

Carry Me Back

We liked to sleep over at Nancy's house. At any moment her older brother, Tim, might prance in, teasing us. Everyone had a crush on Tim. His jeans hugged his butt. The muscles of his arms were sculpted, often on display as he was the kind of guy who wore T-shirts in the middle of winter. He played sports: baseball, football, basketball. He referred to the local bar, which was called The Nutshell, as the "the shell of nut," which we thought was very clever. Nancy was overweight and pimply, but her brother served as currency.

Tim's girlfriend was a homely buck-toothed girl with a shapely body and enormous breasts. It was rumored that she kept a hope chest filled with clothing she would need for her wedding, and that she was sewing a wedding dress, and collecting items for the home she would one day share with Tim. At the time, this seemed romantic, though incredibly old-fashioned. But his girlfriend added to Tim's charm. He could have dated anyone he wanted but he loved a girl who wasn't even pretty.

This did not stop him from kissing our friend Bernadette at a keg party at the lake last summer, after which Bernadette's crush expanded so far beyond our general group crush that it threatened to consume every other topic of conversation. I vowed, along with Nancy and Vicky, to help Bernadette win Tim's heart away from the homely hope-chest girlfriend.

Nancy planned her first, official party. It would be small. We knew Tim would be home because basketball season was over and he was studying for his SATs. Nancy could host these parties because her mother was always working at Devaney's Bar in the next town and didn't come home until 4 am after closing time. Sometimes she slept at the bar, and

didn't come home until sunrise. Rumors abounded about Nancy's mother and Clive Devaney, about him being Nancy's true father.

We'd be hanging out at Nancy's after school when her actual father came home in the late afternoon, reeking of whiskey. A grizzled man who worked as a farmhand on a neighboring dairy farm, he didn't care if we smoked his cigarettes, which were unfiltered, as long as he could pull us on his lap and feel our growing breasts. Laughing he'd grab and laughing we'd dodge him, and Nancy would say, *Dad, leave my friends alone.*

There was another, more malicious rumor about Nancy's father sneaking his drunken, cattle-smelling dirty self into her bedroom at night. Her narrow room that fit only a twin bed and a dresser was separated from her parents' room by a curtain hanging in the doorway. It maybe had made sense when she was a baby, but now she was fourteen, it was just weird.

Tim slept upstairs, where there was an extra bedroom, too, that he used as a study and as a place to heap his clothes on the floor. The whole upstairs belonged to Tim because he was a boy and didn't make trouble, like Nancy did.

Bernadette, Vicky and I came to Nancy's first, official party. Maybe a few others who were cool enough by Nancy's standards had also been invited. But somehow, despite no one admitting to having invited her, Debbie R showed up. None of us knew Debbie that well but she sat next to me in homeroom where she could be funny in an unconscious, blurt-out, Debbie way, so we let her in.

It was Friday. We started drinking right after school. We drank seven-and-sevens with whiskey that Vicky had spirited from her house, and screwdrivers with vodka that Bernadette brought from hers. I hadn't been able to steal anything from my house since my mother drank wine from a box with a spigot.

When Nancy's father came home, we were already well-away, joking, toking and smoking to the Steve Miller Band song. We sipped from her father's mug, scrunched up our faces from the tooth-curdling taste of his firewater, and he pulled us one by one for a turn on his lap, his fingers sliding up our shirts as we squirmed away. I was thankful not to be as

pretty as Vicky, who was, as he called her, his prime piece of meat. We laughed at that, and at Vicky's grimace, and Nancy's father laughed too, opening wide his almost toothless mouth.

Eventually he left, as he did every evening, walking a mile to the no-name bar at the junction where the road fed into the highway. He wouldn't be home until after midnight. We turned up the music and danced in Nancy's living room to David Bowie's "Fame," our favorite.

"Dance with us!" we shouted upstairs to Tim, who was still good-humored, and still humoring us. Nancy put on "Whiter Shade of Pale," an oldies song, so Tim and Bernadette could slow-dance, and it was very romantic, except for Debbie who wailed tunelessly along, spoiling it. I couldn't allow that. I pulled Debbie outside while Bernadette and Tim and Nancy and Vicky slow-danced in the shadows of the living room.

Night was falling. Stars winked over the trees. Our breath condensed in the cold air. I had learned the year before, at thirteen, not to act like an asshole when I drank. I had lurched drunkenly around at a party I'd somehow landed in, yelling stuff like suicide is for swingers, when Bernadette hauled me outside the house and pushed me on the ground. *You keep it up, we're over*, she told me. *I will not be friends with an asshole. So get your shit together and shut the fuck up.*

My bones ached from growing and my breasts hurt from sprouting and stretch marks had appeared on my thighs and my breasts, and my calves ached and my face hurt, I was knotted with tension all the time, and beginning to recognize this would become a permanent state. And I was so eternally grateful that Bernadette hadn't abandoned me. I owed her.

I never acted like that again, except at home, alone, when I'd slice my arms with a razor blade, carving crude flowers and initials into my skin, and carefully wearing long-sleeved shirts to cover the scabs. I knew how to act in public, inebriated or not. There was an invisible, unmentioned protocol that you could learn by observing others and mimicking their behavior. But Debbie didn't want to do that. She marched and staggered along the driveway,

veering around to bump into me, tripping and trying to drag me down with her, all the while bellowing like one of the bulls Nancy's father tended during the day.

I tried to help. I pushed her down. I told her, "Stop being an asshole or we won't be your friends." But what had worked with me did not work with Debbie.

"Fuck you!" she screamed and spat in my face.

I knew I would never forgive her.

The front door opened, Tim yelled, "Good night girls!" got into his banged-up Camaro and peeled out of the driveway. I ran back inside. Debbie lumbered behind. Nancy and Vicky and Bernadette were optimistic because while Tim had slow-danced with Bernadette, he'd licked her ear and rubbed her ass, and he smelled nice, like pine and baby shampoo. It was only a matter of time before Bernadette, who was so much prettier and funnier than the bucktoothed, big-chested girlfriend, would steal Tim's heart away. We toasted to this, and we chugged and swigged our booze and the night could have gone transcendent.

Debbie, however, was a problem. Drunk, loud and irrepressible, she thudded and lurched like a frankenstein monster, repeatedly throwing herself into the sofa as if it was a trampoline.

"This is bullshit," said Nancy.

Though we were all drunk, there existed among us--me, Bernadette, Nancy, and Vicky--a unity of purpose. We wanted to dance, to have fun, to imagine ourselves into a larger world where we could be infinite in our potential. We did not want to babysit a drunken, stupid girl that none of them liked, and that I hated.

Nancy took the cast-iron frying pan off the kitchen stove. When Debbie staggered back to gather herself for another leap onto the sofa, Nancy swung. The sound of the whoosh sheared the air. She missed. I grabbed the pan, startled by its weight, I walloped Debbie across the skull. She went down like a stone statue. Everyone cheered. Nancy and I dragged her behind the reclining chair and Vicky turned the volume up. We danced crazy to

Aerosmith and Wild Cherry. We played air guitar, we pretended we were strippers, we jumped onto the hassock to ham it up, and the party was in full-swing, asshole dispensed with. Except her lumpen body on the floor behind the reclining chair cast a damper on the fun.

Any misgivings I had about what we'd done were tamped down by self-righteousness that she had deserved it. It was a favor. We'd stopped her from making an even bigger fool of herself. But Vicky became uptight after a couple of songs, especially when Debbie began to snore and gurgle so loudly it interfered with the music. "This isn't right," Vicky said. "You could have killed her."

She said *you* not *we*, which hurt. We turned Debbie onto her side when she began to vomit. Vicky called her mother to come get her but Nancy hung the phone up before the call could go through. "You have to swear to secrecy," she said.

Tim returned while *Bad Moon Rising* blasted on the stereo and Debbie was lying in her own vomit and Vicky and Nancy were in a standoff, and Bernadette and I were still trying to have fun. Tim led his buck-toothed girlfriend by the hand across the living room floor, pausing at Debbie's body. "What happened to her?"

"She got too drunk," I said.

Bernadette couldn't say a word. Even I was shocked that after slow-dancing and feeling her up, Tim would have the audacity to bring his girlfriend back while Bernadette was here. As soon as they walked upstairs, Bernadette burst into tears. Vicky called her mom. Debbie snored. I put on *Love Hurts* by Nazareth and, while Vicky grabbed her overnight bag and went outside to wait for her mother, the rest of us grabbed mops and brooms and slammed them into the ceiling while we belted out the words. Love scars! Love wounds and mars! We sang at the top of our lungs, sang against our own limitations and our fears and our cruelties. We sang until Tim came storming downstairs, snatched the record off the turntable and heaved it against the wall where it shattered.

“I got the love of my life crying her eyes out upstairs because of you! Her mother has cancer but do you guys give a shit about that? You don’t care about anything except your stupid-ass selves!”

Well, his diatribe ruined our night. Compounded by Vicky’s absconding. We got quiet and lugged Debbie like a corpse onto the sofa. We vowed to keep the secret that we could have killed her ‘til we died, and cut fingers with a paring knife, to mingle our blood and strengthen the promise.

The fun manifested again, not as full and fierce, a diminished fun, when we filled a bowl with warm water to dip Debbie’s unconscious hand in, to validate the theory that it would make her pee her pants. But Debbie twisted so violently, Nancy spilled the water everywhere. Bernadette’s grief about Tim re-ignited. And I panicked. “Please don’t tell. I didn’t really do anything. She was an asshole. Please don’t tell.” I kept going on about it, even after they told me to shut up. I wished I could call my mother but, unlike Vicky’s mother, mine would never have come to pick me up because she was not a fucking chauffeur, as she’d said many times.

Eventually we all passed out; Bernadette and Nancy in Nancy’s bed, head to feet, me in a sleeping bag on the living room floor, Debbie hogging the sofa. And I must have slept because I didn’t hear Nancy’s father come home.

Debbie woke at sunrise, sobbing that she had a splitting headache. “I don’t remember last night!” she wailed. The whites of her left eye had turned blood red, like the devil.

Just sitting up, I grasped how ill I felt, like death, I wanted to cry, too. But that was asshole behavior, off limits for me. “Grow up,” I told her.

Debbie’s bawling woke Nancy and Bernadette. They stumbled out of Nancy’s room, none of us talking much. Bernadette lived a couple of miles away so she decided to walk home. But my house was too far to walk. Debbie called her mother, who hadn’t known where she was. We could hear her crying on the other end, so relieved to hear her daughter’s voice.

Tim and the girlfriend stepped through the living room after Bernadette left. “You better clean up this shit before Ma gets home,” he said. Nancy turned on the radio, opened the windows and dragged out the vacuum cleaner. The song came on, *You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’ now it’s gone, gone, gone.*

I helped clean, spraying the rug where Debbie had vomited and, finally, I called my mother, too. She said she could swing by in the afternoon on her way home from wherever she was going to be, which gave me several hours to kill at Nancy’s.

So I curled up in the La-Z-boy and fell into a doze. The sound of the vacuum cleaner and the radio reassured me that I had done nothing wrong. But I wished I had killed Debbie R. At least I would have done something memorable. Now I could only bide my time until my life could end, or until my mother could come and carry me back, back to childhood, to a time before I needed to get drunk to feel comfort in my own skin, before my parents divorced and I got my period, before inchoate feelings made an asshole of me, back to a time I’d been loved and admired and fed when I was hungry and cleaned when I was dirty and people tiptoed around saying, ssh, the baby’s sleeping.