

## Just a Girl

Sarah had only been a girl when it happened. Not literally, but when you come from a place like the place she's from, you can be excused for not maturing until late, if ever.

She's used to the inside of her head, where memories come unbidden—as though wipers had suddenly cleared the blur of a rain-soaked windshield. She's been living in them for seventeen years. There is Mr. Dearden. Tenth grade history. She's in the middle row, third seat in, and she's gazing at the old man and wondering if she'll ever know things the way he knows things and comparing him favorably to her father, whose temper makes him unpredictable and her stomach clenches when he comes in from work until she learns his mood. She knew how to glean it from the way the door closed behind him. If it slammed, the pom-poms at the bottom of the curtain knocking back against the window, she knew better than to be doing anything other than her homework, every piece of detritus either tossed into the garbage, pushed into a drawer, or tidied neatly into stacks and rows on the shelf above her. Otherwise he'd fly into a rage, cursing her mother for not keeping better control of her. The girl was untamed and ungrateful. Him out working and when he comes back the place can't even be in order. He'd find something to curse. He could seek his own spark. All she and her mother had to do was exist.

Mr. Dearden, older than her father, is always calm and patient even with Duck Bean, who sits in the front and yells out questions at inopportune times in his weirdly low, mechanical voice, even when Mr. Dearden is talking, but Mr. Dearden doesn't get angry. Not at Jasper John and Tiggy Hansen in the back row either, who huck spitballs at Duck's back. Sarah once saw Mr. Dearden pat Duck between the shoulder blades on his way out of the classroom. Duck didn't like to be touched, and crouched to get away, but Mr. Dearden had swiped the spit ball off, saving him from walking down the brown echoey hallway with the thing stuck to his acrylic sweater.

If people were colors, Mr. Dearden would be a tranquil blue, her father a nasty mustard hue. A color that makes you look away.

She inherited his temper. An invisible cloak, it drops onto her shoulders. She can feel it like a crawling wooly itch that sends tentacles into her like the hairs on one of the steel wool scrubbers her mother used to rake mildew off of grout. She doesn't have any choice but to barf it onto the closest person.

Eliza is often that person. Her cellmate for the last six years, Eliza sometimes hallucinates, but nobody seems to know why. The two of them could go for months without speaking to each other, which would be a good thing after the screaming matches, the throwing things.

Early one morning Sarah's father came home. She was getting ready for school and she wonders now, doesn't know why she never thought to wonder before, why he was only coming in the house at that hour. He wasn't a drinker. She's laughed since, before being in here, skulled back a shot, the glass cloudy from cheap dishwashing powder, or no dishwashing powder, and laughed out loud saying, if

he'd had a drink he might've been a nicer guy. Another shot, saying to whoever was with her—a date, a girlfriend—that booze might've made him right.

It wasn't religion either. He wasn't into that, though her mother was. Had to be if she was going to bear her husband like a martyr. She took it like it was what she deserved, but who deserves that? Only people who think they do because someone along the way made them feel that that was all they were worth. Made them cheap, a liquidation item, happy to be picked up off the shelf.

She didn't hear him come in because it was early morning and she wasn't expecting him to be awake. He must've seen the light under her door. She was getting dressed for school and her bed wasn't made yet and her pajamas on the floor, and he starts telling her how spoiled she is to have her own room and he worked his goddamned ass off and here she was with no appreciation no merit no real worth and off he storms. His ranting, her mother's voice fearful and meek. She got her school bag together and left the house alone. Her mother couldn't even say no to him for long enough to get the girl some breakfast, to make her a lunch. She went to school hungry. Some girls who were her acquaintances offered her apples or granola bars from their lunches when they saw she had nothing, but she declined. After that she started to like the pain that developed in her gut and the dizzy feeling and she would challenge herself to see how long she could go without a single morsel passing her lips.

It's the middle of the night. Snores and sighs and quiet sobbing fill the air damp with women's breath, night sweats like salty blossoms on scratchy sheets, the only solid sound that of the guard's thick rubber soles sticking and unsticking along

the polished cement floor, his chunky key ring taunting the locks on the cell doors as he passes them.

The wedding was a blur. Drunk and happy and her father already dead, her buzz inoculating her against her mother's thin pursed lips and wiry jaw, as though all those years of being with a tyrant had convinced her that the only truth is in suffering, and that her husband, like God, doled out punishment that was deserved. But there was also something else on the periphery: the knowledge that she was only with David because he'd wanted her and she hadn't thought that anybody would. Just like her mother, free for the taking and grateful to go along.

They say you choose a husband either just like your father or completely the opposite. She had chosen—more accurately, been chosen by—the latter. David's terminal unemployment felt liberating at first. He loved his freedom. He didn't make her stack the towels in order of their size or fall into a rage if some coffee grounds hadn't been wiped from the countertop.

He didn't mind her drinking either. It had become an indispensable habit. Anorexia amplified that medication, her clothes hanging from her like curtains, until the pregnancy and her vow to take care of herself, but it was too much to fix, and too late. David had begun staying away later and later and he didn't come home at all the night she miscarried. The next day, when he showed up, she was in bed, so pale she looked yellow, the darkness under her eyes gray and cushiony. She told him to get out and he did. He was going to anyway. He'd had enough anyway and so had she. Half of her was glad about the miscarriage and half of her was devastated. A baby would have been an anchor.

Eliza turns on her cot, the thin springs creaking. The light of the moon brushes against her skin, smoothing it, dusting the ridge of her hip and her thigh beneath the blanket. When she first arrived, she wouldn't sleep on the sheets. She used to wrap herself up like a burrito in her blanket on top of them. She had to have it tight, or something was going to get in. Sometimes she'd kick and writhe in her nightmares, wake up still in her dream; she'd think Sarah was her great aunt Gertrude, or a gigantic moth who had tried to eat her blanket, and she swore she wouldn't go to sleep again because she had to be on guard. Once Eliza called Sarah Barney for a whole week and kept singing I love you, you love me, we're a happy family with a one two three four throw the dog a bone, this old man came strolling home.

Then another morning she would wake up and be fine, as if nothing had happened. Sarah wouldn't remind her of these episodes, because what was the point? All told, Eliza was the best cellmate she'd had.

Before Eliza was Sally, who shouldn't have been here but in a psychiatric hospital. She'd confused Sarah with her mother, and she hated her mother. Eliza hallucinated but Sally had been downright psychotic and violent and Sarah lived in fear until they finally transferred Sally out because she stabbed a guard with a fork during dinner.

The moon has moved and Eliza has become a mountain range. The Blue Ridge Mountains, a place Sarah has never been, but it sure sounds beautiful.

She tries to remember the most beautiful place she's ever seen but those kinds of memories don't come as easily. If you held a gun to her head and told her to

think of one beautiful place she's seen, she would probably have to say the quarry, where she used to get drunk in high school. The quarry was a like a wound in the planet that had healed over with a slippery, gelatinous scab. Sometimes the sun setting would coat the water with a glowing polish and sometimes the shadows of the trees would cut the sunset into slivery geometric shapes.

She falls asleep and wakes to Eliza's voice, very close to her. Get up. Get up. We've got work to do. Sarah's eyelids are stuck together and she pushes them this way and that until they loosen their grip and open. Eliza is kneeling on the cold floor; she's agitated. She's saying, get up, get up and it sounds like she's saying getup, like there's a costume, a getup, and she doesn't want to wear it. As her insistence grows it sounds like giddup, like a rancher out on the plains of the Dakotas, trying to make off on a horse after a bank robbery. Eliza's forefingers are pushed together in front of her face. Git up girl, try to get some stuff done before they come.

Sarah turns over, tries to ignore Eliza, pretends to sleep and there it is in front of her, the boy's body. Again. Bent at a strange angle like it was folded over by a fun house mirror and it's creepy because any time you mix fun and death it's one hundred percent terrifying. His eyes open, unseeing. Sarah suddenly sober, raising her palms slowly to her face.

She wasn't even nearly as lit as she had been plenty of other times behind the wheel.

Get up, we've got work to do. What work, Sarah finally asks, turning over, away from the boy's body. Grateful for the distraction, she leaves him where he is. He'll be back, that much is certain. Eliza is ten years younger than she is. She

implores Sarah, her dark eyes glistening with hallucinatory urgency. Eliza believes she's doing what's right.

Finally, Sarah sits up, makes room, lets Eliza in next to the wall where she has spent years drilling her gaze into the greenish paint.

She holds Eliza until she stops shaking and muttering, strokes her hair, closes her own eyes and slows her breathing, trying to project calm into her. She thinks of Mr. Dearden wiping spitballs from Duck Bean's sweater and tries to remember a time when she did something kind without caring whether it was recognized, but nothing comes to her. She warns herself against feeling any sense of accomplishment; she knows that something will knock her down again, even lower, if she does.

When she wakes up, it is still the middle of the night; Eliza is in her own cot. She is the Blue Ridge Mountains, but the night has become moonless.