

The Sadists

When he told you the girl in the picture was his cousin from California, he lied.

Let me guess, you found the picture in a box of baseball cards? Was it sitting there under the watchful eyes of Nolan Ryan, Wade Boggs, Tony Gwynn and Rickey Henderson? That was where he kept all his treasures in high school, a paint can key with a bottle opener on one end, a dime bag of weed and condoms. Sweet Jesus, he was so sensitive about buying those condoms; I thought I would have to do it myself. But I was golden then, at least to him, in my Dr. Scholl's clogs and strawberry Lip Lickers lip balm, so he went into the Woolworth and I waited outside by the wishing penny fountain.

He has no cousin in California; didn't you notice she wasn't at your wedding? How, by the way, did you confront him without looking like a terrible busybody? Did he go all silent-mad like he used to? Did his face clench up along with his hands, like he might hit something even though you know he never ever would? Not that I was a snoop, we didn't have that kind of relationship, the kind with the house and the kids and the dog that has chronic kidney failure. What, you thought I didn't know about the dog, how he started dry heaving in the laundry room and drinking from the toilet? I know a lot more than you think I guess. Come to think of it, we didn't have your silence either. Yelling, we had lots of yelling, then crying, and loving too. Over and over, ad nauseam, ad infinitum until it was very clear that we were just tearing down the house brick by brick and pretty soon there wasn't going to be anything left but a pile.

We rented this place over on T Street. Not the real tony part of T, the grubby end by the trolley overpass. The landlord listed it in the paper as a bungalow, but really it was just a box. He moved in new his hi-fi stereo and I moved in my hand-me-down Corningware and we played house for a few months until we discovered we weren't really good at it. It was interesting though, about that house. The lady who owned it told me that she had it moved from the other side of the park, just jacked it up, drug it over and set it in an empty lot she inherited from her confirmed bachelor uncle. Why would somebody bother to move that crap-hole little box?

There were eight windows, two on each side, and none of them had screens. It was summer so those nosey mosquitos alighted in and the sounds of our fights escaped out. When I think about it, I can feel the rise of bug bite bumps on my arms. I can smell the river rocks on his skin. I can almost walk out onto the tiny splintered porch in my bare feet and lean into him, willing him to forgive me, willing him to see me as his angel again and again like he always did and willing the whole thing not to vanish like the season itself.

I think he does the same.

It's when I get the call out of the blue, him on his car phone and me at my old number still. Instead of saying *hello*, he says things like, *I heard that Hollies song*. Sure enough, I end up hearing that Hollies song, maybe just the end while I'm flipping through the stations, but I hear it too.

I haven't heard from him in a while, longer than usual. Do you think, in all that silence, he ever thinks about what it might have been like if he'd chosen a quiet life with me? Maybe we'd have two kids, a boy for him and a girl for me, with his over the top dimples and my flat feet. Our dog though, wouldn't be like yours, sick and slowly dying in the sunny spot in front of the sliding glass doors. That's the thing about a dog imagined in the silence, she never dies, does she? That imagined boy and girl don't break your favorite glass pitcher on the patio or call the neighbor boy dirty names. And I don't go snooping in his baseball card box, his treasure box, full I'm sure, of exquisite garbage I will never hold.

The girl in the picture is me and I don't imagine my place in the box is secure for much longer, not with your poking around, but keep this in mind will you? You have his body now, there in your sturdy built house, its sunny rooms and clean garage with bicycles hanging from hooks he put up in the rafters. You might have his hands and face and heart, but I will always have his soul.