

## CACHITO

The men we met at Cachito called us *girls* or sometimes *ladies* and also *chickies*, *broads*, *biddies*, *moon-faces* and *jailbait*, but not *kids*—never *kids*. We learned their speech to disguise our ages.

*Cut us a stoag, will you? We'll give you a buck for a loosie.*

We had our ways with numbers. There were four of us. We let the man watch us pass his stoag from mouth to mouth to mouth to mouth and imagine what he would. Behind their backs we had names for them too: we called them “possibilities”.

Because it was not about the man at all. It was about seeing how far he could take us toward Caston City and back home again before morning. We lived in the driest part of the state where the air smelled like nothing (not nothing as in “absence of” but *nothing* like weeds sunned to death and dust from loose rocks spent downhill to nowhere). We wanted to go to the city to see what we could absorb for how old we were, or else come at nothing sideways. But that bar, Cachito, was about as far as we ever got from home. It lay at the intersection of three counties, just off of a highway crossed by men from every part of the nation. We studied license plates and their cars’ exhalations, disappointed that that sour breath smelled the same coming from anywhere—Virginia, or Texas, or Arkansas.

One night, in the Cachito parking lot, we found a man leaned up against his car with his hair slicked back, tight as a ladybug’s hood. We liked that he was alone—it made us bold.

“Hey, nice hair,” we said to him. “Nice car. You wanna buy us drinks? Wanna go inside?” He looked at each of us and then back at Mini, the prettiest.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Sixty-four.” That was how old we were combined.

The man was tall and timid, and when he walked his arms were like two swinging apologies. He held the door to the bar open for us Dad-style—propped up with one hand high so we could slip underneath. Inside, three of us girls got into one end of a booth and Tammy, the baddest of us, got in on the side of the man. She asked him for four screwdrivers and he ordered in a voice that fell straight into his lap. For a while after the waitress left, he continued studying the menu and then finally, slapped the bill aside to look out at the pinball machine and the beers on tap.

“You waiting on someone?” Tammy asked.

“No,” the man said. “Just lookin’.”

He was rubbing his fingertips together in circles while eyeing Mini again, the pretty one. She wasn’t even pretty. We were all pretty; we were best friends and interchangeable and unified in our understanding of the world. Close enough to love and hate each other in place of loving and hating ourselves.

“So what’s your name, anyway?” I asked.

“Dave,” he said, still looking at Mini.

“What are your plans tonight, Dave?”

“Goin’ to a party in Caston,” he said. “How ‘bout yourselves?”

“Us too,” said Tammy.

“Imagine that. Whereabouts?”

Tammy did not have an answer to this, so she just winked at him.

When our drinks came, the man looked at his as if he had forgotten he had ordered it. He swirled it, tasted, and then drank the whole thing at once. A pair of high beams rumbled through to our booth, making the man angle his eyes. I saw then in the glare that he had thick knuckles and sausage-patterned skin. He was old, truly old—about forty-five. The other girls must have seen it too because everyone got quiet and sat drinking their drinks. This was not the man we hassled in the parking lot. Something had fooled us out there.

“What are y’all’s names?” he asked us, suddenly friendly.

“I’m Tammy. That’s Lisa. And Mini and Jean.”

“Well ladies, if we’re all goin’ in the same direction, why don’t I give you a ride? Would you like that?” When he smiled, we could see one of his bottom teeth was darker than the rest. This time, as his eyes came to Mini I felt her leg jiggle against mine.

“That’d be nice,” said Tammy. “I mean—thanks.”

“I guess any party in Caston is got to be better than this bar,” he said.

“What do you think if we get on now?”

“That sounds okay to me,” Tammy said. She looked at the rest of us and we nodded, heads still attached to straws.

“I need to pee,” said Mini.

“Me too,” the other three of us said.

In Cachito’s bathroom, we could not tell if our faces were flushed or if it was because of the red, green, and yellow fiesta lanterns strung up around the sink. We wet paper towels and laid them on our faces, just in case they were.

“What now?” asked Lisa. “We don’t have a party to go to.”

“He’s weird,” said Mini. “He looks at me weird.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I was either ahead of or behind her adolescent curve. I felt a violent need to call things as they were.

“You guys go,” she said, cuffing up the hem of her shorts. “I’m not going to go.”

“If you were going to be scared, why did you come?” asked Tammy.

“I’m not scared,” said Mini. “I’m just saying it’s weird.”

“What’s weird? There’s four of us and one of him.”

For a man’s car, it smelled surprising in there—not of cigarettes or weed or old socks, but of antiseptic and canned fruit. Tammy got in first, then Lisa, then me. Mini was left to sit up front, where she kept her hands in the thread of space between her thighs, but the man didn’t even look over. He turned on the ignition and the radio and eased out of the parking lot, taking the wheel with one hand. Though old, he had on the kind of music we could sing to and when Mini opened the windows he even poked one elbow out and smiled, bobbing his slick head along.

The roads were so straight and smooth it was hard to tell if we were moving or if things were just moving past us—which wasn’t so different from our usual frame of existence. But that night we were on our way *out* and that changed things. Curiosity was feeling more like an itch and less like a mouth sore. The man pulled off the highway and down a long ramp, over which we could see lights coming up from the valley. Stores and bars lined either side of a long road, their signs flashing against the cars on the street.

“I don’t know where you ladies are heading,” said the man, “but if you don’t mind I’d like to swing by my place real quick to get a bottle of something to take to my party. Then I can drive you where you need to go.”

Mini spoke for us—I didn’t hear. The light changed and we turned off the main street and into a tunnel of trees that mothered the side streets.

His house looked how I thought a normal Caston house might look—small but dignified, with a roof that fell away on either side under the weight of maple branches. He parked in the driveway and pulled the keys out of the ignition.

“You guys want to come in or what?”

“We’ll wait here,” said Mini.

He said, “Suit yourself. Won’t be a minute,” and got out, leaving the car door open. We watched until he let himself inside the house.

Then Tammy called, “Let’s go!” and we left the car. It smelled of the city outside, of motor oil and wood-things and the sweet scent of cold barbecue. I squeezed Lisa’s hand, which was still sticky from screwdriver. We walked a few blocks over and stopped at a house with no lights on. Its lawn was dark green and evenly mowed, and we lay down to feel the grass behind our heads and needled beneath our ears and against the backs of our legs. We lay there watching the sky and I could almost feel the earth move. It was like riding on the neck of a giant, this city a mighty conveyor of safety and magic. “We could never go home,” I said. “Let’s never go home.”

My words gathered weight in silence. The other girls were waiting for Tammy to speak.

“We’d need money.”

“We could get money,” I said. “And besides, we just left that guy. How are we getting home anyway?”

Across the street, an American flag thumped over someone’s garage.

Mini said: “I know where we can get money. The guy left his wallet in the car.”

“Should we go get it?” Tammy sat up. “How much do you think is in there?”

“Probably enough for a cab home, at least,” she said.

Back on the man’s street, his car doors stood open, as we’d left them. Tammy slipped into the driver’s seat and found the wallet just where Mini had said it’d be, resting in the console. There was a lonely twenty tucked into one end of the billfold.

“Better than nothing,” Tammy said, sticking it into her purse. “But you know what would be even better? Screw the money. We should just take the car.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a felony,” Mini said.

“Who’s gonna report us? *I’m* pretty sure that guy won’t want to explain how he got his car stolen by four teenage girls. If nothing else, we could say he was coming on to us and we needed the car to escape.”

“That’s messed up,” Lisa said.

“It’s not going to get to that point, is what I’m saying.”

The screen door opened and the man’s head poked out. In one hand, he was carrying a phone receiver. “Come on in!” he yelled. “I got to take care of somethin’.” He didn’t seem fazed to see Tammy behind the wheel of his car. He’d

changed into a T-shirt too wide for his little shoulders and the bones of his chest jutted through. We sat there and looked at him.

“I can’t tell if you’re joking about the car,” I said.

Tammy dropped the wallet back into the console. “Why don’t we just see?”

Our shadows stretched ahead of us as we walked up to the front stoop of his house, one behind the other behind the other behind the other. The four of us in our heels of varying height, clopping, almost threatening—I mean the man even looked a little threatened, leading us inside with the phone wedged under his chin. He couldn’t smile at us without almost dropping it.

The living room had rust-colored carpeting that was faded in one section beneath a window with drawn shades. Grand against this domesticity, we sat on the couch arranging our legs while he put the TV on for us. “Uh huh,” he was saying into the telephone. After some time pacing around the room, he took his conversation upstairs. Tammy got up to look for the car keys.

“They’re probably in his pocket,” she said, five minutes later, coming up with nothing. “We’ll have to wait.”

So we stood around the kitchen drinking the things we found in his fridge and cabinets—beers, mostly, and a bottle of scotch that circled us once before coming to rest in Tammy’s hands, where its horizon quickly sank below the paper label. Then we went back to the living room to watch TV, which was showing mostly late night shows and infomercials.

By the time the man came back into the room, Tammy had fallen asleep. He seemed surprised to find us still there, and after pausing a moment, sat down

on one end of the couch and put his arm around the back cushion so that Mini was close enough to smell the crooks of him.

“Everything okay?” I asked the man.

“Yeah,” he said, shifting his body toward me and smiling as if he was meeting me for the first time.

“You find your bottle?” I asked. The folds above his eyelids pitched up in smiles of their own.

“Yeah. Thing is, the party called and it said it’s not until later.”

“How can a party call before it’s happening?”

Laughing, he raised his beer to me and twiddled it by the neck before he drank. The skin beneath his chin hung loose and furred with stubble, except for where his sharp knob rose and sank.

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you?” he asked. He started doing that thing with his fingers again, where its tips traced each other in circles.

“Actually, she is,” Mini said. “Smartest one in our class.”

It was just commentary, but it was more about us than we’d meant to say. One look at the man told us he felt the same.

“You come down here a lot,” he said, his voice touched with sarcasm.

“Right? Regular night on the town.”

The pinkness that had winged his cheeks was gone. It’s terrible to watch an old man get sober. You see him shed so much all at once—humor and arrogance and sundry hopes, all at a few heartbeats a minute. You figure: this is what he’s going to look like when he’s about to die.

“Christ,” he said, when none of us answered. “I mean, you never told me where you wanted to go.”



Then the doorbell rang. It was a girly kind of ring, with at least five notes.

“Who’s that?” Mini asked.

The man neither answered her, nor moved. Moments passed and another string of notes sounded.

“You gonna get that?” Lisa asked.

It rang again.

“It’s probably his mother or something,” Lisa whispered to me. “He’s scared to have people find us here.”

Two rings in succession.

Abruptly, Mini got up and left the living room.

“Hey,” the man called, when he realized what she was doing. It was too late; we could hear the door opening and voices outside. Moments later, Mini returned, followed by three men.

“David!” the first one said. He was lightly bearded all the way down his neck, over his shoulders and across the backs of his hands. “Look at the party you’ve got going on here. Sure took a minute to get to the door, huh?”

The man stared back at his friends, not saying anything.

“ ‘Sa matter with you, son? Chipper a minute ago. Excuse Dave’s manners, ladies. My name is Larry. With me here I got Chris and Jon.”

“Tammy,” I said. “Tammy.” She was too far from me to shove awake.

The other men were bringing in chairs from the kitchen because the couch was too small. They did not talk or look at one another. For eight people sitting there, the sound of the TV was alarmingly soft and the main thing I heard

was Lisa's tongue ring going off against her teeth like gunfire. We sat in silence for a few minutes before I asked, "Where's your bathroom?"

All four of them looked at me a while before the biggest one—not the man—spoke. "It's upstairs. Down the hall and to the right."

Lisa and I stood and Mini stared up at us.

"Mini," I said, and the men all turned their heads toward her.

Mini looked at Tammy, asleep. "I'll go after you," she said.

No lights were on in the rest of the house that we could see. At the staircase, Lisa and I felt our way to the second floor where the rug was thick and caught on our heels. I groped until I found a wall that was cool and tiled with a light switch. Suddenly, we could make everything out very clearly: a linoleum floor, strewn shirts, stained toilet and old-fashioned sink. We stepped inside the bathroom and I closed the door as best as I could. Its frame had either shrunk or the door engorged with humidity, but the one didn't fit into the other. Lisa lowered the toilet seat and her skirt and sat there with nothing coming out of her.

"Oh God," she said, looking at the floor. "Where the fuck are we?"

Downstairs, the TV volume went way up and Lisa raised her head, startled. Her hair clung to the sides of her neck.

"Shut up," I said, before she could say anything else.

"Oh God," said Lisa again, and then really did start to pee.

After she finished, we turned off the light so we could feel our way back down the stairs very slowly. When we got to the bottom step we saw that the door to the living room was closed.

“Fuck,” said Lisa. “Shit fuck.”

“S’no problem,” spoke someone behind us.

The fattest man, the one who had given us directions to the bathroom, sat in an armchair by the front door.

“Nothin’ to worry about,” he said. “My friends are not bad people. They’re just lookin’ for a little bit of fun. Everybody’s lookin’ for a little bit. Everybody’s having a good time. You’ll see. You have a seat.”

I turned and knocked on the living room door.

“Tammy? Mini!” I couldn’t hear anything but the TV, so after a while I stopped knocking, just stood there holding Lisa’s hand, my own going cold, and one of us was sweating.

“It’s okay,” I whispered to Lisa.

“It’s going to be alright,” said the man. “You’re big girls. I’m sure it’s nothing they haven’t done before.”

Minutes passed as the fat man talked at us. I can’t remember what he said. I do remember trying to hear over him, into the next room. I remember, too, the way he stood when the door finally opened, expectant, as if he was picking up a lunch order. There was Mini, with the living room lights on behind her.

“Tammy threw up,” she said to the fat man. “Can you get her some water?”

He sighed and walked to the kitchen. From inside the room, someone said, “Fucking nasty,” and someone else was laughing. Then Mini pushed Tammy out into the hallway and closed the living room door. She had both of their shoes in one hand as she walked toward us, her voice stropped, saying *Get out*.

The front door clicked open softly, then the screen door, and we were out. Mini dashed for the car, fishing keys from the pocket of her dress. She threw the shoes in before her and said *Don't slam the door!* just as the rest of us got in and slammed all the doors.

In that moment I was more scared than I'd ever been. The three of us were watching the windows to see if anyone was coming for us but Mini had her eyes turned to the rearview mirror. When I looked around, I saw that a second car on the driveway—the one the other men must have come in—was blocking our way to the street.

“HEY!”

The man's head and shoulders appeared through the doorway.

Mini reversed hard and rocked the front bumper of the car behind us, at the same time slamming my face up against her headrest. Nerves blossomed from my nose all the way around to the back of my head. And when I could see again, what I saw was the man reaching in through the open window and making a fist around the perfect circle of Mini's arm. The raised veins in his grip glistened.

“Get off!” she screamed.

It was as if her voice produced an electric shock; he immediately pulled his arm back and the hard lines of him disappeared, leaving him as timid as we'd found him in the parking lot. He almost didn't have enough in him to step out of the way as Mini lurched us across the lawn. Twin globes of light swept across grass, the car's stunted vision leading us away from the house, the man, and the men.

“Are you serious?” I heard someone shout from a distance. “Are you fucking serious?” The three others came trundling down the stairs, but the man held up his hand to stop them. That hand stayed in the air even after the men stopped chasing, as if in surrender or salute.

I faced front then and didn't look back.

Turn after turn brought us to the main road, but not any stretch of it that we recognized. The bars were empty now, except for the legs of upturned stools framed in darkened windows. We expected Mini to stop at any second, to pull over so we could talk it over, reassess, but she didn't. Her bare feet barely reached the pedals. We left Caston in time to see the mountains appear on the horizon, their outlines still purple and vague with sleep, and only then could I tell we were heading east. I wasn't sure if we were still driving to get away or now driving toward something else.

Hours later, when Mini made the signal to turn into a rest stop, we all straightened up in our seats. She rounded the entrance and parked outside of a Roy Rogers, even though what we really needed was gas.

We sat there in quiet until I said, “You guys are okay, right?”

Mini held my gaze in the rearview mirror, her jaw sharp. One of her eyes was still lined and the other wiped almost entirely of makeup.

“Goddamn,” said Tammy quietly. “That was sloppy as hell.”

*Sloppy*: we had our own way of saying.

“Mini?” I said, when I saw her still looking. “You could have come to the bathroom.”

"I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't leave Tammy alone. And then it wasn't four anymore. It was two and two."

I couldn't bear her eyes and turned instead to study the highway on which we'd come. It's median stretched farther than I could see, one concrete barrier linked to the next, like vertebra on a spine. After a while, I heard Mini and Tammy get out of the car. The two of them walked, shoeless, around the side of the restaurant and disappeared.

"Some people are just better at knowing," Lisa said to me or to herself. "Mini didn't know what was going to happen or she would have done the same thing we did."

"None of us knew what was going to happen," I said.

"Didn't we?"

"Don't say that shit, Lisa. It doesn't matter."

Even though it did matter and does matter. We wanted Caston to show us how we belonged to the world outside of where we were from, and we got what we wanted. But we did not belong to one another, not anymore.

I opened the door and stepped outside, where the heat met me like an anxious parent. It felt good to be touched that way. In the shaded corners of the parking lot, paper cups communed with the wax husks of take-out food. I kicked some aside and sat down on the curb to watch truckers drive in and out of the rest stop, carrying who-knows-what from one side of the country to the next. They nodded at each other, grown men of a union. They signaled left or right and drove off to all the places we were trying to go.