

## Loving Girl

Jill waited for Eric to turn around. He did it every time as if he needed assurance that she was there, fine and young and sitting in the driver’s seat of his car. When he turned Jill tilted her head back slightly and pursed her lips in a distance kiss.

Eric smiled fast, looked up and down the sidewalk before disappearing through the iron-barred door to the liquor store. Jill guessed he was nervous; a twenty-two-year-old buying beer for a girl just turned sixteen. In her opinion it was a stupid time to be nervous; it certainly wasn’t their first beer buying expedition. While she waited for him to return, Jill pulled the rearview mirror down to rehearse the kiss blowing routine. There was a fine line between blowing a kiss as a silly gesture and making the thing a sexy display. Jill had been going for sexy and she tried to reenact the muscle movements for herself in the mirror. She lowered her eyelids until they were nearly closed. Yes. Sexy. The late-March heat was enough to color her face, but not yet enough to make her shine with oil. She practiced the kiss again.

Jill often practiced sexiness by watching her reflection. At home she would stand in front of the mirror, sometimes naked, and study herself from all angles. She knew her body had the qualities magazines urged other girls to work for: a firm ass, a narrow waist,

clear skin. And her hair was straight and black, a nice complement to the triangle of hair that curled sweetly between her legs. As a whole she believed she offered a delicious sight. But still she studied her reflection because somehow the body she felt did not quite match the body she saw in the mirror.

The body she felt sometimes ached so that her breasts seemed bruised and hard. When her time of the month came, Jill imagined her abdomen as a halved pomegranate, bristling with wet achy seeds and nestled just inside her hipbones. The idea was so strong that she suffered surprise to look in the mirror and see instead a flat expanse of white skin. These thoughts did not occur to Jill in words, but rather as remembered and reapplied memories: a tender blue-black bruise on her hip from falling out of a tree, a sliced pomegranate her fourth grade teacher had brought in to illustrate the mythical story of Persephone.

As Jill readjusted the rearview mirror, Eric emerged from the liquor store lugging a paper sack. He arranged the sack on the back floorboard then came around to the driver’s side, opened the door, and offered Jill his hand.

“My turn to drive,” he said.

“No,” Jill replied, clenching her hands on the wheel.

“Come on, darlin’. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I’ll drive,” Jill insisted.

Eric reached over her and released her seatbelt. He took Jill’s hand and raised her to her feet. She turned her face away when he tried to sooth her with a kiss.

“You are so pretty when you’re mad,” Eric said. His words did nothing to cover the clumsiness of the moment and Jill let out an exasperated sigh.

She strode around the car to the passenger side and got in. As Eric started the car she reached into the backseat and grabbed a tallboy and the pack of smokes from the sack.

“I’ll let you drive anytime you want once you get your license,” Eric said.

Jill shot him her dirtiest look and cracked the beer. Resentment opened a thirsty spot inside her and she tilted the tallboy, letting gravity draw the bitter beer into her mouth and down her tongue until it fizzed gently in her stomach. She drank from the can quickly until she thought she might puke or burp.

“You know, if we got pulled over with you driving I could get in a lot of trouble,” Eric finally said.

Jill didn’t respond. She stared out the window, watching the flow of strip malls and traffic as she balanced the beer can on her knee. *We do a lot of things you could get in trouble for* she thought. Jill knew that staying quiet was her best weapon because in the silence he’d worry. He’d wonder just how mad she was and try to be extra sweet when they got where they were headed.

She hadn’t eaten lunch at school that day and the booze quickly dulled her irritation. She switched on the radio and leaned back against the headrest. Soon Jill only heard the seamless, mindless techno track and the humming of Eric’s Pontiac. The seatbelt rubbed against her waist and it heightened the sensation of her jeans snugged around her legs. Jill glanced sideways at Eric.

He was a real cutie. She had thought so from the first time she saw him at church. At first she thought he was cute the way lots of men were; the impossible kind of cute of movie stars on posters, people she knew she’d never meet. Soon, though, she believed he

was looking. She'd catch him watching her although she studiously ignored him. Eric came to church six times before she made solid eye contact.

In those days, Jill would never have guessed he was a virgin. He was too old and too confident. She gained that gem of information months when he, frantic and painfully hard, confessed to Jill that he had never done it before and she had laughed because with that knowledge he became less frightening. Jill was no virgin.

Losing her own virginity had been no big deal; she'd been drunk and stoned when she gave in to Jameson and only remembered crying and laughing, then feeling somewhat stupid when she woke up the next morning. The process with Eric had been altogether different. Jill pictured herself as feline when she finally cornered Eric. She had wanted to play with him, to bat at him until he was stunned, to eat at him while his heart still had a beat. When he gave in on a rainy Tuesday afternoon she felt power in her pity for his fumbling, a sense of owning some part of this boy whom she had made a man. And now he couldn't get enough of her. His desire made her remember the swells of her body, the sweet smell of herself. She liked him in the position of asking.

But today Jill had spent eighth period dreading the approach of 2:15 when the bell would ring setting everyone else free. She guessed the dread came from her run-in with Jameson on her way to her locker. Through her own careful planning she'd avoided him since their stupid encounter and when he passed her at last he smiled, a secret smile, and Jill could feel herself heat up. The heat was the kind she felt when she taught her little sister to blow soap bubbles, had told her a story about the fairies that lived in each one with a fleeting existence that lasted only from the time the bubble left the tip of the plastic wand until the time that it burst. Then Jill had blown a slow, luminous bubble for

her sister and when it popped Jill felt like the empty inside of an iridescent lie, and her sister had cried.

So after school, when Jameson smiled secretly at her from across the hall and the heat crept up, Jill stared through him hoping her indifference was obvious, and that it hurt him. She wanted him to sense that at most she considered him a little boy.

Jill hadn't been in the mood to see anyone after that, especially Eric. But then he'd pulled up to the front of the school, smiling and expecting and calling through the open window of the Pontiac: “Hey girl, what do you say taking a ride?”

She drained the last swallows of her beer and tossed the empty into the backseat, then opened another as Eric turned the car off the main road and into a subdivided neighborhood. They rolled down the streets at the posted 20 mph and Jill felt an eerie sense of being lost near her own home. The houses and lawns were the same as the ones in her subdivision; pastry cutouts with only icing differences: this one with a memorably shaped hedge, that one missing the familiar swing set, slightly cheaper cars than the ones she would have recognized on her block. The sameness made her sick, as dull as the beery metallic taste of the can at her lips.

“Wouldn't it be nice to get a place like one of these?” Eric asked. “Maybe one that has a pool out back? Someday.”

He reached over and massaged her hand, then lightly touched the ridge of her knuckles with his fingertips. Jill didn't say it, but today the thought of “someday” felt like 2:15 had. Suffocating. They drove along the concrete ribbons that sliced the land into neat parcels, one for each family.

The rows of houses fenced the road and Jill remembered standing on the edge of a field that was planned for a development like this one, like the subdivision where her family lived. When the houses gave out, the road ran into a field where the concrete finally cut off into grass. The field, flat and empty, burned yellow with summer, buzzed alive with crickets and heat. She guessed a field like that must still be underneath these houses, these green patch lawns, these slabs of driveways and patios. As it looked, the only thing that remained of what used to be was the name of each neighborhood: Oak Creek Village, Olde Oaks, Ponderosa Forest, Westfield.

“I know a cool spot,” Eric said. “Back of this neighborhood, I’ll build you a fire by the water. Sound good?”

“I want to drink my beers. Can I drink there?”

“You can do anything you want,” Eric said as he pulled into the parking lot at the community clubhouse. The building hunkered down, a blockish structure guarding still-wooded acres on the north edge of the subdivision. Eric parked in the empty lot and Jill wobbled out of passenger seat. The two tallboys were doing their job. She let him carry the beer and followed him from the parking lot to the trailhead that led through the woods.

Jill enjoyed the quiet trudge, the trail padded with softening pine needles and last year’s brown leaves. In this pleasant moment the mosquitoes weren’t out yet and it was a fine afternoon. Through her buzz, Jill admired the way the treetops waggled in the wind.

“Daydreamer,” Eric said when they reached an opening in the trees by the creek. “What’s on your mind?”

Jill noticed how the trees closed in sound as if they were inside a room instead of outside in the sun. She wondered what he would say if she told him that she was thinking of flying. Instead she asked “When are you getting your own place?”

Eric grabbed a beer and sat down on the bank by the crawling creek water.

“When I get enough money,” he said without looking at her. “I’m paying my own tuition you know.”

“Sometimes you could bring me to your apartment,” Jill said. “I really doubt Tom would care if he saw us together.”

Jill lacked conviction in what she’d said. Tom was still her youth group advisor, and Eric’s roommate. So far he had no idea about them. Once Eric had spoken of getting his own place and moving her in when she turned eighteen. The idea had excited Jill. She imagined it would be like playing house, only real and so, better.

“He might mind an awful lot,” Eric said. “Come here for a second.”

Jill sat down beside him on the sandy bank. What she felt in her chest reminded her of the way her pet mouse scrambled when she cupped him between her hands: a scrabbling of tiny feet, dry on her palms. Eric looked serious. For a second Jill was afraid of what he might say.

She studied Eric carefully. He wouldn’t meet her look. Instead, he reached out and played with the ends of her hair. She loved it when he played with her hair, how he was always fascinated by its texture, its color, and its smell.

“So,” he said, and let a silence drop.

“So?” Jill asked.

Eric shifted in the sand. Jill laughed, as she always did when she could see he was uncomfortable; a laugh short and forced. Eric looked at her pleadingly and she softened the moment with an impulsive kiss on his cheek.

“So I’ve been thinking,” he continued.

From the cargo pocket of his pants, Eric produced a rectangular cardboard box. It was white. Jill thought it a strange white; antiseptic, like the white plastic on the tube of toothpaste in her medicine cabinet at home.

“I got you something,” Eric said, fumbling with the lid. “It’s not much at all. Someday I’ll get you something better.”

Inside the box was cottony padding. From beneath the cotton he produced a delicate gold bracelet. The gold looked warm to Jill and she smiled, reaching for it.

“It’s pretty!” she exclaimed. She lifted it to inspect the color and design. He was right, she decided. It wasn’t much. It lacked heft or strength, and in the middle of the chain there was a thin, flat heart with a blob of silver on it.

“It has a diamond,” Eric explained. “See? A diamond chip, really. But we have to start somewhere.”

The blob did have a sliver of shine cutting through. Jill squinted at it and nodded. She handed the bracelet back to Eric and held out her wrist so he could fasten it. After he did he looked at her expectantly. She looked back at him; a steady smile, a practiced smile.

“You’re welcome,” he said.



Jill lifted her wrist to study the way the bracelet hung between the fine, blonde hairs on her arm. The section with the heart slid around to the underside of her wrist, and the gold looked brassy on her skin.

“Whatever,” Eric muttered. He rose and began noisily searching for dead wood. He made a show of building a wood pile for a fire while Jill smoked a cigarette and drank another beer. She thought she should be pleased with the gift, and the fact that she wasn’t disappointed her. No one had ever given her jewelry before. It seemed a grown up gift. Yet she felt nothing. Maybe a little drunk. By the time he had the fire going she had finished off a wine cooler too and she was sure she was drunk. The booze made her fingertips feel lit up and she giggled.

“What?” Eric asked as he flopped back down in the sand, waving the fire’s smoke from his eyes.

“Nothing.”

The sun fell behind the trees leaving the afternoon with a reddish light that pooled in strange places: in the ripples on the surface of the creek, on the tops of Eric’s ears, in the rim of the empty beer cans, in the new embers of the fire pit. Across the creek a long-necked bird descended from a tree and landed without a splash, grey and white on the muddy creek water.

“Look,” Jill breathed, pointing.

Eric’s gaze followed her finger until he saw what she was pointing at. “Weird,” he said. “It looks prehistoric.”

It did; freakishly quiet, orange bill just a pointed extension of its tiny head. Jill brushed the sand from her jeans and walked slowly to the edge of the water for a better

look. When she got too close the creature spread, flapped back up into the tree, the tips of its wings splashing lightly as it ascended. Jill believed that its wingspan was wider than the length of her body, an observation that thrilled her in a fearful way. She tried to spy it out in the shadows but the thick pines had swallowed the thing whole. She wished she had a name to identify what kind of bird it had been.

The heat from the day began dissolving and Jill felt numb. She pulled off her tee shirt and threw it down. The chilly breeze felt good, raising her nipples, causing the hair on her arms to stand up. She crouched and ripped the laces from her boots, then undid her jeans and stepped out of them until she wore only her underwear and bra. She looked down at herself and marveled at the contrast of white cotton underwear against her skin. She breathed deep and wished the cold from the air would seep into her pores, filling them like it filled her lungs. When she looked to the fire she saw Eric. He was watching her. She walked over; stood between him and the flames, so close to the fire that the skin on her back felt singed, so tall that Eric had to look up at her.

He pulled her closer so he could rub his rough face on her stomach. Tired and hot, Jill squirmed from him and moved to stretch herself out in the sand. Staring up from the ground, the trees seemed to lean in and Jill wondered if a bonfire would burn them from the tops down. Soon the heat from the fire and the coolness of her skin equalized and she thought of how long it had taken her to understand that one plus negative one equaled zero. She'd failed several math quizzes over the issue. Jill closed her eyes and imagined red "F"s scrawled across the top of quiz papers. Without looking she scooped up shallow handfuls of sand and listened to the whisk of clothes that fell, landing like blankets across her feet.

She kept her eyes closed as cool fingertips hooked around her panties, pulled them down the length of her thighs, over her knees, along her calves, and finally flicked them off under her feet. Then he lifted her knees and parted her legs and, with a groan, leaned heavily into her. She peeked and Eric’s eyes were closed as he moved methodically, but she couldn’t feel him inside her, only weight and pressure at the soft spot between her open legs. Jill lay there thinking of the time her cousin had shown her how to clean a fish; slice it open and pull back the two meaty halves of flesh to expose its white spine before reaching for the fillet knife.

He touched his forehead to hers and she turned her face away. Her legs felt overextended with him between them now. Her groin tendons ached. Angry impatience snapped through her like muscle cramps. She bit her teeth together trying to picture what made her feel this tightening, this rage, but the direction of her thoughts slipped out and in and out of control so that all she could imagine was sitting on her roof outside her bedroom, chain-smoking cigarettes in the dark, her despair at reaching the end of the last cigarette she had, and how she roughly extinguished it in the fleshy part of her foot, just inside the arch where she still had a thick, round scab to mark the place. Remembering that scab she wanted to cry out *Fuck you!* Instead she spread her fingers across the span of his back, dug her nails in, and raked them across his skin.

He gasped at the sting, his eyes suddenly and sharply focusing on hers.

“Hurry,” she whispered.

He quickened the pace of his grunts and Jill pulled two more sets of scratches down his back. She pictured peeling the skin from him in strips, wrapping the flesh around herself like bandages, letting it solidify into a rough black scab like the tiny round

one on her foot. Her fingernails slipped on the wetness of his back and then the act was finished. He collapsed on her.

“You are so good,” he sighed in her ear. “How do you always feel so good?”

“That’s the way it is,” she said, and then pushed at him with the palms of her hands until he rolled off of her. Without looking at him, Jill gathered up her clothes, shook out the sand, and pulled on her panties first so that the hot liquid would stop dripping down her inner thighs. Clothed, her anger became embarrassing, like a little kid tantrum.

She knew he would be casting questioning looks at her as he pulled up his jeans, but Jill let the tension buzz in her ears without comment. She studied her fingertips hoping that he’d think she felt satisfied instead of just dumb, that he’d mistake her act of violence for an act of lust. Her nails were bloody, and under the tips she saw rolled bits of Eric’s skin.

He kicked sand over the fire until it was buried. There was light enough to reveal blood absorbed from the wounds on his back into the white of his tee shirt. It soaked through in surprisingly small spots. She studied the pattern as if it had a message for her to decode.

Kneeling by the smothered fire, Eric stirred the ashes and sand with a stick. Jill knew what he would do. He did it every time they built a fire. He would take a stick and stir and stir until the black of the ashes and the yellow-gold sand made a pile of grey, until he could reach his hand right into the center and find it quite cool.

Watching him, Jill wondered suddenly if they’d made a baby. He was always so careful about using protection, but not today. Jill sometimes amused herself by trying to

get him so riled up he'd forget to stop. But he never had. She wondered what would happen if you made a baby while you were drunk. She imagined a million tiny sperm swimming their way through her beery body, bumping against the glowing edges of her eggs like they did in the films in biology class. Closing her eyes, Jill commanded her egg to repel their attack. She pictured it oozing alcohol until the whole thing turned to suds. By the time Eric had finished tending the fire it was nearly dark.

“Are you okay?” he asked, crouching down in front of her. “You've been acting weird all afternoon.”

Jill began to get to her feet, but he caught her wrist. He held her right where the bracelet lay, and although he didn't squeeze hard his grip was firm. Under his grasp the links of the bracelet pinched her skin.

“I just have a headache.”

“Maybe you drank too fast,” Eric said letting go of her arm and standing. Jill thought she sensed a reprimand in his tone, but she didn't respond. Her vision was bleary and the headache was no lie. She looked up at him, full of wondering at what it was she wanted to say.

“Jill, what's going on? You're so damn quiet. You're not still mad I didn't let you drive. I'll take you out tomorrow and you can drive all afternoon.”

His worry felt like selfish grabbing, as if he were afraid to lose her to herself. The anger crept back into Jill, prickling and mysterious. She thought about the end of him, the end of this. She wished that if she just kept the silence long enough and hard enough he'd disappear, like not answering the door when someone knocked. But even as she wished it Jill knew she would wait for him at school the next day, and that he would

come for her, a vision of punctuality. She wondered what he would do if she snuck out the back of the school instead of meeting in their usual spot; she wondered what she would do.

“Come on now,” Eric said. “I’d better get you to your house before your Momma gets home from work.”

He reached for both of her wrists and gently lifted her, then put her hands around his neck so they stood clinging like kids at an eighth grade dance. He was so tall Jill felt stretched to reach the ground. He hugged her tight around the waist and lifted her off her feet. Burying his face in her hair he whispered: “Girl, I’m gonna marry you someday. You hear?”