

Tamberline possesses an epic absentmindedness and a particular American beauty, a combination of which every young man receives as a challenge to draw in and tame. I tell myself I'm above it, but I'm lying.

I don't remember Tamberline ever asking me to drive out to her mother's house, but I visit from time to time when I think she might be alone. Her mother has this habit of crossing distant latitudes with handsome men. It started after divorcing Tamberline's father the summer we finished fourth grade. Tamberline never spoke about the divorce or her father, so I don't know much about him. Her refusal to mention the split, however, tells me all I need to know, everything and nothing.

From Tamberline's porch you can see the elementary school, the junior high, the high school, and the prison, all lined up like an assembly line of failure. Every morning Tamberline faces this timeline of a difficult life.

Late dusk kicks up all around me. I stand in her driveway looking for signs of life but don't see any lights on inside her house. I look in the garage and see her car, her bike as well. I ring the doorbell and squash a cigarette under my heel. She said we could hang when we spoke on Monday, but didn't give instructions.

I follow a trail from the back porch down to a clearing where her family keeps horses. Across the field a big green barn casts its last long shadow of the day over the corral. Tamberline stands in the middle with her sleeves rolled up, her jeans worn white at the knee, her boots caked in mud. She leads a colt in circles as she strokes his sepia main. I take a foot on the fence and call to her.

"What's his name?" I ask, leaning.

“Jackson Browne,” she answers, and then walks closer. “I was going to bake cookies.”

I think about cookie dough and remember I haven't been high in a while. She puts Jackson Browne in his stable and walks with me to the house. Light from the kitchen guides us in. I watch her hips and want to crush my lips against her. She's never been stoned and I want to blow smoke in her lungs.

Tamberline talks about her mother from time to time, and though I never met her either, I detect her effect in the house even in her absence. I sense a lingering misery spilling over from a time when she felt captive to a marriage agreed upon at too young an age. I picture some prototypical version of Tamberline sitting in the living room rubbing her pregnant belly and staring out the windows to the edge of the forest. Mists pressed against the Cascades collect in a valley between their house and town. I imagine her mother staring at the passing abyss so intently her image etched itself into the glass.

I'm looking at pictures in Tamberline's living room. I pick one of a woman that looks to be my mom's age and show it to her.

“Is this your mom?” I ask. She glances up from her mixing bowl and squints.

“No.” She says. “How many chocolate chips do you like in your cookies?”

“Not many,” I say. She rummages through the pantry, probably looking for the chips. I put the picture back and look at all the other strangers on the table. It's impossible to tell who is who.

“It's so dark out here,” I say.

“You're from the suburbs, too,” she says.

“These aren't the suburbs,” I say. “We are in the country. It feels like anything can happen.” Tamberline leans against the doorway between the kitchen and living room. The evening’s chill resides in pinkness on her cheeks. All the windows look washed with ink.

“How's your brother been?” I ask.

“Don't worry about the dark,” she says. “We are the only one for miles.”

I wonder what she means, what she could mean, what she meant to mean; I wonder a year’s worth in a flash. She grabs her keys from a hook on the backdoor and shuts the refrigerator with her foot. She almost loses her balance.

“We’re out of eggs,” she says. “I’ll drive.”

We take her car to where blackberry bushes cramp new pavement and tree branches hang low over the road. She pulls up to a store wrapped in a porch. A wooden cow leans against an icebox. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a working icebox, just ones like this, meant to convey authenticity from a supposedly simpler time. A sign atop of the icebox reads *WE HAVE BAIT*, but it’s probably a relic, too.

We open the door and trip a censor, announcing our entrance with a two-tone *ding-dong*. Florescence hums down all four aisles. The place is almost a grocer and almost a country bodega. They keep their dairy behind a plastic veil. There are some half dozen American lagers sold in every denomination, thin stiff bandanas with patterns unchanged since the Civil War folded like prayers above the register, flags with POW/MIA insignias, plastic wrapped cigars, Mexican pork rinds, a tray of tamales, corn dogs, orange tipped cap guns, every cigarette, notebook paper, motor oil, generic bran cereal, and one water pipe gone untouched since being placed in the display case seven

years prior. We search the store for an attendant and find none. I'm about to suggest we steal the eggs, or just leave money on the counter, when I catch a glimpse of her that harsh white light. It's so clear now that bones of her face and indigo eyes don't relate, really, to that unassailable beauty. I hate her for it. I'm angry at the necessity of her ignorance to it yet set on possessing it and if not, then destroying it, and if I have to, her. Because I think it's something I could destroy.

I wonder if lust is necessarily evil or if I'm just slanted.

I watch her inspect an egg from behind a rack of porno mags. I'm not sure what she's looking for, but she seems intent on finding eggs that satisfy. She holds one up to the light, then another, then a third that makes her gasp as luminescence passing through reveals the silhouette of a half formed chick. The reptilian hook of its spine gives it away. She drops the egg and the little feller falls half out of his shell. I peer over the magazine rack at the little wet corpse. Suddenly the emptiness of the store and the pocketknives lined up next to the water pipe and the chick's flat ribcage combine with this rural darkness. I'm unsure how she lives in the country's weird malaise. She looks at me with this goofy *oh my god* kind of look and I hurry out to the car with her trailing behind. I guess we forfeit the cookies.

I could say she's dumb for ignoring what possibility drove me to her on nights like tonight. As she unfolds a napkin on the center console I realize she's taken the deflated body of the almost-chick to bury. Her understanding of preciousness is so nuanced there's no way she's ignorant like I've wanted her to be. She just has this very absent way of saying no. But so do I.

I lean in to kiss her over the cold body of the bird. She pushes me away with a force I don't expect, then drives on.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing," she finally says.

I don't apologize. "With what?"

"With my life. With anything."

I've never contemplated being sure. I've always thought sure came later, after life satisfies the promises it's made. "I don't know what to tell you," I say.

"I just don't want things to be how they were. I don't want to repeat anything." "I think we're too young to be reliving," I say. Taught silence barely withholds what feels like imminent confession.

"We have to bury him," she says. It's not what I expect.

"Fine, we'll bury him," I say. The road curves and rolls. The headlights sweep.

After a moment I ask, "when's your mom coming back?"

She slumps back in her seat and presses her knees against the bottom of the steering wheel. "I don't know," she says, but it doesn't seem to bother her. For a moment her headlights reveal a fence made of un-milled wood staked along the road. Near the entrance to the property a white speckled horse stands next to a sleeping filly. I think of Jackson Browne in his dark stable, chewing hay, licking his chops, his jaw hinging like the wheels of a locomotive starting to roll. I focus on the rhythm as it carries over to another thought. I picture Tamberline in her room at nine, ten, eleven, twelve, sitting awake in her bed, or reading to distract her from this rhythm as well. Her mom knew many men after the divorce. Their bedrooms share a wall.