

SKIN DEEP

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Alan lies face down in the sand. Even with his eyes clenched shut he can feel the scalding brilliance of the late morning, the bone-coloured sky with its glaring white punch-hole of a sun hot against his naked back, and everywhere the insistent hiss of low surf. His pounding heart seems a separate detail. Part of him wants to run, to leap to his feet, push free of his friends and charge away, heedless as to his direction; but self-preservation keeps him down and still.

“Get up,” a voice says, from high above his head. A girl’s voice. There’s no anger in the tone. The words have the perfunctory, disinterested quality of an instruction.

This far up the beach, past the sea’s crawl, the sand is like dust and yields to the shape of his small body. For these few seconds, movement has become

his enemy, even down to the subtle motions of taking and expending air. Holding fast to this position keeps the bloom of pain at uneasy bay, not to mention the incumbent crush of a shame that awaits him in the big hungry eyes of the gathered girls. His friends, who won't be able to help but think less of him now, after this.

Naked toes jab hard at his ribs.

"Come on, little boy. Up, I said."

He struggles to his knees, his eyes snapped nearly shut against the glare, and it is only then that the pain hits, exploding through him like a small bomb. He'd anticipated something, but is unprepared for the magnitude of its punch. As the world dims and turns thick, breath jars from his throat in a little coughing groan. His blood is on fire, and nausea churns the pit of his stomach and begins to swell. He rocks back on his heels, cradles his groin with both hands, and readies himself for the tears that have to come.

Jenny, the girl who kicked him, looms into view. She positions herself above him, a shadowy reef of flesh haloed by a wiped-out sun. One fistful hand juts from her thick hip and the twist of a smirk mangles what might, with effort, be a pretty mouth. She is fourteen, a good year and a half older than Alan, and has no real business trying to be a part of this group. But numbers

are all the way down on the beach this year and nobody can be too selective when it comes to choosing friends.

She arrived at the resort just a week ago, and this late in the season, with a full month of summer already spent, has already missed a lot of boats. Alan had noticed her those first couple of days, studying their group with envious, angry glances from a striped yellow and pink towel while pretending to read, and interrupting herself only now and again to chance a waist-deep wade into the sea in the company of her mother, a squawking, crow-like woman with soot-black hair clipped into a severe bowl cut, mannish except for the ridiculously pointed sideburns, and a wedge of nose that poked a twinge of leer into every smile. There seems a lack of happiness between them, and none in their vicinity. Stretched out on the sand or splashing around one another in the water, they look thrown together in isolation.

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Over the long summer, the playgroup has evolved and whittled itself down to what now passes, at least in the frenetic and constantly fluxing world of children, as a reasonably comfortable and balanced nucleus. Recent weeks have seen Alan, as the only remaining boy, elevated to the status of unspoken leader, ably abetted by his new best friend, Lorelei, also twelve, a girl he met

on his first morning here and who now tries to hold his hand whenever the opportunity presents itself. He feigns annoyance at this, but lets her whenever he thinks no one is looking. The group is rounded out by Lorelei's younger sister, Angela, and Angela's closest vacation friends, a pair of pale, undernourished twins, Holly and Ivy. Both Holly and Ivy tend to speak in murmurs and coded glances but they have a certain physical wildness that belies their limpid frames and seem to hold no fear whatsoever of the sea, even when the surf is high.

Then, yesterday, Jenny crashed the party.

"I want to play too," she said, pushing into the centre of their mix, and something about her, something more than the age-gap that she flaunted before them, caused a shift in the equilibrium. They'd been building castles, each with their plastic red or blue buckets and spades trying in vain to construct out of sand what existed so vividly in their minds. Lorelei looked at Alan with pleading, to speak up, to say or do something that would prevent such an unwanted invasion, but Jenny stood there, too close and too big, with her hands clenched into pale dimpled fists, and not wanting to be faced down, Alan could only bring himself to cock a smile, shrug one shoulder and say, "Sure. Jump on

in. The more, the merrier.” His voice wavered a semitone into sharpness though, and even in the moment, his words felt foolish and cowardly.

“Thanks,” she said, and pulled a smile across her clenched teeth. “But I wasn't asking for permission.”

The down-home edge in her voice seemed a vague cause of shame, and even though she'd long ago cultivated a harsh tone, putting meanness into every spoken word, the inevitable leakage of what lay beneath, or inside, served to magnify rather than mask. And during her silences, which were almost worse than when she spoke, her nostrils flared, throbbing hungrily at the air.

Still grimacing, she considered each of them in turn, scouring their faces for signs of terror or resistance. Then she squeezed into the few spare feet of space that lay between Alan and Lorelei, dropped to her knees and, without another word, grabbed for Alan's empty bucket and proceeded to claw with her hands at the loosely packed sand.

Alan glanced at Lorelei, then lowered his eyes and pretended to be absorbed in the task of completing his own half-built Alhambra. Just minutes earlier, he'd been speaking of such wonders as genies, giant scorpions and rolling sandstorms. But that time now was past and gone.

The coup, in its planning and execution, was militarily perfect. Having so bloodlessly usurped the top position, Jenny's first act in charge was to dismiss the castle constructions of both Holly and Lorelei, and with a few trampling kicks to return their efforts to the beach. The new dictate demanded that, instead of wasting time and energy on individual projects, they instead concentrate their efforts on the building of a single mega-fort. Hers. And because the idea was not wholly without merit, Alan decided that it would be petty to voice an objection. Consoling himself with the half-lie that he was acting in the greater interests of the group, he smiled, bowed his head and said nothing.

Unfortunately, the fantasy of a mega-castle proved grossly unrealistic and fell far short of the promised conclusion, and by early evening all they had to show for its collective effort were wind-burnt shoulders, a few wilting rampart walls and a couple of shapeless sand mounds meant to represent turrets.

"Sand castles are the most stupid things in the world," Jenny said, out of one of her mother's patented leers, and she leapt to her feet and proceeded to kick down an entire afternoon's work.

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"Maybe she'll leave us alone now," said Lorelei, her voice soft with dread.

She and Alan were alone together, walking back in the direction of their summer cabins. The sky remained shelled with cloud, the setting sun clotting the air with a peculiar, hazy greyness, and with the tide out, the impressions of their bare feet held on the wet sand for seconds at a time before evaporating. The beach had mostly emptied and, this late in the day, it felt safe and even pleasant to hold hands, and to feel so close.

He shrugged at her words, not wanting to be seen to make too much of them.

“Maybe she will.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“I don’t know, do I? Maybe, I said. Maybe means maybe.”

Her eyes in the twilight were amber and blackness, and glassy with the press of tears. He looked at her and squeezed her hand, and they walked on.

“I think she will.”

“Why?”

“Why will she leave us alone?”

“No, why do you think she will?”

“Oh. Because she doesn’t like us. And she knows we don’t like her. Do we?”

“Well, I don’t.” Alan scratched the back of his head. His hair, which had been shorn nearly into his skull at the beginning of the holidays, was getting long and thick. He could feel grains of sand coating his scalp.

“Me neither. Actually, I think she’s awful.”

They strolled on, alive inside their silence. This was how they usually ended their days here, walking together, holding hands for at least part of the stretch, enjoying the colours of the water’s surface off to their left and the soft tumble of the breaking waves making the small sound of faraway storms. Then, two evenings ago, they’d stopped for a couple of minutes, just where the jut of headland separated the main beach from a smaller and more secluded second inlet, to watch a crab scuttle out from under a deadlock of kelp. Talons of reef hid them from everything but the open, empty sea, and while they were kneeling and watching the crab advance in sideways stutters, Lorelei had leaned against Alan and lay a kiss squarely on his mouth.

She’d been kissing boys more or less since kindergarten, though only the ones she really liked, which in a way made each time feel like the first for her. But for Alan, it *was* the first. When he felt the wetness of her lips, he started to panic, pulling back hard and glancing around. With nobody watching, he didn’t have to make a face or try to act tough, but that split second of resistance

cost them most of the gesture's goodness, leaving behind only the small thrill of shock.

He gazed at her, confused.

“What was that for?”

“Did you like it?”

Out over the sea, the sky had a turgid heft, the light flushing with shadow, that made him feel small, and oddly empty. He shrugged.

“I guess it was okay.”

She smiled, revealing a tease of teeth, and hugged his arm. He let her, pretending not to care, but held back for just a minute or two before easing free and clambering up over the facing reef, moving slowly so that she could keep at his side. Then they followed the sweep of the short second strand up through the dunes and on in the direction of the holiday cabins.

“But supposing she does come back,” Lorelei said, stopping and stopping him, too, when the turn of the ground brought the terracotta slate rooftops of their summer homes suddenly into view. “What'll we do then?”

“Why do we have to do anything?”

“I don't want another day like today. She's spoiling the whole summer.”

Alan took a deep slow breath. The palm of her hand was warm and slightly clammy against his own.

“If she comes back,” he said, “I’ll just tell her that we don’t want her in our group.”

Lorelei, reading the world into his words, and perhaps already sensing the horror they could cause, stepped back half a pace and considered him.

“She won’t like that.”

“So? That’s her problem. We don’t have to play with her if we don’t want to. No one can make us.”

“Maybe *she* can. I bet she’ll try. And she’s so big.”

“She’s a bully. My dad says all bullies are cowards, and that if you stand up to them they’ll usually run away.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll all stick together and tell her she’s out. What can she do against five of us?”

§

He slept well, woke early, and was first on the beach, a little after eight. Some forty-five minutes later, the others appeared in the distance, with Lorelei lagging slightly, swinging her pink plastic bucket as she walked. Until that

moment he'd been feeling good. He dropped the piece of quartz that he was about to sling into the tide, and stood, hands on hips, waiting.

“Do you think she'll show?” Angela asked, running up to him. Excitement puckering her voice, she inclined her head slightly left and squinted one eye shut against the stab of morning sun. As usual, she had on her one-piece bathing suit, a piece of gaudy orange rayon freckled with black thumbprints, cave-man-patterned, and a pair of yellow jelly flip-flops.

There was no breeze, and the sky again held above them as a hard whiteness that silvered and galvanised the water out to its darker distance and assured hours of fire ahead. After a while, the girls grew restless and went to play a splashing game along the breaking edge of the water. Alan lay down, propped himself on one elbow and considered the sea, flat and mostly still, slopping up onto the pale sand and then pulling back again, conjuring feathers and froth into sheets of glass. He was a fair swimmer, with a decent front crawl and an acceptable butterfly, and chief among his goals for this summer had been to hone his breaststroke to the point where he could mount a serious challenge for a place on the school team. But now that summer was actually here, he discovered, not quite to his surprise, that he'd been mistaken in his ambitions. Swimming was great for cooling off when the day really started to

bake, or as part of a game to be shared with friends, but turning it into a sport and making it competitive only bled it of its fun.

He was bare-chested and wore long rainbow-coloured Bermuda shorts, and the way he sat caused the cut-off legs to ride back up his skinny thighs. Lorelei sat beside him, close but not unbearably so. She didn't say much but kept stealing little glances in his direction that he pretended to ignore.

Time passed slowly, but by eleven or so, just when he'd begun to dare hope that Jenny might have tired of their company, she waded out from between the dunes not twenty feet from where they were sitting.

"Tweedle," she said, by way of greeting, the word evidently making sense in her mind.

A piece of shadow fell across Lorelei's right foot, darkening the flaking crimson of her painted toenails to deeper, bloodier droplets, and her breath caught with a jerk in her throat and she dragged her foot back and away into the freedom of the sunlight. But Jenny either didn't notice or else chose to let such a slight pass unchecked. This morning, she had eyes only for Alan.

"I've been thinking," she said, again twitching into a junior-category masterpiece of a scowl, "that today we're going to bury you up to your neck."

A reed of sawgrass jogged in one corner of her mouth, driven by little pneumatic pinches of her teeth, and her sheer-cut bikini, patterned with scarlet poppies against a pale blue background, struggled to contain the bulge of her flesh. Her stomach in particular seemed bloated, the buttery skin rippled like pebble dash above and beneath the two-piece's biting draw-strung hems. No longer mere puppy fat, this was stiffening toward permanence.

"Go on ahead," she said, removing the piece of grass to give more of a stab to her words, "take it all in, why don't you?"

He blushed and looked away, but the image of her didn't quit. She had hair peeping out in dark spools from her armpits and little white knuckles of fat shone beneath the sunburnt meat of her thighs.

He'd made a mistake in letting her get so close. Gaining an advantage now that she was standing and he was still down would be like trying to sell her sand. But he had to try. Down at the water's edge he could see that Angela and the twins had abandoned their game of splash and, having formed a huddle, were watching with interest. They'd heard him talk a good game and were now expecting scores.

He slatted his mouth, a solemn tweak that parted his lips with a tiny kissing sound, stretched his arms outwards in a quivering semaphore of a yawn

and got to his feet with a casual yet nimble little roll of his body. Instead of trying to stop him, Jenny stepped back and let him up, and for one fleeting second he got a close-up view of that scowl and saw that it was really just a fine line shy of a smile.

“Thing is,” he said, with more volume than intended, “we’ve been chatting, you see. All of us, I mean. Angela and the twins, too. And we’ve decided that there is not really enough room in our group for you. If you’d been here earlier, say from the beginning, it would probably be different, but because you arrived so late we don’t think you really fit in very well with us. No hard feelings, it’s just—”

“Stop it.”

He’d been shifting his gaze back and forth between the floury sand around his feet and the sea off to his right, its calm, gently plucked surface making him think of the flecked onyx stones set into his mother’s favourite bracelet, a cheap but memory-laden thing she’d picked up at a Souk in Agadir during a backpacking summer somewhere in the ancient past of her early twenties. He’d rehearsed a dozen times in his head, and knew that even a glance in Jenny’s direction would capsize his train of thought.

But her response seemed out of time with what he was trying to say.

“What?”

“Stop. I saw you. Checking me out. Don’t think I didn’t.”

Confusion backed him into silence. He swallowed, then threw a look in Lorelei’s direction. She stared back at him from her place in the sand, her mouth a tiny muddled O, her wide eyes struggling to keep up. They were still stuck in that glance when the kick landed.

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Coppery flumes of nausea flush his throat. Cradling his groin with both hands, he slows his breathing, trying to steady himself, but when he sets his left foot down in the sand and lends it some cautious weight, a fresh flare of pain goes off somewhere and there is an instant of brightness and then a long moment when the world spins hard and dark, threatening to jerk him loose. Air hisses in rags of spit between his clenched teeth, sounding inside his head like the waves coming up onto the sand and then dragging themselves back, and for the first time in his life he feels a hint of the understanding that some things are permanent and some are not.

When he can look up again, he sees Jenny waiting, smirking. She takes a sudden step closer, and he flinches and manages only at the last instant to catch his balance with a saving hand. All he can do, in his dead-eyed, soft-boned

state, is hold there in a little defensive squat and wait, trying feebly to brace himself, for the second blow to fall. But Jenny understands the magnitude of her victory. Her smirk opens above the protrusion of a thick lower lip and then folds nonchalantly back into its comfortable sneer.

Incredibly, with all that has happened, his mind registers that she is wearing a smear of glitter-pink lip gloss.

“Next time you put your eyes on my wobbles,” she says, leaning in so he can feel her hot, sugary breath in his face, “you’ll get that twice as hard.”

Then, with one quick, violent shove of her hand she pushes him over, and turns and walks away.

He lies there, on his shoulder, with the hot smell of the sand filling his head, and doesn't even notice his tears until he takes a pass at his dripping nose and with the pad of his thumb finds their rheum slathering his burning cheeks. Lorelei and the other girls look on, giving him space. But curiosity outweighs compassion. He has become their car-smash victim; they seem awed by what has happened, and their world has slanted in a new and unexpected way. Even beyond the thunderous enlightenment of what a girl, no matter how little, can achieve once they are prepared to damn the consequences and fully commit to

a certain alchemical balance of ingenuity and full-frontal brutality, what resonates is a need to consider and understand how it can be possible to both win and lose at something at the same time. Jenny has been culled from their group, but the consequence of his achievement is a wound that runs deep as well-spring.

“Alan?”

The voice is small, kind. Like birdsong, or a kiss. Then Lorelei is on her knees beside him, pressing into his field of vision, her face taking a cautious, angled approach.

“Did she hurt you very much?”

His heart pounds an ache into the hollow of his throat, a feature of certain kinds of tears, he knows, and he wonders vaguely if he will ever again be able to stand in comfort, or carry himself with the confidence that only freedom in a free world can properly grant. A day might come, weeks or years from now, but from down here he cannot quite bring himself to believe it. The damage feels permanent. Every movement, however slight, sets off a grinding of small glass fragments deep in his centre. But still worse is the sheer, yawning depth of the shame he feels and its impact on who he is, or who until mere minutes ago he had thought himself to be.

“Some. She got me when I wasn’t looking.”

His voice feels different, new somehow to the morning. He wants to lie in the sand forever, until he is nothing but bones. He clears his throat and heaves a shuddering breath. New pain awakens inside of him, but he holds it off, trying to be brave, until he remembers the tears smearing his face. Then he gives in to a wince, and mutters: “Jesus.”

Further along the beach, Jenny is receding into the distance. Even from fifty and then a hundred yards away she looks oversized and fleshy in her borrowed slivers of bikini. A grotesque, like someone fallen from a circus crew. He watches after her, wishing her pain, a clumsy trip that will bring small ridicule on her, or a freak wave from the sea on her constant left coming in like an enormous grasping hand to snatch and drag her screaming away. But nothing like that happens, and after a few minutes the curves and undulations of the beach first amputate and then swallow her up.

Lorelei helps him into a sitting position, then settles herself beside him. With their shoulders touching, he can feel the small, unhurried carry of her breathing.

They sit this way for a long time, not speaking, captivated by the silvery way the light mottles the sea. Eventually, realising that the greater drama has

passed, Angela and the twins tire of the silence and start back down towards the water's edge. Ivy, last to the tide, screams against an onslaught as the others splash and kick fans of water up into her face. Amid peals of squeaking laughter, she braves the attack and wades knee-deep into the foaming breaks.

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“My dad says that you should never kick a boy in that place. He says you can cause terrible damage that way. Do you think you'll be okay?”

“I think I'm probably lucky she wasn't wearing boots,” says Alan, surprised at the smile that turns his mouth. It is not much, but it helps. He glances at Lorelei and their eyes meet, and there is a moment, barely a pulse-beat, when embarrassment rushes through him and he feels so overcome that he almost pulls away. Instead, he finds her hand resting on her thigh in a loose fist. She has very thin hands, with slender bones rising like the frame of a tent beneath her fine skin. He folds his fingers between hers and looks at her again. This time, she smiles, and her mouth is a coy, heart-brimming sliver until she pinches her lower lip with the gentle press of her small teeth.

The tenderness in his groin will last for nearly a week. He has to walk slowly, and to sometimes stop and rest, and Lorelei, who has become a permanence alongside, adjusts her pace accordingly. To fill gaps, and to pretend that

everything is still easy, he tells her one of the jokes that he has memorised from his Big Bad Book of Bedside Gags and Leg-Pulls. He likes the way that she inclines her head a little to the left and listens with intent, her teeth showing inside the ready smile, and how she laughs when he hits the punchline, squeezing her eyes most of the way shut in that sweet way she has, even though he suspects that, more often than not, she doesn't really get the point of the gag at all. In truth, he doesn't always understand the jokes either, though he has trained himself to deliver them in a way that seems convincing.

The sordid business of the kick and the subsequent tears are allowed to go unmentioned now, not because these twin humiliations have reduced in importance but because in having cut Jenny so surgically from their lives she has ceased, at least in any sort of notable flesh-and-blood way, to exist for them. Over the coming days, they will each, at different moments, notice her far off in the distance, beached on a long candy-striped towel beside the chandelier carcass of her sunbathing mother, and idling through the clammy pages of some glossy fashion rag. But what they see only partially registers because in just a few hard, swift words she has become disconnected from their lives. They see her, and they recognise her for who and what she is as well as what she has done, but they no longer care to feel anything about her. They share a

strand but stand apart, and they feel galaxies removed, which is how they want it to be.

And when, towards the end of the second week, Holly brings news that a young girl has drowned, a rather plump, heavysset girl, fourteen years old, after having gotten into difficulties while swimming alone barely twenty metres from the shore, neither Alan nor Lorelei immediately associates the tragedy with Jenny, though later it will seem odd to them both that they do not. Nobody bothers to actually tell them what has happened, or what is believed to have happened, and so they are forced to catch the story second- or third-hand, absorbing the details by osmosis, catching stray musical notes of gossip and stringing them together into the only sort of melody that makes any kind of literal sense. Accident, tragedy, desperate misfortune. In truth, no one really knows, and no one wants to guess beyond the pale.

§

Life at the beach goes on. The summer builds to a height, a roll of long sweltering days with not much more to do than swim, play and stretch out on the body-tossed sand to slowly baste. Friendships continue to hold and strengthen, most significantly the bond that has been forged between Alan and Lorelei. After a while, nothing seems to matter more than their time together,

and being able to share stories, hold hands and laugh at the jokes that Alan continues to tell with a relish bordering on obscenity.

There is an eternal quality to this time, the light approaching and receding with such sultry calm that even the reluctant darkness can't quite dispel its memory, or its sense. In the star-tempered night, like soft jazz, sleep yawns as both a respite and a heightening, a chance to relax into dreams. But the heat, the stillness, the long lit hours, only deceive. And suddenly it is mid-August, within reach of school and home, that entire other world, as unreal and then, too soon, as real and true as winter.

The initial reaction is panic. A day or two later, Alan takes Lorelei's hand for the first time within view of anyone who might care to see. People start to smile, kids as well as adults, but the gesture has the kind of courageous quality that seems to soften whatever they might feel like saying, and mostly they look away after the first few seconds have passed, and fix their attentions on other things.

This public acknowledgement lights a fire in Lorelei, causing her to shine, but it also emphasises how deeply they'll each feel their impending separation. But Lorelei's mother smiles and shrugs, says stupid things like, "Well, if it truly is the real deal, I'm sure you'll survive the surgery. True love always finds a

way.” Her voice is maddening, full of throaty breath and languorous, whimpering vowel-stretches that she wrongly assumes can pass for empathetic just because it is the tone she has fallen into the habit of using whenever she picks up a call from her sister, Barbara, who is thirty-three and suffering from early-onset Parkinson’s. Lorelei cries openly, enjoying her heartbreak, but Alan waits until he is in the sea to spill his tears. No one understands.

Then, on the 21st, Alan’s father drops a casual bombshell. He has received a call, a deal hanging in the balance. They’ll have to pack their things and leave for home first thing in the morning. Five days early, but it can’t be helped. His contrite tone is compromised by the forkfuls of fries that he crams at random into his mouth, but it is clear that he is happy to be returning home. Work is his balm, the answer to everything. They finish dinner, which is just hamburgers, in silence. Again, Alan cries, and again notices only after the fact, this time when a tear spills from his hung cheek and splashes into his plate. No one else notices.

“I’ll take care of the packing,” his mother says, following him into his room, some ten minutes later. “You better go and say your goodbyes.” Her narrow face wrestles down a tweak of amusement. He is lying on the bed, star-

ing at the ceiling, with his hands linked behind his head. The tears feel desperately close to the surface, and the least encouragement will set them falling again.

“Maybe it’s better this way.” She picks up a shirt that has been tossed on the floor and begins to untangle the folded sleeves. “You’ve had a nice summer, and made yourself a lovely friend. Lorelei will probably cry when you tell her, but a few weeks from now you’ll both be able to see this for what it is.”

“What is it?” Alan says, to the ceiling.

His mother folds the shirt, sets it on the bed beside his bare feet and picks up a pair of shorts. “Growing up,” she says. “All a part of growing up.”

But that’s too flippant a thing to say. Alan forces a few seconds of stillness on himself, then swings out of the bed. He can feel her smiling behind him, but doesn’t turn. He’s not a child, despite what she might think. He has already kissed a girl. He knows things now.

§

Outside, dusk has settled. The air tastes of tropical islands. Within a minute, the t-shirt is clinging to the small of his back. And his heart is beating hard. He follows the footpath down the block past the row of carefully spaced

but identical summer cottages, watching for stars. But the sky is a big and empty yet, devoid of cloud but baked colourless.

Lorelei's mother answers the door.

There is a moment, there and then gone, when she looks at him without recognition, and her brow plucks like the snag of wool around a slipped needle. Then something shifts and she smiles, leaning against the door's jamb, folding her arms beneath her breasts and overlapping her naked right shin with her left calf. She is wearing close-fitting denim shorts cut-off to mid-thigh, and a blue and white check-patterned blouse, sleeveless and undone to the second button, nothing too immodest but alluring just the same. She is a little taller than him, but by no more than three or four inches, and has a nice, kind face that with just a little effort could probably be made to look beautiful again. Alan wonders if this is what Lorelei will look like in years to come, and hopes for her sake that it is.

"Alan," she says, with a smile that shows teeth and just a hint of tongue.

"I'm sorry for calling so late, Mrs Kelleher. But I really need to speak with Lorelei. If that's okay. My dad says we have to go back home, and—"

"Oh, no. Really?"

"Something to do with work, he says."

“What does your father do? I don’t think you ever said.”

“He’s in advertising.” Alan shrugs. Actually, he has little idea of what this means, but has heard the phrase used often, to seemingly good effect. Other kids get to say their fathers are teachers or lawyers or doctors or forklift drivers. To be ‘in advertising’ seems to imply something else, like being ‘in love’, or ‘in prison’. But that’s the way he is used to hearing it said, and is how he says it now.

Lorelei’s parents are separated. Over the past two months, momentarily forgetting, she has mentioned her father a few times. But the wound for her is still raw and the thought of him causes her to lapse into shy silence. Alan has never been close to anyone whose parents live apart, and he feels some regret, now that the summer for him is almost done, at not having been more curious about the details.

“So, you’re here to say goodbye.” Mrs Kelleher has small breasts, but the way she has her arms folded so snugly beneath, coupled with the two undone buttons of her blouse, somehow emphasises them as a feature of who she is. “Would you like to come inside, or should I send Lori out to you?”

“Out here, I think,” he says, after a moment’s thought. “I’ve only got a few minutes, you see. There’s all this packing to be done.”

She smiles again. "Well, it's been nice meeting you. Lori's going to miss you terribly." He stares at her lips, slightly parted. He has to resist the urge to close his eyes, but he imagines that her mouth has a soft firmness and a hint of dampness. Until she exhales, the sharp citrus halo of her shampoo scent masks a red wine sweetness. His heart starts to pound.

Lorelei appears. She has a flannel dressing gown, the colour and texture of candy floss, open over a thigh-length lemon and green nightdress. She pulls the door closed and leans against it. The evening sky is still without real darkness, and there's no hint yet of the stars to come.

"Hi," says Alan.

"Hi."

"Again."

Another smile. "Again."

He looks at the ground, and at her bare feet, and half-whispers the words, getting them out. The long sweep of lawn has been scorched nearly to extinction, the grass thin and pale, the earth beneath yellow from thirst and cobwebbed with cracks and fissures. But the concrete of the pathway, even after a long summer, has the chill of dead things. The sun can boil the world, and turn everything else to soup, but the concrete won't change.

“Fine,” Lorelei says. “Have a safe journey.”

He'd wanted tears, but she looks back at him, the bones of her face serene, already a stranger. Only her hands are restless. She holds them at her sides, her left squeezing into and dropping the shape of a fist, then brings them together in a prayerful grip.

Her voice sounds the same as always, not even the least bit forced. Tears are as far away as the Gobi. And she doesn't even try to hold his hand. They stand, close but apart, staring at one another, and then she turns and reaches for the old-fashioned oblong brass doorknob.

“It's not that I want to go,” he says. “If I had a choice, I'd stay here forever.”

She half-turns at this, and nods again, but doesn't meet his eye.

“I'll write to you, the minute I get home. I promise. And I'll write every day.” Air shudders in his throat. “We're best friends, aren't we?”

And finally, whether in response to his display of abject neediness or because his words have ventured close to what she's been longing to hear, the wall comes down. She turns and throws her arms around his neck, pressing kisses on his mouth and face. They are innocent kisses, pursed stabs that

bounce like hail against his flesh, but to him they are everything. They embrace until he hears the sound of smothered laughter flapping from behind the shifting curtain of an open window, and then, grudgingly, they part.

She stands in the doorway and watches him leave, raising her own hand in goodbye when, towards the end of the path, he turns and waves back at her. Now there are tears in her eyes, and she wipes them away hard but they keep coming, making a mess of the night. He stands a moment, waving and trying to breathe, knowing his own bravery keeps only to the surface and that he'll cry too, but later, into his pillow, once everyone is asleep. Yet he also knows, on some level, that a week from now he will be crying and laughing over other things. They'll keep in touch for a while, but time and fatigue will wear them down. A year from now, should they both find themselves back here, they'll likely do all they can to gravitate away from one another, partly out of a mutual guilt at not having tried harder, but mainly because, by then, they'll be different people. When you are this young, a year is a long time, a significant fraction of who you are or are trying to be.

As he turns away for the last time, Alan's hand feels for his groin. Time has helped him heal, and the tenderness exists largely as a memory now, but the need to touch is instinctive, because an ache has thickened the pit of his

stomach, a sudden nauseous bloom, not yet overpowering but which may well grow to be.

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