

*Bad Kids*

Unless you counted the nights when Hans woke up screaming *Thelicethelicethefuckinglice!!*, nothing eventful happened at the home until reasonably late in the season, since all you had to do was call out *DUDE protect your eyes* and Hans would roll over, a touch put-off, to face the molding wall. Yvon might have argued that his proposal for the implementation of an independent-study Marquis de Sade course was something to be noted, but we all knew that this was a shot in the dark, being that the raunchiest book taught in the last ten years remained the venerable Ramona and Beezus.

“Poor Laura,” Bird sighed when we saw Yvon float, slump-shouldered, out of his therapist’s office. “Always had dreams too big for the prairie.” And we all had to bite back our laughter.

We knew better than to talk “deep” at the house, for fear of being overheard by one of the wandering patrons. If Carol-Anne or Basil, fresh from the chatty new school of juvenile psychotherapy, caught wind of the fact that we talked of more than just stolen cars and bad k-hole, they’d squirrel us off to their offices to analyze our feelings and watch us draw nude family portraits faster than we could splutter, “Crack!” The dining-hall and rec room were heavily monitored, as was the barn where we checked off our long list of chores and the downstairs bathroom where we evaded them. I’d spent many happy hours locked in the loo, sometimes with matches I’d filched from the kitchen, and if I was lucky, a contraband fork. Razors were a laughable wet-dream; Janey and me held contests as to whose pit-hair grew fastest. Once, in the beginning, I sent my sister a letter, begging her to send me a pack of disposables because I’d fallen for some bilingual pyro, but either she saw through my lie or was not quite as obliquely feminine as I’d had been hoping. Either way, all she sent were magazines and M&Ms and a hand-written postcard dripping with hearts. With the magazines flipped open on the floor and candies littering the sink, I whiled away the afternoons I was supposed to spend “reflecting” in the endless seas of corn. I sought repentance in the zits I popped. I spelled *consequence* along my upper thighs, loath was I to lose my steadiness of hand. I stared into a starlet’s eyes and held my breath until my face was as delicately blue. I plucked out my leg-hairs, one by one, with a pair of nylons crammed into my mouth, until noble Hans, the only one to ever reach the end of his list, pounded on the door, or Janey sauntered in and helped me mark in hot-pink Sharpie all the places where my scars had been and now, beneath god-fearing Midwest sunshine, had begun to fade.

I had to hand it to Basil and co., they’d certainly made our lives simpler. We fed the pigs and wrote letters to the people we’d wronged. We ate prison-grade meals and watched G-rated movies on Fridays. Our sole responsibility was to reflect on our actions. We woke up early to stack hay, but we still stayed up late swapping stories at night, the only thing this place was really good for anyway. Janey and I would snuggle under the covers of her bed, which was bigger than everyone else’s due to her self-proclaimed scoliosis, while Hans and Bird sprawled at the foot and Yvon sat on the floor.

“What’s the worst thing that you ever did?” Janey was fond of asking us. My stories of intoxicated teenage angst always paled in comparison to, say, Bird’s brief affair with the Chilean student-teacher in Shakespeare’s *Mystique*. “There ain’t no one who can say I never took an advanced class,” he said, smirking in spite of himself. He was using pink nail polish to paint a cock in an Elizabethan ruff on Janey’s toenail. “The poor sap sincerely believed that Shakespeare was a chick.”

“I lied about my name once,” Yvon said, gently banging his head back and forth against the bedpost. “I spray-painted this mural of Andrew Jackson with a Mohawk on the side of the

city-hall, and then tagged it with the name of my lab partner. I chickened out, and now that kid's a legend."

"That's not what she meant!" Hans, Bird, and I shouted. Janey tossed a glow-in-the-dark stress-ball at Yvon's head, but he dodged it with such indifferent grace that we loved him all over again.

In short, our days at the home were harmonious.

The courses were a joke and even Janey had straight A's, so for the most part the patrons just left us alone. We knew the humble eye-opened answers to the therapist's questions, the closets to get high in, and the quiet spots along the outskirts of the farm where we couldn't be found if we'd had a shit day. By November, we knew all the tricks in the bag. Just like Janey said, everything went smoothly, provided we never lingered too long beneath a fogbank near midnight and waited, all alone, for the moon to slide out, varnished by haze, and smolder blindly above us, feeling our spindly legs stick out from loose sweaters and knowing, so simply, that this was what death was, the crackling mystery of why do we look so damn comely when no one can see us? and the key is to keep plowing forward, dragging feet through the leaves, ambling homeward with frosty ambition and musical innards, determined *not* to start thinking of that boy in girl's blue jeans who burnt your CD's or the soft-bellied mothers who grieve for the outlook he gave you, via curt burning kisses or Eastern traditions, no no, that's no more, that's the moon in the morning, don't go scanning the sky for its effeminate ghost, you'll only fuck with your eyesight and space out on the favor you told Janey you'd do, that's not cool, so forget it—the flat yellow landscape promised forgiveness so long as we kept mincing forward and never slowed down to swat at the backs of our necks where the hair grew ever sparser and the wind felt offended. No one was afraid of tornadoes at the home; we lay in bed and dreamed instead of all the shit we'd buy once rebirth revved up our corpses and with spit-wet thumb daubed at huge gashes. God would surely favor me, I thought, due to my singular collection of raised and brain-white skin. My body was Ash Wednesday, of the sunlit, dreary, drawn-out kind. My friends paced about its sitting-room in blonde depravity, counting down the minutes with a tacit stir betwixt too-small pajamas and immortalizing Thursday, when we could bathe and fuck, and the whirling lumen of the earth was crudely reinstalled. Good God! We were his quintessential grubby children.

Leave it to Bird to overturn this dynamic. Moody little fuck that he was.

In trying to pin down an origin for our troubles (a mind-bending task when your life has been structured around being troubled) I remember the night we stole snifters of wine from the synagogue down the road and lay in the always-wet field of corn.

We were hidden from view and empowered by night. It had been a long day: three hours of corn-shucking followed by a seminar-cum-puppet-show on anger management concluded by what were called Redemption Stretches and the choice between introspective loom-time or vagina-themed group therapy. Hans belched to orient the stars more favorably above him and coerced us to sit in an Indian circle, knees touching knees in a thrilling mistake of weight shifted and guitar-heavy arms. It was Janey that began it all. She first plunged her hands down her shirt to adjust her bra (she was always doing something like that) and then proclaimed to the scattered, light-headed army in a voice at once cryptic and soothing as only a soprano can manage: "I wanna talk about, what are they called? I wanna talk about...dialectics. My brother sent me a pamphlet. Socrates, man. Philosophy."

No one there cared or knew much about dialectics, Janey included: we all knew she just wanted to talk about herself, and that was OK, because we all wanted the excuse to talk about ourselves and our problems once the time came, as we all knew it would, as we felt rising up like a glug in our bellies. Janey proceeded and we submerged ourselves gladly in the surf of her speech, letting her words rock sore bodies and dissolve friendly ties. We stretched out on the dirt

and drifted like vessels, listening as if accidentally to Janey's monologue and zealously snuggling into our own minds. Hans lay to my left, Bird to my right, Janey right across from me, and Yvon on his own some ten feet away.

"When I first came here, I think it was, well, three months ago, and let me tell you," she began, "I was a city slicker. Straight-up. I hated the corn and I hated the cold. I hated how flat everything was. I hated the sky which hung way too low. All I wanted was to hitchhike back home—right away! It didn't matter to me that I had nowhere to go. I just wanted to be back where I knew what was up."

We all *hmm*ed and raised our limp wrists in agreement. "All the townies thought I was such an anomaly." That was Bird, the surly bisexual. He rolled on his back and leered at the sky, black corduroys pinstriped with sweetgrass, clunky boots violating the cornstalks. "They were far too polite with me. Like at Farmer's Market. They slipped extra strawberries into my bag. They thought I didn't notice."

"So what?" Janey swiped at his triangular legs though they supported the moon and a whole host of stars. "Free is free, my friend."

Bird stared at her and didn't breathe. "It means they were afraid of me."

"Not me," Hans piped up. "I never thought you were strange." Hans had come from a small town to an even smaller one. He had thus been told all along that his big ideas were a burden. He had lots of other problems, Hans, but in tight moments he seemed most ashamed of his fanciful outlook, his outspoken dreams.

Bird blew him a kiss, extracted it straight from the depths of his scowl, which infected the gesture with unseemly tenderness. "Sorry to disappoint," he crowed. "Still, people back home didn't give a rat's ass. It took a lot more to stand out. I know people who dedicated their lives to the task. They did horrible things to themselves. But look, I remember them now. I'm keeping them alive, bringing them back to the boonies. I guess that means it worked."

Janey looked annoyed. "But I made peace with this place," she continued. "I struck a chord. Maybe I don't like the set-up, but I like the countryside. I like the isolation."

"You *like* it?" I peered into her face, a beautiful arrogant rose-colored mug. "I mean, liking the country is one thing. But don't you ever get lonely?" I pushed a hand through my hair and smacked Hans with my elbow. "I do." My voice was soft and loose with wine. "I spend eighty-percent of my time thinking about all of the people who I used to know."

Bird nodded. "Me too." He paused. "But I don't keep in touch with anyone. Sometimes I text my mom late at night and she responds with I Love You! every time." He laughed. "What's the point? I can just get Hans to tell me that."

Hans let loose a bawdy laugh. Janey didn't smile. I suddenly felt too vulnerable, spangled on the ground, and hurriedly sat up. "But isn't she curious?" I asked. "Doesn't she want to know what you're up to? How your new life is going?"

Hans flung a rotted husk at me, chuckling, "Oh you. The golden child."

Bird just shrugged. "She stopped caring about that a while ago. By the time I was twelve, it was clear that what I did on the weekends just couldn't be explained to her. When she asked about my friends, I always used the same words to describe them, words which didn't fit them, or anyone, at all. *Fun. Bright. Nice.* All she cares about now is if I eat right. So I send her a selfie and she's satisfied. *Bon appétit, mon fils!*" This struck everyone as funny since Bird was famously slender and maintained a diet of cornbread, coffee, and bootleg candy-bars. Even Yvon, in his corner, giggled a bit.

Janey stood, dusting the twigs from her skirt. No one else felt compelled to move. She coughed. "I'm going to go join Yvon in his corner now. I'm going to tickle him out of Nirvana." Horrified by the prospect, Yvon glanced up. It was times like these that we appreciated Janey. She smiled and settled back down on the ground. Yvon flushed amicably. "What can I say?" He

inched closer to the group and opened his hands. “If someone is gone, then they’ve left.”

“Oh bravo,” twittered Hans.

Yvon serenely went on. “The polite thing to do is to just let them go. It’s useless to try to catch up. One cannot be caught up. It’s a myth.”

I clapped my hands to my ears. “Yvon!”

“Astrid. Don’t gimme that,” he said simply. “It’s true.” He traced circles in the dirt with his finger which we all found ourselves tensely following. “If I didn’t let them wander out of my mind, I’d sit in a room all day long and torture myself with their image, trying to picture their day, just one single day, what they wore, what they said, how they smelled. And they would have nothing to picture me doing. How is that fair?”

No one knew how to respond. The silence bloomed grotesquely, shoving our bodies farther apart and clogging our throats much like wrath does, and with ringing gravity we found ourselves forced to look away: away from our friends and into the darkness, far drunker than we as the black shapes of cornstalks swaggered and whined. For one dizzy instant I vowed never to forgive Bird as the heat of his forearm pursued me, and then Hans, when he let out a vivacious yawn. I physically longed to be alone, but had not the strength to leave.

It was all on Janey now. She growled cheerfully and pinned her eyes on Yvon, whose most famous attribute was how he looked and acted the same in every situation. “Yvon...ever the life of the party, huh?”

He smiled and re-crossed his legs like a child. The corn lisped chilling invocations.

“Well,” Janey tried to sound casual, “I don’t know about Shaman Yvon here, but I for one won’t forget any of you. Maybe I haven’t dropped enough acid but you all seem real to me.” Everyone stirred and grinned in supreme discomfiture. She plowed on, “I know that June is far away. Hell, I’m counting down until Christmas break. But I still gotta admit, what little time I’ve spent at this dump with these dicks and their new-age psychobabble has been, oh, how would our Yvon say it? *Brightened* by your presence. Hah.”

She settled backwards into the dirt and sighed with tremulous relief. “It was hell at first, that’s undeniable. But as soon as I got to know you guys, everything went smoother. Getting to know y’all has been a real pleasure.”

Bird buried his face in his snifter—empty. Yvon kept on strumming his affable battles in spirit. Hans and I made eye contact over their heads and were silent. We were trying to decide whether or not what she’d said was the truth.

A few days later, I dreamt of the city I’d been born in and awoke earlier than the rest of the house. It was a bright October morning, though Indian Summer was long dead and we’d all be shivering beneath the sun in at least an hour’s time. I lay still, basking in the quiet and running fingers through my hair. Why did I chop it off, with Safety Scissors on my last evening at home? I mean, of course I still knew why, but the discrepancy in slaughter between something human (skin) and something female (hair) and their diaphanous atoms of want, via scabbing or buzzed back-of-neck, still managed to amaze me.

That night I hadn’t slept well and my entire body ached. Hours before, I’d been off in the fields with Hans, and it seemed as if I’d lain upon a patch of brambles, for my shoulders and neck even now were marked with tiny red smiles, not to mention the teeth marks and one monstrous hickey. Hans apologized profusely upon zipping up my dress and finding my back zigzagged with blood, but I assured him that it didn’t matter, I hadn’t even noticed. He’d arched his eyebrows, and in the dark they bobbed like flyaway kernels. “You don’t say?” he smirked. I ardently nodded. “Well then I must be a damn good distraction,” he squawked, letting a touch of his childhood twang ring out over the night. He pulled a cartwheel and I imagined, in that instant, that I too was from the south. I thought of slow hand-held fans and sweet tea. I looked at him,

prowling with his shoulders squared and utterly grimy with internal light, and wondered when and where he'd learned his charisma, before he stretched out his arms and pulled me down to the earth, hollering, "Bloody *me* now, gimme what I deserve."

Gingerly I rose from bed, a smile flitting across my face. I gazed around the room, pearly and neat in the weak morning light, and felt soothed by the shapes of the girls in their beds, the row of blue cots and white dressers, their slack faces angled away from the window and buried in homecoming dreams. I padded past them down the hallway with the loose-jointed delirium of someone convinced they're alone, and ducked into the washroom with a ringing little laugh. It came out of nowhere, but felt related to Hans and the way his chin bullied mine whenever we kissed. His eyes, in velvet occupation, were forever asking questions. His big-handed vigor was infectious and excited me like vanity. I was standing in front of the mirrors that lined the far wall, examining my hickey, when I heard two male voices. The washroom was like a sanitarium, but instead of salmon-colored padding it was lined with linoleum tiles; from one wall sinks protruded, and from the other, thirteen showerheads. All that separated me from the showers was a constantly billowing curtain strung down the middle of the room.

Embarrassed, I turned towards the curtain; two figures danced on the other side. Steam drifted up from under the fabric and their voices were muffled by the hiss of hot water slapping the floor. I peered to my left and saw a toothbrush and comb balanced on the sink nearest the door. My heart seized in paranoia, but I was clearly by myself on this side of the washroom. The voices got louder. I gripped the sink behind me and listened hard through the anatomical sizzle.

"Dude!"

The extreme slenderness of the figure to my left, imbued with self-important jerkiness and compulsively fluffing its hair, informed me Bird was on the other side. His voice shot out in one smooth invocation, and I could almost see the dark blue line it streaked across the curtain—Birdie's wrath was always beautiful, one of the many perks to leanness, for even when it was me he was cussing out, my heart could find distraction in the example-setting prowess of his salt-licked lucky brow. To the stock-still figure on my right, he screamed, "Give that back! This isn't funny! That's mine, that's mine, you *know* it!"

I recognized Yvon's cool voice, like fuzz surrounding Bird's gesticulations, like the fictional haze about bare-wires. His profile was etched cleanly against the shower curtain with his curls paused mid-nod. "Do you know me to make jokes?" he asked. His smile sent a ripple down the curtain-rod. I could count all five of Bird's fingers through the wet fabric, halted in their flail. Yvon went brightly on. "What does it matter anyway? None of this is real."

"I'm not your fucking patient, man. You can't just come barging in when I'm trying to shower and enjoy some, some, some fucking peace and quiet." Bird shook his hair, momentarily tongue-tied. "Jesus Christ, just give me back my mail, man."

On tiptoe I inched closer. By leaning against the doorway, I could peek around the curtain as it fluttered in charged intervals and make out Yvon's backside. He was still wearing his pajamas but his hair was freshly combed. In his left hand, he gripped a letter, written sloppily margin-to-margin on yellow legal paper, already limp and dripping sentiments to the steam which partially obscured their hairless chests. An envelope covered in kitten-shaped stickers lay on the floor by his feet. We all watched as one tabby peeled free and spiraled madly before catching on the drain. Bird took a careful step forward. Only now did I register his nakedness, the fuming of a showerhead behind him.

"What the fuck man," he said. He was whispering, as only I'd heard him do when reminiscing past lights-out about the hot-spots in his hometown where he'd learned about men's bodies, and mistakenly, their limits. He scaled Yvon up-and-down as if looking for the earring or bandanna that would direct their sad affair--to teenage heaven off the highway or a spellbound disrepair. "I don't understand this. Do you have a problem with Lana? Just let me read her letter,

man. I need to know how things are going.”

Yvon patiently shook his head. “This won’t tell you that,” he said. It was if he were explaining simple physics. “This is only nutmeg. You can pretend it gets you high but it’s only one percent of the entire realm of sex. What can she tell you that you couldn’t dream up on your own, in crunchier autumns in cozier clothes in hornier fine-print, with no awkward pauses? That she went for a walk and made cupcakes today? That the dog is sick and your mom is sad, that everyone is fine?”

“Yvon,” Bird begged. His hair flopped in his eyes. “You aren’t making any sense. Just stop.”

But Yvon of course did not. “What she’ll never mention here is how sometimes you disgusted her by dressing like a fag. How sometimes in her head she hated you for sounding like a prick when you rambled on about philosophy. Or how sometimes she felt sure she’d found the origin of light between your teeth. Or how hopelessly attractive she found you after every jag with your dirty blue jeans hanging halfway off your ass. These things can only be remembered. These things can only surface when you’re sitting on the dryer and waiting for the spin-cycle to finish.” He waved the letter in front of him. “Almost everything she does is painfully mundane. You aren’t there to see her eat. You aren’t there to see her fight with friends and take off makeup before bed. She postponed writing this letter for two weeks until one single moment, of boredom or import, stood out in her mind and forced her to sit. How did she sit?” As he spoke, he twisted the letter between both hands. It shredded like slowly-cooked meat. Yellow scraps fell and stuck to their feet. Yvon kept talking as if hypnotized, the corners of his lips turned politely upwards and his gaze warmly patting Birdie on the back. “With her bare legs crossed? In just a bra or in school uniform, her legs not bare at all but actually too warm in pants? And when she changes into shorts, how often does she think of you? Just what does she remember? You’ll never, ever know. She missed the southern mole, Bird. She missed the darling anger in your eyes. She never knew how dirty and nervous you felt after each date, and how long it took you, each and every night, to talk yourself to sleep.” Yvon spread his hands flat before him and the last bits of paper swirled in the space between their groins before disappearing down the drain. His eyes flashed encouragingly. “Fuck the bare minimum, Bird.” Yvon smiled. His voice took on a singsong quality that seared through my body like coffee and made my stomach pitch. “*Mama, yooh been awn myyyy mind! Well...so?*” His cheeks momentarily hollowed like someone suppressing a chortle. “Her writing proves nothing.” His voice rose and well as with desolate sleepiness warping your vision. “You are not there to hold her. She is not here to smell you. You can talk on the phone but you’d never know in one million years whether or not she wore her hair up or down. You are free to touch yourself and cum into the void, all the while nicely chatting ‘til she lies and says she has to go, and you’ll clean up and she’ll strip down. She’s going to a party. You’re going to bed. You are nothing to her now. You are nothing to everyone, except me. She can’t help it; I’m right here.” There was movement, a faint squawk from Bird. I retreated from the curtain and stood with my back to the mirrors. Yvon’s voice was softer but steady as ever. Like hot water it slit and cleansed me ten times over. “Only *I* know of your matter. So big. Only I know if you matter. This—” there came the smack of flesh on flesh, a gentle drag “—*this* doesn’t matter, whirlybird. So nice. You try *so* hard to stay in touch. So, so nice.”

I’d heard enough. Ignorant of the sucking sounds my feet made upon the floor, I lowered my head and booked it.

I hurried down the hallway, refusing to look backwards, trying to forget the stillness of Bird’s body through the curtain, a stillness I had never seen. I knew Lana was a former flame. I had no idea they’d stayed in touch. He never spoke of her too highly. Besides, Yvon hated when we brought up exes and always tried to change the subject. The one time I ever heard Bird go on about his Lana, Yvon walked in and snapped, “Quit drooling! All we have is right now, and even

that won't last for long." The expression on his face wasn't one of anger, but rather, disgust, as if he were a lifeguard looming over a kiddie-pool of paraplegics—all of us hooting, what did you expect, my man? We can't swim for shit!

I didn't care to find out more about her. I wanted to find Hans. I wanted to drag him with me to the corners of the farm, where nobody could find us. I wanted to bury my face in his skin, smash my mouth into the valley where his collarbones met and repeat *This is real this is real this is real this is real*, all the while refusing to look into his face and acknowledge the panic which colored his eyes an unbearably beautiful blue.

Yvon lay in the showers, unconscious and bloody, for an hour and a half before the deaf girl from Canada found him and screamed in her strange dog-like voice. Yvon awoke and irritably hushed her. But it was too late; everyone had heard her and Yvon's nose still resembled a hitchhiker's burnt thumb.

Janey and Bird were at the home for "undue promiscuity." Hans was a runaway, with sticky fingers to boot. I was a boring old cutter. Yvon was still a mystery, though we wagered his crime had something to do with truculence, that perhaps he'd been sent here because no normal adult knew how to deal with his thoughtful and smiling defiance. We'd all been caught many times with pills in our pockets and booze in our blood, but as far as I knew, we all shrunk from the spectacle of violence and pain that didn't come around full-circle. Had any of the physical red-alert kids, as the therapists called them, broken Yvon's nose and then gone back to bed, they'd have been handcuffed and packed off to juvie that very same day. Fortunately, Bird had a couple of bruises on his wrists and thighs which Yvon calmly explained were his doing, and probably looked so disheveled when the patrons came thundering into the bedroom that even the most uptight and/or imaginative shrinks had to admit that he was moody, but dangerous? Unless dressed in hot-pants and mile-long eyelashes, no.

It was a terse weekend as we waited for the therapists to deliberate. Due to the alleged gravity of the situation, our p.m. chores had been suspended, so we wandered about the house in a vagabond daze, scarcely daring to brush elbows in the stairwell and fiending for the Vicodin we knew the patrons snorted after dinner. I felt like an Okie who'd been stacking hay since the moment he squawked *maw!* Despite how often I'd complained of our backwoods isolation, it was only now that I saw how truly alone we were out there, pattering tiredly down the dirt-path to the port-o-potties where we washed up nightly. The other kids either had afflictions so intense that even we couldn't empathize, or preferred to lie in bed all day, sometimes smoking cigarettes the whole wide world could smell, sometimes crying, sometimes murmuring queer litany to the ceiling grain. Near the end of the week, Bird joined them for a puff or two.

It came as no surprise when, late Sunday night, the therapists and dean finally decided to recommend Bird to an indefinite emotional leave. His family had been contacted. Someone would arrive, early the next morning, to take him home, where he could reflect on his offense. He would be allowed to come back once he'd properly "cooled off". The staff imagined that that couldn't be sooner than a month or two.

Bird's personal therapist told him all this in his office. According to Bird, the man had motioned him inside and asked him to sit down. He offered Bird a butterscotch, which Bird softly refused. Instead, he stood by the door with his arms folded across his chest. He didn't say anything after the shrink had stopped talking. He just turned and left. I imagined his feet making vague imprints in the therapist's thick carpet. He went straight to the rec room, where Janey, Hans, and I sat dumbly on the couch, awaiting the verdict with minimal hope. Yvon would've come too if he'd been allowed, but the bored lady nurses wrapped his face up in gauze and confined him to bed-rest, peeping in every minute and offering tea.

"Well," Bird sighed, towering above us. "Consider me free. I'll be your middleman." He

smiled and his face projected nothing but goodwill. “Whuddya want? Les enfants égoïstes. Make me a list.” Like a weary star performer he lay down across our laps with his feet on Han’s legs and his cheek against my belly. He began ticking things off on his fingers. “Chocolate for Astrid. Condoms for Janey. Incense and Hesse for our dear friend Yvon. Nietzsche for all. Aftershave for Hans, but let’s let Astrid decide on the flavor, huh?” Like a hideous flower, he stuck his tongue straight up in the air and waggled it at me. My mouth was dry. I couldn’t even smile, much less speak.

Janey perked up in an instant. “You can send me lingerie! I trust in your taste levels. And I’ll send you photos of it in use. How about it, Big Bird? These backwoods boys won’t know what hit ‘em...” Hans laced and unlaced Birdie’s boots. “I’d love some cigarettes,” he said. “Plus my belt is wearing thin.”

Bird raised his eyebrows. “Naughty boy.”

Janey, upon whose knees Bird’s ass rested, unzipped his fly but pinned her eyes on Hans. “King-sized or regular?” she flatly inquired.

Bird giggled and swatted away Janey’s hands. “Once outside these grubby gates, I’ll smoke you all to smithereens.” He said this teasingly, carelessly, twisting his fingers in mine. “I’ll pollute my body with all of God’s chemicals but purify it of you delinquents and this nasty little house.”

Hans and Janey laughed, bumping shoulders. “Jealous!” they both screamed. Bird rolled atop their bodies like a beetle on a bedsheet hung to dry. “So, so jealous!” Meanwhile I was anchored by the weight of Birdie’s head. His hair flared out in all directions, tickling my midriff. I wanted nothing more than to shut my eyes and will their noise, their fragrant bulk and heat, away, but something kept me rooted to the spot. I stared down into Bird’s face, the crown of his head nestled in the gap between my thighs, and searched it for a message. His eyes spoke of escape; they sparkled and pitched like the wonderful things that had gotten us here, in a dry-rotted rehab with a bunch of glass-eating orphans in the absolute middle of nowhere. I felt myself fading. Janey wrapped an arm around my shoulders. I wished that we could stay like this, our bodies fused as one. I put my hand on Birdie’s forehead and wished, with a sudden frenzy blackening my body, to somehow incorporate myself in him—“See, I’m warm, I’ve got a fever,” I stammered, and everyone around me laughed—so that once he packed his bags and swaggered homeward and met up with his myriad of men again, different only in their beards, perhaps, the colors of their ties, I could snuggle up to them as well and lose myself in their wet eyes, and when they bent to make their move I’d pull loose from Bird’s loose lips and bite their lonely tongue in two. Cleanly would it fall away, as would I, in Birdie’s sexed-up boots.

The next morning, a Monday, we all awoke before dawn.

We shoved out of bed and tugged our clothes on like soldiers, before pounding downstairs and lingering over a breakfast of instant coffee and bacon and oatmeal. We doodled with our spoons and blew nonstop upon our coffee, transferring mug from right hand to left, trying to make it last. Yvon sat sadly at the head of the table, skin made darker by the white adhesive on his nose. He and Bird avoided eye contact. At one point the deaf girl from Canada wandered in, but, sensing our sobriety, grabbed a piece of bacon, twittered what could have been an apology, and turned, with unexpected grace, on her fat heel.

By half past six, Bird was packed. For the first time ever, he wore clean clothes—respectable black slacks, a button-down, a belt, and a cream-colored sweater. His duffel bag and pillow lay slumped beside the door. It was remarkable how little he’d had all along; when crammed into his corner of the bedroom, his baby blanket, fringed pillow, framed picture of Lou Reed, and stack of stolen library books had seemed lush and quite enough. He didn’t bother to say goodbye to any of the patrons, and they let him go without scrubbing and refilling the trough.

He'd warned us that his parents were early-birds.

At seven, we stood idly in the yard, keeping one eye on the winding drive which stretched out for a mile, embellished only by great clouds of dust, before linking with the main road. We could see the busy specks of trucks as they sped along the highway; it used to be a game we played, to count how many passed us in a sitting. Answer: every single one.

Janey wore a sleeveless white frock with black stockings. Her hair spun about her shoulders as she gazed out at the road. We tore our eyes from the driveway to watch its crazy movements; her hair was not unlike the clouds of dust that separated us and the house from the highway. She parted her lips (cherry-cola colored). "Bird?" Straight-spined and soft-eyed, she exuded melodrama, but we chugged it, refreshed by the water (*so fuck-ing cold*) that gathered in the low-points of her speech. Her body, arched towards the highway, even her dress pulled by the wind in that poignant and futuristic direction, was a perennial peak, and like children she scooped us into her valleys, crooning, "Do you remember what you were like, ya know, before you became bad? Like, do you remember being innocent and stupid, the days before you did bad things?" We waded in her redundancy, feeling the words suck at our ankles.

Bird jerked a hand through his hair. All morning, he had been contained; he moved with brisk, conservative steps and seemed determined to keep his face devoid of any alien emotion—and I was grateful, for I wanted to remember Bird as I had known him, Bird in brooding, an expansive bastard dressed in black, Bird the trim and devilish, not Bird about to split, not brinkbound or condemned to flight. Now, his face was smooth, but his eyes were gently storming. He yanked at his stiff collar and we all heard it pop.

When he didn't answer, Hans piped up. "I was such a dork." I was standing behind Janey, put-down in cut-off shorts. He looked at me and placed a hand on my bare elbow. "I was a computer whiz. You name it, I could fix it."

This sparked something in Bird, a flare that began with the one wayward strand, near the back, of his hair. He looked Hans up and down. "Damn," he finally muttered. "I always knew you had potential."

I was quiet. We were all quiet, staring into space and remembering what that was like. Even Yvon, characteristically ten feet away with his hands behind his back, did not object to our nostalgia. I thought of myself as a giddy young thing. Playing co-ed truth-or-dare in someone's walk-in closet—eating TV dinners with my family—copying fractions at eleven in bed. Cherry coke and broken bicycles. A sister and no curfew. Happy banal shit. I didn't learn to hate my body until the seventh grade, when puberty distorted all my actions into fleshy vibrant parody. It didn't matter what I did or said; every gesture, every word, would come out wrong and be misconstrued in my favor. Intricate Fabergé thoughts would crack and fry upon my tongue, ballooning outward as "What's up? I'm fine. And you? Oh god, you're just so cute!" I was like a dog in how incapable I was of expressing myself. Kids thought I was affable, even after I started to whore around and get high, since I had a lot of friends, when in fact I couldn't stand a single one. When I honestly tried to explain to them why I found our friendship so false, they collapsed to the floor in a laughing fit. "Good one, Astrid!" they all squealed. "Gosh, we hate you too!"

Still, remembrance never failed to give me a rush. I could picture my soft yellow bedroom at home more clearly than the room in which I'd just awoken. My parents, fed-up, had exiled me here, but the image of their faces, brown with love or crinkled with despair, never failed to set off a breeze in my heart.

It was Bird that broke the silence. "I was a skinny quasi-fag," he shrugged. "I looked at porn and got beat up. I was in love with Ziggy Stardust. A budding Francophile. Not a pretty sight." He projectile spat towards the cornfields, then wiped his mouth and studied how close the wad, of similar color, had come to disappearing in their shifty mass—not very.

Yvon stepped forward. "I was the same," he murmured. In spite of himself, he chuckled.

“Just a little chubbier. Yeah, I was ugly.” He folded his arms across his chest and stared dead-on at Bird. I tried to find a glimmer of repentance in his eyes, but they were as still and dark as ever, Midwestern windows half an hour before midnight.

“So were you born with your big words?” Hans teased. He moved his hand from my elbow to my waist.

“Or what about your big-ass morals?” Bird asked. His voice was soft and earnest. He ground the toe of his dress-shoes, spit-shined, into the dirt.

“No,” Yvon answered. A familiar smile flicked across his face. “I was born as blank as you were.”

Just then, a car pulled off the highway.

It labored slowly down the driveway, little more at this distance than an autonomous dust-cloud. Nobody mentioned it. Hans tightened his grip on my body. I couldn’t help but glance at Bird. He met my worry with a sneer. Then he snapped towards Janey. “Well, what about you?” he asked, not without a touch of malice.

“Me?” Janey slammed her hands against her clavicle and acted as if he’d caught her off-guard. “I...I...” We all watched the approaching car as she spoke. It was dingy-blue and battered. There appeared to be no passengers. Eyes affixed to the horizon, Janey let out an enchanting giggle. “I was a virgin, firstoff.” It was a woman driving the car, with dark unruly hair like Bird’s. “And I was very shy.” The car braked one hundred feet away. Its engine leaked foul smoke. “I didn’t have any friends. Nobody liked me, really.” The driver’s door, duct-taped in the bottom corner, soundlessly burst open. “That is, until I got my tits.” A middle-aged woman, all dressed in black, came tumbling out. “And that’s when the antithesis took over.”

Bird’s mother flew across the driveway, kicking up great plumes of dust.

The next thing we knew, she had her arms around Bird. The sheer force of her body undid Bird’s neat hair. That’s when we knew he was a goner.

Wailing, she embraced that bag of bones as only a mother can embrace her troubled son--with god-fearing passion and audible ecstasy. She was prepared to squeeze him, just like this, forever. Bird’s face was obscured by the billows of dust; his hands hung limply at his sides.

“Bernard!” she wept. “Bernard, Bernard, Bernard, Bernard.”

Not one of us moved. We stayed where we were, since she couldn’t see us anyway.

The cornfields shifted and moaned like bad babies.

“My world revolves around you,” she cried. Her thick little body quivered. She said it again, pulling back to stare into his face. “My world revolves around you.”

I was the first to turn away.

I bolted up the porch, into the house. I slammed the door shut and almost tripped on Bird’s luggage. I could feel Yvon’s eyes tracing my path. I picked up Bird’s bag and crushed it to my chest. I was bound not to tell him I loved him. My world, after all, was not one that revolved.

It merely blazed forward. It was merely a mouth, an acid gap spitting *adieu*.

It was with eyes full of ash that I opened the door and walked down the porch-steps to hand Birdie his baggage.