

The Fun Girl

Becky, having just helped herself to a packet of instant oatmeal from the pantry and a generous handful of strawberries from the refrigerator, deposits the used bowl in the kitchen sink and lets herself out the back door to run to the Trailblazer for her laptop bag, in the process of which she discovers the pretty corpse that lies next to the back porch.

It is a mild Saturday morning in the middle of September, sunlight dappling the shady behind-house area of gravel boxed among quiet neighbors' fences, and the body is Cherry's, face-down in the patchy grass and gravel. Before the screechy screen door even flaps shut behind her, Becky knows that something is terribly wrong; her throat swallows something which had never been in her mouth to begin with – a sort of low-in-the-throat pushing down of rushing air and projectile fear. But Becky's hands (why do they feel so naked? so stripped of their flesh?) and other limbs do not immediately move towards the curled figure of Cherry, the slung out arm of Cherry that drapes over knees pressing the white slatted side of the house; Becky's own legs continue to propel her towards the Trailblazer, parked in the closest spot fifteen feet from the porch, though the meaty side part of her leading foot resists, lurching against the gradient gravel-grass of the ground, skidding with the *oh god oh no* that starts inside of her there, that sluices up her leg and side and punches her arm socket – *oh god oh no* – zig-zagging from there and skewering the length of her arm, *oh god oh no*, until it bounces into the whole rest of her, clipping the tip of her chin, and the fear fills her all the rest of the way up and fattens her tongue so that "Oh god, oh no," is only a one-syllable groan.

This happens in a matter of moments. In the next moment, Becky is on her knees in the damp, worm-smelling grass, Cherry's tangled black hair and entire fetally-posed figure stippled with dew as well, and *oh god oh no*, Becky's hands stagger an inch above Cherry's slicked pleather jacket, and maybe Cherry had just passed out drunk here last night, struggling with the key to the back door, and she could still wake up, and everything could still be okay even though there is calm, and there is stillness, and there is dew, and it is very, very wrong. Becky knows so, about the wrongness, and does not want to turn Cherry over and look into her face (someone else ought to do it, someone else ought to find her,

something –) but her hands go to Cherry’s shoulder, that shoulder unbearable in its firmness and corporeality, and turn her over on her back, where Cherry clutches an arm to her chest and might be sleeping – with her moon eyelids shut and nostrils white – but for the chapped mauve of her mouth, where a clump of fat, iridescent green flies crawl listlessly.

A sob clamors to the rear of Becky’s nasal cavity. Cherry is a corpse. Just yesterday, she had been – had glowed, and – Christ, what *happened* to her? There is no one around the back lot, no one to rescue Becky and explain how such a wrong, *wrong* cold sweat of a morning could come to be. And what? Now she ought to check vitals or something. She ought to do CPR, right? She knows all this. But Becky can’t move – she just *can’t*, because she also knows without listening for a heartbeat that Cherry is *dead*. And it’s funny, too, but she blanks in the gray void of dread, and all that comes to mind is: When you find a dead body, and you check for a pulse, are you supposed to put your first two fingers to the cold brown flesh at the hinge of the jaw? Or can you put your ear to the chest and listen for the living, muffled metronome that contradicts with bloodsound what your eyes have seen, what your shaking hands have touched? The second almost feels too childlike, too willful of a method. But when do you learn this protocol for finding and identifying corpses? Now, she has to do it. No matter if the two-fingers method is the proper one for the gravity of death – she leans in over Cherry, head going full tilt, ear aiming for the slope of skin above Cherry’s breast, and Becky is once again a little kid at the age when you learn that you could *hear* life at a steady tempo, and when you listen, head to heart, for the *badump, badump* of some separate body, mostly fascinated, mostly playing, but at the same time a small somber piece of you checking that they *are* alive.

There’s that fear that there won’t be any sound.

Only now Becky’s older and the fear is so much worse because it is named certainty – certainty with her hands planted on either side of Cherry, certainty with her own fetid exhalations crowding her lips because the collar of Cherry’s jacket is right there at her mouth, certainty that while the strawberries she ate *may* have been Cherry’s, the bed that

Becky slept in was *definitely* Cherry's, while the girl's small, soft fingers slowly digested rigor mortis and clutched to the shape of claws overnight, and

Then Cherry rolls back over to her side. Becky's heart lurches at the suddenness of gravity – *Jesus Christ! Get it the fuck together!* she says to herself, but then Cherry's arm drops to the ground with a nauseatingly solid *thud*, and her jaw moves – it *moves!* – and Becky's back over her so fast that inertia leaves her own pulse standing still outside of her, a knotthrob of breathing gristle suspended in midair.

“Cherry? Cherry?”

And Cherry stirs. The cluster of flies slough off into the air with a weak buzz, a little irritated exodus, and Becky almost wants to snatch them back up to praise them – to thank them for being present with her heart plummeting and bungee-bouncing back to the simple delirium of hope, and for having the tact to go.

“Cherry,” Becky says again, hands at Cherry's shoulders. The girl croaks, shakes her head from side to side, shut-eye frowns like a child in a nasty dream. “Are you okay? Are you okay?”

Becky rocks back on her heels as Cherry rises to her knees. Cherry then flops to all fours like she might puke, her dark hair hanging in heavy hanks and sharp arrow nose pointing at the ground. Cherry stops there. She turns to Becky.

And Becky could have sworn that Cherry's gaze typically slides around cabinet and tile, and that it is always moving, and it has only ever locked with her own long enough to scan with a smile – a lightning bug buzzing in the cage of two palms before floating away, flickering. Now Cherry's gaze hangs still, a dead insect that no longer spirals up and away, and as it rests on Becky, that swallowing fear surges back to the low phlegm place in Becky's throat.

What keeps the fear from totally overpowering her is that she keeps it nameless. All Becky has to do is leave consonant, vowel, and voice from terrible possibility. It won't do. She is a *terrific* friend.

Cherry looks away. Neck undulating like a cat's, she regurgitates a thin, yellowish-clear rope of bile. And Becky, feeling useless and yearning to reach out and touch – touch anything of Cherry's, her spine or her temple or even the splotch of vomit outside of her on the grass – touch to know she's there – Becky watches Cherry climb the ground from knees to boots and then straighten, now standing. She sways.

"The fuck," Cherry says, her voice cold-soup thick. She scrapes a hand across her cracked, bloodless mouth. "What the fuck?"

"I found you like that."

"So I was..."

"You were passed out there. Cherry, you must have been out here all night. What happened to you? I thought you were –"

But she doesn't say it. She tells herself she'll stand up any second now, looking up at Cherry like, okay, just another second – okay, just another second – okay, just another second.

"I don't know," Cherry says.

"Did you black out trying to unlock the door?"

"I must have."

Becky blinks at Cherry and her mouth velcroes open. "My friend Olivia from home – her boyfriend knew this girl who got dropped home by her friends when she was really drunk one night in December. They watched her walk up the porch and everything before they drove off, too. They didn't ditch her or anything. But apparently she didn't even make it inside, she was so drunk. She curled up on the porch swing and passed out there. It was so cold overnight that she got frostbite in all her extremities. She had to get both her feet amputated." She clears her throat, laces her fingers together. "So, uh. Thank god it's not so cold yet."

Cherry doesn't say anything; she glances around the grass next to the porch, this look in her eyes like she's afraid. That's what Becky just can't take, and she gets to her feet to pull Cherry close to her.

"I'm so sorry." Her arms are around Cherry's shoulders, and she murmurs into Cherry's dirtcrumb-smelling hair. "I feel so bad. I was in your bed all night, and you were here. I shouldn't have left you there at the party. We should have come back together."

"It's okay." But that doesn't seem entirely true, so Becky keeps squeezing Cherry – because she has learned about Cherry that she interprets a message much clearer when it's said with a touch, and Becky needs for her to know that she's her *friend*, and that she's *here*, and that she's really, *really* sorry.

"I need to shower," Cherry says into the hug after a while. They part.

"Okay." Becky watches her anxiously. She never got to listen to her heartbeat, and she's got the restlessness of a task begun and left on the ground. She wants to press her cheek to Cherry's chest and stay there, breathing the dew on the pleather, just listening and feeling the swells. That reaching, half-step sensation goes undone, wrought powerlessly, so Becky fills the silence. "I don't blame you. You must feel like shit."

"Hm." Cherry breathes full and breathes audibly, shifting her weight like a stranger at a new church. "When do you go over to Patrick's?"

"Huh? Oh, uh. I don't know. Later on. I should text him, I guess. But it can wait."

Cherry goes to the back door. "Whatever you want to do," she says, and goes inside. Becky stands there in the winking shade for a moment, at a loss. From the heartstopped fear of truly thinking Cherry was dead, to now, it's like Becky has skipped over some step in between, and it's excruciating that she doesn't know what it *is*.

Is it disconcerting because Cherry should be relying on Becky to help unravel her night? Because Cherry so simply went in the house, when just before there were flies that crawled on her mouth and would have put their tiny legs on her tongue and the backs of her teeth?

Becky follows through the back door, then turns around and goes back to the Trailblazer for her laptop bag.

After putting her laptop on the kitchen table, Becky walks up the groaning hardwood staircase to Cherry's bedroom. Cherry's roommates aren't around; it's likely that Rafa is at the Co-Op working and Laney is with her thirty-year-old boyfriend, Richard. Becky chatted with Richard for a short while the night before, talking teaching assistantships at their respective grad programs, while he, Laney, and Rafa made tamales in the bright, noisy kitchen, Cherry hanging around the stove, closed-mouth smiling when Becky came. She let Becky chat with her roommates for a little while before taking her hand and dragging her, teetering with bags, up to her bedroom, where they both would be sleeping that first night of Becky's visit.

Now, the house does not bulge. At night, there was sound (voices, sizzling pans), and there was richness in the shadowy corners and secret places of an old house. In the light of day, the space of the house sucks into itself, concave, a man holding in his gut and showing his ribs. The open space and contented weekend quiet does that. Becky isn't so sure she likes it. She climbs the last step and goes into Cherry's open bedroom, where Cherry shucks off her jacket onto a large pile of laundry, and where Becky's backpacks sit upright in a corner, slashed open and bloated with blouse tongues oozing out. Cherry goes into the adjoining bathroom, and Becky's not sure about the appropriate privacy to give when she is a guest and her host's room is home base – when there were flies that crawled on her host's mouth and would have put their tiny legs on her tongue and the backs of her teeth.

"I'm disgusting," Cherry says through a crack in the door. "God, I reek."

And it hits Becky then – there *is* a smell. Becky, fidgeting at the rumpled end of the bedspread, breathes it in hard and heady, tries to investigate the smell. It's faint, but it's bad. It is a fraying, gummy, week-old band-aid, the moist underside of a rock that sits in a wooded place.

"Have a shower," Becky calls over the running water. "Just shower, you'll feel better." Neither of them seem to be really talking to one another directly, but if Becky

doesn't worry over Cherry, who slept like a crumpled handful of trash on the *ground* while Becky was warm in bed and slept through her own hangover, she'll feel callous. She at least has to talk to Cherry.

But Cherry's in the shower, and a good two minutes in, Becky leans back on the bed and unlocks her phone. It's something to do.

Patrick, 8:43 a.m.

I get into town around 11. You up?

Patrick, 10:49 a.m.

Come over when you get this. Miss you.

There's a small crick of guilt in Becky's neck – while she was with Cherry and thought nothing of Patrick at all, his night was a takeout pizza and a rented Liam Neeson movie with his parents, who he loves but who depress him every time he goes home (so he told her more than once when they were together, either in his apartment or in the apartment she'd had when she lived here, but not in her apartment in Bloomington, she knows for sure, because he has not visited her there yet, and because he would likely have the shy, guest-like demeanor that he'd come to put on in this long-distance part of their relationship, and so he would likely not loosen his tense, Irish Catholic shoulders to divulge what makes him feel less like a man and more like a boy).

And so Becky stalls over texting back, guilty for the long, hungover sleep past noon that she had not even had. She might as well have had. It's now eleven twenty-two anyway, and Patrick must be lonesome back on a campus that caroused and slept in late without him (he does not do well feeling at home in most places). And the guilt then stretches down along the flinty chain links of Becky's spine, a scarred old tomcat spreading its claws and arching a stump tail. It's the fact that she worries over Patrick rather than Cherry. She wants very badly to leave, and wants very badly to give definitive release to the seeping gloom of knowing she's a bad girlfriend and friend, to cement disappointment from one or the other of them and have it over with. She's yanked in two directions and nowhere at all, and – the bed that she stretches out on has too intimate and too uncomfortable a weight to

it. The rotting outside smell is gone now, but there's something else there. It doesn't matter if Becky's imagining it. There was never only the one smell.

The water's off, and Cherry cracks the door, letting steam and fresh soapy aromas waft out.

"Better?" Becky calls, to have something to say. Cherry doesn't respond. There's no sound of a hair dryer (does Cherry use a hair dryer? She would just let it air dry, she's like that, isn't she?), no move to fetch a pair of yoga pants or elbow angling out the door to have them handed to her. Nothing. Becky thinks of the dew, and she sits upright to glance at the Tegan and Sara posters and try to ground herself in normal and calm, but still she thinks of the dew, and Becky's pelvis commandeers the fear, absurdly; her breath quickens in a physical reaction to how the fear feels, and she is ashamed. She snatches a lungful of air to call out to Cherry and ask again if everything's alright, but she couldn't bear not receiving an answer, so she gets up and goes across the room to the bathroom door, and –

Becky's hand stills at the doorknob. Would Cherry balk at Becky seeing her nudity? After exposing a mouthful of crawling black flies? It occurs to Becky, her fingertips sliding upon a thin sheen of condensation, that she does not believe that Cherry ought to want modesty. The realization is an ugly one. Becky chokes it down.

She says Cherry's name and pushes the door half open, hardly noticing that she's holding her breath, to Cherry standing at the sink with a turquoise bath towel wrapped around her. Becky already said her name. She stands in the part-opened doorway, a spectator, a specter, a dreading voyeur, wanting not to peek but to put her ear to Cherry's breastbone, to breathe the clean, mossy wetness of the towel, and to listen for the sound of Cherry's pulse. To snake her wrists around Cherry's waist and keep her in one place, and – the instinct is immediate – to hold her still. But Cherry stands there gulping at the mirror, that unfocused nightmare expression back again with her dripping vine hair giving winding droplets and rivulets to her flesh. Becky can't do it.

"What's wrong?" she says instead.

“It’s still...” Cherry rubs with her thumb at the space behind the shell of her ear, then glances at Becky almost *impatiently*. She shakes her head. “I still stink. I still stink.”

“What? No you don’t.”

“Yeah. I do. You don’t smell that? And here, I’m...” She rubs the scalp curve behind her ear again (and there would be a squeaking sound if Becky was close enough, Cherry’s that slick with water and looks so clean). She says something that Becky can’t hear. Becky asks, what? and Cherry doesn’t respond. Becky has never seen her like this before. She creeps into the bathroom.

“Cherry...”

“Don’t,” Cherry says, when Becky’s extended and about to touch, to somehow comfort. Cherry backs away and frets with the cinch of the towel, head shaking. “Can you go? Can you please go? I can’t take this smell. I want you to go.”

Becky doesn’t understand; the only smell now is clean humidity, and she says so, but Cherry, in a fed-up voice laced with a panic that Becky can’t bear to trace, says, “Please. Becky, please.” And Becky’s still frightened – perhaps even more frightened now (the fear is more pointed than before, draws more blood than before, though it’s smaller and easier to conceal) – but she’s also afraid of what will happen if she doesn’t go. With another fear, a nameless fear rotating and oscillating in Cherry’s eyes, Becky is afraid of what Cherry could tell her, afraid that what Cherry remembers of last night is exactly what Becky is trying so hard to keep at bay.

What Becky is truly frightened of is that she will look down at her palms and find what she’s been dreading since Cherry came awake: beetle fragments and neon yellow smears of bioluminescence.

While Becky gathers her things and zips her bags, the shower starts running again.

...

She parks the Trailblazer on the street a few blocks down from Patrick's building. He meets her at the car, there to help with her bags, and when he sees her his arms close around her for a few moments of firm warmth and his Old Spice underarms smell. They walk back to his apartment, chatting, and Becky knows he's disappointed that she could be in town before him, and could enjoy herself without him, as though she's really no one's guest – especially not his – and as though she truly travels to visit, rather than to be visited. Sometimes she suspects that Patrick would rather she had no reason to come to town but to see him, but if he feels that way, he never says so. He's a grasping, tight-lipped happy whenever Becky comes to him, and he loves her too much to understand how to form words around his jealousies. That he does not know how to express his wariness of her is one of the things that Becky appreciates about him most.

They go for lunch a mile across town to a new Thai place, and while they eat their stir fry from enormous red clay bowls, Patrick asks her about her night on campus; he listens to her tell of the keg in Nat Sewell's tall old campus house, and of the friends of Cherry's who brought Sauza tequila and wrestled one another out on the lawn, all the while nodding at her with the patient, guarded expression of one who cannot understand drunkenness as sport rather than tool – a descendant of alcoholism, fermented for eight months of last year in Iraq.

She can't stop talking about the partying even though she feels foolish and frivolous relating it to him, going on partly out of stubbornness regarding the fact that she *likes* a good, rowdy college party, and partly out of momentum with no other topic of conversation to spring up and intervene. She goes on to tell him about Cherry, and how she drank so much she'd passed out on the porch ("Lucky it's only September, right? Ha, ha."), but then Patrick's looking at her and it's expected that she say more about Cherry now that they're on the subject, and it was a mistake that she even brought Cherry up at all because now there's a sudden pang of guilt over what happened, a guilt that tells Becky she's a bad person to sit and smile in Patrick's presence – and unexpectedly, uncontrollably, she resents how meaningless and dry it feels around/with/below him, even though he did nothing to prompt it but sit across from her, watching her with caution and love, while she hates herself and pushes the edamame beans to one side of her bowl.

They don't fuck right away when they go back to Patrick's apartment, instead moving in repeated semicircles around his bedroom while trying to find an unobtrusive place for Becky's bags. Becky knows that overnight bags in or out of the way mean absolutely nothing to him, but he won't stop muttering halfmouthed smiles and he won't look up from his large hands. And Becky can't shut up about pointless things. Finally they turn on Netflix, balance Patrick's laptop on the desk chair, and start in on one another's bodies. By the time the sunstripes have dripped away from the blinds, both of them are moving hurried with the clockwork need that comes with being apart since right before start of term. Becky clutches at the sliding muscles of Patrick's back and tries to give herself up to it, but Patrick's thrusts only juxtapose the unending thought of Cherry lying there, spine curved and all slick with dew.

...

She met Cherry her junior year of undergrad, when a girl she'd played softball with in high school, Jerrica Klein, came to the university as a freshman. They met up dutifully and went to a neighborhood party together, Becky introducing Jerrica to places where a freshman could drink underage on Friday nights, and Jerrica subsequently introducing Becky to her roommate in the dorms, an English major named Cherry Subramanian. That year when they had just that one mutual friend between them, Becky hardly spoke to Cherry at all, only providing escort for the eager younger girls and introducing them both to slouchy older boys who studied Fine Arts. Jerrica ended up getting lost to the west neighborhood in the college process, changing friends and going instead to apartment parties with upright-standing boys who studied Business. But Cherry stayed in the east neighborhood, making friends of her own, and went from a frizzy-haired teenager to a smirking, sidling young woman who spoke in a group only to tease. Cherry's friends and Becky's shuffled and mixed in sequences of hookups and graduations in a tight radius, and by Becky's last semester, they ended up members of the same clique, and Becky found that she liked Cherry and her morbid, daring wit quite a bit.

One night in that time when Patrick was gone, a frigid January night when Becky came to a party alone and could not find the old crowd among the new faces, she saw

Cherry for the first time in months. Around midnight, a little more than buzzed, Becky pushed through the crush of drunk boys and girls and made her way to the laptop in the corner of the dark, pulsating living room to have a go at putting on a different song. A girl in black boots stood barring the way to the laptop, cup nestled in crossed arms. Becky did not recognize the girl she had met through Jerrica Klein more than a year before – there was no reason for her to.

“What’s this?” Becky yelled over the dreamy, bass-pounding song. “Security?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“You’re seriously not sick of Grimes?”

“Grimes is the voice of our generation, pretty sure.”

“Shut up! I’m filing a complaint. I want Beyoncé.”

“I can’t give special privileges. Nat has strict rules about his playlist and his computer. You want all these sweaty straight boys to bum rush me thinking they can put on whatever they want? You want to try your luck with Sublime? You really want that?”

“You’re Cherry, aren’t you?”

They ended up becoming reacquainted up against the cluttered sink in Nat’s kitchen, Becky’s head bobbing off-beat to the song that Cherry had put on for her, and Cherry saying things like, “So I told her: do you have any idea how much of this shit I had to put up with from white boys before I came out? No, you’d better apologize before we go any further because I am not to be *popped*, and that shit is not sexy.” And Becky stared, wondering if she had been that cool two years ago, wondering if she was cool now. She never wanted to be friends with anyone so badly.

...

You finish your shower and the house says nothing, is empty. For ten minutes maybe, for fifteen minutes maybe, you’re at the bed, maybe sitting, maybe the towel snakes to the floor and you kneel at the bedside, your nakedness stealing in on you from all sides,

you are a bloodhound for the smell. When does ripe cross over to rotting? When does her next visit come? You're already thinking about her next visit. You put on clothes and go downstairs to the refrigerator, but someone has eaten your strawberries.

There's an idea of a person in your head. You go back upstairs. You sit on the floor between your dirty laundry and the mugs of vodka and soured orange juice, pressing the wetness of your hair as a rag to your cheeks and neck. The idea of a person is the fun girl. The fun girl does not like to age. She knows that sobriety is old. The fun girl says, twisting, *You don't get to talk*, and holds, twisting, holds while feeling inside for a place from which to take.

You put on jeans and a jacket and leave the house. While you walk to the gas station, all you can think about is that cigarettes killed Jerrica's father, and you wonder what they tasted like to Jerrica's father, and after you buy your Camel Crushes you spend too long on the street corner struggling to carefully unwrap the cellophane, because right now you cannot bear to tear something that resists you. You smoke three cigarettes in the ten minute walk home, and something with unseeing worm eyes writhes inside of you, churning your bile and fluids – *you won't call it by that name you won't call it by that name you can't call it by that name* – and when you get home your roommates are both at the kitchen table with a board game, saying hello and asking after your night, and you say *hi, good*, with no eye contact as you hurry up the stairs because they will smell the rancid dog stink on you and they'll know what you've done.

...

Becky is on Nat Sewell's front porch later on that night with Patrick, small of her back mashed into the railing there, keeping him company while he smokes a cigarette. Bass seeps outside and the porch is full of restless standing legs, the palpable need to get drunk, easy alcohol laughter that masks urgency with rowdiness. On the opposite side of the porch are Cherry and a girl with severe, slash-mark eyebrows, and as Cherry bends in to kiss an unlit cigarette to the cherry of the other girl's, Becky's brain rolls out a blackboard and indicates a question:

Does Cherry ever kiss someone in a bed? And not just that, of course (though Becky snags on the thought), but if Cherry kisses someone in a bed, does she kiss on top of another person and concentrate on gulping gravity so that spit doesn't slide down her cheeks and into the other mouth? Because Becky knows that effort, and she pushes off the railing, and she is not followed inside – not by Patrick, who cradles his fourth Hamm's in a slow burn of his own, and not by Cherry, whose cigarette is a bobbing red firefly at her lip, and who said to Becky the night before, "No, I quit. Nine days tar-free, now."

She waits in a narrow upstairs hallway for the bathroom, strips of light peeking out from other rooms that don't emit sounds, and for a moment, Becky stands in the dark hall with her hands sweating at the undershirt curve of her own hips, and simultaneously, she splits from herself, a flat, translucent film of a girl peeling away, floating under a door, drifting under a bed, hanging on to the cracking static voices of boys and girls above her, until everyone leaves and she is left in the lights-out intimacy of a stranger's bedroom to settle, and to expand.

Becky would expect the next sound to be an opening door, to burst such a strange thought with a glimpse at what a bedroom in Nat Sewell's house actually looks like (maybe a girl's room? a stoner's room?), but the next sound is footsteps instead, and the forehead ascending the stairs has the crease of cardboard, and it is Cherry, followed by the girl who Becky does not know.

Cherry walks in a strange hallway with the wide steps of a dog catcher. She leans herself across from Becky, and when Eyebrows says something to her, something benign about the bathroom's wait status and how badly she has to pee, Cherry's gaze swings to Becky's as though on a pendulum, a look of mute impatience – or vigilance? – or imploring? *How dare she!* To look at Becky like that, when at Naomi Shearer's pregame earlier, she had perched on the railing of the back porch and had not met Becky's eyes once; not when Becky had waved last night's gallon jug of screwdriver at her, not when Cherry had let her legs dangle with a limpness that made Becky think of the grass-thudding limbs of that morning, made Becky hiccup – *oh god oh no* – into the déjà vu of rustling fear when Patrick was right there next to her. Becky wants so badly to be recognized for her fear that she

might just peel it from herself in a great long sheet of skin and drape it over Cherry's shoulders. She turns to the other girl and lets her cut in line, and after a few minutes when the bathroom's occupancy changes, she is alone with Cherry, and she opens her mouth and speaks.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you?" Cherry mumbles.

Don't do that, Becky snaps in her head. *Is that a test?* She's her own father.

"I won't say anything to that girl."

"It's fine."

"Is it because Patrick's here?"

"I knew he would be here."

"You're making it seem like something's wrong. Are you -" she scrambles for a shred of courage, finds none, says anyway - "freaked about yesterday?"

The pendulum swings back. Becky goes on.

"Because, come on." She moves to Cherry, and when they are close, when they are secret, she drops to a murmur. "This doesn't change anything."

They stand side to side now, backs to the wall, and while Becky is a paper flat girl under the beds of strangers, there are bars of light that connect those rooms with the living breath of this hallway, where Becky is full and thick, and Cherry rattles.

"And we had fun, right?"

...

Growing up was having Becky in your bedroom Friday night, with her car in your lot and her bags on your floor. Growing up was having Becky's eyes on your things, Becky standing among your things. You'd never had things of your own in front of Becky before.

You'd been a kid when you knew her. Now you had a house for her to stay in, and it was bigger than Patrick's apartment – she told you that herself. You were pleased that the comparison had occurred to her in the first place, occurred to her while she withdrew a fifth of Smirnoff from one of her bags, occurred to her that you might be better than Patrick in any way. You brought two mugs from the kitchen and Becky poured the vodka straight, but while she sipped, you left your mug untouched on the desk because it was six p.m. and you could not drink liquor straight. Becky told you about Bloomington. Becky urged you to drink the vodka she poured you. Her long white teeth showed in the staccato laugh that came often and she urged you to drink the vodka she poured you. You told her you couldn't do it straight so she told you to get up, that she was driving you to the gas station to buy you juice.

...

There comes the sound of the flush from behind the door, and in compulsion Becky is daring – it erupts from her desperation in Cherry's silence – and why does it goad her on this way? In the small parcel of time between the flush and the open creaking door there is a giddy pressure, and she acts upon her body's own unraveling volition and want, a rope of words slithering out from her throat to caress Cherry's:

“Don't let me drink any more or I might tell you that I wish Patrick wasn't here.”

Never has she been more sure of herself than she feels with Cherry. With Cherry, in the steady thrum of a party with vodka fizzing in her blood, with Cherry unblinking and all pupil, tousled, Becky is adventurous. She is fun. But she wants to take Cherry by the shoulders, can almost feel more words bubbling out of her to ask, *Well, what do you think of me now? Haven't I become so unfettered?* A little praise is all that she wants. Just a little praise. But Cherry's lips look so, so dry upon her jutting underbite, and when all she rasps is, “Can I go next?” a black fly scuttles from incisor to canine.

...

So what's growing up mean, then, when you were drunk in your own house and you didn't want to be? Does it count? You were dizzy when you tried to lean back on your

elbow, and it was a misplaced avalanche – how *do* we even land – with mouth wet soft hard on your neck, and does it count? You thought you were grown up, but when you were drunk and never wanted the nine shots worth of vodka that found their way inside of you, here where you thought you lived, you were a fraud, and this was not your house at all. This was her house. Her hand slid between your legs and you were evicted. Your head lolled back and you were a boarder. You shuddered and clung, you gave response, you had had this love for years, after all, and you were more tender than you looked, after all. This was not necessarily a dream but a movie with holes burnt into the reel. You watched yourself. You were an observer.

One time you looked at a girl's pretty portraits on Facebook and made a wish for a girlfriend with a camera.

And then when the camera was there it's here you closed your eyes, and you could see the film, your round bread thighs and your brown nipples and your hazy hangjaw on the film, so you said Oh no, please, I wish you wouldn't.

You don't trust me?

It's not you, I just get nervous.

You seriously don't trust me? I can't believe you.

There was an idea of a person in your head. She brought the vodka to your lips and you were rubber, you were clay, you were splayed – it began again. You purred for the touch – keened for it – but the sound was all in your head, *with* and *for* the idea of the person who lived there – the person who made a home there. From your body there was muteness, and upon you was the weight and the gripping of the fun girl. Since when was it the fun girl? You tried to sit up, but the gripping hand forced your neck. You tried to touch the crown of tawny hair, but your wrist was ripped away and pinned. You tried again to do something else, but your mouth was a swirling drain that could not explain it, and perhaps you did not remember the word that meant Stop anyway, or perhaps this was a punishment – you were not grown up – perhaps the palm that shoved your chin was the

lesson that it is not *fun* to stop, and we won't, we don't, don't, don't, don't don't
don'tdon'tdon'tdon'tdon'tdon't

When she disappeared from on top of you, leaving your breath whistling on the pillow, she was gone; her voice came in flat from the bathroom and told you that you had to get dressed for the party, it was time to go to the party, and you were rubber, you were clay, you were flayed, and

you were both the fun girls.

...

Becky passes ten minutes in the hallway by herself. The girl with the eyebrows doesn't hang around long, heading back downstairs at the first synthesized chords of a song that she tells Becky she likes, but Becky prefers it this way. She drinks from her gallon cocktail. It's funny, but this should have been last night's party. She knows that now. How did she fall asleep the way that she did? Alone? Becky can't remember – does not particularly hasten to remember – the way that she would have fished in the pocket of her jeans for Cherry's spare key, gone up the stairs of her silent house, and fell, supine, into the bed by herself, thinking, *this is fine, this is fine*. It's laughable, honestly. She will go back to Bloomington, go with Carlo for beers at the brewery half an hour's walk from the Archaeology department, and when he asks about her visit she will tell him how she drank so much that she wandered back to her friend's house and slept as dreamlessly as though she had come back to her own bed. They will both laugh, and Becky will file it away.

She will not tell Carlo about how she strained. She will not tell him that she never managed to hold Cherry still and confirm the throbbing meter of her pulse. She will guard that shortcoming and think of it as little as she can.

"Cherry?" Becky raps on the door after a full ten minutes have passed. She is ready for Cherry to come out of the bathroom prowling and grinning already, the way that she always has, so that Becky can go back downstairs to Patrick and her own heart's compartment that houses her relationship with him. She is ready. She taps her knuckles to the thin wood again – "Cherry?" – and brings her ear to it. She is full and thick. She is ready.

The smell comes to her then, as she pauses at the door, and it is familiar. It's faint at first, something curdled. Down at the rectangle of light at her feet, a sparse wad of flies climb out to the dark. The flies drone drunkenly, one by one by two by three, finding their way to the toe of Becky's boot. And the smell rots.