

Scorched

We had been sunbathing relentlessly that summer. Leslie's skin turned a beautiful golden shade. Her light brown hair streaked with blonde. I burned the first week. While the red didn't last long, it never turned into the "bodacious tan" that Leslie had promised. I quit using the Sun-In when it turned my hair a horrendous orange. On a hot afternoon in early August, Leslie stood and sprayed her head with the magical liquid. As she shook her head around, some boys from the local high school rode by and whistled at her.

"Losers," Leslie said, rolling her eyes. I knew she liked the attention, though. Leslie was wearing this tiny red bikini that she'd saved up all of her babysitting money for months to get. The new summer clothes were displayed at Rich's long before spring buds even sprouted from the ground and Leslie had ogled the flawless mannequins through the storefront glass and swore she would own one of those designer bikinis. The flowery one-piece bathing suit Leslie's mother picked out for her daughter was now crumpled at the bottom of her overnight bag just in case her mother went into her drawers with freshly laundered clothes while she was gone.

For a thirteen year old, Leslie was quite developed, or so she liked for people to think. I was in on her secret, though. Leslie stuffed Kleenex in her training bra. Her teeny tiny excuse for a bathing suit was a little more high-tech, it had little foam pads in the top, so she could go swimming in it and she would still look well endowed. I knew she'd be in trouble the day she got to second base with a boy. Then her secret would be out. I certainly wasn't there yet. I hadn't even made it to first base. Leslie regaled me with stories of her kissing Joey Parker behind the school bus in the afternoons.

As we sat on lounge chairs in my front yard, scorching ourselves, we talked about boys and our upcoming eighth grade school year. We made a promise to buy matching shirts to wear on the first day. We had seen ones that we liked in *Seventeen* - cropped t-shirts that exclaimed "Girl Power".

Dazed from the heat, we went inside to watch *TRL* on MTV. Leslie unsuccessfully tried to call in to talk to Carson and request her favorite song for what seemed like the millionth time that week. During a commercial break I went in the kitchen to fix a snack of buttery microwave popcorn and grabbed two Diet Cokes from the fridge. Back in the living room Leslie was doing

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crunches on the floor in front of the TV. I offered her one of the Cokes, which she gladly accepted, but refused to eat any of the popcorn. The look on her face told me that she didn't think I should be eating any of it either.

As the number one song began, Leslie's mom called and said she was on her way to pick her up. After Leslie went home, I went upstairs to take a shower. I was blow-drying my hair while listening to the Spice Girls on my cassette deck when I heard the front door open.

My mom called up the stairs, "Alice, I'm home!" I ran a brush through my hair and headed to the living room. My mom was leaned back on the couch, sipping a can of beer while she thumbed through the mail. I saw a McDonald's bag stained with oil sitting on the coffee table. "Hey, Momma. How was your day?" I asked as I kissed her cheek.

Momma looked at me, weary-eyed, and said, "Just fine." She smiled weakly at me. She picked up the greasy bag of burgers and we went into the kitchen. As I opened the fridge to grab myself a diet coke and her another beer, my report card, filled with A's, caught my eye. It was held to the fridge with a magnet I'd made years ago in school. It was ugly, really, but my parents had kept everything I've ever made. My dad used to be the sentimental one that kept all of my artistic efforts, but he died in a car accident when I was nine.

Mom and I sat at the table in the breakfast nook, and began to eat our burgers and fries in silence. I was almost done with mine and already regretting the calories when Momma looked up from her plate.

"Roxy's gonna come stay with us for a while. Daphne is going to Europe with this guy she's been seeing." Roxy, my cousin, was a year older than me. I only saw her at Christmas. They lived in Miami.

"I'll pick her up at the airport tomorrow afternoon. I'll have to get off work early to do it," Momma said, frowning.

I was excited to have Roxy come visit. Since she was older than me, I had always looked up to her. I hadn't seen her since Christmas before last because she went to her dad's apartment in New York City last December.

"How long is she staying with us?"

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"It depends on what Daphne's plans are. You know how my sister can be."

My mother sighed. I got the impression that Aunt Daphne and my mom had both been pretty wild as teenagers. Aunt Daphne had gotten pregnant with Roxy the summer after she graduated high school. My mom must have cleaned up her act before she had met my straight arrow dad. After he died, though, she started partying a bit again... well, drinking alone in front of the TV anyway. We used to bake together and garden, we even made pasta from scratch once, but ever since the accident she seemed too tired and sad to do much of anything but work and watch her shows.

The next day I prepared myself for Roxy's visit. I cleaned up my room, cramming my beloved stuffed animals under my bed as far as they would go. I kept changing my outfit until my room was a fashion wasteland. I finally settled on jeans and a striped tank top. Casual yet cool.

When Roxy and my mom finally got home, I was lying on the couch, munching Doritos and reading *Sweet Valley High*. I sat up and brushed the crumbs off my top just as they walked into the living room. Roxy looked a lot different. Her heavily made-up eyes made her look at least seventeen.

"'Sup, cuz?" When she spoke I could see metal glinting in her mouth. I realized that it was a tongue stud. In all of my 13 years, I had never met anyone with that had their tongue pierced. I found myself wondering what it would be like to kiss someone that had one.

After a highly processed dinner of macaroni and cheese and hotdogs, Roxie and I went up to the guest room so she could settle in. Roxie told me how she was "kinda seeing" all these boys back at home. It was so ironic, she said, that they all drove Mustangs.

"Your mom lets you date old guys? No way!"

"They are not old, the oldest one is only nineteen. Mom doesn't care. She doesn't give a rat's ass what I do as long as she gets her Xanax prescription on time." To illustrate that point, Roxy told me that her mom had caught her smoking cigarettes in her bathroom, but "didn't do shit about it."

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The phone rang from downstairs, and I heard my mom call up the stairs, "It's for you, Alice!" I ran to my Mom's room to pick up her extension. I sat down on the edge of the bed as I reached for the phone. Leslie was on the other end of the line.

"So, is it slumber party time?" Leslie asked me excitedly. I swung my legs over the faded braided rug as instructed her to bring her nail polish and face masks; we could do facials and pedicures.

Once Leslie arrived, I might as well have left. She and Roxy clicked immediately over their identical purses. They chattered on and on about how hot Brad Pitt was and how Leslie looked almost just like Sarah Michelle Geller as I sat quietly, picking at my cuticles. Later, after I had painted my toes with a pretty pale pink, Roxy said, "Too cutesy." She and Leslie both opted for the candy apple red.

After my mom went to bed, Roxy stuck downstairs and brought 3 beers back up. Leslie quietly clapped her hands, but I was in disbelief. Surely my mom would notice them missing. Roxy assured me that there were plenty left and that after the four she saw my mom have over the course of the evening, she was sure she'd never notice. The other girls drained their cans quickly, but mine had grown warm by the time it was half empty. My first taste of beer didn't leave me yearning for more. Gross.

The beer bonded Leslie and Roxy further and neither of them responded to my attempts at conversation. I fell asleep to their giggling.

We slept until almost noon and then decided to continue our ritual sun tanning. Being the last one out the door, I missed my opportunity to get a chair. Instead, I spread my worn Mickey Mouse beach towel out across the lawn and lay on my stomach, the sun tingling the backs of my legs while the grass poked my shins. After a few moments of silence, Roxy sat up, straddling the lounge chair.

"So, what's there to do? Is there a store around that we could, like, walk to? I wanna get, like, a magazine."

"There's Colt's," Leslie said. Colt's was at least a mile away. It was a pretty far walk and plus we'd have to cross the railroad tracks and walk through the projects. It was only midday, though, so it would most likely be safe. I reluctantly

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agreed to the journey, knowing that my Mother would have a fit if she found out.

Halfway there my flip-flops started blistering the sides of my feet. I voiced a complaint, but both Roxy and Leslie shook their heads in agreement that their feet were absolutely fine. I found that hard to believe. I'd joined in on the make-up application, but high heels just didn't make sense.

As we walked down the street, a young guy was hanging around at the corner, hollering, "What you need, what you need?" to passersby. He took one look at us and said, "Hey, ladies!" But he didn't ask us if we needed anything. Roxy just tossed her hair back over her bare shoulder and shook her butt around as we walked past.

Finally we got to Colt's and the blisters on my feet were red and ripe. The store's dim lighting cast shadows on the dusty products on the shelves. The cool, refrigerated air felt blissful on my sweaty skin after walking in the hot sun. I plucked an ice cream Drumstick from the freezer. Roxy and Leslie picked Diet Cokes out of the fridge. We walked over to the magazine rack. Roxy picked up the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan*. "Ten Ways to Wow Your Man," Leslie said matter of factly, reading from the neon orange and pink cover.

"It's not rocket science," Roxy replied with a sly smile.

In front of the store two guys stood next to a red sport coupe. They were laughing and smoking cigarettes. Roxy sauntered over to the guys, Leslie and I trailing behind her. One of them was super tall; even in her glittery heels, Roxy only came up to his chest. He had spiky, bleached hair that glinted in the August sun.

"Could I bum a smoke?" The guy looked at Roxy for a minute before handing her one. As he leaned forward to light it for her, Roxy made sure that their hands touched for seconds longer than necessary. She took a step back and stood there smoking her cigarette, jutting her hip out like she was on a runway instead of in the parking lot of Colt's General Store. I thought it was incredibly awkward standing there in the parking lot next to these guys we didn't even know, not saying a word. The day was sweltering, and I was trying to eat my ice-cream before it melted down my arm.

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Finally Roxy broke the silence. "I, like, love your ride. I'm Roxy, and these are my girls, Leslie and Alice."

"It's a pleasure," the guy said with a grin. The stud in his chin reminded me of an angry arrow shot through a target.

"I'm sure," Roxy responded boldly.

"So, I'm Damien. Y'all chicks should check out this party we're heading to tonight."

"What time are you picking us up?" The sheer forwardness that Roxy was talking to these guys with startled me. I had to admit though, I was jealous of her confidence.

"Meet us here at nine." With that Damien cocked his head, signaling that the conversation was over. We girls walked off, Roxy swinging her hips all the way.

When the guys were out of earshot, I said, "How can we go to that party? I'm not allowed to go to parties, much less to parties with random guys; random guys who *drive*." Roxy and Leslie looked at me as though my head had just turned into a watermelon.

"We'll tell your mom that we are going to have a slumber party at... somewhere," Roxy began, but Leslie interrupted.

"Say Kelly Smith. We used to always go over there. And her mom works late, so she won't be there when we get dropped off."

The prospect of going to my first ever real party was exciting. I was super nervous about lying to my mom though. And surprised that Leslie could come up with such a deceitful story right off the cuff.

"Well, that's it. We'll say we are staying with Kelly." Roxy and Leslie chatted all the way home about what they would wear and how much fun it was going to be. As they giggled and schemed, I was miserable; my blisters were beginning to hurt.

That afternoon, Roxy and Leslie fine-tuned the plan. When my mom got home we were all sitting on the living room couch watching *The Real World*. I wasn't really watching it. I was picking at the loose navy threads of the sofa. I walked into the kitchen where mom was staring blankly into the freezer.

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"Mom, we are going to spend the night with Kelly Smith. We're just gonna do, you know, girl stuff." My heart was beating out of my chest.

"May we spend the night with Kelly, please?" Mom corrected. This was not the time for an etiquette lesson. I knew that Roxy and Leslie were rolling their eyes in the living room.

"Right, Mom, I mean, yes, Ma'am. May we, please?"

My Mother looked at me evenly. "Y'all will just be at Kelly's house, no plans to go anywhere else?"

"No, Ma'am. Just girl stuff." I could hardly keep the tears from welling up in my eyes. I had never lied to my mother.

"Well, then, of course you can, sweetie. I love you." She kissed me on the forehead.

"Love you too, Mom."

Roxy and Leslie had smirks on their faces when I entered the room. I blushed realizing that they had heard every word of mine and my mom's exchange. After a few more segments of catfights and drunken revelry, the TV program ended signaling that it was seven o' clock.

We hung out in my room for a few minutes before emerging with our pre-packed overnight bags. As we stood in my yard waiting for Mom to come out with her misplaced keys, I could hear children laughing, and further down the street, I could hear the purr a lawn mower.

My Mom finally came out of the house, triumphantly, keys in hand. We piled into her secondhand blue Dodge Neon. Hopefully, it would be mine one day. When we pulled up in front of Kelly's house, it was dark except for the porch light. It made sense, nobody knew we were coming.

"It doesn't look like anyone is home," Mom said doubtfully.

"Kelly's mom cooks the dinner shift at Waffle House, you know. Kelly said that she was going to get Ms. Albertson, you know, the teacher, next door, to take her to the store to get some snacks. She left the door open for us." Leslie said.

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We got out of the car and started up the front walk. Leslie turned so that she was blocking Mom's view of the door knob. She was waiting for us to make it safely inside. Roxy slickly took a school library card out of her purse and expertly opened the door.

When the door closed behind us, Roxy and Leslie burst into a fit of giggles. I looked around nervously. I could not believe we had broken into a house. The Smiths' family portrait smiled at me from above the mantle.

"Let's make this quick, we don't want to get caught." We ran upstairs and changed clothes. Roxy wore a leather mini with a red tube top and her platforms. Leslie came out in a snake print dress.

"Where'd that come from?" I asked.

"It's Roxy's," she replied in a sing-song voice. I quickly changed my outfit, and the girls finished applying a full mask of make-up. Roxy's kohl-smudged eyes looked heavy enough to stretch her lids to her chin.

Roxy took one look at my ensemble and said, "Nice look." Her tone said the opposite. I looked down at what I had thought looked pretty cute when my mom bought it for me at JC Penney. The pants were plaid and flared, in monochromatic green. My top was flirty, coming down into a deep V in the back. Doc Martins completed the look. I had even seen a similar outfit in the back to school issue of *Seventeen*. "School Girl Cool," the caption had said.

Once we had slipped back out of Kelly's house, the glowing numbers on my Timex told me that it was eight fifteen. We walked down Sycamore Avenue towards Colt's. We stashed our overnight bags on the elementary school playground in a tree house.

It seemed as though we had been sitting on the curb in the dark convenience store parking lot for hours when the guys finally screeched to a stop in front of us. I could hear the music playing before they even rolled down the windows. When they did, a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke billowed out. Damien squinted as he pulled his seat up so that the three of us could climb in the back. We struggled to get somewhat comfortable among empty beer cans and cigarette packs. I, of course, got stuck sitting in the middle hump seat, which the guys, for some reason, referred to as "riding bitch." No one said a word, except Damien who said

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that this was going to be a "killer" party and that the music blaring from the speakers was *Rage Against the Machine*.

As we pulled up in front of this huge, old, Victorian-style house, I could see the sea of people standing on the front lawn. I was impressed by the home and its manicured lawn. It was so much bigger than my own cramped home with its peeling paint and patchy grass. I knew that this kid's parents must have been bringing home a pretty penny. From the curb, I could hear bass thumping and girls squealing.

We all piled out of the car, and Damien led the way to the front door. He made a few stops along the way to dole out handshakes and high fives. Roxy strutted along beside him, right at home. I trailed along behind them cautiously wading my way through the throng of people, careful not to get burnt by a cigarette carelessly tossed aside by a partier's flailing arm.

When I finally caught up with Roxy and the rest of them in the kitchen, I realized that it was the place to be. At least thirty people were crammed around the granite island. Every single person in the room was holding a red plastic cup. In the center of the room there stood both a keg and a tub of red liquid. It had fruit floating in it like a melted Jell-o salad. I walked over to Roxy and Leslie, trying to look nonchalant; they were sipping their drinks and giggling between cigarette drags. Neither of them had said a word to me since we had gotten into Damien's car.

"Have some hunch punch!" A heavysset guy in a Bob Marley t-shirt thrust a red cup into my hands. I tried not to wince as I took a sip. The drink was both cloyingly sweet and acerbic all at once. I stood there, silent, with no one to talk to, and thought about how I had gotten into this mess. If my mom found out, I would be toast. To my left I could see Damien running his fingertips over Roxy's bare thigh. The smoke was getting to me. I felt as though I was going to choke; I needed some fresh air. I stepped outside onto the back patio where two girls were comparing belly button rings.

When I went back inside, Damien and another guy were holding Roxy upside down over the keg. When they finally put her down, her eyes were glazed like a honey baked ham. She swayed to and fro as Damien lit her cigarette. Leslie squealed, "Me next!" I wandered out of the kitchen to look for a bathroom. On the way, this guy holding the regulation red cup in one hand and a bottle of Jim Bean in the other bumped right smack into me. His beer

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spilled all down my top. He mumbled something incoherent before disappearing into one of the rooms. I hurried frantically to the door at the end of the hall; it seemed most likely to be the bathroom. I was so distraught about the beer spillage that I didn't even knock; I just pushed right through the heavy oak door.

The room was bathed in an eerie light, as if it had been doused in glow in the dark paint. At first my brain didn't register what my eyes were seeing. Two girls and a guy were standing there, their pale privates in stark contrast to the dark room.

"Join in, or get out! No voyeurs!" The girl on the left looked completely drunk. As she spoke, her teeth shone big and yellow in the unflattering darkness.

My body went on autopilot. I turned and walked straight out of the room and calmly closed the door. I could hear the guy's voice say, "Prude" through the wall. I sped down the hall and down the stairs. I had to find Roxy and Leslie, so I could tell them what I had just seen, and we could get out of there.

I looked everywhere for them, but there was no sign of either of them or Damien. I finally gave up and sat back on the loveseat in the sun room. It was somewhat quieter in there. The punch had gone straight to my head and I was feeling emotional. I couldn't believe that all this was happening. I wished I was at home. Silent tears began to slide down my cheeks.

A large photo album was perched on the coffee table in front of me; I picked it up and ran my hands over the rich leather. I cautiously opened the book. The first page was filled with photos of a family camping trip. The mother was young and pretty, all blond hair and rosy cheeks; she smiled sweetly. The father's arm was around the mother's waist; he was handsome, with sandy hair and perfect teeth. The couple's children were very young, angelic-looking twin boys whose eyes looked beyond the camera.

My mind traveled to a long forgotten memory. My family went on camping trip like that once. Back when my father was alive. We stayed by the lake and toasted marshmallows in our campfire. My mother and father both laughed when they saw how messy I was, sticky with melted chocolate and gooey marshmallow. That night we had eaten fish that my father had caught earlier. I had sat with him while he waited for a bite. "Here it comes," he'd shout as he felt a tug on his line.

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My thoughts turned back to the photographs as I flipped the pages of the album – happy smiling pictures of birthdays and Christmases. The twin boys grew taller and older. There were pictures taken at football games and school award programs.

I had always attended award programs with Leslie and her parents; my Mom was always busy with work something. These boys were so lucky to have such a perfect family.

After sitting alone in the sun room for awhile, I decided I should try to find Leslie and Roxy again. As I walked through the living room, I saw that the backdoor was ajar. Through the crack, I could hear Leslie's unmistakable laugh. I always told her that she sounded like a valley girl.

I walked to the door and pushed it wide open. Sure enough, Roxie and Leslie were out there, along with Damien and two blond, twin guys; the little boys from the pictures. They were all passing around a hand-rolled cigarette, but it didn't smell like tobacco.

Still standing in the door's threshold, I said "Didn't y'all take D.A.R.E. in school? Leslie, Roxy, y'all can't be doing this!" I surprised myself with the authority in the voice.

"Dude, chill out." Leslie looked at me through blood-shot eyes.

I turned and began to make my way through the maze of people to the front door. On the way, I passed a couple making-out against the piano. I slipped out the door, and began walking into the dark, balmy night. What was I going to do? In my head I calculated the distance back to my house. Not too far, I could do it if I had to, but I really didn't feel like I could face Mom right now. How could I explain all of this?

I didn't make a decision right then, I just kept walking. After about thirty minutes I found myself in front of the elementary school. The tree house!

Wearily I trudged toward the tree house, eager to rest both my feet and brain. My conscience was beating me up. I began to cry. As tears ran down my face, I wiped them away and saw streaks of black from all the make-up Roxy had applied to my face. I thought about what a horrible daughter I had been. My mom would be so disappointed in me. I cried myself to sleep there, curled up on the tree house floor.

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I woke up to Leslie tapping on my shoulder. "Hurry up, we need to get home before your mom gets back from her Saturday morning grocery ritual. I opened my eyes, yawning. The sunlight seared through the trees and shocked my face.

On the other side of the tree house, Roxie was taking off her party clothes and putting on a t-shirt. Leslie began to do the same.

"Don't just stand there, change your shirt, Alice. You don't want to get caught, do you?" As Roxy said this, I noticed that last night's make-up was still on her face, smeared around the eyes.

I looked Roxy in the eye boldly as I changed my clothes. "Don't you think that our faces will give it all away?"

Sarcastically, she responded. "Duh! Why do you think we are in such a hurry to get home? To wash this shit off!"

We walked along in silence. Lost in thought, I swore to myself that I would never lie to my mother again. I wouldn't take another drink until I turned twenty-one. When we were almost home, I bent down to tie my shoe.

As I straighten up to continue down the street, something caught my eye. Approaching the red light where we would cross the street was a blue Neon. My mother! *Oh my God, Oh my God! Don't look over, don't look over.* My heart was in my throat, beating away, threatening to tear a hole through my esophagus.

As I was meditating on my silent prayer, the Neon started to skid across the road and smacked into the lamppost. "Mom!" I forgot all about my fears of punishment as I ran towards my mother, terrified that I could lose her too.

It turns out that I was not the only one who had been out all night doing things that I shouldn't. As we sat on the sun-baked curb waiting for the police, my mother told me regretfully, with tears in her eyes, that she had spent the evening at the Renegade, the local blue collar bar. As we hugged each other tightly, she whispered, "I miss your dad." I pulled away and looked at her, her face more worn than I remembered, "I miss you, Mom."