

Nails

The tide goes out, and our castle appears.

Katrina has fake acrylic nails, French-tipped. I am eleven, maybe twelve, and she's into wearing bandanas over her hair so I wear them too. My family comes here for Christmas most years. We leave on the twenty-third and stay until the third or fourth day of January. This is the first year I will make it up past midnight on New Year's, but it's mostly because this is the year I see Jurassic Park 3 and I am afraid of velociraptors tearing through the house's glass windows that face the ocean. My dad says the glass isn't tempered like it would be at home, so I imagine velociraptors breaking through into the living room and I'm stabbed with big green shards of glass before they rip my arms off and eat me. This year I ride in Katrina's dad's Hummer, a big gold boxy ugly fucking thing, but it's the biggest car I've ever been in, and he has a lot of money, and he takes us bowling, just the three of us, and back at his house Katrina runs her acrylic nails up and down my bare back, up and down and in circles, and it feels so good. My mom does it for me sometimes. But I don't want my mom to touch me anymore. I'm that age, the right age to feel that way.

This is a few years before things start to get really messed up, before we stop going on family vacations because my mom drinks too much and sits on strangers' laps in front of my dad and her dad and everyone else. This, as far as I know, is a good year. People are happy. I pretend to be asleep on the couch and hear my parents whispering about something in the kitchen and because I'm twelve or thirteen I think it's about sex, it has to be about sex, and I am repulsed and squeeze my eyes shut so hard but keep pretending to be asleep because I want to hear about it. This is also the way I learn the word "grope", when I am ten or eleven: pretending to be asleep in the car with my dad and my uncle, secretly listening to them talk about women they had been

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with. I look the word up later in the dictionary after we get back to my uncle's house. They must have seen me do it.

I have a lot of pen pals. One of them, Jo, I met when my family went camping one time and we set up our tent next to her family's camper, and Jo showed me how to stay really really still and wait for chipmunks to crawl up to our hands and pluck Cocoa Puffs from our palms with their little chipmunky fingers. Jo has horses, and she sends me photos of her next to them with some of her letters. I send her little fluffs of sheep wool that I pull from the fence in the big field near my house. This is a few years before there won't be sheep there anymore, just houses. I stick Jo's letters to my bulletin board and keep them there for years.

The tide goes out and our castle appears. Mussels pop and click in the air, like they're shocked the water's gone for a while. There are snails stuck to the side, and Katrina picks some off and I tell her Stop, don't hurt them, and when she tries to put them back on they won't hold onto the rock and they fall down to the damp sand and later I forget that they're there and step on them.

The castle is this big rock coral thing, carved out by waves, and this year I'm still short enough to stand all the way up inside it. It smells of salt and rot. Some of the mussels are already dead, not popping and clicking anymore. Katrina's dad is off doing real estate stuff—that's how he got all his money—and my parents let me wander with her because my grandpa knows Katrina's dad kind of well. I don't know how. Katrina wears a red paisley bandana and I have a green one. My hair is braided. Our skin is tan and my legs are in that weird long lanky phase that I want to grow out of. In the castle we take off our tank tops and Katrina undoes my bikini and tickles and scratches her nails against my skin. I lie flat on my front in the sand in the castle, and the waves crash on and on, but the tide won't be in for a while. We're safe.

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Katrina gives me fake nails to wear, the kind that are whole fingertips, little plastic caps I stick on all my fingers, so I'm not just pretending to have long purple nails but brand-new skin. They make me feel witchy. Katrina lies down on her stomach, her head on her folded arms. Through a hole in the castle I watch a man with a sunhat lead two horses down the beach. A third follows, un-harnessed, a ways behind. His head bobs and I feel sorry for him. Katrina's back is sunburned and peeling in little flaky circles. The plastic nails leave marks on her skin, first white where they press and then a darker red where they scratch.

We do this, trading off, for hours.

This is the year before I get my first pimple. My family will go camping in Colorado and on the way my mom will buy me Clearasil, and it will crust white on the pimple and dry it all out. Clearasil will never work for me again. On this trip I will have a crush on this older boy, Seth, whose family is staying in the same campground, and when I play cards with him alone in his camper I hear that Shaggy song "It Wasn't Me" for the first time. I will feel guilty for listening to it. It's a dirty song. We'll exchange addresses and I'll send him a letter but he won't write me back.

In the town where my family goes for Christmas there's a little shop that we go to every year, and every year my mom buys me a little wooden turtle, sometimes a small one and sometimes a big one, sometimes a big one with ridges on its back like an alligator, all painted different bright colors and dotted with white. Their necks are long and are hooked to a piece of stretchy string so when you tap their heads they bob around in the shells. She collects them, my mom tells the woman who sells the turtles to us. She has so many. And I feel so stupid, this year. This is the last year I'll ask for a wooden turtle. But my mom will keep them all in a shoebox

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glued over with baby photos of me cut with crazy scissors. The turtles will sit collected in a corner of the box, next to a pink plastic baby bottle-shaped container that holds my teeth.

This is a few years before I will have acrylic fake nails, French-tipped. This is a few years before I will finger a girl, afraid the nails will hurt her, but she'll say they won't, it doesn't hurt, it feels good. Afterward she'll lie on her chest in my bed and I'll tickle her back, up and down, up and down and in circles, and I'll know exactly how good it feels. Her skin won't be sunburned. Her skin will have little zits around her shoulders, and the tips of them will collect under my nails, and she'll have freckles down her spine, and dimples at her hips.

I'll get acrylic nails one more time, when I'm an adult, and I'll hate them. I'll bite them all off.