

The Mill

In the waning light, Virginia waits for me, a lollipop pressed to her lips. Stained red, they smile up at me and she asks, "How's Jake? And Lily? Done trick-or-treating already?"

Her breathe billows upward, fringed with frost, from her place on the park bench. A coat covers her slinky, cookie-cutter cat costume, complete with headband ears and slightly smeared whiskers. Her eyes are critical and questioning.

"She's with friends this year. Jake's out at a bar. Some kind of sports game." I say as I sit down, feeling dowdy in my jeans and hoodie.

Out on the streets around us, children still run wild. Sugar pumping in their blood, they bang on doors and scramble to get the last of the holiday's loot. All of them are the children of the people we grew up with, went to school with.

A few people, cutting through the park on their way home, walk past us with smiles and nods, how-do-you-dos and calculating looks. This one was in every school play. That one played the cello. She married a doctor. And him? Well, he still works at the supermarket. Everyone here knows us and we know them. Welcome to Nowhere, USA, population two thousand and twelve. The only town for twenty miles.

Always rumors, always eyes, Virginia and I used to laugh. We had been accused of things that had made my parents squirm.

"Did you tell him where you were going?" she asks quietly, as the streets empty.

Her thigh presses against mine. Instinctively, I lean into her warmth. The cold night has me seeking it. The touch is brief, hardly there before we shift away.

"Does it matter?" I shrug. "He'll find out anyway."

My fingertips slowly trace the creases in the bench's weathered wood as the sun's brightness disappears behind the rambling mountain peaks. The last howls of the children echo down the streets, cut off by closing doors.

The soft sounds of night come trickling in; the swooping of bats chasing bugs, a fox barking in the distant wilderness, and the hushed hooting of owls trading secrets.

Together we watch as gleaming Mars marches across the sky. The heavens draw me in deep. There is no moon tonight and, without her brightness, the black night is crisp, like fresh ink. Longer and longer I look, until I feel that I am falling in.

"Let's get out of here," Virginia whispers, breaking the sky's spell. "I'll drive."

The bench creaks loudly as she stands and the crossroads are empty as we leave the park, dashing across the street diagonally.

On the sidewalk, we walk more slowly and side by side. Close enough that I feel her fingertips as they brush mine, concealed from any eyes by the dark. Her presence is everything, everywhere; real and raw.

Feeling bold, I grab her hand, yanking on her arm to pull her close. Leaning my head on her shoulder, I tell her, "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too," she says, smiling and squeezing my hand before pushing me towards the other side of the car. "Get in."

We clamor into the old pickup, her brother's car, parked just street down. Seatbelts click into place and the engine grumbles as Virginia turns the key, deafening after the silence of the park bench.

Before shifting out of park, Virginia lights a cigarette and then gives it to me before we roll away. We pass the cigarette back and forth and I fiddle with the radio. Virginia cringes at the noise.

"Alexander has terrible taste in music," I laugh. Finished with the presets, I aimlessly flip through the stations as we drive past tidy rows of houses until they fade into long stretches of cornfields punctuated with an occasional silo or barn. Soon our headlights and the stars are the only light for miles.

Suddenly, Virginia squeals, "Oh my God! Turn it up!"

But without waiting for me, she slips her hand under mine to find the dial and cranks the volume up. The all-girl punk rock band we discovered when the two of us went rogue to Atlanta the summer after senior year comes blasting out of the speakers.

We both belt out the lyrics and she grins, wide and wolfish, at me. Together our voices are powerful, summoning back and cementing the bond between us.

Terrified of our impending separation, that summer we holed up in a cheap motel, ignoring the phone calls from our parents and swearing we'd never go home. But in the end, she left to go to school in the city, while I stayed and studied at the small university where her parents still taught.

The song fades and the voice on the radio announces the band's impending tour. Virginia's eyes light up and lock onto me, making me flushed and giddy before the words finish forming in her mouth. "That's in Philly! They never come this far north! You have to come!"

The next song is already beginning to blare, so I smile and nod eagerly. But as I begin to imagine the logistics, Jake lurches out of the depths of my consciousness, jarring me briefly back to reality.

The scholarship boy, upstate from the suburbs, with no notion of rumors or gossip, was once so fresh and full of promise. Though we provided each other with pain more often than not.

Inevitably, he fell in with those who whispered about Virginia and me; a dozen or more voices against my protests of innocence. Of course, those revelations came after Lily; our families and lives already entwined.

I sigh slowly. It's good to be out.

"There!" I sit forward as I say it, almost shouting. I point out the window to our landmark, the lightning tree. A fleeting worry that she might have overlooked our intended destination flies through my mind. But as I say the words, she's already pulling off into overgrown grass along the road. The broken limbs of the lightning tree still visible in the side mirror of the truck.

We come to a stop and the headlights wink out as Virginia kills the engine. The doors smack shut amidst the silence, one after the other.

Our feet crunch on the fallen leaves, as we walk towards the woods. Only the stars spill down their light. We find our way by memory, following shadows and the sounds of the river. The grumble of water growing with each step.

Set back from the road, the old mill house lurks in trees and deep shadows. The building itself is nothing more than broken beams and rusted nails; holding itself together out of habit rather than any actual sturdiness.

Virginia steps over the threshold first. The inside of the mill is more outside than in. The old door frame still intact, though the walls to either side are rotted and fallen in. The maimed back wall exposes a vast stretch of the river. Small creamy-white mushrooms blossom on the rotting, fallen wood. And in the absence of any roof, a sturdy young sapling strains its skeletal fingers towards the ceiling of stars.

Virginia lights a candle, nestled in a nook from a lifetime ago, then another and another until we are ringed with soft light. The old millstone altar is strewn with thorn and thistle, sage, rosemary and mugwort fresh from Virginia's coat pockets.

Old wax still encrusted on stone; this has always been our place. We whispered about boys and chanted love spells; the destination of every sleepover since 7th grade. And our corner of the world has become a place of power on this night of between, while the veil is

lifted and the boundaries have been breached between worlds. We echo that energy; tonight we are neither one thing nor another.

In one brisk motion, she pulls her hair down. The brief silhouette of her shoulders, neck, and hair dark against a crown of candlelight, hangs slowly, like a dream, before being swept away in the curtain of her curls.

“Turn,” she says. And I obey. Her hands gently tease my hair from its braid. Once loose, it billows and flaps in the breeze. I free my face from its tendrils and watch, entranced, as Virginia waltzes her way over to the riverbank, just past the broken back wall, and I breathe in the lingering scent of her shampoo. She shrugs off her jacket and tosses it aside. Pulling her feet from her boots, she strips off her dress, up and over her head. Her pale frame wades in and I run to catch up, shedding my clothing at the water’s edge.

The river’s cold makes me gasp and I stumble as I reach her, though we are only waist deep. She holds her hand out to steady me.

There is a smile in shadowy sweep of Virginia’s cheek as she suppresses a giggle at my clumsiness.

She still summons something in me. I take a step towards her and feel it start low in my spine, rocketing upwards to hit with a shock at the base of my skull. I toss my head back to shake it off, but her fingers find the nape of my neck and slide into my hair, combing at the curls. Goosebumps rise on my naked flesh. And without thought, of their own volition, my arms raise with it. The quivering energy streams into my fingertips; it wraps itself around me and I wrap my arms around her. We both pulse with it.

Magic pours out with her laugh, “What are you thinking?”

Her eyes are clear and dark and wide.

And just like that, Scorpio season pulls the truth from my throat; my desire manifests. My family is my heart and soul, but something in me pulls me towards her.

The wind weaves our hair together; red and gold under the moonless sky. A thousand moments like this have come and gone between us and I had always failed to act.

Never have I been so reckless. I press my lips to hers and I tell her, “I want to drink you down.”

We sink, shivering into the water.

And once submerged, we cross over; into a world of our own making. And with her there, in the slow steady tug of the current, I see Mandalas in the dark; those fuzzy lighted particles dance in glorious shapes and patterns.

We emerge and, hands clasped, we step back into reality; her and I.