

Don't Tell Your Grandma

You are beautiful, she said. You are beautiful, he said. You are just so pretty.

Where did you get those eyes?

You want to turn your whole body inside out.

skin in, eyeballs in

vessels and sinew and organs out

synapses seen.

That will teach them how what they teach you causes neural pathways to become

permanent impulses: wretched, sticky,

weathered trenches.

*

Who is this man sitting at the top of the sledding hill? He drinks from a glass bottle, and you think his green eyes are made of glass; is he your mom or dad's good friend? He wants you to sit next to him on the grass, and the sun is going down. His beard is thicker than your dad's. It is reddish, and even though you are nine, you wonder what it would feel like against your face. You flip your hair so more people may notice the pretend dangles. You will get them pierced soon. You're old enough. He doesn't have much to talk about-- this man at your parent's party. You wonder if you will think about him when he gets up to see what all the hooting and hollering is about, and you wonder if he will think about you as he crunches the gravel toward the weeping willow.

Hide and seek.

*

Your parents go to dinner with your grandparents. You stay in your mom's childhood bedroom-- silhouette photography, a scratchy coverlet, a collection of miniature eggs, and a pattern carved into the wood. You trace the lines, a labyrinth spiral on a twin bed.

You suck your thumb. It's hard to sleep.

A boy you saw at Passover dinner babysits. Some family friend's teenage son takes his time, and you learn right from wrong by what he says before leaving the room.

When he rubs your back, you are a kitten-- like the new ones your cat birthed over the summer, so many sweet kittens. You want to purr and rub your back against his hand, and he slides it down to your bottom, under your pajamas, where he rubs and rubs;

You can drift like this. So when he says, don't tell your grandma—
all at once, you are not a good girl.

You are pretty; you are at fault,
and you can't sleep waiting for him to return
so you can ask him what he meant.

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Your grandmother says, "girls your age shouldn't have love handles."
You say, "Pass the pasta."

*

You are teaching high school English. These kids don't want to be here. You're a newbie, and
you can't make it fun yet. This boy won't take off his Tennessee ballcap;
"Go Vols," he says.

Whatever— he is 16.

He blows kisses at you from the back row and smacks his lips over braces.

Your adviser tells you to dress differently: wear old-lady clothes.

You're teaching *The Crucible*. He tells you he knows where you live.

You call him an asshole—the class claps.

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You'll fly to his homecoming in a couple of months.

You and your friends will rent an RV, and you'll avoid school after dinner.

Instead, you'll try to hear secret messages in "The Great Gig in the Sky"
and pretend you're drunk.

He'll want a repeat, but you won't let him get past your clothes. You'll roll on the carpet in the
upstairs office all night. He'll beg like you're an expert, and he'll pout.

You'll fade apart.

He'll hear that you have another boyfriend already, he'll cry on the phone and never want to talk
to you again.

He will later confess he accidentally left the shoebox you saved filled with your hand-written,
long-distance relationship on the Greyhound to Chicago.

*

You have a pink leather jacket and a 10-speed Schwinn that's red.

In your neighborhood, you meet up with this kid who lives on the other side of the canal,
and you sneak into the houses under construction. They remind you of treehouses.

You love a good fort.

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You sneak onto the golf course at night. Both couples. She seems to be into it because they've been dating for a year. But you are not sure, and you think you'll get caught. He thinks he is Morrissey. He does look like him, you admit. You like him a lot and know better, but you can't seem to break away. He mashes his lips to yours and pushes you onto the soft grass. His tongue is Camel Lights. He's pushing into you, pulling at your jeans. You tell him no, but he has you pinned, and you give in.

The sprinkler system cuts on, you are drenched, and you are safe. He laughs for way too long. You guess he's good at pretending. You'll adopt this persona for a while.

*

Every day is a chance to start again. Even when the light's all wrong inside the tent, and you know you said no, but were too drunk to stop it from happening (again). You want him to be worthy. You want to go out to breakfast, but first, he has to stop by his friend's van parked in a way-out lot of the festival. Other people are there too. He sells a variety of drugs. Like the ice cream man, he's a fucking vendor, but with baggies in coolers. You curse your life choices but still are hungry, and the new guy in your life doesn't seem to buy anything- just says hi, so ok, you can handle the fact that they are friends, you tell yourself. So you go to eat breakfast with him in town. He doesn't have enough money. So you pay for the food. And still, a week later, you cling to the maybe. The wish for him to be something other than what he is sticking to you, like the stink of the sleeping bag the next day.

*

Wrap up all these endings.

Send them afloat-

see if someone adopts the basket of goodies downriver.

Let them make something beautiful out of all this.

Decades remind you that you're always you,

but it's hard to believe the chapters written and still not written are also you—

your ten-year-old is asleep.

You roll over and tell your husband they'd be 21 and 19 now, grateful he can follow your midnight train of thought.

His arms fold around you- tuck you in, safe.