

Like That

The first time I pick him up, the day I get my license, I back out of his driveway in the family car and roll straight into a tree. We both get out to take a look.

“Dude.” He says, looking at the tree shaped dent over the back fender.

“Oh, fuck” I say.

“Dude! That sucks.”

“Shit,” I say.

Then he laughs with that laugh he has, “You totally hit that tree. Dude!” he says it again.

I laugh too, then we get back in the car.

When he laughs like that he can make me do things; drive to the city to buy a bag of weed, or give him my last cigarette. He can make me blow off Jill from Honors Chemistry even though we have a test and I need her notes. He can make me skip the last class of the day to stand around the park and get high.

He doesn't like drinking. His mom is a drinker and this seems to have turned him from it. I like the feel of a good drunk and more than once have been known to carry a thermos of booze to school. Not to drink from, not then, but just to have for later. But we don't drink together, not ever.

I have this idea that if we both get drunk we might be more in our bodies, all loose jointed and needing to be touched. People slip and fall into each other when they're drunk; they need to be

held up or held down or held back from something crazy. Just held. This is something I want from him. If liquor is in the mix I think I might have a shot.

But he says “I hate women who drink.” So I stop being a woman who drinks, when I’m near him at least. And I agree that his mother is a disaster, even though she isn’t a bit like me.

One night we go back to his house after the park. We are kind of coming down but still in that place where he’s relaxed and being funny. The house is dark when we come inside and he walks around turning on the lamps that still have bulbs, stepping around the piles of things stacked on the floor. It smells like cigarettes and dust, the air is thick with it in the dim yellow light.

Then his mom opens the door to her back bedroom. She stands in the doorway wearing a stained white nightgown, clutching a Big Gulp of vodka.

“Where have you been?” she says, tipping onto the door jamb.

“Go back in your room, Mom.”

“I mean it, what have you been doing?”

“Go. Now,” he points a finger back to her doorway. She looks for just a second like she wants to say something and then just kind of smirks and turns away.

“Fuck,” he says when the door closes. “Can you fucking believe that?” It puts him in a mood for the rest of the night, the kind where he just wants to listen to music on the couch and watch the television with the volume off.

His dad is a musician, floating somewhere in NYC with a new girlfriend. The two of them live off the alimony she gets from a famous singer who was once her husband. But his whole house looks like his dad still lives there; his dad’s music collection is still under the stereo, his empty

terrarium is still in the living room, there are a bunch of his old coats still in the hall closet. His dad has been gone for more than a decade.

This all gives him a certain darkness, an edge. He wants to be a musician too, and he might be famous after all. He has a cultivated, timeless cool; like he could jump on stage any moment. People desire him. They are drawn to him. And out of all the people he could think is cool, he has singled me out. I will do anything I can to save the protective glow this gives me.

Last summer he had sex with a woman for the first time, an Asian woman from another town. And even though it happened just once, even though he doesn't call her or see her and she probably doesn't even know that all his friends call him Fish, he and his friends, Sean and Brian, bring her up all the time.

"Tell us again what she looks like." Sean says.

"I don't know," Fish says. "Like, hot."

"You need to say more about it than that. Details. Nice ass?" Brian is always looking at girls' asses. I try to never turn my back to him.

"I guess, yeah."

"Mouth? Like big puffy lips or like small and tight?"

"I don't know, man, just hot. Like Asian hot," he takes a drag from his cigarette then gives it a hard flick with his thumbnail.

"Asian hot?" I ask.

"You wouldn't get it." He turns to Sean, "Dude, you know what I mean?"

“Totally.”

I study all the Asian girls at school to see what they have in common. I can't find it.

Sean and Brian haven't even come close to losing their virginity. Sean is tall and gawky with a nose and teeth too big for his face. Brian is short and foreign looking with tight curly blond hair and pale, blotchy skin. They look to Fish to give them cues on how to act. That's why they tolerate me. The three of us have a sort of truce held together by his approval.

I'm not hot or tight or fuckable. And because I am not those things, I am supposed to be like one of the guys. I am not supposed to have a crush on Fish so I tell myself I don't. I am a hangout kind of girl.

Once, I lean on his arm, wrap my fingers around his bicep. Like a joke.

“Dude, don't be like that,” he says.

“Like what?”

“You know,” and he points his cigarette at my forehead and squints his eyes. “Like that,” he says it again.

So I don't. Be like that. I keep a careful buffered distance between us both. I go out of my way to never touch him; not when we are passing joints, not when we are sitting and watching a movie, not when we say hello or goodbye.

And even though I think it's not the whole truth, that he does like me like that, I go along with it. I pretend like I don't feel the energy bursting between us. I pretend I don't believe that he likes me best of all. It is not going to be like that.

That was the fall. Two things happen during the shitty slide into winter: he moves into the basement and then he gets a girlfriend. Her name is Kathleen and she is nothing like what I expect. A good girl. A soccer player with strawberry blond hair and freckles. He brings it up over lunch, how they started hanging out, how they hooked up last week.

“You are totally going to corrupt her,” Sean says.

“I know, right?”

“No, I mean like, totally make her dirty.”

“In the best way though.”

“Right.”

As if on cue, Kathleen walks by with her group of bubblegum sweet girlfriends and gives him a shy smile. I feel my stomach hit the floor but I keep a flat look on my face. I chew the bite of donut in my mouth even though it tastes like cardboard and I can't swallow.

“You going to drink your chocolate milk?” Fish says when she's gone. I slide it over without looking.

I don't know how he dragged the furniture down to the basement by himself but it was somehow done in the space of one Saturday afternoon when his mom was out. It was mostly taken from the living room. There are shadows on the carpet where the furniture used to be, a checkerboard pattern of darker green exposed to the air for the first time in 20 years.

The only things he left in the living room are a card table in front of the TV and a plain wooden chair. This is where his mom is sitting when I come over after his move downstairs. She has seeped into the space he left, free from her bedroom and the need to avoid his judgement.

And for his part he has started to pretend that she isn't there at all. Like a roommate. He told me to just come in the front door, "I can't hear the doorbell from the basement," he said.

"What about your mom? I don't want to freak her out."

"You think she gives a shit?" This is what he told me on the phone, so it's what I do even though it feels weird to just walk in without knocking or anything.

I pass by the living room on the way down and it seems true that his mom doesn't give a shit. She looks up at me then back to the puzzle laid out next to her ashtray. Her Big Gulp cup is sweating on a coaster and the television going at top volume.

She waves me towards the door in the kitchen that leads to the basement.

"Tell him he needs to come up if he wants dinner," she says over the sound of a commercial.

Downstairs it smells like cinnamon and pumpkin. Sean steals scented candles from his mom and brings them over like an offering. They think that the smell of the candles hides the scent of weed. In addition to the candles, they have arranged a giant fan that points out a missing pane of glass in a subterranean window. It is supposed to suck out the smoke, but the whole place smells like a combination of Yankee Candle and a head shop.

Sean is sitting on the couch pulling a long tube from a three foot bong. When he sees me come down the stairs he blows a cloud of smoke straight to my face, more smoke than I would believe could fit in his lungs.

"Blow it to the fan, dude." Fish jumps up from the couch and waves a guitar magazine in wide flapping motions, trying to get the smoke to go out the window. The scented candle flame is flickering in the wind and dropping big globs of wax on the coffee table.

“Sorry, man,” says Sean.

“What the fuck is on your face?” Fish says after he stops flapping and finally looks at me.

“Lipstick.” I bite back the urge to press my lips together, to take it back.

“I hate girls with lipstick.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

He rolls his eyes. “Take it off. You look stupid.”

I pick up the roll of toilet paper he uses to mop up spills. I swipe my lips like it doesn’t matter, like I didn’t think about this a lot, and throw the wad in the overfilled can.

Sean passes the bong over to Brian who needs to stretch his short arm as long as it can go to have the lighter reach the bowl. He probably hates that bong.

I sit on the couch next to a stain. The stain is big and brown, something that spilled a long time ago. It never rubs off, but I avoid it anyway. The couch feels kind of damp, I can feel the moisture vaguely seeping into my jeans from the cushion.

Every move his mom makes upstairs comes through the ceiling; her footsteps going from the kitchen to the back of the house, her chair creaking when she sits, the television blaring. She doesn’t seem like she misses all her stuff, though apparently they got into a screaming match after he took the furniture and she wants everything back.

Over the couch is a poster of a giant brown tiger creeping through yellow grass.

“Why is it that tiger brown?”

“It’s orange.”

“It’s definitely brown.”

“Whatever,” Fish shrugs. “It’s just fucking old, that’s why.” This is the way he talks to me when Sean is around.

“Was it your dad’s?” I ask.

“Probably, I don’t know, it was upstairs in the crawlspace,” he says, then he and Sean look to opposite corners, the way they always do when someone brings up a dad.

“Did you see Leah today?” Brian changes the subject.

“I know, right?” he says.

“I mean those fucking shorts, I totally saw ass cheek.”

“Ass cheek? Fuck!”

“Yeah, right where it hits the thigh.”

“Stop it, dude, I’m getting a boner.”

“I mean I think I saw just a whisper of snatch, like one hair.”

“Stop it, I mean it.”

“Can you just imagine that tight little snatch?”

“Fuck you man, if you make me hard I’m going to stick it up your ass.”

“You would love that wouldn’t you? Sticking it in my ass?”

“Fuck you.”

“Come on, I’m waiting,” and he bends over, shoves his ass in the air.

I use my thumb nail to pick at the wax that fell when he waved the magazine. One piece has dripped in the exact shape of the state of New Jersey. If he were alone I might point this out, but in front of Sean and Brian he would just get sarcastic, “Oh yeah, that’s special,” he would probably say.

I scrape the state of New Jersey into oblivion. I can feel my face starting to burn, wondering if I got all the lipstick off, if it is smeared across my face like a clown and they’ll make fun of me later. They don’t notice when I get up to go to the bathroom.

It’s maybe the shittiest bathroom on the planet. The size of a coat closet with a squishy floor and a mildewed shower, a little rectangle of mirror that only shows part of a person’s face at a time. There isn’t any toilet paper and the toilet itself is yellow with crusted old piss.

A brown hand towel with an embroidered butterfly floating near the hem is hanging on the rack over the sink. I wipe my lips with what I think is the cleanest edge, erase any expression, then thread the towel back through the bar.

Spring doesn’t happen. Winter just gets wet and melts off the planet into mud and freezing rain and if there is that one day when the temperature is just right and the flowers start to pop and smell good, I don’t notice.

During lunch Fish doesn’t come out to smoke cigarettes anymore. He and Kathleen spend the time making out in the stairwell by the auditorium. It’s dark there, unused, and full of couples clutching at each other.

It’s just Sean and Brian with me outside now at lunch. We smoke and they talk, endlessly, about what they would do if they changed places with Fish, if they could have Kathleen.

“All that fucking hair. I just want to wrap it in my fingers.”

“Like a handle, right?”

“Totally. I want to mess her up in the best kind of way, you know?”

“Oh, I know, dude, I know.”

Kathleen is a fixture now on the couch in the basement in the place next to the stain. His place is next to her, his arm around her shoulder or putting his head in her lap, letting her touch his hair. When she’s not there, he is sullen and impatient, like the light has gone out of the room. He doesn’t do things just to make me laugh anymore.

I am supposed to be cool with this, so I try to get to know Kathleen, to be friends the way girls are supposed to be. She invites me over to her house to hang out. Her mom served us cut carrots and cookies on a plate. She had stuffed animals on her bed. She told me about camp. I want to kill her and be her at the same time.

Fish’s mom didn’t get fired from her job but she’s been put on leave. There was a car accident on the way to work, a DUI, a trip to Human Resources and then she is always home, a gatekeeper to the downstairs even in the afternoon.

“How’s school?” his mom asks when I let myself in through the front door. “You like school, don’t you?”

This is probably the only thing Fish has ever told his mom about me so it’s what she has brought up the only other times we have talked.

“Fine.”

“Come in the kitchen. I need to feed the cat.”

I follow her there. The soles of my sneakers stick to the dirty linoleum, making kind of a sucking sound as I come in and stand by the wall. I notice she isn't wearing shoes and her heels are cracked and black on the bottom.

She rummages in the cupboard and pulls out a can, dumps the new food on top of the old food in the dish and throws the spoon in the sink. The cat, as big and fat as a dog, walks along the wall and makes his way to the food. She leans against the counter and lights a cigarette that she pulls from the front of her robe.

“You apply to college?”

“Yeah.”

“Good for you,” she says, then takes a long drag and curls her lip to blow it to the ceiling. “I can't figure out what you're doing over here with these guys.” She tries to slide the pack of cigarettes back in her robe but misjudges the height of the pocket and it takes two attempts.

I don't know what to say so I adjust the strap of my backpack over my shoulder and pretend I don't notice that she's soft around the edges, that she is drunk just a little. He is always saying terrible things about what she does when she drinks; how she yells at him and breaks things. But she just looks sad to me.

“I met his Dad in college, did you know that? True love for ever and ever.” She ashes into the sink with a flick of her thumb without taking her eyes off my face. I can feel her evaluating me, looking at me like I might explain something she doesn't know about her son. I study the macramé planter over the sink.

“Alright. Go on down. You don't need to be polite anymore.” She gives a nervous laugh.

And it was sad, right, because she didn't seem like such a bad person just kind of stuck. I wish I knew what to say to make her feel better, but her back is already turned and she's looking in the cupboard.

So I walk down the stairs and the first thing I see is the back of Fish's head pressing into Kathleen's face on the couch. Sean is sitting on a chair across the room looking at his phone, the bong in his hand, and he looks up with something like a sneer. I feel so small and alone and angry. I turn around and go back up. I walk out the door without saying a word and decide I will never come back. Fuck all of them.

There is a time when I think this will matter. My absence. That he might say that he misses me or wants to hang. That he will call and we will go to the park and laugh. But that time never comes. Instead there is a chill that blows so deeply between us that when we accidentally run in to each other in the Science hallway I can feel tingles up my spine when he gives me a sour look. He has decided to reject me with five times the intensity that I reject him.

I try not to cry about this. I cry about this.

In the summer I get a job working at the supermarket. I learn that foods have codes, I learn the difference between leeks and scallions, and I open a bank account and put my minimum wage paycheck into it every week.

The other girls I work with are Latina from one town over. One tall, one short, they both wear thick make-up that is shiny and not really the right colors; blues, purples and the wrong colors of beige. They look like clowns, but it has been so painstakingly and perfectly applied no one could accuse them of looking bad, not even the manager who watches us like a hawk in a way that he thinks looks protective but everyone knows is pervy.

“Oh, chica, you are working so hard,” they say when I stock the shelves or carry something heavy.

“You are such a hard working chica!” Then they laugh and say something to each other in Spanish that my high school level classes are helpless to translate.

After work their boyfriends pick them up in small, loud cars. The boyfriends are short but look way older. They arrive in the parking lot ten minutes before the shift ends, cross their arms and wait for the girls to come out. I can hear the cars rumble for blocks as they drive away.

I steal cigarettes from the store as often as I can. I also take gum and cans of soda. I get good at doing this. I put everything I’ve stolen in my red backpack, next to my thermos of booze that is a mixture of all bottles in my parent’s liquor cabinet, calibrated to look like nothing is missing.

Most nights I sit in the park and have some drinks and try to lean into a streetlight bright enough to read my book. I watch the smoke from my cigarette mix with the humid air. Some nights I walk around the neighborhoods and look at all the houses and imagine things about the people who live in them. I try to decide which homes are happy and which one I would most like to own.

One night I get to the park and find Sean sitting in the woodchips and Brian hanging from the monkey bars. I would have kept walking, found somewhere else to be, but they see me before I can turn away.

“Don’t you want to say hi to your old friends?”

“Hey.”

“You gonna come hang out with us? Come on, we know you’ve got something to drink in that bag.”

We sit on the swings and drink from my thermos, passing it from person to person down the line. Eventually, Brian pulls some weed out of his pocket and we get high. I want to ask about Fish; where he is, what he’s doing, but I don’t want to show them I care.

Sean has some money and we go to buy snacks. The three of us walk the few blocks past the closed library and the police station to the convenience store. The bright light burns my eyes when we walk in. It smells like old microwave food and floor cleaner and the temperature is 30 degrees cooler than outside.

Sean pulls a giant coffee cake off the shelf and he walks around the aisles eating it with a plastic fork from the hot dog station.

“You no do that!” the lady behind the register shouts at him.

“What?” Sean says, spilling crumbs from his open mouth.

“You no eat in the store,” she says.

“I’m going to pay.”

“You no eat in the store!” She is short and has her black hair pulled up in a complicated bun held together with a shiny plastic barrette. Under the uniform I can see a flowery kind of polyester shirt hugging her saggy bosom.

Sean laughs in her face. He goes to the register and throws down some money. “Here, take it.” He always has cash. His grandparents are rich and load him with a big allowance, probably because they feel so bad about the situation with his father.

The clerk takes the money without counting it, “You go now. Bye, Bye. You go.”

“Okay. We go now,” Sean says. “Bye, bye.” He drops the remaining part of the coffee cake face down on the floor. “Bye-Bye.”

When we follow him out, Brian gives him a high five. “That was awesome, dude.” Through the plate glass window I see the woman get a broom and dustpan and stoop down to clean up the mess, talking to herself. They watch her clean it up, too.

“That’s right, get on your knees,” says Sean through the window.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I say.

They turn to look at me. “What?”

“I said that’s totally fucking rude.”

Sean turns halfway to meet me. Raises an eyebrow. “What do you care?” The two of them exchange a look, solidifying their allegiance.

I can feel the crack in the ground opening between us; Sean and Brian on one side and me on the other. It feels good. I haven’t felt this way in a long time, like I’m on top of what happens next. It’s the thing that made Fish like me, but also the thing he took away.

“She doesn’t get paid for that.”

“Oh, is she your friend?” Brian is standing a little behind and a little to the right of Sean, sneering and using him as a shield at the same time.

“I just think it’s shitty to treat people like that.”

“Yeah, and you know so much because you have so many friends?”

“You’re an asshole,” I say and hope my voice doesn’t shake

He laughs. “That’s the best you got?” Brian laughs too.

“Fuck this.” I pull my backpack over my shoulder and walk away from the parking lot.

“That’s right, keep walking. Why don’t you go somewhere to get that giant stick out of your ass?

I don’t know why Fish even liked you.”

I turn around, I want to know what he meant.

“No, don’t stop. Keep going. You fat shit.”

I can hear them laughing as I walk down the street.

I can’t go back to the park. They might go back there, too. I start walking. Every once in a while I unscrew the lid and of my thermos and drink some more. I step away from the headlights and into the shadows whenever a car passes. I keep my head down. I finish the booze in the thermos and realize as I look down at my sneakers that they aren’t landing in the place I want them to go. I realize I’m actually pretty drunk.

But it feels good. It all feels good. I feel more like myself than I have in a long time. My feet take me to Fish’s house, all the way at the very edge of town. I’m ready to get in his face, to ask him what the fuck is wrong with him. To ask him what the fuck is wrong with me. I feel like he owes me an answer.

I stand at the end of his front walk and pull a piece of gum from my backpack to wipe away the taste of everything else.

The front porch is coated in a pile of leaves that blew in during the fall and no one bothered to sweep out. It smells earthy and humid. There is a wicker chair with half the seat rotted out and a

pair of old sneakers underneath caked in mud. I have stood at this door so many times before that the feeling of familiarity washes over me.

I reach to open the door. The doorknob doesn't spin. I try again. Locked. I rattle the door, wonder when they started locking it.

The light in the front hall switches on. Then the porch light. "Hello? Is someone there?"

It's his mom. She slurs, garbling the breaks between the words like she's talking underwater.

Drunk. Which is kind of funny because I'm drunk, too. Only it occurs to me that she might not find it funny, that she might make a fuss over me or call my parents in some fit of caretaking that she has never had before. So I don't answer even when she says it again.

"Is someone out there?" I hear her voice shaking like she's afraid. I imagine her cowering behind the door, waiting for it to be thrown open by whatever crazy person is trying to break into her house, waiting to be attacked. Or maybe she is just afraid of anyone at all coming inside and seeing her in her stained white nightgown, drunk and alone.

I wait for something to happen. I wrap my arms around my shoulders and feel what it feels like to hold my own skin. The door will open, or it won't. I hold on to myself and remember that I am still here, that I exist no matter what. Letting go of what happens in the world outside my own body will always be my greatest defense.

I start to feel dizzy so I slide down the door and lean against it, look up at the trees that hang over the street. There is a whole jungle in the tops of the trees, all the big ones connected in a giant canopy. The branches are thick and strong enough to live on, to crawl across and lie down. I close my eyes and remember that I don't have to be here. There will always be tomorrow, and cigarettes and books and the park.

The porch light turns off but the inside light stays on. I imagine his mom with her eye to the keyhole looking to see if someone is still there, not knowing how to tell.