

## Grown Home

I had five hours left to Evergreen, Alabama. Palo Alto, sunny California, now two days in the past. I kept a steady speed of eighty-five, my eyes peeled for signs of authority or worse, deer. Penny sat next to me with her feet on the dashboard, nail polish in hand, lit Pall Mall in mouth. An inch of ash hovered from the tip until gravity dislodged it and wind filtered it outside. The cold kept me awake, but I shivered with discontent. Penny put her cigarette out and rolled up the window.

"Don't be like that, Billie," she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"I told you a week ago."

"Yeah?"

"After Aaron called I put the date on the calendar," Penny said. "You saw it."

I leaned forward to turn the volume up on the radio and rolled down my window, allowing the midnight air to stir me from sleep. I looked at Penny.

"Give me a cigarette?" I asked. She tossed me a pack from the carton at her floorboard. The radio played a tribute to Janis Joplin. "Cry! Cry! Baby," faded into the smooth voice of the radio announcer. "We'll all be crying for you tonight, Janis"... static... "Thirty years later and you're still in our"... more static... the signal was gone. Penny switched off the radio.

"I'll get some sleep," she told me. "Wake me when you get tired."

I pulled up to Aaron's house. Aaron Baxter, the boy next door. The boy who gave me Indian burns in first grade and flowers in fourth. The boy who beat up Tommy Davis for saying

Billie wasn't a girl's name. The boy who took me to prom. When I rang the doorbell, Penny tried to hold my hand. I pulled away.

"I've missed you," I said to Aaron, embracing him. He smelled of bourbon and antiseptic.

"I wasn't sure if you were coming," he told me.

"Molly was like a mother to me, too. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner."

I introduced Penny to Aaron; he shook her hand, took her backpack and led her up the stairs to the guest bedroom. I wandered to the den curious to see if the stain from the night I had too much Seagram's was still there. It was. Oddly shaped like a bear rug and right in front of the fireplace. Christmas stockings hung from the mantle. I was surprised, not because it was June, the Baxter's kept their stockings up year round, but because there were three: Aaron, Molly and Billie. Would Molly's be hanging four years from now? Maybe not, I had simply been gone, she was dead.

"You have time to take a shower, if you want. I put your bags in your room."

"Aaron... you startled me."

"Sorry. Go ahead and get cleaned up. The funeral starts in an hour."

The funeral took place at the New Hope Baptist Church. The pastor reminisced about the many years of devotion and bake sales Molly had provided to the congregation. Vince Halliway, former captain of the football team, was whispering to Lara Fields. Lara nodded, giggled and gasped, every so often glancing my way. About ninety percent of my graduating class was there, and I couldn't recall more than a third of them ever meeting Aaron's mom.

The wake took place back at the house. I amused myself by telling everyone who asked something different. While I explained to Lara why I had felt the need to move to Arizona and

help save the endangered black-footed ferret, I listened to Penny's conversation with Vince.

Vince's infamous smile had knocked the panties off of half the cheerleading squad, and he used it full force on Penny as he refilled her wine glass.

"How do you know, Billie?" he asked.

"We're *business* partners."

"Great! What kind of business do you run?"

"Shit, I don't know. Ask Billie." I smiled at Lara and excused myself.

"Dog grooming, Vince," I interjected. "Do you know the proper way to shave a poodle?"

Penny finished her wine. Turning toward Vince, she smiled and said, "It was nice to meet you." She handed me her empty glass and added, "I'm tired. Good night."

Aaron appeared behind me; placing his hand on my arm, he asked me to join him outside for a minute and led me to the balcony. I lit a cigarette.

"When did you start smoking?" he asked.

"The day I left."

Rather than offer a reprimand, Aaron just stood there, looking at me. After a moment he said, "Listen, I need a favor."

I raised my eyebrows.

"When I talked to Penny," he continued. "She said you would only be able to stay for the funeral."

"We have a gig," I told him.

"Can you cancel it? I need help going through her things."

"I don't know, Aaron."

"She'd want you to have some of them."

I paused. He looked more like some sentimental object than a man, like he was my blanky or something. I placed him with so many thoughts in my mind, so many memories.

"Okay," I told him. "Fine."

The light in the guest room was still on when I went upstairs. I tapped on the door before entering. Penny lay in bed reading *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac, her blonde hair tied in a loose ponytail keeping all but a few strands out of her face. She looked up from her book, but did not put it down on the bedside table, did not remove her glasses and give me a smile.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"We have to cancel the show," I said.

"I fucking knew it."

"I'm sorry."

"You're fucking sorry."

"Penny, please. I have to show respect to this family. You know how much I owe them."

"I've heard the story, and you're not asking you're telling. I'll cancel the fucking gig so just do whatever the hell you want. I'm going home tomorrow. You can take the bus."

The next morning I dreamt of picking tomatoes off the vine and carrying them in my dress to the kitchen door. Molly took the tomatoes from me with a scolding look and told me that was not the proper way a lady held her skirt. She cut the tomatoes into thick slices and fried them in a bit of leftover bacon grease. My mouth watered; the smell seemed to be the only thing that was real. And it was. I rolled over in bed and spent what felt like an eternity staring at the ceiling before I went downstairs.

The windows in the kitchen were open, letting warm air inside. Aaron hummed an old Carter family tune that I couldn't remember the name of. His brown hair still messy from bed, he wore plaid boxers and an Evergreen Police Department t-shirt. I took one of the two seats that were set at the table and filled my plate with tomatoes. They tasted as good as I remembered. Fresh still, not like the ones from the store.

"Sleep well?" Aaron asked. He put a waffle in front of me and brought maple, blueberry and raspberry syrup out from the fridge. I nodded while making a smiley face: one brown eye, one blue eye and a big red smile. Aaron brought me a cup of coffee.

"It feels weird to be back," I told him. He sat down across from me and began to fill his plate with bacon, hash browns and tomatoes.

I spent the morning working on song lyrics while Aaron read the paper. Around noon, he insisted that we go to the swimming hole. I hadn't brought a swimsuit so he took me to the new shopping center in town and bought me one. We took turns with the rope swing, jumping from the cliff without putting the knot between our legs to see who could hold on longer. I could only hold on for a few swings now. Aaron whipped me by holding on till the rope lost momentum then he dropped calmly into the water.

"Feel normal now?" he goaded. "I win."

I cupped my hands in the river and squirted him in the eye. Perfect shot. He blocked the next and sent one back.

"How about a breath holding contest? You filthy smoker."

I retaliated with a tackle. After a bit of roughhousing, I stole Aaron's swim trunks and beat him to the shore. At the water's edge, I grabbed our dry clothes, including his pants jangling with car keys. I spent about five minutes driving circles around a naked Aaron. I had the

window rolled down with my arm off the side of his jeep, cigarette in hand, head half way out the door so he could hear my lewd catcalls. Then I let him in and threw him a towel.

"Let's go to Mickey's," he suggested.

"You can't be serious," I said.

"Yeah, come on, it'll be fun. I promise, no one you know will be there."

"Lies."

"Billie, we're all adults now."

"Then let's eat *adult* food. I'll cook." I drove us back to the house with promises to make my famous marinara. Aaron stopped whining about Mickey's and smacked his lips.

The back patio of the Baxter's house. Past the sliding door, the porch swing, the glass table surrounded by reclining chairs. Beyond the two weeping willows that canopy the patio furniture and the creaky swing set. Down the path from the BBQ pit and the log fire. Behind the little water well overgrown with moss and bereft of water, I went to the garden. The rows of would be pumpkins with thick stems spread their fuzzy green leaves out beyond control. The peppers had been choked and the yellow squash were losing an uphill battle. The other side of the garden, next to the wooden fence that marked the end of Baxter property, stood in complete disarray. Tomatoes thrived in the anarchy that must have come with Molly's death. Their vines spread out to claim any nutrients left over from the decaying potatoes and cucumbers.

Molly's gardening stool was overturned and abandoned among the mess. I picked it up and brushed off the soil. Then placed it next to the fence and stood on it, using my toes to give me the leverage I needed to see over into the adjacent yard. Neatly cut grass surrounded the neighboring house. Fresh white paint covered any traces of rot or holes that once existed in the walls. Glass reflected light in the absence of taped plastic. When I was a little girl, I thought

those windows would never be replaced. I thought their absence would remain forever. The whimpering plastic a constant symbol of what my father said I'd done.

I crawled over the fence, a transgression I hadn't dared since switching sides. I stretched out on the grass comparing it with the hot dirt I recalled as a little girl. Stiff as a board, light as a feather, a game I used to play alone, trying desperately to lift my body with my mind. I spent hours in the sun till my front turned two shades darker than my back. You'll ruin your eyes, he said, get in here, you're weird, that's why she left, you're different. And he broke another window. I remember her being different. I remember her telling me I could do anything I wanted. You're the queen of the world, Billie, she said. And then she left. I heard a more familiar voice calling to me.

"Billie! Billie, get out of there. A family moved in last year. What if they're home?"

I opened my eyes to see Aaron beckoning me from the other side of the fence. I got up and climbed back over.

"Sorry," I said. "Don't want to freak out your neighbors."

He put his hands in his pockets, looked down and dug his right shoe into a spot in the ground.

"Did you get my letters?" he asked. He began to trace a circle with his foot.

I nodded, but he wasn't looking at me so I said, "Yes."

Aaron didn't move except for his leg, which continued round and round, as the donut beneath his steel-toed boot got deeper and wider.

"You want to go visit him?" he asked.

"No." Why would I?

Aaron helped me gather ingredients and we went inside.

I always loved making marinara. Fresh tomatoes, garlic and basil combined with a bottle of burgundy wine. There are three cups in a bottle of wine: one for the sauce, two for the cook. Aaron strutted around the kitchen like a lost turkey making crude noises and rubbing his belly. I opened a second bottle to go with dinner. Aaron declined from having any.

"You seem happier today," I said.

"I'm just relieved. I know that Mom is smiling at us right now."

After dinner, we began the task of sorting through Molly's belongings. We started in her bedroom, a pleasant garden of white linen and moonlight. I could never decide whether it looked better in the night when it was cool and serene or in the day when it was bright and cheerful. Next to a large window was her old Victorian four-poster bed. I sat on the edge and dangled my legs, which still couldn't reach the floor. Aaron brought some boxes out. We began with the walk-in closet, separating what would be donated to the church from what would be sent to Molly's sister. Then we moved on to the dresser and packed up her jewelry and cosmetics. The last box, in the very back of the drawer, was small, black and velvet. Aaron took a breath before he removed it.

"Billie," he said. "She'd want you to have this."

I took the box and opened it. "Aaron, this is Molly's wedding ring."

"I want you to have it."

I felt like crying, but more than sad I felt sick. All I could think of to say was, 'Don't.' I already knew the question, the answer.

"Marry me, Billie."

"No."



Aaron watched me from the doorway of my room as I withdrew my pajamas from the wicker dresser and put them in my backpack. I ran my fingers along the side after I shut the empty drawer.

"It's because of your father," Aaron said.

"Stop it." I went to the bathroom and parted the shower curtain. I never liked the black and white tiles, they made me dizzy, but Molly said they were nice and clean looking. I decided to leave my new swimsuit hanging on the showerhead; it was still damp.

"Why don't you listen to me anymore?" Aaron asked.

"I wasn't happy."

"You were about to be. I was saving you."

I walked to the bed and removed my journal from the night table. I wrote an entry, ripped it out and handed it to him.

I went downstairs and opened the front door. Aaron followed not far behind. I paused and turned to take one last look at him.

"How the hell are you going to support yourself?" he asked.

"Me and Penny do just fine, Aaron. We do just fine."

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The bus station was empty. Nobody leaves Evergreen. By the time we hit Houston a couple of drifters had come aboard. One of them had bongos and the other a mandolin. We sat in the very back of the deserted greyhound and I sang Nine Pound Hammer.

*"I'm going down this long lonesome road..."*

"Keep that racket down!" the driver said.

"Lord, lord, don't want to be treated this old way."

I called Penny when I arrived at the station in San Francisco, and she picked me up. She was quiet.

"You're mad," I said.

"I'm not mad."

"Okay, you're pissed the hell off."

Penny gave me a look, one of many, the one that warned me not to put words in her mouth. I kept mine shut. I was on my way home by Fiat, not foot and thumb, so she couldn't be that upset.

We had a load of gigs ahead of us. Usually, we played in a large warehouse twenty minutes outside of town. Sometimes we doped sandwiches, copying the old ways of Kesey and his Kool-Aid. Our band, PsychoDeli, gained a reputation because of it, and we were starting to get shows at real venues. We resumed practice right away. I played bass and wrote lyrics. Penny, our lead singer, played the piano. Ken played steel guitar, sang backup and slept with Sunny on the side. Sunny played mandolin or violin and carried Ken's baby. Then there was Heddy, our drummer. His real name was Eddy. We added the H because he liked to get blowjobs during shows.

I felt preoccupied, not able to get Aaron's dejected look off my mind. When I left, I thought he would be okay. Now, I felt unsure. I felt like I'd let both him and Molly down. He would be moving back in, alone, with nothing but his memories. But was that my fault? He could have sold the house rather than his apartment. He could have met someone new. Molly said she helped me because that's what God wanted her to do. I didn't believe in God, but I believed in Molly.

A couple weeks passed, and I still had trouble writing lyrics. Late one night, I sat in bed with a pad of blank paper and nothing but guilt on my mind. The room was dark except for the lamp at my bedside table. The phone basked in its light. I called Aaron. He sounded grumpy and half asleep when he answered.

"It's me," I said.

"Billie, it's three in the morning."

"We're having our biggest show yet, next month."

"Congratulations," Aaron said. He didn't care.

"Will you come?"

"To California? You call me in the middle of the night to ask me to go to California for a rock concert?"

"We're more of a bluegrass band..."

"Jesus, Billie, I need to get some sleep." He hung up, but I knew he would be there. I could tell by the change in his voice. Penny's silhouette stood in the doorway.

"You can't bring him to the show," she said.

"Why not?"

"He's a cop."

"We're not doing anything illegal."

"People will be smoking dope there. And what you're planning, by the way, is far from legal."

"Relax, It's Aaron."

Penny came over and sat next to me, took the pen and pad of paper out of my hands and tossed them to the floor. She brushed the hair out of my face and leaning forward so that her

breath tickled my ear whispered, "Remember when Aaron said you'd see the light once he made you come?"

I nodded.

"He finally did it, right?"

"What's your point?" I asked.

"LSD isn't going to save his soul, Billie."

"I'm not trying to save his soul."

"Soul. Life. Whatever. You two are so alike you probably should have just gone ahead and married him."

"Fuck you."

"Alright babe," she said. "But only because you asked so nice."

Penny saw right through me, but it seemed that she was willing to play along. I suppose she was excited to see what would happen.

I picked Aaron up from the airport the morning of the show, brought him back to the two-bedroom house that I shared with Penny and showed him to the extra room.

"Sorry about the mess," I said. "Most of our stuff is at the warehouse, but we like to practice here as well. That couch turns into a bed." Aaron put his suitcase in the closet and went to look out the window. Penny came in and sat on the couch.

"Hey Aaron, how was your flight?" she asked.

"Long."

Aaron had never been to California. The farthest Molly had ever taken us from Evergreen was Mobile, where Aaron nearly lost his head when he saw the docks. So we took him to the beach.

"Everyone's half naked," he observed.

"It's the beach, honey, what did you expect?"

Aaron looked at Penny incredulously.

"I've seen swimsuits before," he said. "But look! Look at that... actually don't, it's indecent." Penny's eyes landed on the bare ass of the woman Aaron had pointed to. She started to laugh.

"I guess thongs aren't real popular in Evergreen," she said.

"Two pieces aren't real popular in Evergreen," Aaron replied.

We had fish tacos for lunch. A few hours before the show, I asked Aaron if there was anything in particular he wanted to do. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's take him to the warehouse," Penny recommended. "And show him all of our killer equipment." She winked at Aaron. Using her seductive voice she said, "We can put you to work, if you like."

It was still early, but I couldn't think of anything better to do. Maybe Aaron would be interested in seeing all the sweat that went into setting up for a concert, so we went. The whole band was there, helping to get all the lights and sound ready. Aaron whistled and forced a smile.

"Looks like you've done real well for yourself," he said. He walked around a bit, hands in his pockets, eying the ceiling, then turned to me. "But do you really need all this space?"

"Just wait till the show starts. This place will be packed. Follow me." I led him upstairs to the VIP room with couches everywhere, a full bar and a perfect view of the stage. I handed Aaron an all access pass.

"You can use this to go anywhere you want during the show," I told him.

People began to arrive at eight; we started at nine. I left Aaron in the care of Heddy's groupies. He was hungry so I gave him a sandwich.

"Enjoy the show," I said.

I took my place at the back of the stage, where I felt most comfortable, where I could see Penny illuminated from behind. She always hung her head a foot from her keyboard, entangling hair with two furiously moving hands, and she would bob it up and down, blocking and unblocking the spotlight from my eyes. That light always drove me mad, and I wished that I could perform in complete darkness. The heat, as if from the same sun. I would get confused, listen to the music play...

At set break, I scanned the crowd for Aaron. Didn't see him. I was about to go look for him when one of the groupies came on stage and told me to please, please follow her.

"This'll be interesting," Penny said and looked at me. "You can be a real bitch."

We went to the VIP room. I saw Aaron pacing back and forth with a bottle of Jameson in his hand. He kept touching his forehead, his nose, his ear.

"Are you alright, Aaron?" Penny asked. He started and looked up at us for the first time.

"My face is coming off," he said.

"Relax, honey," Penny told him. "You still got your face."

"No, look, it's there on the floor. It's right there on the floor." He pointed to a puddle of what I assumed to be whisky. "And, I'd like to pick it up. I'd like to pick it up and put it back on, but I'm scared... my face could be my whole life."

"It's fine," I told him. "Everything will be okay."

I led him to the balcony. The fresh air was clouded by smoke and did little to calm Aaron down. I sat him in the corner and put peppermint oil on his temples. He closed his eyes and groaned. I felt his breath become steady as I rubbed the oil in small circles.

"What's happening to me?" he asked. "Why am I wearing this shirt even though it's so hot? Why am I always wearing this shirt?" He started tugging at his white t-shirt. I helped him take it off.

"You don't have to wear it, if you don't want to."

"Can I take my shoes off, too?"

"Of course you can, let me help." I started to untie his shoelaces.

"You can do anything you want," I told him. Reminded of that long ago voice that used to whisper such words to me, I added, "You're the king of the world."

Aaron looked up at me with doughy eyes.

"I want to drink more whisky," he said.

The next morning, I got up early and cooked breakfast. Aaron wandered downstairs around eleven. He carried his suitcase. He walked up to me, put his bag down and without saying a word took my hand and placed a crumpled piece of paper in my palm. Then he picked up his bag and walked out the door. I opened the paper and recognized my own handwriting:  
*I'm going home.*