

LOVE SONGS FOR A SICK GIRL

FIRST GLIMPSE

Five feet, seven inches.

One hundred pounds. Give or take. Always take.

Three forgotten ribs down from my collarbones,

the ones most people don't know they have.

Quiet yellow light.

Heavy thuds of thin ventricles lapse.

White pillows and four down feathers on the floor.

The tails of velvet ribbon catch on my shirt and

come undone hanging down to tender points exposed.

A sharp breath in.

The small difference between fear and horror.

Warm breath between us.

Unreproachful thumbs on bony hips.

The origin of scars in question soon,

stories of bike rides and a fall from the treehouse minutes away.

Ticking hushed.

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ON THE OUTER BANKS

The sand folds into itself, softly giving way to our steps.

Thin grey instead of focused blue on the edge of my sight.

The tide is out, leaving exposed flattened bubbles; origin unknown pinprick holes.

Broken shells and softened reeds pick up the smoky light.

My cheeks begin to sting; I can feel them chap red.

They will be like this for days and I smile toward the gusts.

I don't want to go inside, but each muscle aches to the bone.

You give me your cap; I've forgotten mine.

The wind is relentless, cutting through every yarn.

My favorite sweater, it's one you picked. Fair Isle. Fuzzy Wool.

You pull the cap down around my ears,

willing it to cover more of me.

On The Outer Banks we are nearly free.

We are the young, fiercely in love.

We have the fire of new found freedom,

the shiny glimmer of independence.

On The Outer Banks we find the wild horses.

We are very quiet and we stand still.

We walk in their prints,

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toes inside the soft half-moons.

Their coats are felted and fleecy.

Brown with blond manes. Velvet on every inch.

We wait for them to leave us, breathing only a little.

I take a picture of the smallest one. Her name might be mine.

She swooshes her tail in warning and in fear.

You take a picture of me, my cheeks so red waiting for a charge.

On The Outer Banks we are very free.

You hold my hand in your pocket.

We are alone in the muted dunes,

I can see everything on the beach.

On The Outer Banks I am very well.

We don't have to worry.

We have everything to hope for,

and it seems possible.

The sun sets on The Sound.

My picture will be a small silhouette on bright clouds.

You wrap me in a blanket, breathing softly in my hair.

On The Outer Banks I am never better.

We have the warm wind of a bonfire.

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We see a fox in the shadow of a lookout stand,

quietly slipping away.

On The Outer Banks we don't see the tide go out.

We have the quiet glow.

We will see it in the morning,

a sloping wave covering our steps.

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PINK BALLOONS

Pink balloons from below, shiny sheer in the sun,

a call to hope, a blushing glow.

Daffodils beginning to open, the sweeping expectation of exhilaration

in something so small.

A delicate taste of raspberry jam,

a rosy drop on the white linen table cloth.

If I am a color I am blush or pale blue. I'm sweet cream and almond macarons.

The picture from years ago. White fluffy tulle and satin pointe shoes.

I am all things fragile; wisps of spun sugar, and handmade lace.

Gentle silk stretched at the corners, pulling tight with each tug.

Everyone handles me with care,

taking great pains to let the snowflakes fall together.

Sips of tea, tiny slivers of pears, the delicate radius of roses, and tender girls like me.

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A HILL LIKE OURS

On a very snowy morning, we take out our sleds.

Mine is long because Grandma says my legs are like a giraffe's.

Yours is red and shiny, riding a little low to the ground.

We've waited all year for this day.

In the doorway Mom says we look just alike, a mental picture snapped.

I have red curls, hooded brown eyes, and

You have black hair, with big blue eyes.

We're never mistaken for siblings, unless we wear toboggans.

The strands of our genes took wildly different paths.

I can no more help my little sticky brain than

You can your nearly hollow bones;

We are a pair.

On the first run

I go down to clear the path.

You come behind me on the verge of smiling.

We are out of practice and full of nerves.

The neighbors come over; they don't have a hill like ours.

I put them together on my sled.

You show them how to steer.

We laugh when they scream before the push-off.

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The littlest girl dares us to go together, bringing the sled to me.

I sit in the back so my legs can rest around yours.

You grab the ropes and they push us off.

We are never faster.

From behind I peer around your cap.

I can see the river is frozen over, the one

You catch frogs in every summer.

We keep them in jars until our parents find them and we have to let them go.

The wind stings my face,

I feel tiny snowflakes on my cheeks.

You shriek and steer sharp to the right.

We are on the ground in seconds, red spots in the snow.

The neighbor kids come down the hill, running with a weight.

I clear my cheeks of the slow chilling snow.

You cup your hands to your face, rich red running between your knuckles.

We say our own silent prayers.

With my scarf, I wipe your hand and pull it back.

I will myself to look.

Your eye is a tiny pebble in the red stream.

We say nothing and stay still.

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On the hill I see a branch sticking up from the snow.

I put my scarf to your eye and lift you;

You can't stand on your own.

We feel the snow seep into our boots in the steps up the hill.

Our Mom sees us coming and the red pool we left behind.

I call for the ambulance while she tries to look.

You are standing in a pool of brilliant snow.

We would normally be in trouble for such a mess.

She says it's going to be okay.

I know what it means.

You do, too.

We hold hands until they come.

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NOW SEEN

It's The Day. Inevitable.

In every other way it is ordinary. Orange and red leaves have accumulated for days, crisply rumbling with gorgeous breeze. It's Tuesday. Everyone works with the sleepy hum of busyness.

I can't leave the house. I can't be touched.

We have plans to watch a movie; it's all very benign. You want to make spaghetti and treat me right.

The seizing panic of this prospect begins at Two. My ruined brain has a catch in it. Like a stitch in the ribs after running too far. I can't seem to move without that sticky needling overwhelming me.

What words feel like peace?

What words feel like good-enough?

It's after work and I know you'll go get the mail, then take off your shoes by the door. Your patterns are kind; yours are the peaceful rhythms of daily care.

I call and it's three rings.

You hear it in my voice.

/We will reschedule/

Up 'til now my little ticks and fears were all just theoretical to you, described in vague terms, clinical notions barely observed save visible vertebrae in every movement.

Do I want you to come over?

/Yes/

I've had three showers and I turn on the water again, hands raw and burned. You knock. I turn it off. At the door you search my face and the skin that you can see.

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Are you shrinking?

/Yes/

Most people hug me like petting a tiny bunny, scared to break me. You hug me like a wild animal in need of taming.

You are in my kitchen.

Soup and crackers.

I don't have a choice.

I am relieved.

At the table I want to weep and say I won't take one bite. You tell me I'm okay and you hold my other hand until I lift the spoon.