

## Seven

SEVEN girls, seven young girls, set themselves aside, away from gym class and far from the open doors of home economics, math, and history, or the choral sounds of glee club and the brassy drums of band, and wait patiently near a fence where the school fields end, and purplely wild flowers flourish like weeds, and unmowed fescue becomes taller, ankle deep, and ocean sand, like pumice to the skin, swirls across an asphalt lot in a cosmic, hippy fashion.

The first girl waits and hopes she's last. She thinks she's different, but she's one of seven that look and talk and act the same. Each a small cautionary smile. Blooming eyes. Sweeping lashes. Heads perfectly round, beaming like bug lanterns, all out for themselves, a protective little troupe well-schooled by their mothers.

The second is the tallest girl with braces on her teeth. She talks about Ester Mendenhall, as if Ester is someone famous.

The third girl is the shortest one. Her freckled face is an enigma, points of a thousand nails, eyes gathered and pinched, she looks as if she's impatient or has been here before.

The fourth girl wears gym clothes: unshaven legs, blue cotton shorts, yellow T-shirt and rubber cleats, and she wants to hurry back to soccer practice, while two others, five and six, have plenty of time, wearing pretty ruffled dresses as though they hold invitations between gloved fingertips. They look nervous, as well as they should be. Accepting such heinous invites.

The last girl, the seventh, the one with red hair, straight eyebrows and horn-rimmed glasses, knows that she does not belong here because she is not popular, nor does she compete well in school or the arts or sports, and she knows, if anyone is blamed for all their stupidity, it will be her. So she edges to the front of a nonexistent line, as the girls gather in a squad, book bags lying in the tall fescue like raised stones, and they sit and wait and pick wild flowers or weave grass bangles from the sturdiest, longest blades. One holds a ladybug steady on the tip of her finger, blowing gently across its spotted red dome, until it launches erratically into the wind.

Away from the six girls, the first spreads out on a patch of sandy ground that feels like salt because it bites and burns her skin. But the sun is plentiful, suffusing like a minty ointment. She sees seagulls and mist in the sky, and feels the ocean breeze, its coolness and dampness on her skin, and dreamily she closes her eyes. Beneath her eyelids she sees the same sky and seagulls round in a circular motion, and she doesn't know that she's been sleeping until she awakens. Shading all her face are his out stretched arms, wide and full, like the wings of a Pegasus with long white feathers, fluttering in a sea breeze. There is no haste because all the girls are gone and she realizes that she *is* last, and she believes that last is best for there is no embarrassment, nothing to hide, no shame to feel or reassemble. It is less indulgent than first, and *last* carries the much nobler burden of completion.

She keeps her hands above her head, for no lovemaking is allowed, that's the plan, yet there is no prescription on how this is done—only the plain and sensual feelings of life should be allowed in—the sun on her face, for instance, or the pellets of salty air melting on her tongue. And why not let the tips of fescue tickle her naked breasts and inner thighs, and why not let the perfumed fragrances of the wild flowers fill her nose the way blood fills the heart's empty chambers. All physical sensations she believes should be kept alive and she nearly demands it,

arching her back and finally letting go. Love, she says, is truly a spear. That's right, it will crucify the hypocrisy he says, and amazingly his wings open and he flies away, joining the seagulls circling above, and with her last breath, she takes in the ocean spray with the wind, and unlike the six others, she waits for the fog to appear as a white-lace gown with its innocent splendor, corrugating all around her.

“Yes,” she says, in a drifty, far off voice. “Yes, this is good.” She closes her eyes and turns her head, hearing only the feathering beats, slow and long, the wince of inhales and exhales, and this time, the winged creature appears in flesh and blood, yet he holds the spirit of a dead sparrow, and instantly she wakes up alone, here at night, lying in her bed with the silence of a divorced household.

There are times when everything is wrong, and the memory of the solid door, red and seamless, welded shut along a city block of plastered wall, sticks out in her mind as a burning symbol. And a girl, from out of nowhere, opens it, entering without as much a hesitation or an excuse me. She follows her inside. Stands in line and waits until handed a paper. An old, saggy-faced receptionist, dry lips and nonjudgmental eyes, directs to her read it then sign her name at the bottom. Signatures have a sneaky way of losing their identity. She recognizes hers only as a twisting river of ink that winds around itself until knotting off the paper.

Taking a seat in a row of chairs, last in a line of mortified girls. She waits, head down, kicks a blank form lying on the floor under her chair. The 27 makes multiple runs to the east side of town, twenty, thirty minutes apart, and she remembers the wooded trees of the John Muir, seventy, eighty feet high, and recalls the evenings near a campfire, roasting marshmallows until blackened and blistery puffs, and the songs they'd sung, like incantations in the bug whirling

light, to the yelps of coyotes, breaking the séance the way hiccups break an intense moment. One girl removes her glasses. Another stabs a *Bic* pen tip into her left palm. Whatever the fear has brought to her bones, the anticipation does twice to her muscles—sharp chills run spiderlike across her skin, and her eyes drift upwards towards the ceiling plane—white and speckled tiles, turn as black and napped as a starless night sky—*fucksticks!*

Shasta Falls. Only half the class attended the outing. The seven girls sat together across a log and the four boys sat on the other. They formed a V with the campfire in between. Mrs. Stalwart, their homeroom teacher, wore kaki head-to-toe and a terry cloth headband, and sat alone on a long, empty log, completing a triangle, a pair of binoculars hung from her neck, anxious for the stars to appear.

His wisp of bangs covered his eyes as he popped colorful M&Ms from his pocket. He wore jeans, Wranglers not Levis. She smiled, blushed. He gazed across the fire. Twilight, the evening the stars glimmered.

He came over.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

He whispered in her ear that they could go by the lake and smoke cigarettes. They walked a short distance through the pines to the edge of the lake. He removed his shoes. She sat on a rock and lit a cigarette. He removed her left sneaker and floated it like little a toy boat on the water’s surface. Laughed. She ripped off her right and laid her Converse carefully in a luminous pool of green algae. She wiggled her toes and together they laughed as they dig their toes into the crust of sand. Holes broke opened and out came tiny grey sandcrabs, upended, legs kicking in a frenzy, sand stuck to their small shells, spinning and digging their way back.

A new moon. The lake was flat and black, stilled by the hemlocks and firs that'd choked the flow of water. Broken and split limbs stuck out of the murk like woody and twisted arms, where hidden in the reeds, toads and frogs croaked offbeat. Crickets a crispy rap song. Tiny sparks; greens, blues, and yellows popped like concert lights. Something magical all around her. The buzzing sounds. The eerie night more beautiful than fearsome. It made her skin tingle. She wondered why he hadn't been with her before: this time, this way, this late, this awestruck.

He reached for her cigarette and kissed her. Mouth open, she kissed him back in a forbidden fashion, and him, without swallowing, his saliva bubbling at the corners of his mouth, worked his tongue its way down her throat.

Coming up to the lake, she heard the slap of zorries on the bottoms of bare feet. Giggles, minuscule like Chiclets, and the girls from class, arriving together, suddenly swarmed around them like mosquitoes. Stronger than the meager insects, they tugged at him, pulling him up by his hands and arms.

He laughed. "You coming?" he asked her.

She wondered why—after such a kiss, why he didn't resist. "No," she said, "I'm staying," and from behind is back, she blew a softer, gentler kind of kiss.

And alone, without her shoes, one sank, and the other had floated away, she sat and waited for him to return. She thinks of herself a girlfriend or young wife on a dock, small ships drift at sea, waving her soldier boy goodbye.

She's called to the back. This is it...Fucksticks again! —And after, she's done, she sits back down in the same frozen metal chair with her knees together, feet pigeoned, straps slipping off her shoulders, and she waits, and waits, and waits. He doesn't show. On the bus ride back, head

against the window, the heavy feeling the normality is trusted madly upon her and she wipes her nose dry. Straight to her room, she climbs in bed, crawls crabways across the sheets, and turns onto her side. Sharp, obtrusive pains inside jab the wadded pillow clamped between her legs. She bleeds and cries and falls asleep to the sounds of pipes speaking in the walls: pipes breaking, valves sticking, the wind sucking, termites at play, sex at play, lovemaking, arguing, hitting, grieving, an old movie playing, ecstasy in the bloodstream, a slinky toy down the steps, sleeves rolled up, memories attached, hearts attached, breaking, broken...whispers of the alpha and omega...forever inside these walls, pipes chittering, banging, thrumming, jeeze about to burst. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The phone rings. It's him.

"Do you want to get together, do something?" he asks.

"Fuck you," she says.

She goes back to sleep weightless, because she dreams of being on the space shuttle.

The next morning she wakes and before she realizes where she is, she'd dressed, rinsed her mouth, slipped on her sandals, turned off the light in her bedroom, snuck out the front door of the house, petted the cat's arching, furry and pebbled spine, walked two blocks in the bruising light of morning, caught the bus, the 27, paid the token, and ridden, head against the window, back to the east side of town, to the clinic. Now she stands across the street, looking at the seamless red door, a hopeless past tense hits her the way a gun clicks a sound with no bullet loaded. She goes into the nearby Quik-Mart, buys a Twinkie and pack of cigarettes, and even though she is underage, she knows that the man who sells them from behind the thick-glass booth likes her. The store smells of styrofoam coolers and packaged luncheon meats, and she strikes the match with nervous awkwardness, lights the cigarette, and throws down the match. She eats the

Twinkie, tonguing first the mellow cream, and scans the magazine at the rack, spotting a Hollywood starlet showing off her naked, swollen belly right on the cover. Though velvety and smooth, it's exploitive and piggish. She shoves the Twinkie in her mouth, while shoving the magazine back behind the Popular Mechanics. *Ten Extreme Motorcycles*.

She thinks there's nothing magical; a smelly rabbit out of a fucked-up hat.

Outside she picks up the payphone and calls him. "I was there for you," she says into the oily receiver.

"I know," he says, breathing tinny.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

There is a white bird that crosses the sky. Then another. Wet ocean air basks. Salt curls her hair. And she leaves the phone hanging, dangling, twisting.

"Hello, Katie? Hello, hello . . ."

There is a future, and she sees it. Out there is something she was supposed to be part of. A lie. And yet there is nothing but staged truth. And truth reeks of shit. In the parking lot close to the mart, she feels the air back of her neck, although clouds of white flutter stand still. Then something, someone looks and smells too familiar.

—My name is Katie, what's yours?

—I haven't any answers, if that's what you're truly asking.

—I just asked your name, that's all.

—Did your mother ever tell you not to smoke?

—I suppose.

—I bet she's told that smoking leads to all sorts of things.

—I suppose.

—Do you have another?

—No. What are you doing out here?

—Damn questions. You won't get the truth from me.

—Why do you keep thinking I'm here to ask for the truth?

—Again with the questions!

She quickly asks what she's long awaited. "Of all," she cries. "Was I loved?"

Suddenly a light, or cloud, or aura, but something rises up in the Quik-Mart parking lot.

Quixotic sand swirls across the asphalt, and she wakes to streams of faint hellos.

When they'd make love they'd lie against stomachs, chins touching, sandy fields all around them. Fingers splayed and claw at the soft tissues as if raking sand, and she'd feel the swell of her ribcage against the pan of his, and a pain through her breasts like two heartaches. Other times they're in his room, a dark-paneled room, mattress on a greenly shagged rug, dirty and frayed, bits of paper, lost buttons, tiny conch shells, earring backings, and crushed in the yarn, brown M&M's. He was her first and only. But she just his last.

She drops her cigarette, tucks at her waist, realizing that this whole time, she's been on the phone. Alone. Least she thinks alone.

Well before all this, she's at school. Students fill the halls. The marching band is practicing in a room nearby. Occasionally, a tuba burps through the grist cinderblock. She opens her locker. Inside, her pink sweater with pearled buttons balled up next to her textbooks, in the back, a pair of rubber zorries, a sweet-scented candle, loose pens and markers, caps off, tips dry, and in front, is a cup. Then past the junk, the books, the paper, a Burger King cup, waxed-rim chewed, and



inside, is a bangle. An artifact she's never seen before. She slides it on her wrist, and at the bottom of the cup, circled by a brown ring of dry Coke, are the words, "I love you." She cautiously looks side-to-side, closes her locker. The band stops, but her mood jumps, and she hurries to the fence out by the fields, where purplely wild flowers flourish like weeds. The skies are blue. The sand whirls in the parking lot.

And there comes a time, when everything goes right, and it is hard to believe that anything could ever, ever go wrong in love, in life, in truth.

Hello. Hello.