

Honeysuckle

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The stiff, brown grass poked my bare feet. I tried not to walk like a nervous cat in snow as I followed my friend out of her pool and to the wooded area at the back of her yard. She stopped in front of an oak tree whose lower branches had been consumed by vines. On the vines hung white, slender blossoms with yellow stamen that burst forth from the flared petals. My friend told me they were honeysuckles.

HUN-ey-suck-le. It sounded like cold sweet tea, a treat I could only enjoy while at my friend's house, away from my Midwestern parents. Sometimes, after playing in her pool for hours, my friend and I would walk two houses down to her grandmother's for a glass. Her grandmother made the perfect sweet tea—mostly sweet with a hint of bitterness. Just like Southern women.

My friend pinched off two blossoms, handing one to me. I twirled it in my fingers, feeling its delicateness. I told her it was pretty. "You eat it, stupid." She then pushed the stamen to the side and sucked on the flower. "It's good."

I tried to mimic her. I had never eaten a plant before. I had tried to eat a blade of grass once, under the pine tree in my yard, but my teeth couldn't separate it. Its stubborn wholeness

almost choked me, and I had to spit it out.

I felt the pollen brush onto my cheek as I pressed the petals to my mouth and sucked. I tasted nothing but the sun, the red dirt, and the humidity. I tried harder. I wanted to be a Southern lady like my friend who had descended from Southern ladies and would eventually become one herself, but I was just a kid from nowhere Indiana who said *pop* and *you guys*.

Growing up, I tried not to emphasize my non-Southern roots, but I felt them every Sunday as my family drove past the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian mega-churches on our way to the only Catholic church in town. I felt them as my mom pinned a cloth magnolia flower onto my First Communion dress. I felt them on Grandparents' Day in third grade, when a priest had lunch with me. Father Paul was young, in his mid-thirties, and he stuck out at the table like the white square of his clerical collar against his black shirt. Several people asked if he was my uncle. While the other kids were embraced in between their grandparents, I played with the teddy bear Father Paul had brought me. I stretched its arms open, trying to make it hold the distance between Georgia and Indiana, between my grandparents and me.

My friend tossed her emptied blossom onto the ground like a peanut shell at a Braves game. I did the same with mine.

“Yeah, it’s good,” I said.

She picked several more honeysuckles, passing a bouquet of them to me. I cupped them in my hands, afraid they would escape in the slightest breeze. We sat down in the shade. My friend leaned against the tree trunk while I sat off to the side; pine needles poked my exposed, pale legs.

I wanted to be as natural as my friend was, the way her skin easily browned in the sun. It seemed like everyone in the South was at least 1/16 Cherokee, Creek, or Chickasaw, their families having long ago mixed with the natives. It wasn’t enough to look it, but it was enough to absorb the sun into deep tans that lasted year-round. I was of German and Swedish stock—translucent, fresh-off-the-boat white. What sun I did get burned under my skin, making it shrivel and peel, leaving me as white as I was before. As white as the honeysuckle I held in my hand. Which tasted like nothing.

I sucked harder and harder on the honeysuckle. I licked the insides like a hummingbird but only got pollen in my mouth. I cleaned my tongue off on my hand, tasting the pool’s chlorine and my own sweat.

Many years later, I would learn a better way to eat a honeysuckle: pinch the bottom of the bloom with one hand and

pull the stamen out with the other. But it didn't matter. By then I had stopped trying.

Having consumed their nectars, my friend began peeling the delicate flowers apart; the petals littered her lap. She belonged there on that ground, under that tree. Land was her birthright, her Southern heritage. It had been passed down along with the tarnished silver and membership into the United Daughters of the Confederacy. While many of my friends lived on streets named after their great-great-grandparents—Parker Road, Stanton Road, Potts Road—my name was just a spelling test every time a pizza was ordered or a school form was filled out: *Fouts. F as in Frank, o, u, t, s.* But even that spelling was some corrupted version from an Ellis Island log, the original German lost at sea.

I imagined myself pulling the honeysuckles apart, too. I imagined the nectar dripping down my fingers. I imagined its sweetness sinking deep into my skin, so when I licked it, I couldn't tell them apart.

I started to unpeel a blossom, peer into its insides.

"Come on," my friend said, brushing the white petals off of her. She raced back toward the pool. Her splash reflected the sunlight back at me.

In my hand, nectar seeped from the split in the honeysuckle's flesh. As I watched it bleed—from the wound I had inflicted upon it—I felt ashamed, like when I had lied to Father Paul during my First Confession, thinking more sins would make me more Catholic.

I laid the blossom on the pine needles reverently, as if I were placing it in front of the lichen-covered gravestone of a stranger. A remnant of my presence.