

As faces go, Lettie Buckley’s was an ugly one. She figured this to be the objective truth. She’d had her suspicions since kindergarten, when girls started trying on both the word and its opposite, as though each were, respectively, a stained apron or sparkly tutu from a newfound dress-up box. Suspicion converted to conviction, though, one muggy May day when she was twelve, in her school cafeteria at lunchtime.

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The air-conditioning vents blasted. It was unclear whether the Jamison Middle School vice-principal meant for this frigidness to combat the outside humidity, or to offset the hormonal heat of one-hundred-and-fifty seventh graders who, after three irrefutable dings over the loudspeaker, enjoyed lunch together in the same room, in the same half-hour period. Well, in this case the words “enjoyed” and “together” could mislead: scores of these pimpled pubescents found no enjoyment whatsoever in the thirty-minute respite from classes—although one mightn’t have known it from their rehearsed nonchalance—and the only togetherness in the salami-scented atrium was reserved for the well-established cliques that roosted daily in the same locales they’d claimed back in September when the madness began.

At the room’s centermost table, Carl Jefferson and company—a group of boys who, on the whole (and as far as twelve-year olds go), were good at sports and possessed no glaring genetic defects—were deep into a lively game of charades. That’s what they called it, at least. But instead of gestures as clues, the players employed edibles to help their teammates guess the lucky classmate who’d been chosen, without consent, as that round’s answer. Officially, like charades, the player giving hints wasn’t allowed to talk.

A few minutes into the game, though, someone had declared that, unofficially, players could use words at the end of each round—in moments of dire need.

The current round was especially riveting. Danny Tromper had draped long strings of plain spaghetti over his head, rubbed cherry filling from a donut onto his lips, and finally, right before time was called, twittered daintily, “I’m so perfect, everybody loves me!” Leaping from his seat, Gil Martinez shouted, “Lyssa Harvey!” and scored them a point. Two tables over, Lyssa, the prettiest girl in seventh grade, rolled her eyes and plopped a plump green grape into her perfect mouth.

At the table diagonal from Lyssa’s, tucked into its farthest corner, Lettie Buckley hunched over her ham and cheese sandwich and studied the delicate circles Lyssa’s jaw made as she chewed her grape with grace. When, after twenty tiny rotations, Lyssa finally swallowed the digestible morsels of sweet pulp and tart skin, her throat barely tightened. It was effortless. Whenever Lettie ate anything, all of her neck muscles contracted into a combined special forces unit, battle-hardened and with a singular purpose: to funnel the oversized onslaught of carbohydrates down the dark gorge of her esophagus. The assaults always scattered mustard remains across her muzzle.

A thunderous “Game point!” drew Lettie’s focus back to the charades and, more precisely, to Carl Jefferson’s tousled blonde waves. He was up, his team’s last hope. Danny Tromper licked leftover donut from his lips and taunted, “This is game! Better not EFF it up, mother EFFer, ’cause this is GAME!”

Carl gave Danny a look that, in no uncertain terms, told him to shut the fuck up. Then, cradling a tray full of food, he climbed on top of his stool. Lettie felt the thrill she did each time she saw Carl step onto the pitcher’s mound. The surrounding tables (and

Danny Tromper) grew still. The torsos of Carl’s teammates tilted forward. The teachers on lunch duty, stuffing their faces near the doorway, pretended not to see.

Carl’s face assumed its ninth-inning composure as he looked to Gil Martinez monitoring the clock’s second hand. Finger suspended in midair, Gil whispered, “Wait for it, wait for it...”

The silence overtaking the atrium spread outward from their center table. It reminded Lettie of what she’d learned in history class about the bombing of Hiroshima and how a blast wave travels radially from an explosion site.

“GO!”

Carl’s pointer digit dove into a muddy glob atop his tray. As he drew with chocolate pudding a big circle around each eye, one of his teammates called out, “It’s a Four-Eyes!”

Carl nodded vehemently and motioned to keep guessing.

Lettie pushed her frames up the bridge of her nose and telepathically advised Carl that he should give another clue. Half their class wore glasses.

“Show us something else, dude! We need one that’s like, pa-CIF-ic!”

Carl’s eyes searched the lunch table.

“Forty-five seconds!” Gil shouted.

Carl spotted a crumpled ball of foil and bent for it, accidentally tipping his tray and spilling red Kool-Aid on Danny Tromper’s khakis. Danny jumped up, cussing at him. One of Carl’s teammates shrieked, “Danny got his period!” Carl slammed down the tray and thrust his fistful of foil toward the clock. His trio of teammates refocused as Danny stomped off to the boys’ room.

In solidarity, Lettie’s fingers gripped the foil around her sandwich as she watched Carl hurry to separate the crushed aluminum. He finally managed to tear a strip and mold it to his front teeth. He flashed the table a grotesque smile.

“Capped teeth?” someone ventured.

Carl shook his head.

Another friend called out, “No, you shithead, they’re braces!”

Carl clapped at him as Gil Martinez barked, “Thirty seconds!”

His teammates scanned the perimeter, taking frantic stabs at various four-eyed, metal-mouthed seventh graders. Name after name was catapulted into the atrium, but Carl rejected each. The owners, not sure if it was worse to be identified and rejected or identified and accepted, shrunk into their seats to silently deliberate. After the tenth incorrect guess, Carl threw back his head in frustration.

Lettie dug a chunk of sandwich crust out of her own bracket and felt her stomach drop; she was nervous for Carl. There wasn’t much time left. He’d better think of a really good clue, and fast.

He shot forward and snatched from a friend’s tray a packet of ketchup. He ripped it open and squeezed a bit onto his finger. From the first red dot he painted on his forehead, Lettie knew what he was doing.

“They’ve got zit-face!” blurted the friend.

Carl pointed at him excitedly.

Gil Martinez sang, “Fifteen seconds!”

His face a canvas of adolescent misery, Carl flung the empty ketchup packet to the ground and surveyed his vast audience. Half the cafeteria—now confident they were

out of harm’s way—was in hysterics. A cohort of smitten girls stood ready with paper towels. Lettie marveled at how all the attention didn’t throw Carl off his game one bit; he still looked entirely alert, hovering at the precipice of his next idea.

Then, for a brief second, Lettie thought she felt his eyes meet hers. But before she could be sure, Carl was bending down, grabbing for the same spaghetti Danny had used for Lyssa Harvey’s hair. He planted the fistful at the back of his head, and Lettie watched the noodles hang there limply, like a soggy ponytail.

Gil counted down the last ten seconds, “10, 9...”

One of Carl’s teammates hollered, “It’s a girl!”

Carl bobbed his head up and down. Then, another light bulb flicking on, he puffed out his cheeks.

“...7, 6...”

A second voice called, “A fat one!”

Carl lit up. They were getting it now.

“...5...”

A plea rang out, “You can talk you can talk—say something!”

Carl dropped the spaghetti to his side.

“...3...”

He filled his lungs.

“...2...”

His words rang clear in the final second, “I’m the ugliest girl in the whole school!”

Just before his teammates all screamed the same answer, Lettie felt the acidic twinge of leftover ham and cheese rising up her esophagus. Drowning out even the vice-principal screeching through his megaphone, a loud voice in her head commanded, *Tomorrow it's green grapes for you, Lettie Buckley. You'll nibble them slowly, and with grace.*

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So, she sat on her back porch that dense evening, grinding her teeth and considering the objective truth of her ugliness. She tried fiddling with geometry as a distraction, but for some reason the Pythagorean theorem had lost its allure. Her daddy sat beside her—rifle in one hand, a bottle of Lone Star in the other. The lawn chair's vinyl webbing stretched under his weight. His eyes squinted at the line of wilted honeysuckle that marked where their backyard acre ended and the rear lot of Billy's Used Auto Parts began.

The harsh hum of cicadas made the hot evening feel hotter. The sun had assumed its six o'clock stance, smirking through the honeysuckle. Lettie's daddy shielded his eyes with his beer hand. This was prime time for spotting what he called the “ugly lil' sons-a-bitches” as they crouched in the golden grass, gnawing on god knows what—nuts probably, but it could be anything. Too often it was birdseed meant for the cardinals and purchased with his hard earned money. Thus armed with his .22 and self-righteousness, he peered through the glare and awaited the arrival of the vermin.

Lettie didn't share her daddy's hatred for the squirrels, but she joined him every evening for the back porch festivities because, although he didn't say much, she knew he liked the company. Well, she didn't know for sure, but she'd started to realize that

whenever she spent sunset on the porch, afterward her daddy cooked up two generous helpings of meat, and even some potatoes, whereas if she did her homework inside their trailer, she'd end up eating a microwaveable chicken pot-pie for supper. The occasional gunshot was a small price to pay for medium-rare chuck eye.

She tried to calculate c^2 but instead traced with her pencil eraser the constellation of pimples that seemed to have taken up permanent residence on her forehead. Why did Carl pick her as that final round's answer? He never spoke to her except during their tutoring sessions, and even then it mostly was just to gripe that it didn't make any sense how a fraction got bigger when you divided it by another fraction. But, she reminded herself, he had started telling her the past few Mondays about that day's baseball practice, and how it didn't matter how often Danny Tromper practiced his curve ball, he'd never beat out Carl for first-string. She would listen, nodding emphatically while correcting his work. His voice had this scratchy sound to it that made her want to wear colorful undies instead of white. Lettie blushed to think of the bright pink ones she had on now, which she'd bought at Wal-Mart a few days before: she had waited for her daddy to finish loading the truck with groceries and then had run back inside, pretending she'd forgotten notebook paper.

Still, Lettie had trouble making sense of how their improving conversation could lead to Carl humiliating her in front of the entire seventh grade. She thought that because he'd begun confiding in her, however superficially, it'd meant he was starting to like her. Maybe not *like* like her, but at least enough to notice her. But that must be what people meant when they said, “be careful what you wish for”: now that Carl knew she existed, she was a big fat pimply target.

The low whistle of a passing train swept into their backyard. Lettie listened, counting the total seconds it chugged along the tracks a quarter-mile off. *Forty-two*. She remembered how when she was small she'd clutch to her momma's floral-print skirt, and together they'd cross through the neighboring woods that opened onto a meadow where a long section of rusty track lay. They'd pick wildflowers, tie them into tiaras, and pretend to be secret princesses waiting for the train that would whisk them away to their castle. Seated side by side in the grass, her momma would tuck Lettie's stringy hair behind her ear and whisper, "You'll be beautiful one day, Lettie Lee, just like a princess." Then Lettie would correct her, "No, like you," which always made her momma cry. Lettie never could figure out why something nice and true made her sad. When eventually the train whistle sounded, her momma would rise, rest her hands on her hips, and stick her eyes to the approaching headlight. Lettie never watched the train. Instead she stayed seated, gazing up at her momma, whose chest, as the engine's churning grew louder, rose and fell in steadily expanding crests and troughs. It was as though she hoped the train would take her with it. A couple of years later, when her momma got up from the table during supper and never came back, Lettie knew it finally had.

The chugging died away. Lettie's daddy coughed up some phlegm. He spat at the dirt and took a swig of Lone Star, swishing it from cheek to cheek, keeping his eyes on the distant honeysuckle.

“Carl Jefferson's momma called the shop 'bout two in the p.m.”

He spoke so infrequently that whenever her daddy began a conversation, it took Lettie a second to overcome the surprising boom of his voice before she could register his words. This particular revelation she found even more shocking than his voice.

“Why?”

Her daddy lifted his beer for another drink but stopped just short of his mouth. His whole body stiffened. Never glancing from the honeysuckle, he set down the bottle, scooted to the chair’s edge, and raised his rifle.

“Oh I see yuh, yuh ugly lil’ sonuvabitch.”

The squirrel danced under the honeysuckle. Filtered sunlight speckled its coat. As the animal flitted, the light and shadows shifted, too, making it difficult to pinpoint the outline of its soon-to-be carcass. Her daddy followed its path with the barrel of his .22, ready to fire at its first pause. A miss would scare the rodent back into the brush and raise her daddy’s blood pressure, so he waited for stillness.

Lettie knew better than to speak in times like these. The suspense, though, was killing her. What could *Carl’s* momma have to say to *her* daddy?

The buzz of cicadas rose to a higher pitch. Then, without warning, the squirrel stood motionless on its hind legs, right at the honeysuckle’s edge.

A second later her daddy pulled the trigger. Lettie wondered if the animal sensed it because just as the rifle sounded, she watched its tail disappear into the brush.

“Gahhd dammit! I had it. I swore I had it!”

He bent for his bottle and slouched in his chair. He still watched the honeysuckle, but now as the silenced victim of a serious injustice.

For sensitivity’s sake, Lettie counted to ten before asking again. “Why’d Carl’s momma call you?”

Her daddy’s thumb wiped condensation from his beer bottle in a series of repetitive downward strokes. It reminded Lettie of how she rubbed her thinking stone when deciding on an answer.

“Carl. Carl Jefferson. That’s that boy you been schoolin’, innit?”

Her daddy said “school” like “skewl.” It bothered her.

“Yessir.” She found it hard to look at him so instead directed her answer to an isosceles triangle.

“He do somethin’ to you or somethin’?”

The day’s charades flashed in her mind. “No sir.”

“Well he musta done somethin’.”

Why did her daddy think that? What did he know?

“ ’Cause he’s headed this way now to ’pologize.”

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Later, when looking back on that evening, Lettie wouldn’t remember how she answered her daddy, if she’d answered at all. She also would have no recollection of the knocking at their trailer’s front door, of dragging her Velcro-sandaed feet inside and across the pea-soup-colored carpet, or of failing many times to grip and turn the aluminum knob before thinking to dry her drenched palm on her Algebra All-Stars t-shirt. She would remember, though, opening the door to that look on Carl’s momma’s face. It made Lettie wish she were wearing her satin church dress instead.

“Good evening—Lettie Buckley?”

“Yes ma’am.” Lettie’s voice sounded to her like those squeaks she once heard coming from inside their bathroom wall. Her daddy had said that likely a mouse was trapped and dying in the fuzzy pink insulation.

“I’m Carl’s mother, Mrs. Jefferson.” Her peach lace glove flinched, then reasserted its grasp on her purse. “Carl, your salutations, please.”

She spoke the pretty kind of Southern, barely saying the “r” in her son’s name. Lettie couldn’t believe such an elegant lady was standing on her trailer’s front steps.

“Hi Lettie.” His gaze hovered just to the right of her head. Lettie thought his voice was not unkind.

“Hello Carl.”

“So this here’s Carl Jefferson?” Her daddy appeared and flanked her left side. “I heard my Lettie’s been schoolin’ you.”

Lettie winced.

Carl’s eyes widened as he swallowed. “Sir?”

“Been teachin’ you your numbers.”

“She has, Mr. Buckley,” confirmed Mrs. Jefferson. “Carl’s a new student, thanks to your daughter.”

“My Lettie’s the smartest girl in the whole school.”

Lettie didn’t understand why her daddy had picked this moment to start talking so much. “Maybe, Mrs. Jefferson,” she heard herself chirp, “you’d care for some iced tea? It’s fresh and... iced.”

Mrs. Jefferson put a glove to her heart. “That is kind of you.” She looked expectantly at Lettie’s daddy, whose massive shoulders blocked the door.

“Oh shore shore, right this a’way.”

Her daddy plodded ahead of Mrs. Jefferson. Carl passed Lettie without a glance, his right palm patting a sort of stiff, erratic rhythm against his leg. She watched the back of Carl Jefferson’s radiant head cross the threshold of her home. The skin above his shirt collar sparkled with sweat. Lettie realized some of her own had pooled under the band of her too-small training bra.

She stepped inside and saw her daddy offering the Jeffersons seats on their tattered gray couch. Yesterday he’d spilled cream of tomato soup on it, and Lettie hadn’t been able to vanquish the stain.

“I should get momma’s upholstered chair for Mrs. Jefferson—”

“Don’t trouble yourself, dear.” Lettie saw her spy the orange splotch and tuck her chiffon skirt beneath her. “An ice-cold glass of tea would be heavenly.”

Lettie nearly sprinted to the refrigerator. From its beige door, an 8”x10” of this year’s school picture beamed. She’d thought it a fine photo when taken—good even—but now it was nothing short of repugnant, highlighting every erroneous, offensive detail of her face. Lettie hurried to remove the magnets, then flipped over the picture and stuck them back in place—now over an 8”x10” tabula rasa. She added a few heavy-duty ones to be safe.

She lifted the plastic pitcher from its cold shelf and searched the cabinets for glasses. All they owned were an assortment of plastic tumblers featuring various sports teams’ insignia. She selected four of the least faded and arranged them and the pitcher atop the only tray she could find, which featured Santa, his reindeer, and a jolly “Ho Ho Ho!” in a speech balloon.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Jefferson, smiling, after Lettie set the tray on their coffee table. She was one of those women who smiled only with her mouth. Lettie’s momma had been different: each time she smiled it was as though she were breathing the whole world into her face.

“It’s not Christmas,” Carl chimed from the opposite end of the couch.

Mrs. Jefferson laughed politely, pointing at a cup, “Oh Carl! The Oilers! Football’s glory days, so says Mr. Jefferson.”

“Your husband’s right in the head.” Lettie’s daddy poured Mrs. Jefferson some tea, tilting the pitcher with great care. He kept straightening his back as he sat. Lettie thought he could’ve looked almost refined had he not been wearing his mechanic’s uniform, the torso section unbuttoned, hanging loosely at his hips.

“He sure thinks so!” tittered Mrs. Jefferson. She took the smallest sip of tea. Then, seeming to remember something, she turned to her son. “Carl?”

He sank into their couch, arms crossed. His face was imperious, withdrawn—how it looked when Lettie corrected his math work. He had eyes only for the coffee table leg.

Mrs. Jefferson lowered her voice, more for effect than privacy. “We will stay here as long as it takes for you to apologi—”

Lettie’s daddy piped up. “Maybe that back porch’d be fitter for talkin’.”

Carl looked to his mother. Lettie did, too.

“I suppose that works just as well.”

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In the forgiving, seven o’clock glow, Lettie found it harder than usual to look at Carl. He sat not three feet from her at the edge of her daddy’s chair, elbows on knees,

eyes vaguely seeing the honeysuckle. His impenetrable profile made her chest ache. Every so often he glanced over his shoulder at the living room window, treating her to a view of his whole face, awash in bronze light.

She hoped he would break the silence first, and soon. She had no clue what to say and was terrified that her supper-deprived stomach would speak before either of them. To achieve some sort of serenity, she started listing and spelling in her mind all the state capitals in alphabetical order. She was on the “s” in Lansing when Carl finally opened his mouth.

“That yours?”

He pointed at her daddy’s .22, lying on the ground next to a dead potted cactus.

“My daddy’s.”

“What’s he shoot with it?”

“Squirrels.”

“Squirrels?”

“Yeah.”

“Funny.”

Lettie didn’t think so, but she laughed anyway.

Carl scanned the open acre of grass, its uniform flatness interrupted only by an old charcoal grill and a pile of last winter’s rotting firewood.

“Don’t squirrels like trees? Y’all just have grass.”

“They live out a ways. In those bushes.”

“You ever shoot one?”

“Once.”

He met her eyes for the first time that evening. She wanted to turn away but couldn't.

“What was it like?”

“It didn't die.”

“You missed?”

“No, I mean it didn't die right away.”

“But it died.”

“Yeah.”

“How long it take?”

“A minute. Maybe two.”

It was the longest he'd ever looked at her.

“So it suffered.”

Lettie remembered the squirrel's crying. Like a plea from someone who's already given up.

“My daddy took the gun and shot it in the head. It died after that.”

Carl turned to face the honeysuckle. She felt like she was shrinking.

“But it's not like they serve any purpose,” she proclaimed. “They're just a bunch of ugly lil' sons-a-bitches.”

Carl laughed. She'd made him laugh.

“Look,” his spine straightened. “There's one now.”

Lettie peered through the dusk and found it, crouching under the bush with the most blossoms.

Carl grabbed the gun and offered it to her. “Try and shoot him.”

He grinned. It was like they shared a secret.

“Hurry,” he urged, his eyes targeting the squirrel, “before he runs back in.”

The gun gleamed in his hands.

“Lettie, come on.” He’d never called her by her name before. “It’s just an ugly ol’ squirrel. It doesn’t matter.”

Lettie watched it nibbling something brown, minding its own business. It had no idea it was ugly. No idea it didn’t matter.

Her voice clotted her throat. “I guess I can try.”

When Carl transferred the gun to Lettie’s hands, his fingertips brushed her palms. Lettie could feel his eyes glued to her as she lifted the .22 and tucked its wooden butt into the soft tissue above her underarm. Her left finger poised on the trigger, she squinted through the scope to find the squirrel’s bushy tail.

“You got it?” Carl whispered.

She shifted her aim a centimeter left so that the scope marked its head. “Yeah.”

Everything grew still and quiet. The only sound was Carl’s heart beating. Or maybe it was hers. On the third pulse, Lettie pulled the trigger. The squirrel fell backward—simply, without any fuss.

Carl burst into cheers and hooted, “That was awesome!” Underneath his celebration, Lettie thought she heard something crying. She put down the gun and headed for the honeysuckle.

She found the squirrel lying limp in the grass, its eyes wide, staring blankly at a cluster of yellow dandelions. It wasn’t crying; the sound was only a train whistle in the distance. Lettie sat beside the carcass and studied the delicate curvature of its spine

against the earth. If it weren't for the open eyes and little bloody circle on its temple, it could have been sleeping. *Forty-two*, she counted. Then it was gone.

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“So ya got one!” said her daddy's voice from behind her.

She saw the shadows in the yard had deepened. “What time is it?”

“Bout ten after eight.”

“Carl left?”

“His momma wasn't too happy 'bout the gunshot.” Her daddy crouched down.

“So he 'pologized?”

Lettie stared into the blacks of the squirrel's eyes. It didn't seem to matter that he hadn't. So she nodded.

“What'd he do anyhow?”

“Made fun of me. In front of some people.”

He cleared his throat. “What'd he say?”

She picked a dandelion and wrapped its stem around her finger. “Said I was the dumbest girl in the whole school.”

Her daddy let out a big bellow of a laugh. “Damned idjit!” He stood up and tucked his undershirt into his jumpsuit. “You're the smartest girl in that place. That's the objective truth.” He started back to their trailer and, as an afterthought, gestured behind him at the squirrel, “I'll take care 'a that after supper.”

Lettie unwrapped the dandelion from her finger and picked two more. She tied them into a tiara for the dead. The sunny petals brightened the squirrel's cold, stiff face, and Lettie Buckley thought that in this moment, it was something close to beautiful. ❖