's Chevy. Finally pushed to their limit, Miss's parents enrolled her in a Christian summer school program for wayward kids called Miracle Camp.

"Go to Canada," Eric suggested at lunch. "That's where I'd go if my folks tried to send me someplace like that..."

"How long? I mean, aren't you kind of old for summer camp? What would you do there?" I asked.

"Damned if I know and damned if I care. I'm not going. I'll burn the house down before I do, and then we'll all be going to camp..."

The next week Muffy and I skipped our meetings again. While we lay locked together on her bed, the afternoon fading away, I told her what had happened to Miss. I expected her to be cavalier or even happy about the disposal of her old enemy, but she wrinkled her brow instead.

"Your parents wouldn't send you to that place if you got caught with me, would they?"

"I doubt it. Better you than Ricky probably..."

"You're already in trouble though."

"Well maybe, but I'm not going to waste my time worrying about it. You can't just go around not doing what you want because you might get in trouble."

Muffy rolled off the bed, crawled over lumps of clothes to the mirror, and plucked down the skull puppet. She crouched low for a moment, and suddenly its little face was peering at me over the side of the mattress.

"Patricia Barnes," it said in Muffy's lowered voice. "You will now be sentenced to three months hard labor at an oppressive Christian prison camp. Do you have any words to say in your defense?"

"Will you get back up here please, you moron?"

"Patricia Barnes," it said. "I love you."

•

Out of nowhere, I received a call from Jen. My mother allowed me to talk to her, telling me that it sounded like something was very wrong. Something was.

"Pootie," Jen said, her voice full of mucus. "I'm pregnant."

Suspecting a prank, I asked if she was serious. She begged me to come over. It was nearly seven, but Mrs. Goldman was at home, so my mother indulged me. When I entered Jen's room, she was sitting on her bed in her prom dress. Black lace over nude satin. Strapless. (Eric had approved of mine: a short black velveteen with spaghetti straps.) Jen's eyes were swollen to slits and her back was hunched into a C.

"I know you hate me."

"I don't hate you. I thought you hated me." I sat next to her on the bed and petted her hair. After a moment, I asked what she was going to do.

"I don't know. Probably keep it."

"What about Chad?"

"I don't know if it's his." Fresh tears poured forth, and she buried her wet face in my shirt. She told me she had

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talked to Sam, and he had denied the funeral sex. He was as infuriated with her as her mother.

“I’m sorry Pootie. I don’t know why I acted like such a bitch. You’re my best friend...” Jen was sobbing now, almost choking. “It’s just I get so jealous when you’re with Sam, and I’m afraid you’re only friends with me to be with him.”

“That’s not true.” *Was it?*

“I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay Jen. Really. It’s no big deal. I would have been grounded anyway.”

“Not if my mom hadn’t opened her mouth.” Of course—that was how my mother had found out. I put my arms around Jen, and we rocked back and forth for a while, not speaking. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be pregnant, to face my mother and stepfather and father carrying a little Rodrigues inside me. An icy slush of dread washed over me, and I hugged Jen tight.

Our prom took place in the Stouffer Hotel downtown. I was surprised to be let out for the entire evening, even in the capable, platonic hands of Eric, whom my parents knew and liked. But I had not gotten pregnant, like Jen. I had not been arrested, like Miss. I had not been caught shoplifting at Lakeview Square, as Courtney had. By omission, I was granted a night of freedom.

When I put on my dress, my mother clapped her hands together and said, “Look at those gams!”

Bea said, “When you bend over everyone’s going to see your underwear.”

My mother and I agreed that Eric looked handsome and smelled wonderful. His tie was velveteen, like my dress, and he had chosen a tiger lily corsage. Before leaving, we posed for a few pictures in front of the fireplaces at both our homes and again in front of Eric’s mother’s car. I had told my mother I was going to accompany Eric and some other drama kids to a cabin on Goguac Lake, where adults would be chaperoning, but that was not what I would be doing. I had promised Muffy I would pay her a long visit as soon as prom was over.

The night went on and on. The dinner was bland and tepid. The DJ spun a glut of slow R&B songs, which Eric and I giggled through, alongside sporadic forays into old ’70s funk. When he played some tunes we remembered from childhood, like When in Rome’s “The Promise” and The Hooters’ “And We Danced,” Eric would drag me out onto the floor. Most of the time, however, we sat at the table and made caustic remarks about our classmates’ dresses.

Rio and DaShaun, however, looked like film stars. When they popped in, Rio ran over and embraced me while DaShaun chatted with his old pals in the senior class.

“Girl I miss you,” she said, and bit me softly on the shoulder.

“Hey!” She had never been so affectionate with me before.

She told me that she and DaShaun had booked a room in the hotel and invited me to come up and say hi after prom was finished. When she pronounced hi she put the gloved tips of her thumb and forefinger together and placed them against her pursed lips. DaShaun appeared and gave me a stunted hello before whisking her away for a dance. I quickly grew achingly bored and longed to leave. But Eric seemed to be having fun, joking around and dancing in rings with his drama club friends, so I stayed until the lights finally came on.

•

After a quick stop at Rio and DaShaun’s room upstairs, Eric dropped me off at Sir Pizza, where I’d told him I was meeting Ricky in secret. (Eric had done much stomping and groaning when I’d let him know I wasn’t coming to the cabin and the reason therefor. *Trifling! Trifling Pootie!*) From Sir Pizza, I walked to Muffy’s house and knocked on her bedroom window.

“Go away,” I heard.

“It’s me, stupid.”

“You’re late. You said you’d be here right after midnight.”

“Will you open the damn window, fool.”

She came to the window wrapped in her bedspread, and slid it up with her one exposed hand. I heaved myself in and tumbled onto the floor.

“You’re late,” she said. “You’re late and you reek of pot!”

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“What are you whining for? I’m here now.” I pulled at the bedspread and brought her toward me. When I kissed her lips and nose, she didn’t respond.

“Did you have awesome good times at your precious prom?”

“No, it sucked,” I said. “Kiss me already.”

“It was certainly a lot of fun sitting here waiting for you like always.”

“Hey you said you didn’t want to go.”

“Well you could have not gone with me.”

“Will you stop crybabying and give me a kiss, or do I have to make you?”

“You’re being obnoxious.” She shuffled over to the CD player and pressed a button, and the Smashing Pumpkins began to play at medium volume. Then Muffy dropped the bedspread. Underneath she was wearing a sixties-style A-line dress in seafoam-green organdy. She opened a drawer in the desk and pulled out a tiara, which she placed on her head. I put my hand over my mouth and doubled over laughing.

“I knew you would laugh at me,” she said, scowling. “It’s my mother’s dress.”

Still chortling, I walked over and put my arms around her waist. “I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing near you.”

She put her head on my shoulder and we danced.

•

*A Doll’s House* opened during the last week of school. Eric played Torvald and Muffy played Christine. A complicated play for high school students, it had drawn numerous protests from parents who felt the material was too racy. This gave ticket sales an enormous boost. I found the play depressing, and Muffy’s part not large enough. Eric was astounding. I did not recognize him. The entire play I glowered, fidgeting, crossing and uncrossing my legs, prompting my mother, when it was over, to ask whether I was premenstrual. Actually, I had promised Eric I would attend the wrap party at his family’s restaurant, and I was full of pricks and nerves at the prospect of talking to Muffy in public.

My mother wished me the best of times, and when I told her I would be home at seven, she waved her hand at me. “Stay out until eleven if you want. I think you’ve been punished enough.”

And like that, my confinement was ended.

At the party, it was Eric who made the transition into public friendship with Muffy easy. He took me by the wrist and led me to her, then grabbed her by the wrist and shoved our hands together.

“Marisa, this is Poot—I mean Patricia. Patricia this is Marisa.”

“We know each other,” I said.

“Yes we’ve met.”

For the rest of the night we sat talking, an arm’s length apart. I told Muffy I didn’t understand the play, but she was great. She said she didn’t believe me about either. I told her I was no longer grounded. Her eyes bloomed.

“During the summer...” She stuttered softly, and her cheeks glowed red.

“I know right.”

“Promise me,” she whispered.

•

The last bell of the school year drew whoops of joy, and when the doors swung wide, a breath of sweetest summer met us all. In three weeks, the heat would become unbearable—a muggy Michigan jungle air would settle on the city—but June was mild and fragrant. I began working thirty-six hours a week at the library, and with the money was able to afford a modest amount of movies and records, and of the weaponry-emblazoned garments I preferred. Bea, now old enough, got a part-time job as a bagger for Felpausch. Miss, unfortunately, was shuttled away in the night by her parents. I didn’t get a chance to wish her luck.

I spent much of my time those first weekends with Muffy. Rio spent hers largely with DaShaun and rarely requested my company. Soon I convinced Muffy that lying out in the sunshine covered with oil was not ridiculous,

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and she introduced me to the comic book shop on Michigan Avenue. Nights I watched scary movies with Jen, who was beginning to show. She was morose and complained constantly about Sam. He was different. He was a mess. They didn't know what to do with him. One night, when I dropped in with a copy of *The Lost Boys* as requested, I found the house empty and the door locked. The next day I was informed by my mother that Sam had come home very drunk, and at some point during the evening had tried to choke Jen to death.

Rio broke up with DaShaun toward the end of June, as the air was becoming dense and the Riverside Country Club pool less blue. Suddenly she was asking me to the mall, to the pool, to Meijer market for some aimless wandering—anything to pierce the crust of boredom. With Jen we could do little other than watch DVDs and play rummy, but Rio wanted to party.

Muffy and I had precious little time together, and she grew impatient at my outings with Rio. I pointed out that this was mostly her doing, as she was the one who insisted on not introducing me to her mother.

“You're not one of my *Magic* friends. And you're not in drama. She'll suspect something.”

“Like what? That you're friends with such a trashy girl?”

“You're not trashy. You aren't like your Neanderthal friends. I don't know why you even associate with them.”

“You sound like my mother,” I said. “Listen. I want to go to South Haven for Fourth of July, and I want to bring Rio. And I want to bring you too.”

Muffy was removing a Type O Negative CD from its case. She stopped short and stared at her feet. “Why?”

“Because I love you.”

“No, why do you want to bring *her*?”

“Because she can get beer and a cooler, and we can get wasted,” I said. Her nostrils flared. “And because she's my friend. She broke up with her boyfriend and she really wants to go.”

“I'm very perturbed right now.”

“Well what do you want me to do about it?”

“Why don't you and Maria Rodrigues go and have a wonderful time.”

I jumped up from the bed and flew at her, pinning her to the wall by her arms—a method of seduction from which I still rarely deviated. Slowly I bent my head into her neck and then, when I felt her muscles relax, pinched her flesh with my incisors. She screamed *Ouch!* and pushed me away from her so hard I nearly fell backward onto the floor.

“You psychotic, stop doing that! You can't do that to me all the time,” she said.

“Settle down.”

“Don't tell me to settle down. In fact, do me a favor and get out.”

“No.”

“Get out.”

“Make me.”

“I can't make you. You are a brute, you know that? You are a beast. You are the meanest, cruelest miscreant I have ever had the displeasure to know.”

“What's a miscreant you mega-dweeb?”

“And stop acting dumb!”

“I'm not acting.”

“Yes you are. You pretend to be stupid so your stupid friends will accept you and in the meantime, you're smarter than anyone I know. You could have a tremendous future ahead of you and every time you, as you so elegantly put it, ‘get wasted,’ you put it in jeopardy. Why? Why? Why?”

I paced in a circle, stomping over garments and crinkled comic books, and once I had rounded the room, I stepped up to Muffy, placing my face close to hers. In the loudest voice I could muster, I shouted, “Guess what? I already have a mother. And I don't need another one. And when I do I will let you know. But I don't. So stop judging me about everything!”

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Muffy's face broke. "I'm not judging you..."

"You are. And you don't understand what it's like to have real friends so you don't know what it's like to be loyal to them."

"I have friends..." She began to cry.

"No. Your *Magic* geeks and those snotty drama bitches don't count. Where are they, huh? Why don't you hang with them outside of school? Because you and them are like Eric and me. You are in-school friends. But it's summer now, and some of us still have people to see and things to do."

"You're so mean...why? Why are you... so... mean to me?"

"Okay. Stop crying please."

I moved a patch of her hair aside and breathed into her ear, "Didn't you hear me say I love you? Did you hear me?"

"Ohhh..."

"You're coming with me. You have no choice, do you understand? So be ready."

Rio was easier to convince. I told her and Jen that Muffy and I had made friends at Eric's party after the play and that she was actually pretty cool.

"Yeah she is kind of cool, huh," Rio said, chomping away on a radish from a veggie tray Mrs. Goldman had made.

"What?" Jen said. "Are you joking?"

I was equally shocked.

"She didn't tell on us about that sewer thing," Rio said. "That's cool."

"So you don't mind if she comes to South Haven with us too?"

Rio looked skeptical, but I assured her that our sneaking a couple of beers wouldn't cause a problem. Muffy would, as with the sewer incident, be discreet.

Jen shook her head. The bruises on her throat had faded into greenish smudges. "What the hell," she said. "I get pregnant and everything in my life turns backwards."

From this time on, Muffy, Rio, and I functioned as a threesome. Rio and I quickly put to rest her worries that we were luses. In fact, our drinking was very infrequent: a couple of beers at night on the beach in South Haven, rum poured into a giant pop at the movies, a forty-ounce or two shared on Rio's front porch. Muffy never partook, but Rio declared to me that she was more fun when we did, unlike Jen, who Rio had come to call "queen of the mopers." It even seemed, after a while, that Muffy could see the humor in her own elevated language, such as when, at the pool, she referred to Rio tossing Laura Greenwood's flip-flops into the garbage as a "ceremonious and symbolic gesture," which was, of course, exactly what it was.

•

My eighteenth birthday fell on July 25, a Thursday. I called in sick to work and spent the entire day with Muffy. We went to Henry's and shared a sundae, after which, owing to the oppressive heat, we watched old *Tales from the Crypt* episodes indoors. I did not drink, though Rio had given me, as a birthday present, a bottle of Hennessy, which I had never tasted, but which she assured me was delicious—one of DaShaun's favorites. I did not call Rio or attempt to contact her, easy enough now that she and DaShaun had reconciled.

As evening closed in, Muffy and I lay on her bed, a rotating fan blowing our sweaty bodies dry. I sucked the salt from her collarbone, softening her up, because I had something to tell her that might upset her. Rio was planning an overnight trip to Cedar Point in Ohio. We would ride coasters all day and sleep in a Sandusky hotel at night, then drive back in the morning. Rio's Aunt Marta would come with us, so there was no worry in terms of my mother and Mike's rules. Muffy was of course invited—it was necessary in fact, because we would need an even number. Though she seemed an unlikely roller coaster lover, that wasn't my worry. DaShaun was going to meet us there with Ricky. "And it's not our fault or Marta's fault either because oops—how did we know they were going to be there? What a coincidence! No worries, matey," Rio had said.

Muffy sighed, as if waiting for something. Rolling on top of her, I kissed her throat. Then I told her about the plan. I didn't love Ricky, I told her, which was not a lie. We were only friends, really, who hadn't seen each other in a while. In truth, there were still moments when I missed him—his company, mostly. (Though the rest had not exactly been torture and there were times when my mind wandered mischievously in that direction.) Rio told me

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that he had learned to play guitar but could only play John Denver songs, and everyone in the family made fun of him. I had missed out on a rendition of “Thank God I’m a Country Boy” that had sent them all into hysterics. He was terribly bored and lonely, she’d implied.

At the news, Muffy began chewing her cheek, a habit she had picked up from me, and averted her eyes.

“Am I to believe you won’t be sleeping with this individual?” Muffy asked.

“Hell no. I mean hell yes. I feel sorry for him, that’s all. And this trip means a lot to Rio, too.”

“Maria is far too enamored with that DaShaun. It lacks dignity.”

“I want you with me this weekend.”

“Then stay here.”

“No. You come with us. With me.”

“I don’t like rides.”

“Okay well then don’t come,” I said, and sat up between her legs. “But I’m going.” I stood and hastily began dressing. Muffy rolled over and placed her head in her arms. “And I can’t promise I won’t sleep with him if you aren’t there, okay?” That would do it.

Muffy slid up onto her knees, her eyes aglow with rage. “I knew it. I knew you wanted to sleep with him. You liar.”

“I just told you so I’m not lying. I’m just saying...”

“You don’t love me. That’s why you’re a liar. You ogle boys all the time. You don’t care about my feelings. You are a monster.”

“I do love you.”

“You don’t. You like boys.”

“Yes I like boys. You knew that.”

It was true that Muffy had often had to endure my and Rio’s frank sexual comments about the boys at the pool and the beach, with their dripping Bermudas, shiny and browned and lean. We speculated about whose genitals would be hairier, whose would be more massive—tried to follow the small ravine that ran from their hip bones into the fronts of their shorts to the undulations and striations underneath. Rio would apologize to Muffy in those moments, to my embarrassment, but Muffy always dismissed her, saying she was just as capable of making objectifying remarks about the girls in their bikinis, but that she was above it.

“If I slept with some other girl, you wouldn’t tolerate it. You would leave me,” Muffy said.

The words *leave me* pried something open in me. I stopped buttoning my jeans and my arms fell to my sides. “So you’re going to dump me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well that’s what it sounds like.”

“I merely said that if I were to sleep with another girl...”

“Don’t even think about dumping me. Don’t even *merely* think it.”

“I don’t want to dump you. I just don’t want you to sleep with that man.”

“Then come with me.”

She did.

•

Sometime that August we all began wearing black eyeliner, thick and raccoonish on the edges of our lids, and black-red lipstick on our lips. It was Muffy who started this trend. I came over one afternoon to find her seated before her mirror, cross-legged, staring at herself. When I crouched and gently bit her scalp, I saw that she had taken liquid liner and applied it far too liberally. I gasped, because she looked beautiful, striking, older. Her hazel eyes were suddenly shockingly vivid.

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“Do you like it?”

“Kind of.”

Her fingers swam in a pencil box full of assorted tubes and wands and pulled out an expensive-looking lipstick.

“This is called oxblood,” she said, and smoothed it over her lips. It was aptly named.

I sat facing her and presented my own lips. “Do me.”

She slowly applied the moist waxy substance to my lips and then kissed me, pressing our creamy lips together with a smacking sound. Then we both turned and looked at ourselves in the mirror. When I smiled, I noticed the dark lipstick made my teeth look very white.

“Can you do my eyes?” I asked.

“You needn’t humor me.”

“I’m not. I like it.”

The truth was I loved everything about her. The makeup was lurid and silly, perhaps, but I thought it looked tough. Only Muffy would have been brave enough to try it. The semi-independent films she took us to were always more entertaining than they sounded. Because of Muffy, Rio had begun a collection of anime graphic novels in spite of her long-time resistance to books. Muffy was cool, even if no one but me had realized it until now.

She lined my lids with the coal-black liquid, then blew gently over my eyes to dry it. By the end of the afternoon, blackberry-colored lipstick covered our bodies. My belly. Muffy’s neck. My breasts. Muffy’s toes. Her feet were truly perfect, clean and tiny and soft as silk. Typically, when I put them in my mouth she squealed and begged me to stop (meaning, I’d discovered, not to stop), but on this occasion, she just sighed deeply and stared at me, her foot slipping from my hand.

She had been acting very solemn ever since the trip to Cedar Point, and I was fearful that it wasn’t just the looming specter of school. At the park, she hadn’t joined us on any of the coasters, and Ricky had been in an affectionate mood, picking me up and spinning me at the gate, raking his fingers through my hair as we stood in line, attempting to tickle me.

He insisted on staying with Muffy and me in our room, and though I told him that we were only going to be friends, he kept reminding me that I was eighteen now. That I was free to do what I pleased. Then, while I was brushing my teeth before bed, he began vigorously rubbing my back—stiff and bunched from hours of standing followed by being yanked into and out of the grip of gravity. My muscles, my nerves, and my skin had memories of this man’s body. They wanted to relive them. We were noiseless, save for the rustle of sheets and my breathless moans, which I buried in Ricky’s chest hair. Muffy (it appeared) had long been dreaming. When Ricky fell asleep, I crawled in next to her, cold with shame, and wrapped my arms around her waist. The next morning Muffy had said nothing, and I assumed I had gotten away with it, but the feeling had lingered, dark and stormy, that I was losing her.

Yet, more than ever, Muffy seemed willing to participate in the sort of adventures Rio and I enjoyed. She rode in DaShaun’s car with us when we egged Tori Winchell’s car, stopping to write “whore” and similar epithets on the windows with our plum-dark lipsticks. She came to Meijer and strolled through the aisles with us, listening to us coo at the rows and rows of makeup and toys and guns. She took sips of our beer and other alcoholic treats on the occasions when we could obtain them, and sips were all it took for her to appear to be sloshing drunk.

When we went to see *The Crow: City of Angels* at West Columbia 7, Muffy drank half of the rum and Hennessy concoction Rio and I had manufactured in a vat of cola. She made her ensuing intoxication worse by spinning herself around in the parking lot on the way to the car, forcing DaShaun to catch her before she tumbled to the pavement. In the back seat, she fell asleep in my arms as Rio and DaShaun argued bitterly in the front. She insisted I come home with her and climb in the window, even though it was far too early for her mother to have gone to bed. When I crawled inside, she was struggling heatedly to unhook her bustier, which she had worn under a ragged mohair sweater.

“Here dummy,” I said, and made my way over to help her. Her breasts bounced happily when they were released, and Muffy placed my hands on them.

“I want you so bad...” she said.

I hushed her and pushed her back onto the bed, then knelt at the edge and reached under her skirt, a very long one that seemed to be made of patches, and removed both of her tall boots. I went to remove her panties, but found the skirt an encumbrance. She immediately sat up and reached behind her to unzip it while I kissed each thigh impatiently. In that moment, Muffy’s mother, still awake and, as Muffy had often implied, enormously inconsiderate of her privacy, knocked on the door and opened it at the same time. When she saw us she immediately backed out and shut it again, wailing in apology (*Oh my goodness sorry I’m so sorry I’m sorry...*) while I, horrified, flung open the window and threw myself into the humid maroon night.

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It was only an instant, no more than ten seconds, but that woman's voice, and the sound of that door swinging open and—*whoosh, slam*—shutting again would echo in my memory for years to come. I ran as fast as any other kid could run that night, to my house. So many times I had fallen behind: at the sewer, toilet papering at Halloween, escaping police at an illicit party. But this night I ran faster than I knew possible.

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Marisa Snow, aged twenty-eight, is on the phone behind the counter at the Resource Center. Her hair is piled into a bun on top of her head, with a pencil run through it. When she sees me, she blinks, squints, and blinks again, then drops the phone and runs out from behind the counter, bumping her hip (they have become quite a bit wider). Her arms come crashing around me and mine embrace her in return. Her smell is different. Different shampoo. Different water.

"I can't believe it," she says. "I can't believe it's you."

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For an agonizingly long week after being discovered by her mother, Muffy and I did not see each other. I waited for the phone to ring at home, imagined my mother's ashen face when Mrs. Snow detailed what she had seen. But the only phone call came from Muffy herself, and I thought, at last, that everything would be fine. She implored me to come over, saying it was urgent. I half walked, half sprinted to her house. Upon entering her room, I collapsed in her arms and brought her face to mine for a kiss, but she pushed me away and nervously placed her desk chair against the door under the knob. I sat on the bed and caught my breath, letting out a giggle. She paced back and forth, biting her nails, another habit she'd gotten from me. Once I could breathe normally again I announced, "Well I'm horny. Who else in this room is?"

"No. I can't do it."

"Then just sit there and I'll do it."

"I can't."

"Hey, get over here." Something in her voice, an ice bridge, hung off her words, prickling my skin.

"No Patricia. I can't do this." She drew her hands back and forth between her body and mine. "I can't do us. I can't do you and me anymore."

"What do you mean?" But I knew. I felt myself crack open, deeper and wider.

"I love you. I love you so much, but you are... are... abominable! You are just... cruel and unfeeling and unthinking! As long as I am with you I am in danger."

"What are you talking about, you big drama queen? Cut it out, will you."

"And you... you don't care. I drank because of you. I'm an accomplice to any number of crimes. But I can't continue to drag myself into some abyss with you..."

"Don't say that," I said. Tears pressed my throat.

"No. I am not going to condone any more of your despicable behavior and then allow you to treat me like... garbage..."

"Don't say it."

"I'm sorry, we have to break up. This is over."

"No." I was crying now. I walked over and put my arms around her, sobbing into her breast.

"I'm sorry. Please go."

I stood up straight and looked at her, waiting. She looked down at her shoulder.

"You can't do this to me," I said.

My rage whirled around me, like wind in a tunnel, howling and screaming and cold. Perhaps I should have slapped her then. Kneaded her in the stomach. But I did not. Instead I climbed out the window and lurched home, letting the hole grow wider until it had no edge.



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I called her several times, but Muffy was determined not to have any contact with me. I ignored all other calls and stayed mainly in my room, reading and listening to music. At night I cried and cried. My appetite disappeared. Food tasted like poison. One Saturday night, Courtney made a remark about the way I ate that implied I had an eating disorder. She had been learning about anorexia in health class. I replied that if she had a problem with what I ate, she could relocate. Then I flipped her off.

“Eat that,” I said. “And clean up the bathroom once in a while, why don’t you? Just because you have sticky fingers doesn’t mean the rest of us have to.”

“Okay, Patricia,” Mike said blandly. “You’re excused.”

“What on earth is going on with you?” my mother asked. I pushed back my chair and went to bed, imagining all the ways blood might spill.

The night before school started, my mother announced that Marisa was on the phone. I tore out of my room, where I’d been lying in the dark contemplating evil, and took the phone. It was Rio. She told me that Miss had come home pregnant. There were no morning-after pills at Miracle Camp. She and Jen would be attending night school and working toward their GEDs, and would receive their degrees months before I would. Then, before I could beg her not to, she put Ricky on the line. His greeting, *Sweetie, what’s happening...* brought me to a gush of tears, so violent and unwieldy it pulled me apart. Ricky flew into a panic. “Don’t... don’t do that Pootie. Please. I don’t like it...”

I hung up.

•

The start of school was like waking from a pleasant dream and being told we would not sleep again for nine months. We were all clouded over and twitchy with the remains of summer, but no one was more haunted than me.

I wouldn’t even make it through one day.

What I remember most was pain. Pain like nails driven into my hands and wrists—a noisy, hot pain. I had hurled Muffy against the wall so many times in the throes of desire I thought nothing of doing that to start. The moment her body collided with the lockers, my hands, which had for so many hot afternoons caressed and gently searched her flesh, balled into fists and began pounding her face, her chest, and her head in sudden, virulent strikes. I will not say I couldn’t control them. This was a case of mind over matter to outdo them all.

The joints of my hands screamed in ruthless agony. I could feel them disintegrating, and yet I willed them to continue as Muffy slid to the floor and tried to crawl away. She got away from my hands only momentarily, only to meet the tip of my sneaker head-on. When she collapsed, I set my hands to work again. Already broken, mangled, exploding with pain, I demanded their continued co-operation. Blood poured from Muffy’s mouth and nose. When I caught a blurry glimpse of her face at last through the red veil over my eyes, she wore an animal look of shock and terror and confusion. The taste of blood washed in, a rotting in my mouth.

In the end, I, not Muffy, ending up sitting in the emergency room at Leila Hospital. Her lip was bruised and split, one eye swollen shut, her nose bloodied. I had two broken metacarpals and two fractured proximal phalanges, and took three stitches on the inside of my mouth where I had bitten open my cheek. Following the treatment for my injuries, I was held in the Emergency Psychiatric Unit until a doctor and a social worker had seen me. Both declared me severely depressed. This they concluded from my silence, which is all I gave them.

The school’s officials deliberated and decided not to expel me. My stepfather and my mother met with the principal, along with Muffy’s mother, in the school office, to negotiate the terms of my punishment. At the least, I figured, my parents would take me out of Central and enroll me at St. Philip’s, the local Catholic academy, for the remainder of my schooling. Muffy’s mother certainly recognized me from that night after the movie. She had never called my mother. Now I supposed she wished she had. Her eyes were watery and dim. She was silent for a while, then put her head in her hands and told the principal that what was done with me was his decision. The principal informed me that Muffy had begged them not to suspend me. She knew I would not do this ever again. I swore it was true, and my heavily bandaged hands testified on my behalf. I could not dress myself, feed myself, brush my teeth or wash my hair, much less assault someone with my hands. In the end, they agreed on a week-long suspension, followed by six weeks of in-school suspension, and I was to see the school psychologist once a week for an hour for an indefinite period.

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*I never meant to hurt you. I’m so regretful of the way I mistreated you. I hope you can forgive me. The beginnings of wrinkles beneath her eyes. I hope you can forgive me.*

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My glass refilled. *I was ashamed of you—the person I loved!*  
*I brutalized you...*  
Do we have this conversation? Am I me or am I her?

• • •

The day the casts were removed, Ricky played “O Holy Night,” “The Little Drummer Boy,” and “Do You Hear What I Hear?” on the guitar in our living room. Though it was only September, he had ventured from John Denver to Christmas songs and was anxious to try his skill out on my family. Ricky had been terrified to leave me alone following the incident, and had driven by the house so many times that Mike finally asked him to come in, at which point he darted over and gathered me in his arms. It occurred to me that I could cry in front of exactly two people in my life: Bea and Ricky. Again and again he ventured into our house, to the chagrin of Mike and my mother. It started with his delivery of an electronic toothbrush. Another time my mother walked in at lunchtime and discovered Ricky in the kitchen, feeding me a Speeds cheeseburger, rotating it so I got the best bites. Eventually he became a fixture, an extra set of hands. My parents had surrendered.

It was a motley bunch there in the living room, circled around a plate my mother had piled with grapes and cheese and pretzel twists. Bea and my mother wearing the same befuddled expression—questioning the whys and wherefores of this dusky young man’s presence in their house. Courtney sulky and indignant and grounded again. Mike singing along merrily, *Do you know what I know?* And myself, hands pale and wrinkly but not forgetful. Suddenly my mother placed her hand over her mouth and erupted in laughter. Bea started singing along in spite of herself, her face splotchy red and her voice beautiful. Courtney had taken to wearing dark red lipstick and thick black eyeliner, too. She rolled her eyes and made obscene gestures in the corner. Mike, who was butchering the lyrics, plucked a grape from the bunch on the plate and whipped it at her head.

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The ankle bracelet is removed before Thanksgiving. I make love to Aaron noisily in my mother’s house, his hands on my abdomen like vines growing slowly up a wall to the sun. Is he him or is he her?

*I never meant to hurt you...*

*When you were hurt, when you were threatened...*

*Somewhere along the line I learned that to love someone is to break them down, to beat them into submission. Where did I learn that?*

*There you go, pretending you don’t know something when you do.*

Ann Stewart was born and raised in southern Michigan. She is now a Ph.D. candidate in creative writing at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she also teaches English.