

THE GIRLS

A NOVEL



EMMA CLINE



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

THE GIRLS

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Cline, Emma.

The girls: a novel / Emma Cline.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8129-9860-3

ebook ISBN 978-0-8129-9861-0

1 Teenage girls—Fiction. 2. Communal living—California—Fiction. 3. Nineteen sixties—Fiction. 4. Counterculture—Fiction. I. Title. PS3603.L547G58 2015 813'.6—dc23 2015012714

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

8 9 7

Book design by Liz Cosgrove

I LOOKED UP because of the laughter, and kept looking because of the girls.

I noticed their hair first, long and uncombed. Then their jewelry catching the sun. The three of them were far enough away that I saw only the periphery of their features, but it didn't matter—I knew they were different from everyone else in the park. Families milling in a vague line, waiting for sausages and burgers from the open grill. Women in checked blouses scooting into their boyfriends' sides, kids tossing eucalyptus buttons at the feral-looking chickens that overran the strip. These long-haired girls seemed to glide above all that was happening around them, tragic and separate. Like royalty in exile.

I studied the girls with a shameless, blatant gape: it

didn't seem possible that they might look over and notice me. My hamburger was forgotten in my lap, the breeze blowing in minnow stink from the river. It was an age when I'd immediately scan and rank other girls, keeping up a constant tally of how I fell short, and I saw right away that the black-haired one was the prettiest. I had expected this, even before I'd been able to make out their faces. There was a suggestion of otherworldliness hovering around her, a dirty smock dress barely covering her ass. She was flanked by a skinny redhead and an older girl, dressed with the same shabby afterthought. As if dredged from a lake. All their cheap rings like a second set of knuckles. They were messing with an uneasy threshold, prettiness and ugliness at the same time, and a ripple of awareness followed them through the park. Mothers glancing around for their children, moved by some feeling they couldn't name. Women reaching for their boyfriends' hands. The sun spiked through the trees, like always—the drowsy willows, the hot wind gusting over the picnic blankets—but the familiarity of the day was disturbed by the path the girls cut across the regular world. Sleek and thoughtless as sharks breaching the water.

PART ONE

IT BEGINS WITH THE FORD idling up the narrow drive, the sweet drone of honeysuckle thickening the August air. The girls in the backseat holding hands, the car windows down to let in the seep of night. The radio playing until the driver, suddenly jittery, snaps it off.

They scale the gate, still strung with Christmas lights. Encountering, first, the dumb quiet of the caretaker's cottage; the caretaker taking an evening nap on the couch, his bare feet tucked side by side like loaves. His girlfriend in the bathroom, wiping away the hazy crescents of eye makeup.

Then the main house, where they startle the woman reading in the guest bedroom. The glass of water quivering on the nightstand, the damp cotton of her under-

pants. Her five-year-old son by her side, murmuring cryptic nonsense to fight sleep.

They herd everyone into the living room. The moment the frightened people understand the sweet dailiness of their lives—the swallow of morning orange juice, the tilting curve taken on a bicycle—is already gone. Their faces change like a shutter opening; the unlocking behind the eyes.

I had imagined that night so often. The dark mountain road, the sunless sea. A woman felled on the night lawn. And though the details had receded over the years, grown their second and third skins, when I heard the lock jamming open near midnight, it was my first thought.

The stranger at the door.

I waited for the sound to reveal its source. A neighbor's kid bumping a trash can onto the sidewalk. A deer thrashing through the brush. That's all it could be, I told myself, this far-off rattle in the other part of the house, and I tried to picture how harmless the space would seem again in daylight, how cool and beyond danger.

But the noise went on, passing starkly into real life. There was now laughter in the other room. Voices. The pressurized *swish* of the refrigerator. I trawled for explanations but kept catching on the worst thought. After everything, this was how it would end. Trapped in someone else's house, among the facts and habits of someone else's life. My bare legs, jotted with varicose veins—how weak

I'd appear when they came for me, a middle-aged woman scrabbling for the corners.

I lay in bed, my breath shallow as I stared at the closed door. Waiting for the intruders, the horrors I imagined taking human shape and populating the room—there would be no heroics, I understood. Just the dull terror, the physical pain that would have to be suffered through. I wouldn't try to run.

I only got out of bed after I heard the girl. Her voice was high and innocuous. Though it shouldn't have been comforting—Suzanne and the others had been girls, and that hadn't helped anybody.

~~I was staying in a borrowed house. The dark maritime cypress packed tight outside the window, the twitch of salt air. I ate in the blunt way I had as a child—a glut of spaghetti, mossed with cheese. The nothing jump of soda in my throat. I watered Dan's plants once a week, ferrying each one to the bathtub, running the pot under the faucet until the soil burbled with wet. More than once I'd showered with a litter of dead leaves in the tub.~~

~~The inheritance that had been the leftovers of my grandmother's movies—hours of her smiling her hawkish smile on film, her tidy cap of curls—I'd spent ten years ago. I tended to the in-between spaces of other people's existences, working as a live-in aide. Cultivating a gen-~~

"Where's Russell?" I asked Suzanne. She was stoned, like me, her black hair loose. Someone had given her a shrub rose, half-wilted, and she was trying to knot it in her hair.

"He'll be here," she said. "It doesn't really start till he's here."

She brushed some ash off my dress and the gesture stirred me.

"There's our little doll," Donna cooed when she saw me. She had a tinfoil crown on her head that kept falling off. She'd drawn an Egyptian pattern on her hands and freckled arms with kohl before clearly losing interest—it was all over her fingers, smeared on her dress, along her jaw. Guy swerved, avoiding her hands.

"She's our sacrifice," Donna told him, her words already careening around. "Our solstice offering."

Guy smiled at me, his teeth stained from wine.

They burned a car that night in celebration, and the flames were hot and jumpy and I laughed out loud, for no reason—the hills were so dark against the sky and no one from my real life knew where I was and it was the *solstice*, and who cared if it wasn't actually the solstice? I had distant thoughts of my mother, houndish nips of worry, but she'd assume I was at Connie's. Where else would I be? She couldn't conceive of this kind of place even existing, and even if she could, even if by some miracle she showed up, she wouldn't be able to recognize me. Suzanne's dress

was too big, and it often slipped off my shoulders, but pretty soon I wasn't as quick to pull the sleeves back up. I liked the exposure, the way I could pretend I didn't care, and how I actually started not to care, even when I accidentally flashed most of a breast as I hitched up the sleeves. Some stunned, blissed-out boy—a painted crescent moon on his face—grinned at me like I'd always been there among them.

The feast was not a feast at all. Bloated cream puffs sweating in a bowl until someone fed them to the dogs. A plastic container of Cool Whip, green beans boiled to structureless gray, augmented by the winnings of some dumpster. Twelve forks clattered in a giant pot—everyone took turns scooping out a watery vegetal pabulum, the mash of potatoes and ketchup and onion soup packets. There was a single watermelon, rind patterned like a snake, but no one could find a knife. Finally Guy cracked it open violently on the corner of a table. The kids descended on the pulpy mess like rats.

It was nothing like the feast I'd been imagining. The distance made me feel a little sad. But it was only sad in the old world, I reminded myself, where people stayed cowed by the bitter medicine of their lives. Where money kept everyone slaves, where they buttoned their shirts up to the neck, ~~strangling any love they had inside themselves~~.

How often I replayed this moment again and again, until it gained a meaningful pitch: when Suzanne nudged me

so I knew the man walking toward the fire was Russell. My first thought was shock—he'd looked young as he approached, but then I saw he was at least a decade older than Suzanne. Maybe even as old as my mother. Dressed in dirty Wranglers and a buckskin shirt, though his feet were bare—how strange that was, how they all walked barefoot through the weeds and the dog shit as if nothing were there. A girl got to her knees beside him, touching his leg. It took me a moment to remember the girl's name—my brain was sludgy from the drugs—but then I had it, Helen, the girl from the bus with her pigtails, her baby voice. Helen smiled up at him, enacting some ritual I didn't understand.

I knew Helen had sex with this man. Suzanne did, too. I experimented with that thought, imagining the man hunched over Suzanne's milky body. Closing his hand on her breast. I knew only how to dream about boys like Peter, the unformed muscles under their skin, the patchy hair they tended along their jaws. Maybe I would sleep with Russell. I tried on the thought. Sex was still colored by the girls in my father's magazines, everything glossy and dry. About beholding. The people at the ranch seemed beyond that, loving one another indiscriminately, with the purity and optimism of children.

The man held up his hands and boomed out a greeting: the group surged and twitched like a Greek chorus. At moments like that, I could believe Russell was already famous. He seemed to swim through a denser atmosphere than the rest of us. He walked among the group, giving

benedictions: a hand on a shoulder, a word whispered in an ear. The party was still going, but everyone was now aimed at him, their faces turned expectantly, as if following the arc of the sun. When Russell reached Suzanne and me, he stopped and looked in my eyes.

"You're here," he said. Like he'd been waiting for me. Like I was late.

I'd never heard another voice like his—full and slow, never hesitating. His fingers pressed into my back in a not unpleasant way. He wasn't much taller than me, but he was strong and compact, pressurized. The hair haloed around his head was coarsened by oil and dirt into a boggly mass. His eyes didn't seem to water, or waver, or flick away. The way the girls had spoken of him finally made sense. How he took me in, like he wanted to see all the way through.

"Eve," Russell said when Suzanne introduced me. "The first woman."

I was nervous I'd say the wrong thing, expose the error of my presence. "It's Evelyn, really."

"Names are important, aren't they?" Russell said. "And I don't see any snake in you."

Even this mild approval relieved me.

"What do you think of our solstice celebration, Evie?" he said. "Our spot?"

All the while his hand was pulsing a message on my back I couldn't decode. I slivered a glance at Suzanne, aware that the sky had darkened without me noticing, the

night gliding deeper. I felt drowsy from the fire and the dope. I hadn't eaten and there was an empty throb in my stomach. Was he saying my name a lot? I couldn't tell. Suzanne's whole body was directed at Russell, her hand moving uneasy in her hair.

I told Russell I liked it here. Other meaningless, nervous remarks, but even so, he was getting other information from me. And I never did lose that feeling. Even after. That Russell could read my thoughts as easily as taking a book from a shelf.

When I smiled, he tilted my chin up with his hand. "You're an actress," he said. His eyes were like hot oil, and I let myself feel like Suzanne, the kind of girl a man would startle at, would want to touch. "Yeah, that's it. I see it. You gotta be standing on a cliff and looking out to sea."

I told him I wasn't an actress, but my grandmother was.

"Right on," he said. As soon as I said her name, he was even more attentive. "I picked that up right off. You look like her."

Later I'd read about how Russell sought the famous and semifamous and hangers-on, people he could court and wring for resources, whose cars he could borrow and houses he could live in. How pleased he must have been at my arrival, not even needing to be coaxed. Russell reached out to draw Suzanne closer. When I caught her eye, she seemed to retreat. I hadn't thought, until that moment, that she might be nervous about me and Russell. A new

feeling of power flexed within me, a quick tightening of ribbon so unfamiliar I didn't recognize it.

"And you'll be in charge of our Evie," Russell said to Suzanne. "Won't you?"

Neither looked at me. The air between them crisscrossed with symbols. Russell held my hand for a moment, his eyes avalanching over me.

"Later, Evie," he said.

Then a few whispered words to Suzanne. She rejoined me with a new air of briskness.

"Russell says you can stick around, if you want," she said.

I felt how energized she was by seeing Russell. Alert with renewed authority, studying me as she spoke. I didn't know if the jump I felt was fear or interest. My grandmother had told me about getting movie roles—how quickly she was plucked from a group. "That's the difference," she'd told me. "All the other girls thought the director was making the choice. But it was really me telling the director, in my secret way, that the part was mine."

I wanted that—a sourceless, toneless wave carried from me to Russell. To Suzanne, to all of them. I wanted this world without end.

The night began to show ragged edges. Roos was naked from the waist up, her heavy breasts flushed from the heat. Falling into long silences. A black dog trotted into

the darkness. Suzanne had disappeared to find more grass. I kept searching for her, but I'd get distracted by the flash and shuffle, the strangers who danced by and smiled at me with blunt kindness.

Little things should have upset me. Some girl burned herself, raising a ripple of skin along her arm, and stared down at the scorch with idle curiosity. The outhouse with its shit stench and cryptic drawings, walls papered in pages torn from porno mags. Guy describing the warm entrails of the pigs he'd gutted on his parents' farm in Kansas.

"They knew what was coming," he said to a rapt audience. "They'd smile when I brought food and flip out when I had the knife."

He adjusted his big belt buckle, cackling something I couldn't hear. But it was the solstice, I explained to myself, pagan mutterings, and whatever disturbance I felt was just a failure to understand the place. And there was so much else to notice and favor—the silly music from the jukebox. The silver guitar that caught the light, the melted Cool Whip dripping from someone's finger. The numinous and fanatic faces of the others.

Time was confusing on the ranch: there were no clocks, no watches, and hours or minutes seemed arbitrary, whole days pouring into nothing. I don't know how much time passed. How long I was waiting for Suzanne to return before I heard his voice. Right next to my ear, whispering my name.

"Evie."

I turned, and there he was. I twisted with happiness: Russell had remembered me, he'd found me in the crowd. Had maybe even been looking for me. He took my hand in his, working the palm, my fingers. I was beaming, indeterminate; I wanted to love everything.

The trailer he brought me to was larger than any of the other rooms, the bed covered with a shaggy blanket that I'd realize later was actually a fur coat. It was the only nice thing in the room—the floor matted with clothes, empty cans of soda and beer glinting among the detritus. A peculiar smell in the air, a cut of fermentation. I was being willfully naive, I suppose, pretending like I didn't know what was happening. But part of me really didn't. Or didn't fully dwell on the facts: it was suddenly difficult to remember how I'd gotten there. That lurching bus ride, the cheap sugar of the wine. Where had I left my bike?

Russell was watching me intently. Tilting his head when I looked away, forcing me to catch his eyes. He brushed my hair behind my ear, letting his fingers fall to my neck. His fingernails uncut so I felt the ridge of them.

I laughed, but it was uneasy. "Is Suzanne gonna be here soon?" I said.

He'd told me, back at the fire, that Suzanne was coming, too, though maybe that was only something I wished.

"Suzanne's just fine," Russell said. "I wanna talk about you right now, Evie."

My thoughts slowed to the pace of drifting snow. Russell spoke slowly and with seriousness, but he made me feel as though he had been waiting all night for the chance to hear what I had to say. How different this was from Connie's bedroom, listening to records from some other world we'd never be a part of, songs that just reinforced our own static misery. Peter seemed drained to me, too. Peter, who was just a boy, who ate oleo on white bread for dinner. This was real, Russell's gaze, and the flattered sickness in me was so pleasurable, I could barely keep hold of it.

"Shy Evie," he said. Smiling. "You're a smart girl. You see a lot with those eyes, don't you?"

He thought I was smart. I grabbed on to it like proof. I wasn't lost. I could hear the party outside. A fly buzzed in the corner, hitting the walls of the trailer.

"I'm like you," Russell went on. "I was so smart when I was young, so smart that of course they told me I was dumb." He let out a fractured laugh. "They taught me the word *dumb*. They taught me those words, then they told me that's what I was." When Russell smiled, his face soaked with a joy that seemed foreign to me. I knew I'd never felt that good. Even as a child I'd been unhappy—I saw, suddenly, how obvious that was.

As he talked, I hugged myself with my arms. It all started making sense to me, what Russell was saying, in the drippy way things could make sense. How drugs patchworked simple, banal thoughts into phrases that seemed filled with importance. My glitchy adolescent

brain was desperate for causalities, for conspiracies that drenched every word, every gesture, with meaning. I wanted Russell to be a genius.

"There's something in you," he said. "Some part that's real sad. And you know what? That really makes me sad. They've tried to ruin this beautiful, special girl. They've made her sad. Just because they are."

I felt the press of tears.

"But they didn't ruin you, Evie. 'Cause here you are. Our special Evie. And you can let all that old shit float away."

He sat back on the mattress with the dirty soles of his bare feet on the fur coat, a strange calm in his face. He would wait as long as it took.

I don't remember what I said at that point, just that I chattered nervously. School, Connie, the hollow nonsense of a young girl. My gaze slid around the trailer, fingers nipping at the fabric of Suzanne's dress. Eyes courting the fleur-de-lis pattern of the filthy bedspread. I remember that Russell smiled, patiently, waiting for me to lose energy. And I did. The trailer silent except for my own breathing and Russell shifting on the mattress.

"I can help you," he said. "But you have to want it."

His eyes fixed on mine.

"Do you want it, Evie?"

The words slit with scientific desire.

"You'll like this," Russell murmured. Opening his arms to me. "Come here."

I edged toward him, sitting on the mattress. Strug-

gling to complete the full circuit of comprehension. I knew it was coming, but it still surprised me. How he took down his pants, exposing his short, hairy legs, his penis in his fist. The hesitant catch in my gaze—he watched me watching him.

"Look at me," he said. His voice was smooth, even while his hand worked furiously. "Evie," he said, "Evie."

The undercooked look of his dick, clutched in his hand: I wondered where Suzanne was. My throat tightened. It confused me at first, that it was all Russell wanted. To stroke himself. I sat there, trying to impose sense on the situation. I transmuted Russell's behavior into proof of his good intentions. Russell was just trying to be close, to break down my hang-ups from the old world.

"We can make each other feel good," he said. "You don't have to be sad."

I flinched when he pushed my head toward his lap. A singe of clumsy fear filled me. He was good at not seeming angry when I reared away. The indulgent look he gave me, like I was a skittish horse.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Evie." Holding out his hand again. The strobe of my heart going fast. "I just want to be close to you. And don't you want me to feel good? I want you to feel good."

When he came, he gasped, wetly. The salt damp of semen in my mouth, the alarming swell. He held me there, bucking. How had I gotten here, in the trailer, found myself in the dark woods without any crumbs to

follow home, but then Russell's hands were in my hair, and his arms were around me, pulling me up, and he said my name with intention and surety so it sounded strange to me, but smooth, too, valuable, like some other, better, Evie. Was I supposed to cry? I didn't know. I was crowded with idiot trivia. A red sweater I had lent Connie and never gotten back. Whether Suzanne was looking for me or not. A curious thrill behind my eyes.

Russell handed me a bottle of Coke. The soda was tepid and flat, but I drank the whole thing. As intoxicating as champagne.

I experienced the whole night as fated, me as the center of a singular drama. But Russell had put me through a series of ritual tests. Perfected over the years that he had worked for a religious organization near Ukiah, a center that gave away food, found shelter and jobs. Attracting the thin, harried girls with partial college degrees and neglectful parents, girls with hellish bosses and dreams of nose jobs. His bread and butter. The time he spent at the center's outpost in San Francisco in the old fire station. Collecting his followers. Already he'd become an expert in female sadness—a particular slump in the shoulders, a nervous rash. A subservient lilt at the end of sentences, eyelashes gone soggy from crying. Russell did the same thing to me that he did to those girls. Little tests, first. A touch on my back, a pulse of my hand. Little ways of breaking down boundaries. And how quickly he'd

ramped it up, easing his pants to his knees. An act, I thought, calibrated to comfort young girls who were glad, at least, that it wasn't sex. Who could stay fully dressed the whole time, as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening.

But maybe the strangest part—I liked it, too.

I floated through the party in a stunned hush. The air on my skin insistent, my armpits sliding with sweat. It had happened—I had to keep telling myself so. I assumed everyone would see it on me. An obvious aura of sex. I wasn't anxious anymore, wasn't roaming the party squeezed by nervous need, the certainty that there was a hidden room I wasn't allowed access to—that worry had been satisfied, and I took dreamy steps, looked back into passing faces with a smile that asked nothing.

When I saw Guy, tapping a pack of cigarettes, I stopped without hesitation.

"Can I have one?"

He grinned at me. "The girl wants a cigarette, she shall have her cigarette." He held it to my mouth and I hoped people were watching.

I finally found Suzanne in a group near the fire. When she caught my eye, she gave me an odd, airless smile. I'm sure she recognized the inward shift you sometimes see in young girls, newly sexed. It's that pride, I think, a solemnity. I wanted her to know. Suzanne was giddy from something, I could tell. Not alcohol. Something else, her

pupils seeming to eat the iris, a flush lacing up her neck like a trippy Victorian collar.

Maybe Suzanne felt some hidden disappointment when the game fulfilled itself, when she saw that I'd gone with Russell, after all. But maybe she'd expected it. The car was still smoldering, the noise of the party cutting up the darkness. I felt the night churn in me like a wheel.

"When's the car gonna stop burning?" I said.

I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her, the air soft between us.

"Jesus, I don't know," she said. "Morning?"

In the flicker, my arms and hands in front of me looked scaly and reptilian, and I welcomed the distorted vision of my body. I heard the brood of a motorcycle ignition, someone's wicked hoot—they'd thrown a box spring in the fire, and the flames soared and deepened.

"You can crash in my room if you want," Suzanne said. Her voice gave away nothing. "I don't care. But you have to actually be here, if you're going to be here. Get it?"

Suzanne was asking me something else. Like those fairy tales where goblins can enter a house only if invited by its inhabitants. The moment of crossing the threshold, the careful way Suzanne constructed her statements—she wanted me to say it. And I nodded, and said I understood. Though I couldn't understand, not really. I was wearing a dress that didn't belong to me in a place I had never been, and I couldn't see much farther than that. The possibility that my life was hovering on the brink of a new and permanent happiness. I thought of Connie

later, that she'd gotten a bad feeling and stayed behind but I don't know if that is true. Did Russell hold her back, sensing a stubborn virtue in her that might yoke her to the real world? Roos with Nico, a child of her own. Roos, who did become the main witness against the others, taking the stand in a white dress with her hair parted straight down the middle.

I don't know if Suzanne told Russell I was coming—no one ever answered that question.

The car radio was on, playing the laughably foreign soundtrack to other people's lives. Other people who were getting ready to sleep, mothers who were scraping the last shreds of chicken dinner into the garbage. Helen was jawing away about a whale beaching down in Pismo and did we think it was true that it was a sign a big earthquake was gonna happen? Getting up on her knees then, like the idea thrilled her.

"We'd have to go to the desert," she said. No one was taking her bait; a hush had fallen over the car. Donna muttered something, and Helen set her jaw.

"Can you open the window?" Suzanne said.

"I'm cold," Helen whined in her baby voice.

"Come on," Suzanne said, pounding the back of the seat. "I'm fucking melting."

Helen rolled the window down and the car filled with air, flavored with exhaust. The salt of the nearby ocean.

And there I was among them. Russell had changed, things had soured, but I was with Suzanne. Her presence corralled any stray worries. Like the child who believes

that her mother's bedtime vigil will ward off monsters. The child who cannot decipher that her mother might be frightened, too. The mother who understands she can do nothing for protection except offer up her own weak body in exchange.

Maybe some part of me had known where things were headed, a sunken glimmer in the murk: maybe I had a sense of the possible trajectory and went along anyway. Later that summer, and at various points throughout my life, I would sift through the grain of that night, feeling blindly.

All Suzanne said was that we were paying Mitch a visit. Her words were spiked with a cruelty I hadn't heard before, but even so, this was the furthest my mind ranged: we were going to do what we'd done at the Dutton house. We'd perform an unsettling psychic interruption so Mitch would have to be afraid, just for a minute, would have to reorder the world anew. Good—Suzanne's hatred for him allowed and inflamed my own. Mitch, with his fat, probing fingers, the halting, meaningless chatter he kept up while looking us over. As if his mundane words would fool us, keep us from noticing how his glance dripped with filth. I wanted him to feel weak. We would occupy Mitch's house like tricky spirits from another realm.

Because I did feel that, it's true. A sense that something united all of us in the car, the cool whiff of other worlds on our skin and hair. But I never thought, even

once, that the other world might be death. I wouldn't really believe it until the news gathered its stark momentum. After which, of course, the presence of death seemed to color everything, like an odorless mist that filled the car and pressed against the windows, a mist we inhaled and exhaled and that shaped every word we spoke.

We had not gone very far, maybe twenty minutes from the ranch, Guy easing the car along the tight dark curves of the hills, emerging into the long empty stretches of the flat land and picking up speed. The stands of eucalyptus we passed, the chill of fog beyond the window.

My alertness held everything in precise amber. The radio, the shuffle of bodies, Suzanne's face in profile. This is what they had all the time, I imagined, this net of mutual presence like something too near to identify. Just a sense of being buoyed along the fraternal rush, the belating.

Suzanne rested her hand on the seat between us. The familiar sight stirred me, remembering how she'd grabbed for me in Mitch's bed. The spotty surface of her nails, brittle from poor diet.

I was sick with foolish hope, believing I would ever stay in the blessed space of her attention. I tried to reach for her hand. A tap of her palm, like I had a note to pass. Suzanne startled a little and jarred from a haze I had not noticed until it broke.

"What?" she snapped.

My face dropped all ability to costume itself. Suzanne must have seen the needy swarm of love. Must have taken the measure, like a stone dropped in a well—but there was no sound marking the end. Her eyes went dull.

"Stop the car," Suzanne said.

Guy kept driving.

"Pull over," Suzanne said. Guy glanced back at us, then pulled into the shoulder of the right lane.

"What's the matter—," I said, but Suzanne cut me off.

"Get out," she said, opening the door. Moving too fast for me to stop her, the reel snapping ahead, the sound lagging behind.

"Come on," I said, trying to sound bright with the joke. Suzanne was already out of the car, waiting for me to leave. She wasn't joking.

"But there's nothing here," I said, circling a desperate look at the highway. Suzanne was shifting, impatient. I glanced to the others for help. Their faces were lit by the dome light, leaching their features so they seemed as cold and inhuman as bronze figures. Donna looked away, but Helen watched me with a medical curiosity. Guy shifted in the driver's seat, adjusting the mirror. Helen said something under her breath—Donna shushed her.

"Suzanne," I said, "please," the powerless tilt in my voice.

She said nothing. When I finally shuffled along the seat and got out, Suzanne didn't even hesitate. Ducking back inside the car and closing the door, the dome light snapping off and returning them to darkness.

And then they drove away.

I was alone, I understood, and even as I tended some naïve wish—they would return, it was only a joke, Suzanne would never leave me like that, not really—I knew that I had been tossed aside. I could only zoom away, to hover up somewhere by the tree line, looking down on a girl standing alone in the dark. Nobody I knew.

15

There were all kinds of rumors those first days. Howard Smith reported, erroneously, that Mitch Lewis had been killed, though this would be corrected more swiftly than the other rumors. David Brinkley reported six victims had been cut up and shot and left on the lawn. Then the number was amended to four people. Brinkley was the first to claim the presence of hoods and nooses and Satanic symbols, a confusion that started because of the heart on the wall of the living room. Drawn with the corner of a towel, soaked in the mother's blood.

The mix-up made sense—of course they'd read a ghoulish meaning in the shape, assume some cryptic, doomy scrawl. It was easier to imagine it was the leftover of a black mass than believe the actual truth: it was

image of Suzanne in my mind. Suzanne Parker. The atoms reorganizing themselves the first time I'd seen her in the park. How her mouth had smiled into mine.

No one had ever looked at me before Suzanne, not really, so she had become my definition. Her gaze softening my center so easily that even photographs of her seemed aimed at me, ignited with private meaning. It was different from Russell, the way she looked at me, because it contained him, too: it made him and everyone else smaller. We had been with the men, we had let them do what they wanted. But they would never know the parts of ourselves that we hid from them—they would never sense the lack or even know there was something more they should be looking for.

Suzanne was not a good person. I understood this. But I held the actual knowledge away from myself. How the coroner said the ring and pinky fingers of Linda's left hand had been severed because she had tried to protect her face.

Suzanne seemed to look at me as if there could be some explanation, but then a slight movement behind the shrouded windshield of the bus caught her attention—even then, she was alert to Russell's every shift—and a businesslike air came over her.

"Okay," she said, urged by the tick of an unseen clock. "I'm taking off." I had almost wanted a threat. Some indication that she might return, that I should fear her or could draw her back with the right combination of words.

I only ever saw her again in photographs and news reports. Still. I could never imagine her absence as permanent. Suzanne and the others would always exist for me; I believed that they would never die. That they would hover forever in the background of ordinary life, circling the highways and edging the parks. Moved by a force that would never cease or slow.

Suzanne had shrugged a little, that day, before walking down the grassy slope and disappearing into the bus. The queer reminder in her smile. Like we had a meeting, she and I, at some appointed time and place, and she knew I would forget.

I wanted to believe Suzanne kicked me out of the car because she'd seen a difference between us. That it was obvious to her that I could not kill anyone, Suzanne still lucid enough to understand that she was the reason I was in the car. She wanted to protect me from what was going to happen. That was the easy explanation.

But there was a complicating fact.

The hatred she must have felt to do what she'd done, to slam the knife over and over again like she was trying to rid herself of a frenzied sickness: hatred like that was not unfamiliar to me.

Hatred was easy. The permutations constant over the years: a stranger at a fair who palmed my crotch through my shorts. A man on the sidewalk who lunged at me,

then laughed when I flinched. The night an older man took me to a fancy restaurant when I wasn't even old enough to like oysters. Not yet twenty. The owner joined our table, and so did a famous filmmaker. The men fell into a heated discussion with no entry point for me: I fidgeted with my heavy cloth napkin, drank water. Staring at the wall.

"Eat your vegetables," the filmmaker suddenly snapped at me. "You're a growing girl."

The filmmaker wanted me to know what I already knew: I had no power. He saw my need and used it against me.

My hatred for him was immediate. Like the first swallow of milk that's already gone off—rot straining the nostrils, flooding the entire skull. The filmmaker laughed at me, and so did the others, the older man who would later place my hand on his dick while he drove me home.

None of this was rare. Things like this happened hundreds of times. Maybe more. The hatred that vibrated beneath the surface of my girl's face—I think Suzanne recognized it. Of course my hand would anticipate the weight of a knife. The particular give of a human body. There was so much to destroy.

Suzanne stopped me from doing what I might be capable of. And so she set me loose into the world like an avatar for the girl she would not be. She would never go to boarding school, but I still could, and she sent me spinning from her like a messenger for her alternate self. Suzanne gave me that: the poster of Hawaii on the wall, the

beach and blue sky like the lowest common denominator of fantasy. The chance to attend poetry class, to leave bags of laundry outside my door and eat streaks on parents' visiting days, sopping with salt and blood.

It was a gift. What did I do with it? Life didn't accumulate as I'd once imagined. I graduated from boarding school, two years of college. Persisted through the blank decade in Los Angeles. I buried first my mother, then my father. His hair gone wispy as a child's. I paid bills and bought groceries and got my eyes checked while the days crumbled away like debris from a cliff face. Life a continuous backing away from the edge.

There were moments of forgetting. The summer I had visited Jessamine in Seattle after she had her first child—when I saw her waiting at the curb with her hair tucked into her coat, the years unknot themselves and I felt, for a moment, the sweet and blameless girl I had once been. The year with the man from Oregon, our shared kitchen hung with houseplants and Indian blankets on the seats of our car, covering the rips. We ate cold pita with peanut butter and walked in the wet green. Camping in the hills around Hot Springs Canyon, far down the coast, near a group who knew all the words to *The People's Song Book*. A sun-hot rock where we lay, drying from the lake, our bodies leaving behind a conjoined blur.

But the absence opened up again. I was almost a wife but lost the man. I was almost recognizable as a friend. And then I wasn't. The nights when I flicked off the bedside lamp and found myself in the heedless, lonely dark.

The times I thought, with a horrified twist, that none of this was a gift. Suzanne got the redemption that followed a conviction, the prison Bible groups and prime-time interviews and a mail-in college degree. I got the snuffed-out story of the bystander, a fugitive without a crime, half hoping and half terrified that no one was ever coming for me.

It was Helen, in the end, who ended up talking. She was only eighteen, still desirous of attention—I'm surprised they stayed out of jail as long as they did. Helen had been picked up in Bakersfield for using a stolen credit card. Just a week in a county jail and they would have let her go, but she couldn't help bragging to her cellmate. The coin-operated television in the common room showing a bulletin of the ongoing murder investigation.

"The house is way bigger than it looks in those pictures," Helen said, according to her cellmate. I can see Helen: nonchalant, thrusting her chin forward. Her cellmate must have ignored her at first. Rolling her eyes at the girlish bluster. But then Helen kept going, and suddenly the woman was listening closely, calculating reward money, a reduced sentence. Urging the girl to tell her more, to keep talking. Helen was probably flattered by the attention, unspooling the whole mess. Maybe even exaggerating, drawing out the haunted spaces between words as in the incantation of a ghost story at a sleepover. We all want to be seen.

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All of them would be arrested by the end of December. Russell, Suzanne, Donna, Guy, the others. The police descending on their tent encampment in Panamint Springs: torn flannel sleeping bags and blue nylon tarps, the dead ash of the campfire. Russell bolted when they came, as if he could outrun a whole squad of officers. The headlights of the police cruisers glowing in the bleached pink of morning. How pitiful, the immediacy of Russell's capture, forced to kneel in the scrub grass with his hands on his head. Guy handcuffed, stunned to discover there were limitations to the bravado that had carried him that far. The little kids were herded onto the Social Services van, wrapped in blankets, and handed cold cheese sandwiches. Their bellies distended and scalps boiling with lice. The authorities didn't know who had done what, not yet, so Suzanne was just one of the skinny jumble of girls. Girls who spit in the dirt like rabid dogs and went limp when the police tried to handcuff them. There was a demented dignity to their resistance—none of them had run. Even at the end, the girls had been stronger than Russell.

It would snow in Carmel that same week, the barest slip of white. Class was canceled, frost crunching thinly under our shoes as we tromped across the quad in our jean jackets. It seemed like the last morning on earth, and we peered into the gray sky as if more of the miracle were coming, though it all melted into a mess in less than an hour.