

Phoenix

You think of her when you're half asleep. A child phantom, she plays at the foot of your bed, a guilt-ridden game of hide-and-seek, she hiding, you seeking. You drag yourself awake just in time to watch her disappear.

You think of her when you touch that balding patch on the top of your head. You feel silly straining in the mirror, trying to catch a glimpse of wisping greys and flaking scalp. She's laughing at you as you apply Rogaine and Just for Men in tandem.

She's with you in the office, when your boss is telling you about the new account. You're not listening, because all you can see is her, bathing in a sun that burns eternal, her stomach brazen, bare and concave thin, her eyes closed behind Lolita heart-shaped shades. Even in the fluorescent-humming claustrophobia of your cubicle, her skin is tanned and warm and alive.

Sometimes her memory occurs where you don't want it. You're taking out the trash, you're putting the kids to bed, you're watching the game. You're making love, your back arched in climax and there she is, just watching you, not smiling, just curious, and then she's gone. You look down and it's your wife that's looking back up at you, beneath your sweat and your strain and she's beautiful, yes, but suddenly, aching plain.

You think of the reporters. Vultures for tragedy, they descended upon your cul-de-sac that sleepy summer so long ago. They pecked at her memory, dissected her flesh down to the bone 'til all that was left was a carcass, the same skeleton that haunts you now.

This is what you didn't tell them:

It was baseball season. You remember because your father sat before the set, all-limbs at the edge of his La-Z boy, coaching below his breath to the little men on the screen. The light from the TV cast eerie shadows on his face and when the umpire yelled strike your father would tug at his full, defiant head of hair. Your mother hid in the kitchen, wrapped herself up in telephone wire, gossiped with her friends.

It was the end of summer. You remember because you can still taste the desperate charcoal flavor of last minute barbecues. School was starting soon and Lydie Carmichael had come back from camp with sunburn and breasts.

She'd left on the longest day of the year and returned in the twilight of waning sun. Suddenly, frighteningly, you were aware of her hips under the white of sundress lace, you were aware of the pink of her lips, of her gums, you were horribly excited by the reality of her pink insides.

Later, when you went to college, state, of course, along with everyone else, you'd try to recreate her. But where Lydie Carmichael existed in hopeful blossoming, college girls were in full, familiar bloom. Lydie's long fawn legs led always in your memory to perpetual possibility. And with her there was never any morning after.

Lydie smoked sometimes. She puckered her lips to blow out smoke in almost rings. You wondered where she'd learned it, you wondered if she'd teach you. She smoked carefully, delicately cradling the cigarette between middle and pointer finger. Not like your older brother who clamped the cigarette between thumb and pointer. Not like your grandmother, the old pro, whose fingers were yellowed and who kept her cigarettes in the fridge.

Sometimes Lydie blew smoke into your face and you'd claw through it, pretending you couldn't see her, pretending she'd disappeared.

You watched yourself on the news over dinner. Your mother called your grandmother and your aunt, made sure they'd be watching your onscreen debut. When you appeared on channel three at five after ten the camera crew's lights made you too pale for the end of summer and your eyes were crossed as you looked down at the microphone. Threatening, it advanced towards you, a black smudge at the edge of the screen. The caption billed you as a neighbor/classmate and when asked what you thought of Lydie Carmichael you answered in a voice too high, even then, to be blamed on puberty, "she was a cool girl."

She *was* a cool girl.

The first time you saw her, really saw her—not as a girl, but as an almost woman whose burgeoning curves looked, in themselves, like hesitant question marks—you were tossing around a football with Charley Berman. Charley was an asthmatic kid with skinny arms, freckled and bruised like a banana. You still run into him sometimes, he's in your fantasy football league. He still has skinny arms and has a dour, dimple-chinned wife. They have four, freckled, ugly daughters.

The Berman's lived next door to the Carmichael's; a stretch of yard ran from one identical ranch house to the next, without pause or hesitation. With no clear delineation the place in between the two houses existed as a no-man's land, a boundary whose exact location fluctuated with the seasons, so the spot the Carmichael's shoveled to in the winter was never the same as the place the Berman's mowed to in the spring.

A tall elm grew wild on this dotted line, tilted just so, from which a hammock swung, connected to another tree deeper in the Carmichael wilderness. The Berman's lawn was meticulous, green grass clipped tight, but that boundary elm dropped mischievous leaves onto their frenzied perfection.

Charley's next toss went wild and you ran across two lawns. It landed with grace where Lydie lay. She was reading a book, a heavy, hardcover textbook and she was lying, not across the hammock, but curled up on her side in a ball, a fetus wrapped around Bullfinch's Mythology, a fetus in a womb of netted white.

"Hi there," she said.

You remember it was the end of summer and the leaves were just beginning their tentative, twirling suicide down onto the Berman's lawn.

But it was your mother who started the trouble.

"Brian," she said to your older brother. He lay on the couch watching tiny particles of dust sparkle in a column of light, dead skin and fluff floating through the air. His hair hung dirty and limp over the edge of the couch's arm.

"Brian, how about you go over to the Carmichael's and trim those hedges?"

Brian did not answer. Lay on the couch, dead, dirty, limp. Your mother turned to you instead.

"Go over to the Carmichael's and trim the hedges," she did not ask.

And here she leaned in conspiratorially close to you. "It's awful, really," she'd said and cupped her hand around her mouth in gossiper's glee, "they say he left her with nothing."

Mr. Carmichael existed only in whispers. He was a topic that delighted the mothers of the cul-de-sac who, drinking martinis together at noon, hypothesized his disappearance on the arm of one of Lydie's perky-breasted babysitters.

You think he must have been around once, a tall, sullen looking man, blending in at block parties and in the audience of school plays. But by that particular summer it was only Lydie and her mother in that house with its broken siding and rotting shingles and the grass grew nearly wild with the rumors. Mrs. Berman, who mixed the martinis, insisted that Mrs. Carmichael was a raging alcoholic.

You showed up at the Carmichael's with garden sheers and a nervous sweat. The doorbell was broken so you had to knock and finally Lydie answered, dressed in one of those too-short summer dresses.

"My mom's asleep," she said and, "Let's go for a walk."

The sky was blue, to yellow, to red as the sun went down and you walked slow, fighting through a cloud of gnats. As you walked, Lydie told you her favorite stories from her big book of myths. But she told them all wrong so that Greeks cohabited with Romans and Hercules was responsible for the beheading of Medusa. She told you, in delighted gruesome detail, the story of Pandora and her box, but made absolutely no mention of hope.

You made your way out of the cul-de-sac in slow, purposeless strides. At the end of the street lived the first Indian family to move into your neighborhood. As you walked past, Mr. Singh, old and wrinkled, came out. He sat on his lawn, looking prophetic, cross-legged and barefoot, and though he held up a newspaper, the skin on his hands, pulling and puckering like a crumpled brown paper bag, his hot-coal eyes followed you as you passed.

You were headed towards that-goddamn-factory. A spot of contention, if it had had a name once, it was lost forever in favor of the derision with which it was viewed. What had been manufactured there was of equal mystery. It stood just east of the cul-de-sac, a mountainous monstrosity on the otherwise even landscape of cookie-cutter rooftops. It sprang up one year quite suddenly and despite a series of heated town council meetings, that winter it opened up. The employees were bussed in, men with tired smiles and calloused hands. They were strong and rowdy, nothing like your cowed, cubicle-shaped fathers, who lamented the demise of the neighborhood's property value.

And then just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was abandoned, the mystery gears were stilled and the jovial sound of the lower class was silenced, leaving the factory to exist in a museum-like state, an edifice in freeze frame. The rumor was that their departure had been so abrupt that a sink in the men's room had been left running.

You and Lydie Carmichael came to that-goddamn-factory's grounds. The soaring structure—whose architects had, strangely enough, decided to make the building resemble a church with its one indomitable tower—was made even more ominous by a coil of barbed wire on top of the surrounding chain-link fence. Lydie put her little hand on that big fence, flecks of rust giving way to her touch.

“Have you ever been inside?”

You shook your head, because your mouth felt dumb.

“Me either,” she replied, but she easily pulled on the fence in just the right spot, making a gap at the bottom just tall enough for you to sneak through.

The grounds were of asphalt, long ago dulled by sun and cracked by creeping weeds. You looked around, feeling wonderfully mischievous, before darting for the entrance, a door that Lydie must have known was unlocked.

Just that past spring, Meredith Hellman, a spinster, bespectacled and heavy-set, had gone door-to-door, despite arthritic knees, with a petition citing the abandoned factory as a hazardous abomination. Everyone, your parents included, had signed. At that moment, as you entered its dingy depths, you could see why.

The air was nearly solid with dust and you felt as though it was a pervasive force driving you out, a hand trying to expel you. But you pushed on and when your eyes acclimated to the lethargic light seeping in through blacked-out windows, you were able to look around.

Below you the ground was a layer of shredded linoleum and jagged shards of glass; the glass was probably from years of errant boys and their vicious stones. The walls and ceiling sagged dangerously with water damage. That first room must have been some old patrol station, you surmised, because on top of a tilted desk was a large monitor, gutted and strangely hollow. The stories about the workers' sudden exodus must have been true, because behind the desk was a display of sixty or seventy keys, hanging from hooks, aged and tarnished.

Lydie was drawn to them. Her lighter flared suddenly to life and she approached to study them the way an explorer might lean in to read hieroglyphics on a cave wall. You walked around the desk to join her.

She looked up at you and said something like, "we have all these keys. We can go anywhere." Or maybe she didn't. Maybe you only think she did or wish that she did, that she had

some sense of all the prospect of her youth. Maybe she didn't say anything, but sighed a little, puffing out a breath of vulnerability.

And so, of course, you had to lean in and kiss her. Smashing your lips into hers, you went through the machinations you'd seen your older brother employ on his own girlfriends. It was stop-and-start and strange and, because you'd only ever practiced on the back of your hand, you were distracted by the feeling of someone else's teeth against your tongue. You pulled away quick to examine the shocked face of Lydie Carmichael, and then with a confidence you were glad at least one of you possessed, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed you properly and quite thoroughly. You were hot then cold in sudden bursts and her hip bones jutted out in precocious reply to your nervous, searching finger tips. Beside you those besmirched keys jingled their approval, moved by some force or energy you'd created.

You'd spend the next years of your life hoping to recreate the exact sensations you felt that day, but eventually you'd come to realize that that kiss in the factory with Lydie Carmichael was not your first time but your last. Each time you thought about it, it was reborn, that feeling, that kiss, burning, all types of infinite, in your flesh.

School started suddenly, like waking abruptly from sleep, and that summer existed as a pleasant dream the memories of which were present in a warm haze devoid of detail. You remember it was a school night when you heard the sirens.

The cul-de-sac rose with a renewed energy, everyone peeking out of doors or standing on their lawns and porches, wrapped up in jackets and sweaters against the night's sudden chill. The ambulance and fire trucks drove past your street in single file, too slow you thought, too much like a funeral procession. But you went along as the inhabitants of the cul-de-sac moved as one,

moth and light, to watch that-goddamn-factory burn down. The blaze seethed for three straight hours, a cackling, howling spectacle, a funeral pyre that made your street seem bright as day. The heat of it reminded you how far away summer really was. The smoke hung in the air for days afterwards; the ash scattered and settled, a layer of it on the rooftops like early snow.

The news rippled through the town the next morning with the predictable undulations of a slow wave, and on their murmuring lips you heard her name. Lydie Carmichael, they said, she was inside. She was inside and she didn't make it out.

It was then that the reporters invaded. With a sickening glee they descended upon housewives, schoolgirls, pool boys, pumping each neighbor, classmate, concerned citizen for every last drop of tragedy. And the cul-de-sac delighted in their hot lights and huge cameras, the epicenter of a quiet town basking in fifteen minutes of fame.

Every night at ten o' clock you tuned in and slowly, surely, the story unfolded and you nursed, as long as you could, your denial. It was Dan Bennett who had reported the fire. A stocky blonde boy who lived across town, he'd appear on the screen every night, and teary-eyed reveal how Lydie had brought him to the factory, how one of her cigarettes had started a fire that had spread too quick. Baby blue eyes would peek through bowl-cut blonde hair and plead with the camera, as he'd explain how he'd escaped through a boarded up window and ran for help.

"But I was too late," he'd say and one fat tear would roll down his cheek as if his mother had told him that this was the exact moment when it should.

You went to the factory once before they finally tore it down. It looked sunken, defeated. A makeshift memorial of flowers and teddy bears surrounded what remained, but that riot of bright colors looked garish next to the black soot and ash. An enormous photo of Lydie hung on

the fence, a portrait, probably clipped from the yearbook. It was the same one they'd used in the papers, with the headline, "thirteen year old girl dead in factory fire."

She smiled out at you, her head tilted at an uncomfortable angle, her skin pale, her hair not the right shade, not at least, the way you remembered it. And her pores were made of pixels, so that everyone lost and making an illegal U-turn in the cul-de-sac could get a glimpse of her and stretch thin her tragedy 'til there was none of it left for you. You screamed at her picture, awful, terrible things that you don't remember now, or remember too well and were glad no one was around to hear.

You think of her when you catch the scent of smoke.

And if you could gather up that smoke that has descended in all the corners of your life, you'd form the girl you knew, the one who'd been disappeared, distorted by a collection of other people's incomplete memories. And you'd hold her, if you could, but of course you cannot. And her smoke would not be grey but that youthful, purity pink. And her smoke would not smell like the noxious threat of burning wood and chemicals—the cul-de-sac nearly declared a mini Chernobyl, a little disaster—no, her smoke would have the back of the throat insistency of tobacco and would taste just as cloyingly hot and wantonly strange as a kiss that sets itself on fire and is bold enough to go on, to burn and burn and burn.