She's Got You

Ammon was staying home from school and the authorities were coming every day and the ladies in flowered hats and pedal pushers brought fruit pies and casserole. His mother received them in the living room and sobbed openly. Ammon loped around the house hiding from the visitors with a gnawing whining at the bottom of his stomach. The authorities slouched up to the doorway with notepads and pens, badges and questions, scratching their noses and smoothing their bellies under their belts. They accepted coffee and wrote down dates, hours, numbers, facts about them all: Lorraine, Ammon and his grandmother.

He knew his mother was not innocent. He sat with the police in his living room (where they had found his father) on a velvet armchair with his hands folded across his crotch and did not say anything about how he was feeling. Ammon concentrated on pinching his whole body up and answering the authorities' questions politely and concisely. No, he did not remember ever leaving the basement window open. No, he usually didn't go down there.

"Not even to play ball or get something for your mother?"

He did not remember any strange men coming up to him as he walked home from school.

"No one that looked like they might cause trouble?"

Eventually, they took his mother away. Ammon missed more school to watch cartoons in his pajamas, spilling wet cereal on the carpet (sometimes on accident and

sometimes on purpose) while his grandmother read *Reader's Digest* and *Entertainment Weekly*. His father's murder faced him each morning the same way his spoon hit the scratched sides of his cereal bowl. It was plain. The murder was as monotonous and unrelenting as the sound of his own chewing and the taste of sodden wheat puffs, as stark and reoccurring as the remaining milk that obscured the bowl's bottom.

They lived in the large familiar house in eerie silence. It was the first time Ammon himself identified the house as large, despite people walking through and saying, "This place is huge" his whole life. There were two stairwells and an upstairs kitchen with a tap his mother used to leave running when he was having trouble falling asleep. With his mother and father both gone, the house looked the same, except for the couch in the downstairs living room, which had been taken away for forensic testing.

"It had been a beautiful couch, a really beautiful couch, I don't know if you remember it," his grandmother said to the few people who still came by bearing gifts. Ammon's grandmother cooked him hot dogs (she kept forgetting to get rolls, so he ate them bun-less, in their naked sadness) with horseradish, relish and mustard. No ketchup. This is what he had for dinner most nights, even though after a while it made him melancholy.

At night, he imagined the police speaking to his mother in harsh voices and slapping her face. He imagined her face crumpling. Once, he and his father had watched a black-and-white gangster film. Slipping the slab of plastic into the VCR, his dad had said, "*Shh*, don't tell Mom." Ammon had not known why. But now he imagined her like the lady in that movie, with a pillbox hat and wide eyes, saying over and over, "I had nothin', nothin' to do with it." There was more of this ridiculous monologue, but it made him

sadder than his grandmother's hot dogs to think of her saying the rest. In bed, he lay stiff with a paralyzing fear occasionally softened by half-sleep. He clutched the edges of his down comforter and saw men with hooks for hands and mechanical eyes that clicked open and closed like cameras. They were trying to find him, his father's son. To finish the *unfinished business.* Ammon thought of a suited, slick-haired man pointing a gun straight at him. It was these times he felt something besides nothing: a longing for his mother to come lie next to him like she had done when he was small.

He knew from the kids at school and the Providence Journal (he read it each morning with a glass of milk; his grandmother should not have let him, considering the circumstances, but she seemed to find it easier than telling him herself) that some people thought the Mob had murdered his father and maybe his mother had helped. He did know from his grandmother their "liquid assets" had been frozen until they found out who had killed his father. For the hotdogs and the car gas and other things, his grandmother had to use her teacher's pension, which made her sigh in the check out line of the supermarket as she punched in her PIN code with a rubbery frown. His grandmother was kind, but not comforting—he knew in the morning it would only be her at the kitchen stove, speechless, and he knew not to bury his face into her stomach.

Ammon took to staying in the library after school let out. He would page through the oversized reference books with the vibrant, glossy pictures, sitting at one of the oversized tables meant for multiple children. This habit might lead someone to think that Ammon was unpopular. Perhaps, one might think that Ammon was one of those unfortunate children whose existing sadness was deepened by a rare and barbaric tragedy

and that, even before the untimely death of his father, Ammon's young life was one that only glimmered in solitary moments of aesthetic pleasure. Factually, this was incorrect. Even after his father's conspicuous end, he maintained a gang of the grade's best boys. He did not sit alone afternoons in the school library for want of those who liked and admired him. He sat there, because, as he quickly found out, there is a grace period after the murder of your father, when life takes on the sheen of pretense. He attended school, lips were moved in his direction, but no one truly spoke to him, or expected a response. The same girls flirted with the same pubescent wantonness, their faces only now tugged downward, more tentative. He raised his hand in class and always had the right answer. Teachers stopped marking his compositions. When they handed work back in the class, he received none, without explanation.

This was how it was until summer time. The weight had gone out of the world and he spent afternoons in the library, not reading, but turning and turning pages. Every so often the librarian, Mrs. Fincher, would come by and run her fingers through his hair, letting her unremarkable adult body linger next to his adolescent frame. She would sigh and pet his buzz cut. Before this might have startled him, but now he just continued turning the pages of *Ghost Towns* or *The 1900 World's Fair* or *75 Years of National Geographic*, and said nothing. He never even looked up. Sometimes, on the third floor, Ammon would masturbate into the pages of encyclopedias, causing them to stick together. Trying to be quiet, he would let out sighs of relief into their bindings. He never thought about it after the fact—it only occurred to him on those days late in the afternoon, half an hour before closing, because it was the worst thing he could think to

do. He knew it would not matter if he were caught—the school would not punish him; his mother would not punish him.

One day, a few weeks after she was taken away, a yellow taxi pulled up in front of the house and his mother stepped out. His grandmother met her on the porch, and the two women embraced for a long time. Ammon watched from the upstairs balcony. He did not know what to think. He did not come downstairs for a long while, but he heard his mother crying at the kitchen table, and then a long silence.

In the next few months, Ammon saw his mother retire from parenthood. Before, she'd been a young, fine mother. Now, she burrowed down into herself and listened to the same Patsy Cline song over and over. She bought fine clothes from mail-order catalogs. The things she bought for Ammon either didn't fit or itched. His grandmother took him to the new mall to buy spring clothes and the walk from the parking garage into the cavernous commercial center was too long.

There was a meeting at the school—the modern, private school—about Ammon. The school was concerned; his father had just been murdered. *Was Ammon all right?* His mother and grandmother went to a meeting in the headmaster's office. Ammon was only in middle school, so, really, it was only the headmaster of the middle school's office. But he was concerned, the headmaster of the middle school. Lorraine was struck by the narrowness of the hallways and the institutional carpeting. She was impressed by the student artwork that hung in the glass display cases.

"This is where you spend all of your time at school?" She asked Ammon as they walked to the headmaster's office.

"Not exactly right here," Ammon said.

"Of course," said his mother, "Of course." When they got to the end of the hallway, the headmaster came out of his office.

"You won't mind waiting outside?" He said to Ammon, who shook his head. He didn't care. He didn't even like hearing his mother's straining voice through the door or his grandmother's consoling, shuffling tones, her sniffs and shifts of indignity.

Lorraine had become loudly helpless. It was as if her mind had aged twice as fast as her body. Manners and customs and new technologies and faces were to her large and small offenses. These offenses could so often not be articulated that she expressed them physically. She spent silent hours in the living room, or gave the house a violent and thorough cleaning, or rearranged the furniture, upsetting and relocating whole rooms. Once, she broke plates on the kitchen floor, one after another, until Ammon's grandmother swept in and caught her hands. She had always gotten herself into strange, awful predicaments. As he got older, the more he thought about his mother, the more he realized she had always been, in part, this way: leaving the gas pump in the car as she drove out of the station, burning dinner beyond recognition, throwing out important bills and letters, picking up the ringing telephone only to place it back in the cradle. Once his father was dead, she stranded herself in highway breakdown lanes, let the dogs out of the backyard without their leashes and walked down to Store 24 barefoot.

Shortly after his mother's return, his grandmother confided to Ammon that his mother had always acted like this, even as a child, "senseless like an animal." The two of them were driving to the mall, and his grandmother said to the windshield that, although she loved her daughter, she had been astonished that an accomplished doctor like Ammon's father had wanted to marry her. She said, while her daughter held a certain

bodily charm, Lorraine was no great beauty and had been an outcast at school. She was just glad, she said, reaching across to pat Ammon's knee, that he hadn't turned out like her, and more like his father, after all.

One afternoon, as Ammon was letting himself out into one of the library books, he was caught. Mrs. Fincher rounded the corner to one of the shelves and found him, sighing into the open pages of Britannica MA to MN. She gasped, covered her mouth, but did not back away—she stepped forward. Ammon was unable to believe that this was actually occurring, so he simply froze. He waited for her to realize what he was doing, and walk away, leaving him to remove himself from the pages of the book and go home.

Instead, she said, "Ammon!"

Ammon did not say anything. He remained still.

"Ammon! That's school property."

He did not say anything. She sighed.

"I am not going to ask you to leave the library. I am not going to tell Mr. Daylos, even. But the younger children use the encyclopedias. I won't tell you to stop." Ammon was shocked. He was, also, not shocked. Mrs. Fincher wore a long, purple dress and a long chain of glass beads. Her gray hair puffed into a cloud above her head. Her glasses shook on her face—she had a twitch.

The police were still coming by the house every few days. They had many details on which to question Lorraine, which apparently had not been covered when she was in custody, and they went through all of his father's telephone books, calling everyone, all

the way back to his college days. For a while, they came by in the mornings, when Ammon ate his cereal at the kitchen counter—no more carpet, now that his mother had returned—and his grandmother noticed how he was unable to eat when they were in the house. After that, she asked them to come by after Ammon had left for school, and so Ammon could only gauge police visits by his mother's mood. If she was howling behind a closed door, or in bed, they had visited, but if she was, unexpectedly, in front of the stove, or lip-sticked, about to go out with her one friend (a divorcee with two boys at the private, modern school) they had left her alone that day. Either way, frantic or mournful, Ammon was not real to her, and he seldom did anything at home besides eat, watch TV, use the bathroom and avoid his grandmother.

One day, just as the weather had brightened, Ammon entered his home to find his mother lying at the head of the stairs, moaning lowly. His grandmother made rapid hand gestures over her that seemed to come to nothing.

"She's fine, Ammon. She's only being dramatic," his grandmother said. His mother continued to moan, churning her backside into the carpet. She was only wearing pantyhose and a green sweater, which was her favorite. Ammon knew this as he knew her current position was what his grandmother called "behaving badly" and that there was no one's bad behavior that vexed her like his mother's. Ammon did not respond to his grandmother's statement.

He went up to his bedroom and turned on the TV. He watched the ABC Family nightly line-up all the way through, not even flipping channels during commercials. He

watched frame-to-frame, end-to-end. At nine o'clock, his grandmother came into his room holding a plate of dinner and set it down on his night-side table.

"Please do not worry about your mother, Ammon. She's just having a hard time." Ammon did not move or acknowledge her presence in the slightest; the TV cast its unearthly glow over his face, which was his only body part visible with his down comforter tucked under his chin. His grandmother's hands were blue in the light.

"She just misses your father. It's okay. We all do. You should talk to her. You two should be able to help each other."

Ammon did not respond. "Alright," she continued, "Please eat your dinner." She laid a hand on his arm—even through the heavy blanket she knew where to find it—and then lifted herself off the bed, padded across the carpet and out of the room. When the nightly news came on Ammon turned off the TV and lay in the dark. He hated the anchors faces, whose lips moved so casually, their cheeks like cuts of meat.

His father had loved movies and football games and popular sitcoms. He had looked over the prime-time line-up every day before heading over to his practice. He had been obsessed with the corporate goings-on at HBO and Showtime and was dedicated to several TV serials at once. His father would even watch TV shows—the type that Ammon wasn't allowed to watch, that if he entered the living room his parents would scream and say 'Go away!'—that his mother used to giggle were "girly." In their house, TV time had been family time. His parents had never been like some of his friend's parents who did everything together, but Ammon did remember Friday and Saturday nights—if they weren't going out to a dinner party or restaurant—the two of them curled up right next to each other on the couch. However, in the last year, Ammon had found it

difficult to watch anything with his parents; it made him feel itchy to sit with them in silence. The presence of his parents made characters on TV shows he liked irritating; it made the silliest romantic storylines feel like pornography. He began to campaign for a TV in his own room on the basis that he wanted to watch his own shows and play video games. Ammon thought of this in the dark, as the milky bridge of sleep appeared before him: watch his own shows and play his own video games.

The next day, when Ammon went up to the third floor, before closing, Mrs. Fincher appeared a few minutes after he was deep inside a dictionary. (He had thought, maybe, the younger children were less partial to the dictionaries). She took the dictionary from him, put it back on the shelf in its rightful place, and took Ammon in her hands. He was already aroused from the pressure of the book, and he did not question Mrs. Fincher's action. A few months ago, before the murder of his father, he would have jumped, or run, but now he felt nonplussed. The way she rubbed him seemed thorough, service-like, sympathetic. He felt it to be yet another way the school was making an exception for him, and he opened himself up to it in the same way he had to everything else. He accepted its inevitability. He closed his eyes and rested his head on one of the metal shelves. When he was about to finish, she pressed a tissue against the tip of his penis. The one thing he thought unsavory was the haste with which she put the tissue back in her pocket, wet though it was. Ammon turned quickly away from her and buttoned his pants.

"Ammon," she said, touching his shoulder, "I am going to close the doors downstairs. It's about time you go home."

Ammon left the building quickly, dumbly, casting a glance over his shoulder. At home, his grandmother met him at the door, with her gray hair, her long dress, and, for a moment, he thought she was Mrs. Fincher.

That week at school, to celebrate the good weather, there was a picnic on the lawn across the street, with all the faculty and middle school students. There was a girl new to the school that semester, with light blond hair, and the willowy body of a magazine model. Her name was Joyce and she and Ammon spoke over the sparse food the school served. She was the only student in the class who had not known him when he had had a father, or who did not remember the show-and-tell on being a doctor his father had given last year on Parent's Day. The others left them alone, running around, smushing hamburger buns into the dirt, throwing ice at each other, while the teachers told them to cut it out. Ammon's group of boys hovered nearby, and then dispersed, when they realized he was not going to stop talking to Joyce. The afternoons with Mrs. Fincher had continued, but Ammon barely thought of this as he scanned the celebration, the adolescent and adult bodies he knew so well from repetition.

Joyce placed her hand over Ammon's knee, delicately, and drew her hand closed gently. Ammon flinched; it tickled.

"It's supposed to be one-sixteenth of an orgasm," Joyce whispered. "Kids were crazy for doing that at my old school. Personally, I don't believe it." Ammon looked at her; she was proud, with straight, white teeth that had already seen braces, and a long, straight nose.

Ammon said, "Yeah."

“Hey,” Joyce said, “Does your family belong to one of the summer clubs around here? We just joined one. I forget the name.” Ammon didn’t know if they belonged anymore.

“You probably joined Agawam. That’s where we belong. The other one is Jewish.”

“Oh, good,” she said, and smiled. “We can go swimming this summer. My mom said she’d drive me over whenever I want. I need to get a tan.” She held out her arm, “See? Pale!” Ammon laughed.

“I bet you just burn,” he said.

“No way,” she said, “I can tan. I burn, a little, at first. I am jealous of you, though. You’re tan all year around—I bet you get dark in the summer. Now, it’s, like, you have a little cinnamon in your skin.”

Ammon didn’t know what to make of this. “I guess,” he said.

“Definitely,” she said, and placed her hand on his arm. He stayed talking to Joyce until her mother pulled up to the school in a red minivan and Joyce clambered into it, shouting a goodbye behind her.

The afternoons with Mrs. Fincher continued. She left him alone, mostly, until he would go upstairs, and then a few minutes later she followed him. He did not know what to make of it, but he couldn’t stop the cycle, it was too fascinating. Her hands were always warm. Her face always bore the same expression of firm sympathy, and then he would stand close to her, looking over her shoulder, and could not see her face until she pulled away, work done, the expression exactly the same. Sometimes, he would think

vaguely of spending one such afternoon with Joyce, far from the library, and the picture books, and Mrs. Fincher. He sat next to Joyce at lunch, sometimes, when the best boy and girl groups converged, and in science class, which they had together four days a week. But every day at three o'clock she was spirited away in the red minivan and Ammon did not know how to circumnavigate such an official obstacle.

One day, at lunch, Maureen Tate, a girl with a rotten face and a notoriously rich father, tapped Ammon on the shoulder. He was standing in the lunch line, alone, but his friends watched from their nearby table.

"Ammon," she said, "Do you like Joyce?"

Ammon reflected and, then, replied, "Does Joyce like me?"

She pursed her lips, waiting a beat, and then gave one quick nod. "Do you like Joyce?" she repeated.

"Yeah," Ammon said. At this word, she sped out of sight. Ammon ordered a grilled cheese.

That afternoon, Ammon climbed the steps of the library for the dull thrill of habit. He had not even waited for his friends to depart—kids usually mingled in swarms before the vans and sedans came up to the school's front, depleting their number. The library was particularly dead this day—all the other kids were out for ice cream, or hitching rides to the mall. Some might even head out to the country clubs outside the small metropolis to swim with their families.

Ammon spent the afternoon in the company of the picture books, and Mrs. Fincher, who nearby photocopied leaflets for a presentation on MLA citations and cataloged new books. As the sun outside dipped, Ammon returned his books carefully to

the shelves, and went up to the third floor. He walked between the two farthest books shelves—for the first few times, he'd continued the pretense of the book, and then he had stopped. He examined the spines as he waited: Encyclopedia Britannica L, M, N, O, P, World Encyclopedia X, Y, Z. No one used the Encyclopedias anymore because of the Internet. Teachers didn't even suggest it.

Mrs. Fincher appeared at the end of the row. She smiled her wordless smile and Ammon stepped towards her. She unbuttoned his pants and began to rub him, her hands warm as usual, and he began to feel warm, a weightlessness came and went, heat flushed into his cheeks. Her pace quickened and he began to breath audibly, closing his eyes.

When he opened them again, Joyce stood before him at the top of the stairs, her head cocked to one side, mouth agape, questioning. She had slipped up the stairs inaudibly, as girls of that age can, weighing nothing. He could tell, from the expression on her pretty face, that she was confused, not knowing what she saw, but knowing enough to know it was strange. All she could see, from her perspective on the stairs, was Mrs. Fincher's back, and Ammon's head hovering over her shoulder. Mrs. Fincher had not noticed; she continued, but her work made no sound. The whole moment was silent. Ammon stared at Joyce—he dared not stop Mrs. Fincher, for then it would become clear their activity, and he dared not call out to Joyce for the same reason. He instead did nothing, and Joyce, after a few seconds, perplexed, but understanding what she saw was private, padded down the stairs as fast and silent as she'd come.

Ammon stopped going to the library after school. He convinced his gang of boys to rove with him on Thayer Street instead, and they began their colonization of the area, befriending fry cooks for free, greasy meals. Ammon graduated from the school five

years later, and Mrs. Fincher continued as the librarian. She worked there even after he left for college, until she retired in her seventies. Ammon only saw her occasionally after that time, because she seldom left the library, and he seldom went there. He began dating Joyce in high school, and she never mentioned what she had seen that day until the winter of their senior year. One night, very late, they strolled on the Agawam golf course. No one else was there. Earlier in the day, there had been a big sports meet between the private modern school and its rival. Ammon played soccer, and Joyce ran track. They had come out to Agawam, leaving a party with their friends, to celebrate and drink champagne. Joyce wanted to make love on the golf course, because her friend had done so over the summer, and she did not want to be outdone. Joyce was full of such ideas—"Sex on a golf course," she'd said into Ammon's ear back in Providence, "is normal in July." Ammon was happy to oblige, because he loved Joyce and he loved to drive. They were drunk when they got to the course, and drunker as they drank the champagne. The idea of taking off their clothes was ludicrious—it was almost too cold to be outdoors at all. Joyce ran toward the first hole, and Ammon chased after her. When he caught her by the waist, and they landed on the wet ground, she asked, "What were you doing that day with Mrs. Fincher?"

Ammon was startled. Mrs. Fincher belonged to the strange months after his father's death. He held onto Joyce's hipbones and said, mouth to her bare stomach, "I thought you had forgotten that."

"I almost had. I remember it was right after I moved here, and I'd just met you. Everything from then seems kind of hazy—nothing seemed real, because I had just moved across the country, and it was all so much different than California. But then

today I was talking to Maureen and she said to me, 'Remember when I asked Ammon if he liked you?' And that's why I had gone up to get you. I stayed after school, because I was sure you'd ask me out, and then you weren't there, and everyone knew you went to the library, so I waited around, and then, finally, I got up the courage to go and talk to you."

"Really?" Ammon said, and laughed. He put his fingers on her stomach, wriggling them into her muscled softness, and she screeched. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Wouldn't believe what?" she said, gasping.

"About Mrs. Fincher."

"Oh, yeah, *right*," she said, pushing him off and standing up. She jumped up and down to keep off the cold. "I'll race you to the next hole."

"Too far."

"Fine, I'll race you back to the parking lot."

"Okay," he said, but before he had even said it, she began to run.

That day, years before, he walked home, nauseous and pale. In the last weeks of school, Joyce was to ignore him, sitting next to Crosby Johnson in science class. He waited in agony for his secret to become public. It was then that the police stopped coming by the house. They stopped visiting, and the summer came, and it was from this summer he would awake cured as he ever would be. But that afternoon, Ammon came home to his mother frozen in the velvet armchair. She looked out the window, and he stood in the doorway, watching her for a quarter of an hour. Still, he simply knew by looking at his mother that she was not innocent. She would listen to old records for hours

on end—to that one song over and over—and the sound would fill the whole house. She talked to his grandmother in hushed tones, asked Ammon to turn down the television and wanted to read him bedtime stories even though he was too old. With a glass of wine nestled against her thigh, she played solitaire, or she emptied the dishwasher, whimpering. He saw her guilt in the way her hand went to her mouth when Patsy Cline sang *she's got you*; she wore this mouth, this dried apricot, like a badge. She sat in the same spot, looking out at the street and wiping her cheeks. He knew these were the forces of exhaustion. This was the undergarment of her daily dressed grief, that tight mask of mourning, that stern bob of widowhood. She kicked off her shoes, arched her back and moaned. The dusk approached with that husky New England blueness and Ammon saw shadows—strange darks and lights—play across her face.