

EAST OF CHIQUITA

It's so quiet outside the school, Renee can hear the power lines hum. The buses and all the cars have pulled away, and through a window of the school's main office the big round clock glows beneath the exit sign. Almost midnight. Beyond the school grounds the dark Florida night is both close and vast.

"Maybe we should call your mom," Renee says to Erica who's sitting on a suitcase.

"She's at Larry's this weekend," Erica says.

"I thought she was there last weekend."

"She was." Erica takes a pocket mirror and a tube of lipstick out of her purse and starts putting it on. When she's done she smacks her lips together. "Try your mom again."

"I'm telling you, I let it ring a zillion times. Once she takes her pills, she's out." Renee steps off the curb and looks up the street for signs of her older sister's car. "Lisa said she'd be here."

"Yeah, that'll happen."

"I don't see *your* sister coming," Renee says.

"That's because it's, like, the middle of the night and my sister has, like, a job."

"Lisa's got a job."

Erica snorts and starts filing her nails.

Renee's sister Lisa is a closer at the McDonald's on Del Prado, all the way in town. Her boyfriend Frankie works there too. That's probably where she is now, making out with Frankie in the walk-in.

Renee sits down on her suitcase and unzips the side pocket. She takes a cigarette out of the crumpled pack she stole from her mother's purse before leaving on the school trip to D.C.

The book of matches tucked inside the cellophane are from the Sheraton where they stayed. It's the same book that Scott Hurley was playing chicken with in the lobby of the hotel with some of the other boys until the lady with the shoulder pads told them to stop.

"Do you have to do that?" Erica waves her hand in front of her face. "You're gonna die of lung cancer."

Renee lets the smoke spill out of her mouth. She's still working on inhaling. "At least I won't die of hairspray cancer." Erica's hair looks exactly like it did when they left the hotel this morning, her bangs a good two inches high.

"I should have let Tracy Lynn's mom take me home."

"Tracy Lynn's a fucking weirdo," Renee says, puffing on her Camel. Tracy Lynn uses wide-ruled paper and carries WWF folders. In Washington, she hung all over Scott Hurley.

"Why? Because she doesn't wear concert T-shirts or part her hair in the middle?"

"Eat me."

"Who the hell's Judas Priest anyway? Isn't that, like, from the Bible?"

Renee doesn't know who they are. It's her sister's shirt. Lisa doesn't like to wear it anymore, though, because it's not a show she saw with Frankie. "It's a band, idiot."

"Yeah, a hippie band."

Renee flicks the ashes from the cigarette with her thumb like she's seen Frankie do. They glow red as they fall. "What the hell's up with Tracy Lynn and Hulk Hogan?"

"What?" Erica asks.

"Hulk Hogan. Tracy Lynn's, like, obsessed with that guy."

"What do you care?" Erica says. "At least people know who he is."

"Why don't you marry him, then?"

“God Renee, grow up.”

“You grow up.”

Across the field they see headlights. A car turns onto Chiquita.

Erica stands up and picks her shorts out of her butt. “It’s about freakin’ time.”

Renee stubs the cigarette out and throws it into the bushes. She puts a stick of Juicy Fruit into her mouth. It’s warm and soft from being in her jeans pocket.

“Don’t be a bitch,” Renee says. “She doesn’t like you already.”

“Like I care.”

They watch as the car speeds down the deserted boulevard, past the Gulf Middle School sign.

“Shit!” Erica says, stamping her sandaled foot. “What’re we gonna do, Renee?”

“Don’t spaz,” Renee says. “Give me a dime.”

They walk over to the payphone. Renee lets it ring and ring, then she hears silence.

“Mom?”

“Who is this?” Her mother sounds frightened.

“It’s Renee. You awake?”

Her mother doesn’t answer but makes strange noises into the phone, almost like she’s singing.

According to a pamphlet Renee stole last year from her mom’s psychiatrist’s office, people like her mom can’t help doing weird, inappropriate things. But that doesn’t make it any better. Especially now when she and Erica are stranded.

“Mom!”

Erica giggles and motions with her hand. Renee turns the earpiece so they can both listen.

Her mother keeps making those weird sounds.

“She sounds drunk,” Erica whispers.

Renee wishes she were drunk. At least then there’d be a possibility of her sobering up and getting in the car. “Mom, I’m at school. Me and Erica need picked up.”

“Okay. I’ll get it.” Her mother sounds suddenly awake, but Renee knows she’s still out of it.

“We need a ride, mom. Lisa didn’t show up.”

“I can’t find – Do you know where – ”

“Where what, Mom?” Renee can picture her mother in the kitchen lifting up the stove burners, opening the fridge. She probably doesn’t even have the lights on. It used to scare Renee when her mother did this, but now she just thinks it’s funny. She bites her lip and looks at Erica who has her hand over her mouth.

“Where – ”

“Where what, Mom?”

There’s a long pause and Renee knows she’s just standing there staring at the wall.

“Mom? Are you awake?”

“Why are you at school?” Her mother has snapped out of it and sounds like Tracy Lynn’s mom did earlier when she asked Renee, “Are you sure you girls have a ride?” It annoys Renee when her mother suddenly sounds normal; she knows it won’t last.

“We went to Washington, remember?”

Another long pause. “Who?”

Erica makes a face, and Renee stifles a laugh. “I set fire to the school, mom. They arrested me.”

“Tell her they’re gonna throw you in the slammer,” Erica whispers.

They both break out in giggles.

“Okay, honey. I’ll get it.”

“Your mom’s a trip,” Erica says after Renee hangs up.

“You should see her when she doesn’t take her pills.”

“What’s in those things, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Renee says. “But Lisa took ‘em one time and said she saw a talking manatee behind Frankie’s house.”

“Trippy,” says Erica.

Renee looks out across the bus ramp to Chiquita. Beyond the school sign there’s nothing but a few scattered houses, their porch lights twinkling like stars that fell but never went out.

“Too bad Skip’s gone,” Erica says. “I bet he’d come get us.”

Renee chews on a hangnail that’s beginning to throb. Skip was her mother’s last boyfriend, an ex-con who cooked at the Pink Palms Diner where her mother sometimes went for coffee. Skip was short and bald and had a handlebar moustache and told funny stories about his days working with a carnival. He called her mother Peanut, which made her mother laugh like a little kid.

Renee thought for sure he’d be the guy who’d make it through one of her mother’s freak-outs, but the first time he came home and found her sitting at the kitchen table with five cigarettes burning in the overflowing ashtray, crying about how the cat had killed all those poor Jews in Europe, he packed his bags and left.

“I’ve seen some loco shit, kiddo,” he told Renee outside, shoving an old guitar into his El Camino. “But your mom takes the piñata.”

“You sure you can’t call Larry’s?” Renee asks Erica.

“You really want me to?”

They both know that if Erica’s mom finds out Lisa didn’t show, she wouldn’t let Erica hang out with Renee anymore. Erica’s mom thinks Lisa’s on drugs and that her mom’s crazy. It’s all true, but still. Renee doesn’t see why it should be held against *her*. Renee’s never touched anything harder than a cigarette and it isn’t her fault that her hands shake.

Renee wonders how far her duplex is from here. She lives on Skyline, which is just the next main road east of Chiquita. A mile, maybe. Two? Three? She’s no good with distances. All she knows is that it takes ten minutes by bus, and if it weren’t for the canals it’d probably only take two.

She picks up her suitcase. It seems heavier now that she knows she has to carry it.

“C’mon,” she says.

“Where you going?”

“My house.”

Erica kicks her suitcase. “I’m not walking all that way.”

“You’d rather hang around here till Monday?”

Erica snorts. “Ra *-ther*.” Then, quieter, “No.”

“C’mon, then.”

At the end of Sandpiper Lane, Erica stops. “I gotta pee.”

Renee sets her suitcase down and rubs her hand. Her fingers are already stiff.

“Cover me,” Erica says, squatting down in the flowerbed.

“What are you, Rambo?”

“I’m serious, Renee. Some weirdo could be out here.”

“Just you pissin’ in the bushes.”

“Renee!”

“Whatever, Erica. There’s no one out here but you and me and the panthers.”

“No there’s not,” Erica says, but by the sound of it she’s trying to go as fast as she can.

“You better pee quieter. They can hear it.”

Erica looks up and loses her balance.

“It probably doesn’t matter,” Renee says. “I think they can smell it too.”

Erica catches herself with her hand. “I thought that was blood.”

“You’re thinking of sharks.”

Erica tells Renee to get a tissue out of her purse. When she’s done and has her shorts pulled up, she throws the tissue over the spot and kicks dirt over it. She looks at Renee. “So they won’t smell it.”

Renee laughs. “You’re so easy.” She picks up her suitcase and starts walking.

Erica falls in behind. “You shouldn’t joke about things like that.”

“You’re just mad ‘cause you fell for it.”

They walk in silence and turn onto Chiquita. Renee wonders why anyone would build a school way out in the middle of nowhere. The only kid she knows who lives out here is Jennifer Schmidt, a girl from Pennsylvania who always talks about horses. She even makes her own T-shirts, with iron-on pictures of horses. Some of the other girls make fun of her. “This ain’t that kind of town, farm girl,” Renee’s heard them say.

Renee used to have trouble with those other girls, too, until she made friends with Erica. Erica isn’t exactly popular, but her bad reputation makes her seem tough enough to leave alone.

Rumor has it she once gave Chris Durham a blowjob during a Boat Safety Assembly. “It was just a hand job,” Erica’s told her. “You think I’d put my mouth on it?”

Renee doesn’t know what to think. She’s never had a boyfriend, although she was once kissed by an older guy named Dominick. He came by the house one time looking for Frankie. Her mother was in her bedroom with the door shut where she had been for days. Renee had wanted to leave, but there was no place to go. Dominick sat on the piano bench drinking a beer that one of her mother’s boyfriends had left. “Lisa never told me she had a pretty little sister,” he said. He had black hair and a shiny nose. When he leaned over and kissed her, Renee thought, so this must be Frenching. When he was done, her whole face was wet and he asked her if she wanted to take a ride. That’s when Lisa came home, saying, “What have you two been up to?” as though Renee had enjoyed it. Still, she called Erica that same afternoon just to brag. “He went up my shirt and everything,” Renee told her.

“I wonder what time it is,” Erica says. She stops walking and looks up. “Can’t you tell by where the moon is?”

“You’re thinking of the sun.”

Erica cranes her neck and turns around in a circle. “I don’t even see the moon.”

Renee looks up too. “Maybe there isn’t one tonight.”

“I saw it earlier,” Erica says.

“It must have set, then.”

“Doesn’t it set when the sun comes up?”

“Not always.”

Erica turns in another circle, still looking at the sky. “Well, that’s stupid.”

Renee's glad she wore tennis shoes. Erica's had to stop twice already to get rocks out of her sandals. When Erica stops for a third time, Renee sits down on her suitcase. "I might just turn fourteen by the time we get home."

"Hey," says Erica, hopping on one foot. "It wasn't my stupid sister who forgot to come get us." She tips her suitcase on its side and sits down on it Indian-style. "I think I have a blister."

Renee takes the matches out of her bag and strikes one up. Kneeling down next to Erica, she takes a look. The blister is the size of a nickel, right beneath her big toe.

"Hand me my purse," Erica says, squeezing at it. From her make-up bag she takes out a safety pin.

"You gonna pop it?" Renee asks, blowing the match out and lighting another.

"Uh, yeah," Erica says, hiking her foot closer to her chest. She holds the pin in the flame for a few seconds before bringing it down.

"You shouldn't come at it from the top," Renee says, blowing out the match. She puts her fingers in her mouth to cool the burn.

"I need some light here," Erica says. Then, after Renee strikes another match, "Why not?"

"You've got to prick it at the base, otherwise dirt and shit will get in there."

"Like this?" Erica asks, positioning the pin.

"Yeah." Renee leans over Erica's shoulder. Her hair smells like Aqua Net. Renee hopes Erica's not flammable. She must have used two cans of hairspray today.

Just as Erica's about to stick herself, the match goes out. "Renee!"

"Sorry, sorry." Renee goes to light another one.

“For God’s sake, just get my lighter out of my make-up bag.”

Erica’s lighter is a pink baby Bic. Renee’s seen her use it to melt her eyeliner pencil.

“Hold it steady,” Erica says. She pokes the side of the blister and squeezes the liquid out.

“Fucking gross!” she laughs.

Renee laughs, too. “Cool.”

They sit in silence, nothing around them but the sound of crickets and the faint hissing of the lighter. Erica sets the pin on the suitcase beside her foot and rubs her finger over the top of the blister. It looks soft and wet and pink.

“I need something to wipe my hands on,” Erica says, looking around. “Come ’ere.” She holds her finger up and wiggles it at Renee, laughing.

“Keep it away!” Renee screams, leaning back.

“I wish we could walk on water,” Renee says. They’ve made it down Chiquita and have just turned onto Trafalgar. “Wouldn’t it be nice to just cut through that field and walk right across the canals?”

“You shouldn’t say that,” Erica says. She’s got a piece of tissue stuck inside her sandal near her toe and is lugging her suitcase with both hands. With every step, it knocks against her knees.

“Why not?” Renee asks.

“It’s blasphemy, that’s why. Everybody knows only Jesus can walk on water.”

“Okay. I wish Jesus was here to carry us across the canals.”

“That’s blasphemy, too.”

“Why’s that blasphemy?” Renee asks.

“If you went to church, you’d know why,” Erica says.

“Oh, like you go?”

Erica shifts the suitcase to her left hand. “I’ve been.” Then, shifting it back to her right,
“More than you.”

“You give your preacher a hand job, too, didja?” Renee laughs, pushing Erica gently with her hand.

Erica stumbles a little. “Hey!” she says, righting herself. She looks at Renee and smiles a little. “What’s wrong with you anyway? If you’re gonna wish for anything, wish we were home already.”

Halfway down Trafalgar, a street lamp they’re walking under goes out. Erica kisses two of her fingers and touches her heart.

“Will you stop with that,” Renee says. Erica’s been doing it all weekend. When they drove over the train tracks in Georgetown, when she thought she saw a black cat near the Lincoln Memorial, when the clock radio in their hotel room said 11:11.

“Everybody knows it’s bad luck to walk underneath a burned out street light.”

“No. Just you, weirdo.”

“Whatever.”

Renee rolls her eyes. “Oh, I’m scared. We better watch out or some perv’s gonna come along and rape us.”

“I’m not scared. I kissed my heart.”

“Like he wouldn’t do you, too.”

“It wouldn’t matter,” Erica says. “I’ve already done it.”

Renee trips over her own feet and the suitcase slams into her shin. “What?” They step onto a bridge and Renee can hear fish jumping in the water. She looks at Erica, who’s smiling like she’s just read a funny note in the middle of English class.

“You’re so full of shit,” Renee says.

“Whatever. Don’t believe me.” Erica’s long permed hair sways across her shoulders as she walks.

“Who with?”

Erica keeps walking, her smile breaking and showing teeth.

“Tell me who,” Renee says.

Erica stops and turns her full-blown smile on Renee. “You promise not to tell?”

“Of course!”

“Cross your heart and hope to die.”

Renee does as she’s told, making the sign across her chest.

“And?” Erica says.

Renee touches her face. “Stick a needle in my eye.”

“That didn’t seem very sincere,” Erica says, acting like she’s going to turn away.

“Come on!”

“All right. It was Scott Hurley.”

Renee looks at Erica. Then across the road. Then back at Erica. “Scott Hurley? Tracy Lynn’s boyfriend, Scott Hurley?” She sets her suitcase down. “You’re kidding, right?”

Erica giggles. “I am so not kidding.”

There's a deep welt across Renee's palm. With her other hand she rubs the mark, staring at it until her eyes cross wetly. Scott Hurley wears Vans and says things like, "bitchin'." He plays football and lives near the yacht club.

"What's wrong with you?" Erica asks.

Renee pretends to have an eyelash loose and digs at her eye. She wipes her hand on her jeans. "When did you do it?" She asks Erica.

"Last night at the dance."

There must have been a hundred eighth-graders in that ballroom. "Are you talking about sex?"

"Uh, yeah," says Erica. "There was this place behind a curtain where they kept room service carts and trays and stuff. We went back there and started kissing. Then we did it underneath a table."

Renee remembers the curtain. It was a huge velvety thing that went all the way up to the ceiling. It was right near the snack table where she had spent most of the evening watching the other kids dance to Duran Duran and Madonna. Renee had stuffed herself with cheese puffs and ranch dip, but it was the sight of Scott Hurley slow dancing with Tracy Lynn to Foreigner's "I Want To Know What Love Is" that made her stomach hurt.

Tracy Lynn has braces and a gummy smile. She uses wide-ruled paper and carries WWF folders.

Tracy Lynn.

"You're lying," Renee says. "I saw him there with Tracy Lynn."

“He *was* with her. Earlier. But she got cramps or something and had to go lie down.”

Erica leans against the railing and examines her foot. “He only goes out with her because their mothers are friends. He thinks she’s a dork.”

Renee stares down into the canal, then across the fields. It’s so empty out here. Not a tree or a bush or even a ditch. She thought Scott had left when Tracy Lynn did, so she had too, going back to her room to fantasize about Scott dropping by her house sometime and French kissing her. Scott would sit on the piano bench and tell her she was beautiful, with her scuffed Nikes and long straight hair, which in her dream was blonde, not brown, and never tangled.

She looks at Erica. Her bangs are still perfectly poofed. “So, how was it?”

Erica readjusts the tissue in her shoe. “Okay, I guess.” She looks up at Renee and shrugs. “He smelled like laundry detergent.”

At the corner of Trafalgar and Skyline they stop again. This time Renee has to pee, which she does crouched behind a stop sign. Erica watches out for cars, even though they haven’t seen any since they started walking.

When she’s finished, Renee stands up and zips her jeans, happy she wore her comfortable pair. Last night at the dance she had worn Lisa’s old Jordache, the ones she had to lie down on the bed in and zip up with a pair of pliers. Frankie had laughed at her the first time she tried them on.

From where they’re standing they can see the lights from Cape High on Santa Barbara, the next major road down Trafalgar. Renee’s duplex is north on Skyline, and you can see the high school itself from her back porch. If they headed south, they’d get to Erica’s apartment complex.

When Renee and Erica met in the sixth grade they both lived in town, just two streets away from each other. They could get to the other's house in less than five minutes on foot by cutting through backyards and fields. Their moms had moved out to Skyline around the same time. Renee and Erica had been excited about living on the same street until they realized they would be ten times farther away.

"I don't see your house," Erica says, her hand on her forehead like a visor.

Renee grabs the handle of her suitcase and starts walking. This last stretch seems longer than Chiquita and Trafalgar put together.

"It feels like we should be in another state by now," Erica says, laughing in a way that doesn't sound like laughing. "Another planet, even, huh?" Erica shifts her suitcase to her other hand. "Another planet," she says again, her voice trailing off.

Renee knows it's not fair to be mad. She never told Erica she liked Scott Hurley. She didn't even know it herself until this trip when she had to sit next to him on the plane. He smiled at her when he caught her staring at him. He had long hair that fell over his eyes and a scar on his left hand shaped like a shovel. The kind of shovel that'd come with a small, plastic beach pail. She wanted to reach out and touch it. She had just worked up the nerve to ask him how it happened when Tracy Lynn came down the aisle asking if she minded switching. "Thanks a mil," Tracy Lynn had said, scooting in beside him.

Renee can almost see her house. She hopes her mom went back to sleep. And that Lisa's at Frankie's house and not passed out in her room with the stereo blaring. She doesn't want to have to sleep in the living room. Erica's never made fun of it, but Renee's still embarrassed about their furniture. They have two sectional couches that used to belong to Frankie's dad.

When she sleeps on them, her feet hang off the end and she wakes up with her butt wedged down between the cushions.

Since Erica's sister is out of high school and lives in Fort Myers, Erica gets her own room. She has a daybed with another one underneath that pulls out for company. Her sheets are a matching set, and they're always clean. The couches at Renee's house smell like Swamper, the cat Lisa found in the storm drain behind their house last year, the one her mother sometimes thinks is the reincarnation of Adolf Hitler.

"You know, I don't even like him," Erica says after a time.

Renee kicks at a stone and watches it bounce into the median. She stops and takes a cigarette out, but the book of matches is gone. She must have left it back on Chiquita.

"Let me use your lighter," she says, holding out her hand.

Erica stares at her, making no move to open her purse. "You know, if you wanted me to I could teach you how to use a curling iron."

Renee looks away. "Can I just have the lighter, please?"

"You can't expect boys to notice you if you don't try."

Renee crosses her arms. "Please?"

Erica takes the lighter from her purse and hands it to Renee. "You're not ugly, you know."

"Gee, thanks a mil." Renee strikes the flint but there's just a spark. She tries it again.

"Shit," she says, throwing the lighter into the field.

"It's for your own good," Erica says, slinging her purse higher up her shoulder.

Renee clenches her hand around the cigarette. “I don’t need your help. Boys notice me fine.” The loudness of her voice sounds strange out here in the empty dark. Silly, even. She lets the broken cigarette fall from her hand and brushes the tobacco crumbs off her jeans.

“I was talking about the lighter,” Erica says, turning away.

Even in the pretty pink-yellow light of morning, Renee’s house looks squat and dull. Her mother’s big brown car sits too close to the front window and the mailbox leans unsteadily into the road. And although she can’t see it from this distance, Renee pictures the patches of dead oily grass around the side where Frankie and his friends park their cars. She thinks of the faded street sign on the corner and the weeds that sprout waist-high in the middle of the road after a hard rain. Inside, she knows that her mother’s bedroom door is probably closed, that there are ants nesting in the TV, and that her own bedroom door is wide open, waiting.