

Fiction  
4900 Words

## Good Girls are Hard to Find

Stacey walked straight to the Subaru and sat in the backseat and left the car door wide open so her family could see her. She crossed her arms and glared.

She did not want to go to Florida.

It was a too-hot day for spring, as they all were now, thanks to neoliberals like her stepfather Gregory and her mother Belinda who voted again and again for aristocratic capitalist drips of the Democratic establishment, which Stacey had just shredded like wheat in an essay for AP American Government.

*A+++++!!!! Her teacher had written. You really know your stuff!*

A year before, when Belinda had decided to make worship of Gregory her full-time job, she made them all move to a suburb of Atlanta until, allegedly, Gregory could find something closer to affordable in the city. But they'd been in this freshly concreted corporate sprawl for nearly a year. No porches out here, no mossy weeping willows, just stoops and garage-fronts that residents tried to make happy with giant potted plants.

When Stacey's family emerged from the house, she had not budged. Gregory's tee shirt was bright blue with I'M HERE FOR THE PROTEST blazing on the front in yellow. He held baby Jason, who wriggled as Gregory put him in his car seat.

Stacey held her phone face-out in Gregory's face. "He is still in Florida."

Gregory clicked the shoulder straps into place.

"He was last seen extremely close to exactly where we are going."

Gregory put the pacifier in Jason's mouth.

"Well," said Stacey. "I wouldn't take my kids anywhere near there."

“Why can’t she stay home?” asked Bug, Stacey’s little sister.

“She might burn the house down,” said Gregory. “Steal all the silver.”

“Mom,” said Stacey. “What are you going to do if he finds on us?”

“He’s not looking,” said Belinda. In an effort to look wilderness-oriented, she wore a purple North Face cap with her hair in a ponytail out the back.

“He’s got his own militia,” said Stacey.

“He *had* his own militia,” said Belinda. “He’s might not even be in this country anymore.”

“We’re going to die!” Stacey said.

Bug started to cry. “I don’t know why she has to come.” She had long hair, smooth and fine, like their real father’s had been.

Stacey felt guilt, then tamped it down like a weak muscle.

“Ignore her, Sweetie,” said Belinda, reaching behind the passenger seat to touch Bug’s knee.

“My mother wants to see her,” Gregory said. “God knows why.” Then he took a deep breath and put his hands on the steering wheel and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I said that. He right at Stacey in the rearview. “We want to see you, too.”

Their attempts to handle Stacey consisted of nurture and patience they never maintained, because she crushed them like a weak revolution. She strutted around the house like a peacock and let her full Self rise up—a New Stacey, a Stacey that took up all the space and let her fury spill. Felt it cover her family like blood.

She pushed her purple glasses up her nose and touched her waistband through her tee shirt. It divided her gut in two—a roll above, a roll below. She unbuttoned her shorts, then

checked the CNN Fugitive Finder again: a blinking red dot on the Georgia/Florida border, north of Jacksonville.

“We’re heading right to him!” she said.

“That was weeks ago,” said Belinda. “He’s not going to be standing on the side of the road.”

“Not without an M-16 to kill us all!” They pulled out of the driveway. “I guess that’s okay with you.”

“Shut up,” said Bug, sniffing.

They drove.

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They passed strip malls and trailer parks. Between exits, kudzu covered trees and shrubs and ditches like a giant drape and smothered all life. Why had they moved here? Why had they done this to her?

*Gregory’s job*, Belinda had told her. Stacey’s real father had been dead for only a year, sick for five.

Cancer of course. What else?

*I need this, honey*, Belinda had said. *I need to move on*. She’d wept at Stacey’s knees. *I deserve this. Please, honey*.

But what about me? Stacey had not said, because that had been Old Stacey, the one who wanted to please. I don’t have to move on, she didn’t say. I don’t want to leave my friends for the home of slavery and Jim Crow and doughy white political oppressors. She understood that the North wasn’t innocent—she was an International Baccalaureate student, she knew history. She knew a lot.

And what about what Stacey needed?

What about what Stacey deserved?

Her phone clinked, a text from her friend Sapphie. *Where ru*

*Outside Thomasville SHOOP What ru doing SHOOP*

*CLINK Shakespeare paper*

“Gregory hates that,” Belinda said. “Why don’t you turn it off and look around? The country is beautiful through here.”

“The country is fucking boring through here,” said New Stacey.

“Language,” said Belinda.

*My mom is such a bitch SHOOP*

*CLINK She’s so skinny*

*Her butt is so full of cellulite it’s gross SHOOP*

*CLINK YOU are such a bitch!*

Belinda snatched her phone, turned it off, and put it in the glove compartment.

“I have to keep track of the news!”

“You’re just texting,” said Gregory.

“Fuck you!”

“Don’t,” said Belinda. She squeezed Gregory’s shoulder. “Please, Stacey,” she said. “I am so tired.”

Good.

New Stacey looked at the houses set back from Highway 319. Dirty mobile homes kitchen chairs and rusty cars in the yards. Tarps over holes in walls and roofs.

“Are they poor?” Bug asked.

“Very,” said Stacey. “I mean, look at those children.”

They reached a stoplight between towns, an abandoned post office and a Zaxby’s on one side and a BP on the other, power lines crossing. Tall oaks and green grass surrounded all the disenfranchisement and poverty. And yet Gregory’s non-profit fed only people in parts of Africa who were starving.

*Why not feed people right here?* New Stacey asked every morning when he drove her to school. *Why don’t you do anything for our people?*

*All people are our people,* Gregory said. *You are buying into a false narrative.*

Old Stacey had kept her from talking back. From pointing out how media-literate she was, how smart, how she had moved here and shot herself to the top of her class and now stood proudly on the pile of her competition, her foot on their backs.

*You’re such a phony,* New Stacey said into the back of Gregory’s neck.

God, she couldn’t wait to go to college.

The sun was beaming on Stacey’s thighs. Fat girls wore shorts all the time. Why couldn’t she just deal with it?

“It never used to look like this,” Gregory said. “There was more wilderness. More beauty.” Gregory told endless, boring stories about growing up in rural Georgia, eating Fudgesicles and playing in the woods.

“Developers,” said Belinda.

“There used to be more forest between towns.”

“Can we go to Chick-Fil-A?” asked Bug. Jason grinned at Stacey from his car seat. Old Stacey would’ve poked his belly, tickled him a little.

“They’re against gay rights,” said Belinda. “We shouldn’t have gone that last time.”

They passed a funeral home that looked like a miniature casino, a rectangle sign over the front door with blinking lights around the border. *Serve your dead well*, it said.

“This place is gross,” Stacey said. She meant the South. She whole thing. Every dripping racist inch of it. She pulled her nail file from her front pocket. It was frosted glass, the handle etched with lacy flowers. The top point had broken off, leaving a jagged, lopsided spike. She carefully filed her pinky nail.

Bug started to cry again.

“I’m sorry, Bug. Sweetheart. I wish you could sit up here with us.”

The guilt was there again, a quiet boom in Stacey’s chest. A nag. Gregory angled the rearview mirror so she could not avoid his eyes.

“This is the last time you come anywhere with us.”

“At long last,” she said.

“This is dysfunctional!” said Gregory. “This is sick!”

“We need therapy,” said Belinda.

“*She* needs therapy,” said Gregory. “*We* are doing fine.”

She pushed the nail file back into her pocket, nestled between her hip and thigh. Jason pursed his lips like a fish.

“Where are we going to eat, then?” asked Bug.

“Terry Tarleton’s Piggy Park!” said Belinda. “It’s a famous local place.”

Bug was wiping tears away. *I’m sorry*, Old Stacey wanted to say, but New Stacey put her in her place.

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Wasn't hash made of boiled pig's head? Hadn't Stacey read that somewhere? Melted skin, softened pieces of bone and cartilage in gravy and broth. She sat at the picnic table on the restaurant back-patio and watched a father feed it to his kid.

"I can't believe you made us move to this place," Stacey said to Gregory. Two veins on his forehead popped out like interstates on one of those old relief maps that hung on the wall of her school library, there on display to prevent anyone from moving out of nostalgia, to keep them all grounded in eras long gone.

Bug sat on the bench, legs gently swinging. Stacey wanted to touch her shoulder and smile.

New Stacey said, *Don't*.

A Sphynx Cat, hairless and wrinkled, slept on one end of a bar that this place obviously never used since it was lined with bus tubs full of papers. On the other end, a TV was on CNN. Another interview with his former wife, who somehow was not in prison.

"Can I please have my phone back?"

"No," said Gregory, bouncing Jason on his knee.

"I want to know where they've seen him last."

"He's in the forest, hiding under rocks where he belongs."

"You said there was no more forest."

"Let's hope he's in a hole, like Saddam," said Belinda.

"Who's Saddam?" asked Bug.

"Here you go!" said Terry Tarleton herself, walking out from the kitchen with plates of food stacked up her arms. She was a big woman with most of her weight in her hips. She wore a

dark orange shirt with grease stains around the collar, tight slacks, and a gigantic white apron. She put their plates in front of them and looked at the TV. Radar circles, a map, that red dot.

“He’s getting closer,” said New Stacey.

“Can’t we go home?” said Bug.

“That was weeks ago, honey,” Belinda hugged Bug. “Your sister is mean. Just plain mean.”

“We’re not going to run into him. It just won’t happen,” Gregory said.

“Don’t worry, Sugar,” said Terry. “He comes around here, we don’t call the police.” She nodded to the gun cabinet behind the bar, glass panes foggy with dust.

Gregory and her mother hated guns. Belinda, who had never been anywhere near a mass shooting, wept whenever they happened. Old Stacey had held her hand. New Stacey rolled her eyes and said *Oh please* and offered to write a memoir called *Mom’s Manufactured Trauma*. Sometimes you just toughened up. Grew some armor. People in prison did! Women in Texas did! Nurses did! Why couldn’t Belinda? Because she still believed that LOVE WINS, the words printed at the top of that sign of lies that Gregory insisted on keeping in their front yard. But love didn’t re-freeze arctic ice, stop a dictator from dropping weapons on towns full of families, keep immigrants from drowning in the Rio Grande. Love didn’t kill everyone with a virus or boil babies alive. Stacey learned about this when she wrote a paper on war crimes for IB World History. During an attack on a tiny village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, soldiers had dropped newborns, alive, into a giant pot of boiling water while the mothers watched. And during the Yugoslav wars, Serbians forced captured Bosnian families to fuck each other. Their favorite game? Father-Son.

Hadn’t love lost long ago?



New Stacey respected guns. She wanted at least to hold one, to know how to use it. The last time she had stayed over at Saffie's, her friend had led them into her garage and opened the gun safe in the corner. They stood in the middle of the concrete floor where a car was usually parked, the garage door closed, the light on.

"You just line up the sights," said Saffie, holding a Glock, aiming it. "The front and the back. Stand hard. Put your legs apart a little, like this."

She handed it to Stacey.

"Is this plastic?"

"The grip is," said Saffie.

Plastic weapons. Saffie showed her the safety, turned it on and off. She was barefoot with pretty toenails. Light blue.

"It's unloaded," she said. "You can pull the trigger."

"Are you sure? Can you check?"

"It always is," said Saffie. "We're not crazy."

Stacey aimed for a black cabinet knob.

"Pull it," Saffie said. "Go ahead."

Click.

Stacey and her family had stopped eating to watch the silent TV. Footage of the last moments of the trial, when he cried and yelled and pounded his fists on the defendant's table. Without his hair, he looked like a disheveled clown. That bothered Stacey. They couldn't let him have his hair back? Wasn't he pathetic enough by now?

"Mr. Tarleton is the best shot in Lowndes County," Terry said. "We don't worry about a thing in here."

“You didn’t support him?” Belinda asked.

“Honey, I was never with that monster.” She put her hands on her hips. “He wasn’t doing nothing except for himself. I told my friends—you’re voting for a menace! A liar! Terrorizing the whole country! Taking us all back! And now they know. And they say, Terry, you told us so.”

“It’s just wonderful that you never supported him,” said Belinda.

Stacey cringed whenever her mother said *just wonderful*.

Terry shook her head. “No ma’am. Things ain’t the way they used to be, though.” A call bell rang in the kitchen. Jason hiccupped. “We crossed a line. We ain’t never going back.”

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Gregory forced them to go to three antique stores in Thomasville and bought matching brass lamps, bases tarnished green. Stacey stayed in the car, but he refused to let her have her phone back until they were on the road again.

*I hate my life SHOOP*

*CLINK Maybe your grandma will give you money again*

*Not worth it, between her and Jason too much drool SHOOP*

“Let’s stop at that Confederate monument!” Belinda said. Jason was asleep in his car seat. Stacey rested her arm on it.

“I don’t want to be late,” Gregory said.

“I think it’s just up here. Stacey, check your phone?” Belinda only took hers with her when she was going somewhere alone. She thought phones were responsible for the decline of western civilization. She’d forgotten about Chuck E. Cheese.

“Belinda—”

“Every time, you say we’ll stop.” Belinda said. “Every single time.”

“It’ll just be a plaque, if even that,” said Gregory.

Belinda crossed her arms. “I would like to see a Confederate monument, please. I still haven’t, not out in the country. We are in the South.”

Stacey turned the sound off on her phone. “It’s this road coming up,” she lied. Because fuck them.

“This next one?” said Belinda.

“Yep.”

“I thought it was further up.”

“Fine,” New Stacey said. “Don’t believe me.” She crossed her arms, looked out the window.

“Gregory, make the turn.”

“I don’t have time!”

“Yes you do. Please, honey! Go on!”

The tires barely squealed as Gregory turned onto the county road, and Belinda whooped and smiled. The lamps thumped in the trunk.

The road stretched deep into countryside, the hills slow and rolling. They drove past brick homes, a weedy mobile home park, a tiny closed General Store, then through a town with an all but abandoned downtown and a neighborhood of dilapidated tract houses with families on the porches, a diapered child in the dirt.

“The poverty,” said Belinda. “Look at that.”

“We should turn around,” said Gregory.

“Keep going,” said Stacey. “Like 2 more miles. It’s a former plantation.”

“Really?” asked Belinda.

“What’s a plantation?” asked Bug.

“Where slaves were forced to live and work,” said Stacey.

“Masters in the mansion, slaves in shacks.” Belinda shook her head. “Awful.”

“You’d think they’d have signs,” said Gregory.

“It says it’s been unmarked for years,” said Stacey. “I think everyone forgot about it.”

“Amazing!” said Belinda. “I’m so excited!”

“It says turn here,” said Stacey.

“That’s a dirt road,” said Gregory.

“That’s what it says.”

“Are you sure?”

Stacey nodded her head. “Positive!”

“Okay. Here we go.” The road was brown but tinged a dark orange, a rusty curve that cut into the earth.

“Thanks, honey,” said Belinda.

Stacey put her phone face down in her lap and turned the sound back on.

Tall pine trees grew along the road on either side, the tips mottling sunlight that shone into the car.

“What time do we have to be there?” Gregory asked.

“We have plenty of time,” said Belinda.

Bug’s side of the Subaru was all shade. The road was getting worse. Gregory hit a pothole so deep that the bump woke Jason. He started to cry.

“How much further?” Gregory asked. Through the rearview, Stacey saw sweat on his upper lip.

“Is that a railroad bridge?” asked Belinda.

“I think so,” said Gregory.

“It’s tiny,” said Belinda. “It’s like a ruin. How weird.” She turned to Stacey, who was looking out the window. “Look at your... oh my God.”

Stacey clasped her hands and hooked them around her knees as she met her mother’s eyes.

“What?” said Stacey.

“Turn around,” said Belinda.

“What do you mean?” asked Gregory.

“She lied about everything. Turn around.”

“God damn it!” Gregory yelled.

Jason cried louder.

Belinda blinked, sniffled, then put her hands over her face and sobbed.

“Mommy?” Bug asked.

“I’m okay, honey.” She pulled a Kleenex out of the glove compartment and blew her nose, still sobbing. “I’m okay.”

“There’s no plantation?” Bug said.

“No, honey. Stacey didn’t get the directions right.”

“We were going to see a mansion!” Bug started to cry.

“What does this get you?” Gregory slapped the steering wheel in fury. “What? What does—”

Stacey's phone rang. She'd set the tone to By the Seaside, a jolly organ tune that startled them all, especially Gregory, who lost control of the steering wheel as the Subaru hit another pothole, bounced as if on a trampoline, and went hard into the sloped shoulder. They crashed downward into a thicket of blackberries. Green knobs of fruit and tiny thorns pressed onto Stacey's window. The tires kept spinning, pushing the car further in, back tires scraping dust and gravel.

"Is everyone okay? Jason! Bug!" Belinda yelled.

"Everybody out!" Gregory yelled. "I can't back up!"

The thicket was blocking Stacey's side of the car. Belinda helped Bug out and tried for Jason but couldn't unbuckle the car seat. He cried for Mommy, arms reaching toward her.

"I'll get him!" Stacey yelled.

"Don't you touch him!" What Gregory called Stacey at that moment was unthinkable. Stacey flinched as if he'd slapped her. Her lip trembled.

Stacey started to cry.

Gregory climbed over the gearshift to exit the Subaru from the passenger side, then reached into the back and finally unclicked Jason's seat belt and hoisted him out. He was screaming.

Stacey kept crying. "I'm sorry," she said. New Stacey had vanished. "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry I'm sorry."

"Are you okay?" Belinda asked, looking in.

Stacey nodded and wiped her face with her fingers.

Belinda sighed and closed her eyes. "Try to climb around the car seat."

Stacey maneuvered herself—she wasn't *that* fat—got out, and stood with her family. The road ended at the bridge and forest continued on the other side. Sycamores towered above them.

“We had an accident, Gregory!” Bug said. “We had an accident!”

“I know,” Gregory said, looking at his phone. “No service.” Stacey's phone was in the bottom of the Subaru. She heard it clink.

“I have service!” Stacey said. “I could crawl back in and try!” No one looked at her. Stacey heard birds. Jason grew quiet; Bug hugged her mother's legs. Gregory held his phone up to the sky and stared at it, walked toward the bridge. “Come on,” he said.

Stacey pictured herself walking through the trees, finding a house, calling for help.

They heard a car and all five of them turned to look. Dark blue, driving toward them.

“That's a limousine,” said Belinda.

“On this road?” said Gregory.

Bug jumped up and down. “Help! Help! Help us!” She waved her arms and ran toward it.

“Come back here, Bug!”

The car stopped, motor running, tinted windows up. The limousine was alien, out of place. There was no breeze. Sweat pooled in Stacey's bra, her stupid bra with pads that were too big for her.

“Why don't they get out?” Bug asked.

Everyone waited.

“Check your phone again,” Belinda said.

“I'm going to go get mine,” Stacey said. But then the driver's window went down. A man got out of the back and stood on the road beside the limousine. He wore a red cap that was ill-fitting and cheap—they could all see it, a spot of aberrance in all the green.

“Oh my God,” whispered Gregory.

“Mommy!” Bug cried. “Mommy!”

“No.” said Gregory.

“God help us,” said Belinda.

He approached them and pulled a gun from his front pocket. He held it with a drooping, awkward wrist and thick fingers that didn't know where to be.

“It's you-know-who,” he sing-songed. The writing on his cap was frayed, unreadable, marred with dirt and grime. He wore a white undershirt with a tear in the shoulder, suit pants, and filthy black dress shoes.

“We won't tell anyone we saw you,” said Belinda.

“Got that right,” he said. He was much thinner. He turned his head to the side but kept his eye on them. He put the gun in his pocket. “Come on out, boys!”

Two men got out from the front of the limousine. One wore a cap with a rainbow peace sign and overalls that hung only to the middle of his shins; the other wore a suit without a tie and no shoes. Both of them had automatic rifles, the kind men used in mass shootings. They left the car doors open. The sky above the trees held a faint orange glow where the sun had just been.

“We won't tell,” said Gregory. “We just want to go home.”

“It's tough, yeah,” he said. “It's tough all right. Like tall grass tough, huh?”

“What?” said Belinda. “What are you talking about?”

“Like Times Square. Yeah. I know. I know it all. I knew more than anyone, do you get that? Did you get that? I had it all. I knew more than anybody. Ever.”

His face looked like papier-mache painted pink and blobbed with red. As if he were wearing a pull-on mask of himself.



“Our family is in crisis right now,” Belinda said. She rocked Jason as she spoke, twisting back and forth at her waist, spreading her fingers around the back of his head, pulling him to her shoulder. “We just want to go home.”

“They made me eat out of a can,” he said. “On the floor of a cell. A rat right on my foot.” He pointed to his toes.

“I’m sorry,” said Gregory. “I’m sorry.”

The men walked toward them.

“It’s tough. Yeah.” He smiled and his teeth were so white they shocked Stacey. Whiter than real, young and shining, a fantasy. “But I’m tough too. No one got that. No one knew.”

He sat down on the ground and grunted.

Stacey knew what to do. She knew! She knew psychology. She’d taken beginning, advanced, even a lab. Agree. Support. Mirror.

She squatted down to meet his eyes.

“You are tough.”

He looked at Stacey, skin beneath his eyes desiccated, sunken. He was no longer a big man. “Do you know me?”

“Like you’re my own father.” Stacey said. She didn’t know where her voice was coming from.

“I’d think of me like a daddy.” He licked his finger and made a clean stripe through the layer of dust on his shoe. “Like your daddy.”

“I do,” said Stacey. “I will.” The man with the peace cap walked to Gregory and nudged him gently toward the trees.

“Where’s he going?” Belinda asked. “What are you doing? Please God please God please God please.”

“They took my money,” he said.

Gregory walked into the trees, rifle at his back. “Belinda!” he called.

“I think you’re a good man deep inside,” said Stacey. Because weren’t we all? When everything was stripped away?

He crossed his legs into the lotus position but wobbled and cringed as if the effort caused him great pain. Dust from the road stirred around him, settled into his pants, his black socks.

“Let’s go into the trees,” he said. “I’ve been everywhere in the world. I’ve been to Abu Dhabi. You know that? I’ve been everywhere there is. Everywhere there was. People don’t respect that.”

“You’re right, Daddy,” Stacey said. Three shots went off, the vibration sinking into her ears. Everything had left her now. “About all of it,” she said, her voice breaking like glass. “You’re always right.” She took a step toward him. His gun rested on palm, open in his lap.

“I was raised like a king,” he said. He looked stuck in lotus, as if at any second a spring in his hips would break and send his legs flying out like a Jack-in-the-Box. “A king! The only king! Mother knew.” Was he crying? “Mommy,” he said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand like a little boy. “I’m thirsty.”

The man with the cap came out of the trees and nodded to the man in the dirty suit, who walked over to Belinda, Bug, and Jason.

“These are my babies,” said Belinda.

“They’ll turn on you,” he said. “I bet they will. They’re incapable.”

“No, Daddy,” said Stacey. “We’re loyal. She raised us like that.” He looked away from her.

“We adore you. We never stopped loving you.”

He stood. Stacey saw the whiteness of his skin beneath the undershirt. He walked her through the legs of the trestle. Stacey saw bits of wrappers, cigarette butts, tiny pecks of glass and batteries and plastic bits and pieces that you’d never have known were there from a distance. Nobody ever did. No one knew how much there was. It was all so infinitesimal.

He stopped beneath a cluster of trees and stood behind her, put his hands on her waist and squeezed her flesh. He smelled like he needed a bath.

“My little girl.” He turned her toward him, with Belinda and Bug and Jason right there—but no, they were back on the road, Stacey couldn’t see them anymore. Were they crying? Was that what she heard? Or was it animals?

“Say Daddy to me,” he said.

Five shots, ringing into the air.

Stacey’s throat was tight, a rubber band around a scroll.

He guided her to the ground. Stacey couldn’t feel her legs. He kissed her neck but she didn’t quite feel that either, couldn’t make sense of it. At her hip something pressed like a point into her flesh, almost like a needle, and while he licked the cavern of her collar bone she touched her hip and felt the nail file in her pocket, its broken tip.

“I like dry pussy,” he said. Above her, the branches formed shapes and spaces, layer over layer with the sky behind.

“Say it. Say how dry you are.”

Stacey pulled out the nail file and wrapped her fist around it so the spikes stuck out. He took a breath to speak; Stacey envisioned his head as a water balloon and plunged the file in his neck and pulled it toward her, a lever through his flesh. Blood spurted. A stream arced through the air. Did it whistle? Was that a whistle? Stacey scrambled out from under him. He gurgled and put his hands over the wound. Blood poured between his fingers. Stacey was shivering, freezing. Her chin trembled; her neck muscles hurt like she had the flu. She heard him fart, smelled his shit, saw him piss himself as he convulsed. He kicked his feet and looked at the sky, raised one hand in the air and curled his fingers but couldn't make a fist. His hand dropped hard onto the face of a rock. She heard his little bones crack.

Stacey clutched herself, her teeth clicking. His body jerked, then stilled, his eyes open to the rest of the world.

“Sir?” a man called sharply. “You there?”

Could he hear her teeth? She bit her tongue. There was no trace of sun, no clouds. Everything was cleared away; both the Staceys had left her now. The nail file was a nub in his neck. She heard herself breathe in staccato beats, high slices deep in her ears, and pulled the gun from his pocket, but her bloody hands made the gun slippery. She wiped them on her shirt, on her bare legs. She could not swallow. She tasted blood from her tongue and opened her mouth, closed it again, licked her lips.

“Are you there, Sir?” the man called again.

She held the gun as she'd been taught, her arms coming together in an arrow. She took a tiny step forward. She was wild. A baby assassin, desperate to do good.