

Ugly

Word Count: 1810

High school smells like canned corn and you thought it would be big enough to hide in, for your skin to bleed into the beige tile, walk so your feet make no sound. Make your face disappear into perfect smoothness and will your hair to be blonde, long, straight. You try. You iron the awful orange curls *God gave you. Oh, the ladies in the salon say. Oh, those beautiful curls. Oh how lucky.*

Fucky lucky.

You take the iron on the highest setting and you lay your head on the kitchen table and press the iron as close to your scalp as you can and push down so the steam boils the edge of your ear and afterward there will be blisters and so what.

The field is between the high school and your house. Dirt and sharp rocks, bottle caps, rusted slide. Wind kicking dust from the diamond. Gulls settled in a puddle on the blacktop. And always a group of boys.

Hey Ugly.

Head down, eyes on the ground. They make sounds like a seal or a dog and thrust their hips at you and laugh. And it's the laughing that you hear even when you're rocking yourself back and forth in bed that night and it's only the first week of high school. When you're staring at the medicine cabinet wondering how many aspirin you need to swallow to die and you stand

there with the bottle and look in the mirror. Freckle face red headed bucktooth wiry Brillo hair glasses. And your little brother comes in with his lumpy face and his wet Mongoloid eyes and he strokes your face tender.

Alone in your bedroom you try to love. You love your thighs. The freckles on your arms, the freckles on your face, the bones of your knee. You try to love everything about your body and you build a fortress around it. Your fat ankles, your pale lashes. Your teeth. You love and you promise to wait, deep inside yourself, for later—after high school sometime—when you will walk by a group of boys and no one will say anything at all. You promise that you'll wait until you grow up and you'll be beautiful then.

The field is crunchy with freeze and it's fun to walk on.

Hey Ugly!

The sounds.

Hey dog!

The pretend barking.

And all your work at loving yourself is for nothing. Your brain turns to glass.

You don't know their names. You know their jackets: TCC sewn on the front pocket. You hear it stands for The Cock Club. The boys show up together at dances. They have steps they all know that are the same and they dance to "Papa Was a Rolling Stone."

At homecoming you danced with your friend Lisa until a guy asked her to dance and then you sat on the bleachers in the dark and waited for it to be over and for your dad to show up to drive you home.

You'll always be beautiful to me, he said, when you ran to his car and burst into tears.

Mother is popping pimples on your back and in between she's smoking. You're both sitting on the couch in your nightgowns and her legs are long and brown and freckle-less. *You have to have personality or looks, so you should start working on your personality*, she says. She seems either afraid of you or tired of you.

The thought of going to school shuts you down. The thought of staying home shuts you down.

Your brother brings you a flier about a thing. His gift to you. They need kids. Some Halloween mansion. Your mother rolls her eyes. Because she rolls her eyes you go. And because your brother.

You sit with other kids in a fake mansion. They talk you through what you signed up to do. They show you where you stand. Hide in a secret pocket in a hallway. Hear people coming toward you. Wait until they've gone past you. Jump out and hit a metal bucket with a crowbar. Scare them so they piss themselves.

They give you a black cape.

They give you a crow mask.

In the parlor with a pipe.

The dark you see with your eyes closed is the same dark you see when you open them. You suck in sweet rubber of your mask. Adjust to gray-on-gray, fake cobwebs against chipped drywall. Load your greedy eyes with dark, your ears with buzzers, your nose with chainsaw smoke. A kid comes around the corner, a stripe of red exit sign light scissoring across his neck.

The crowbar's weight in your hand feels adult.

School is endless. The field is dark when you cross it.

Hey, Ugly.

A cat call. Then they're in front of you, surrounding you. They make kissing sounds. You take a step. They block your way. You look at the ground. You smell the sweat stink of wool baseball jackets.

Fuck you. You say it out loud.

They laugh. One pushes you into another. *Kiss her.* That one pushes you back. *You kiss her.*

Fuck you all. You yell it.

One holds your arms and you kick at the one that's grabbing for your foot. Then four of them are holding you and they pin your shins and arms to the ground and the ground is tight under your back and the grass cracks under your elbows and you need to be gone from here. Now is a flicker of a lime street light. Now is a sparrow in the dusk. You are grass you are dirt you are asphalt pebble leaf. But then they stop. They don't know what to do next. One says *Get her underpants.*

Despite everything you know and hate, you suck in your stomach.

One pulls up your skirt and tugs off your underpants, not looking. Your thighs flash white fish belly.

You feel

Every second

You see

The crease in the jeans cuff beside your head

Ketchup on the t-shirt sleeve holding you down

Grass stain on the knuckle

Rip on the rubber sole of a sneaker.

Her lips are chapped, one says. She's been busy.

They laugh.

You don't know what it means. You don't think they know what it means.

They release your arms and legs.

Let's get out of here.

And they go, forgetting you.

You feel your own body's weight on the ground and the tickle of wet grass under your naked ass. You tug your skirt down to cover your knees.

The last one pauses, looks back. Eyes on your eyes. Sorry eyes. Eyes looking to see if you're all right. You flash back at him. *Like you could hurt me.*

It's a joke.

And it's not.

You and that last boy. You watch the back of his jacket go maroon to gray. He looks back again.

The weakest.

What did you expect the grass whispers.

You get up and lean against a tree. You are cold under your skirt. The wind moves the swings. You walk home. Tomorrow perches on the edge of each roof lining your street, one hand on its crotch, the other picking at your hair with a fingernail.

Your ears shut down so you don't hear in the cafeteria as you eat. Your ears shut down so you don't hear your algebra teacher call your name. You don't hear the bell. You sit at your desk not hearing.

Your underpants, taped to the Boys Room wall, arrows pointing to the stained parts.

In your room you glue yourself back together. You swallow back your guts. Feel your arms attached to truck, feet to floor. Calm your heart, your heart, your heart.

Your father calls up to your room: *dinnertime, beautiful*.

You don't want to go but he drives you to the mansion. *It's the last night*, he says.

Halloween!

You are glad for your corner of dark, you feel safe in the world inside the world. Bird mask, wet breath. Fake torches, headless dolls, painted blood. Your stiff red curls snake out along the drywall and disappear into the poisonous vines painted there. You disturb the gentle clouds of fake fog with your hand. Shadows of kids slide along the walls like horses. They slip across ceilings.

You see their jackets round the corner.

Crow bar in your hand. How your fingers itch. How you clutch the bar in both hands. You raise it high. Your shadow scales the wall. It is enormous. The dark is nervous around you.

(Would anyone blame you?)

You see him, the last one, the one with the eyes, the weakest. You bang the bar on the can. He turns.

You want to be seen.

You smile under your mask.

Then you hear it. From another part of the mansion, a man-goat sound. You know who and why and your heart panics. You drop the bar, the mask. Run along the fake walls, claw apart seams, feel your way through the dark to your brother. Snot running down his chin. Crouched in a corner, arms wrapped over his head, flabby bare belly showing. Scared. Kids cluster and you hiss, *Get lost*. You wrap your brother in your cape and you talk to him, tell him it's not real, lead him out of the mansion to the street and the light.

Your dad, waiting. Apologizing: *Your brother wanted to see you. I thought he'd like it. I didn't realize. I didn't know.*

You sit on the curb and stroke your brother's head whispering, *It's alright, it's just pretend. We're okay. See?* He settles, leans against you. You lead him to the car. Dad holds the door open for him, takes him home.

You go back to your pocket in the dark.

Bang the bar. The sound hollows you and fills you.

The night is over. You leave the cape, mask in the makeup trailer . Some kids—evil nurse girl, Leatherface, scary doll girl—passing a joint in its shadow.

Hey crow!

You stop.

That was awesome, what you did tonight.

With that retarded kid.

Very cool.

Totally cool.

You coming to the cast party, they say. Your insides seize. They walk, as if you'd join.

You do. You go. You dance. "Ain't No Mountain High Ain't No Valley Low." You smoke pot.

You feel. You float. When you walk home the pavement sparkles with frost. Your lungs are full like when you break through the surface of a lake and gulp the air, so sudden and so bright.

Tomorrow winks from the rooftop as you slide by.

Your brother is asleep on the couch with the TV on. You lift his heavy head onto your lap and trace the shape of his beautiful eyebrows with your finger and you pray that this is the night you'll remember.