

Weightless and Hysterical

Mariel was telling me how even a fetus the size of a shrimp can feel pain, her mouth stuffed with a hush puppy¹ from the Long John Silver's² next to the clinic.

"But they don't even have brains yet," I protested.

I slurped my Coke loudly through the straw to indicate how done I was with the conversation. I wanted to eat my seafood in peace. I used to be afraid to stand up to Mariel because since kindergarten, she'd always made me feel stupid, but she only scored a 1250 on her SAT's³ and I got a perfect, so we both knew the jig was up⁴. It was mid-April, cherry blossoms blooming everywhere. The day was unseasonably warm, which was good since we'd been standing outside the clinic all morning with our signs, which we'd left leaning next to the Long John Silver's entrance when we came in.

"But what if somebody steals them?" Mariel had argued.

"Who's going to want a picture of a bloody fetus?" I said. She shrugged.

"Atheists?"

Outside the window of our booth, Kelly and Becca stood with their faces tilted toward the sun, waiting for their boyfriends to meet us. Mariel and I weren't jealous because she was a closeted lesbian, and I had a boyfriend named Jordan – a boyfriend no one knew about because he was twenty-three, and I wouldn't be eighteen until May. We ate our fried fish in silence, sharing the plastic cup of tartar sauce. I snuck fries off of her plate until she finally shoved the whole thing towards me.

I met Jordan at the pet cemetery. Peaches, my dog since first grade, had been like family, so when she passed away my parents agreed to bury her at Noah's Ark Pet Cemetery, which was attached to a larger person-cemetery where some people bought their plots in advance so they could be buried close to their beloved animals at The End. The day I first saw Jordan, he was spreading mulch, and I was wearing a sundress. I pretended to be older than I was, but when he asked to see my driver's license, I was caught in my own lie. I asked him out, right then, and promised to keep us a secret. He gave me his phone number, and I kissed him on the cheek, but lingered close until he shook his head, smiled devilishly, and called me trouble. Like something out of the romance novels my grandma thought she'd done a good job of hiding. [...]

For Mariel's sixteenth birthday, her father bought her a BMW, and she became our designated chauffeur. The car was baby blue with a vanity plate⁵: SAVDBABE. I'd read in the Post⁶ that Virginia had the highest percentage of vanity license plates in the country. I shared this fact with Jordan – I felt proud to know something he didn't since he was always talking about things I didn't understand.

"Probably because most Virginians have more money than brains," Jordan said as I followed him around the grounds, helping to pick up twigs.

I liked watching him work. He was a man, not a boy. He was serious. He had a job and a car and his own apartment in town. I couldn't wait to leave the stupid suburbs. Jordan had talked about taking over a cemetery on the West Coast where his grandparents lived. I'd started researching colleges in those states, even though I'd already been accepted to a state school. I brainstormed future baby

¹ *hush puppy*: deep fried cornmeal dough

² *Long John Silver's*: American chain of seafood restaurants

³ test for admission to American higher education

⁴ *the jig was up*: a dishonest activity that has been discovered

⁵ *vanity plate*: customized license plate

⁶ newspaper

40 names in my journal. First, of course, we would have to start having sex. We scheduled it for my
eighteenth birthday. He even reserved a hotel room. We'd seen a lot of each other once spring
rolled around – inside the shed – so much that the smell of old dirt immediately turned me on. But
winter had been difficult. I'd had no good reason to go to the cemetery or take a walk. Everything
was buried under ice and snow. Sometimes Jordy would get upset, but he'd always forgive me as
soon as I knelt down and unzipped his faded work pants. Touch had power. Sex had power. That's
45 why everyone kept telling us not to do it. Not because it was sinful, but because it was almost
magical. Jordy gave me my first orgasm with his hands and for a moment, I felt weightless and
hysterical. And happy. I wanted to always feel like that. Like heaven. Orgasming into oblivion
sounded much more enjoyable than singing hymns and playing harps all day. Would I go to hell for
just thinking that? I wondered. Probably.

50 Mariel and I used to play "house" a lot growing up. She was the husband, and I was the wife, and
there was always a lot of kissing on top of each other, something she had seen her parents doing on
Sunday afternoons when they thought she was napping or playing quietly in her room. I think Mariel
thought if she prayed hard enough, she might change who she was, or at least if she was a religious
extremist, she could make up for her sinful nature, the one that threatened fire and brimstone if she
55 wasn't careful. I knew she was secretly in love with me, but I pretended not to notice. We'd been to
all of each other's birthdays, choir concerts, and school plays. Sometimes we felt more like sisters,
the way we fought with each other. But we always made up. Our relationship had become much
more strained since a month or two ago when, at a sleepover, I had asked her if she liked girls and
not boys. The way her face looked in that moment, I swore she was going to punch me.

60 "I don't like anyone," she'd said, sliding down until her feet touched the bottom of her sleeping
bag, and I could no longer see anything but the top of her head.
I thought about telling her about Jordan then, as a trade, but instead I rolled over and went to sleep.
The next morning, we pretended like nothing happened.

Once the boyfriends left for soccer practice again, Mariel and I went out to gather up Kelly and
65 Becca and our signs. We had two more hours of standing. Mariel had made her own sign with
crimson paint and a slogan she'd come up with on her own: If You Aren't Pro-Life, You're Pro-Death.
I had to say it had a certain ring to it, even if I didn't entirely agree.

"Did you bring sunscreen?" Mariel asked the group.

"Of course not. I want to get a base tan going."

70 "I have a hat."

"I have olive skin," I said.

"You're all going to get cancer."

"Let's pray we don't."

We were all silent for a few seconds.

75 "Amen."

A car honked as it drove past. It was hard to tell which honks were in support and which were fuck
yous, but we waved, like pageant queens, at all of them. Xavier, the security guard, just stood in the
doorway, shaking his head. We were so naïve we thought he was there to protect us.

"We've got a live one, girls," Mariel said a few minutes later.

80 Our first. Saturday afternoons seemed to be slow on the clinic front – people probably didn't want
to ruin their entire weekends. We all turned to where she was looking at a twenty-something couple
get out of a truck together. They both wore dark sunglasses, and she wore the telltale oversized
cardigan to disguise any weight she had already gained. They made a beeline⁷ for Xavier, who was
holding the door and waving them in, just as Mariel yelled, "Baby Killers!" And Kelly yelled, "Baby
85 Killers!" And Becca joined in like a chant now, "Baby Killers! Baby Killers!" And I stayed silent.

⁷ straight line

“What was wrong with you today?” Mariel asked as she drove me home.

“Too much fried food. I felt sick,” I lied. “Hey, can you drop me at the pet cemetery – I can walk from there.”

“You still visit Peaches?”

90 I nodded. Mariel reached over and awkwardly patted my knee. She dropped me at Peaches’ hydrant-shaped stone. She had come with me a time or two, in the beginning, but cemeteries crept her out, lucky for me. I waited until her car disappeared out onto the highway before making my way over to the shed, excited to surprise Jordy. He was standing with his back towards me, dumping soil into a small wheelbarrow. I breathed in deeply. Immediately I wanted his touch. I
95 knocked softly on the side of the shed, and he turned and saw me. His face broke into a smile. He dusted his hands off on his jeans and came over to kiss me before we even said hello. This is what I wanted. I was the kind of girl who liked talking without words. After a few minutes of roaming hands and tongues, I broke away, panting.

100 “Have you ever known anyone who’s had an abortion?” I asked. I imagined him going immediately flaccid in his boxers.

“Are you pregnant? I mean, we haven’t...”

“No. I know. I just don’t understand how someone can do that.”

He was quiet. I worried I had gotten too serious.

“My first girlfriend. We were sixteen. Not ready for a kid.” He sounded far away.

105 “But wasn’t it sad?”

“We didn’t throw a party. It just... was.”

I thought of the girl I had been just a little less than two years before: my first kiss during Spin the Bottle in a basement at someone’s sweet sixteen, learning to drive in my parents’ minivan, finally used to the itchy band of my no-longer-training bra. I felt jealous of this girl Jordan had been with,
110 his first love. Going through something like that added a level of seriousness to their relationship that our own relationship lacked.

“Do you still think about it?”

“Sometimes. I don’t regret it, if that’s what you mean.”

I stepped closer and slipped my hand down the front of his pants.

115 “I think we should have sex. I’m ready.”

“You’re still seventeen.”

“What’s a few weeks?”

“The difference between an arrest or your dad kicking my ass.”

I pressed up against him and stroked him harder. He pushed me away.

120 “Not here. Not yet.”

“But I want to.”

“But I don’t.”

I let go of him and stormed out of the shed. I walked and walked to the edge of the grounds, listening for footsteps.

125 I didn’t feel like going home, so I called Mariel to come and get me. My parents did not tolerate any sort of moping. My heart was supposed to be full of joy, despite my circumstances, since Jesus lived there. *And if the Devil doesn’t like it he can sit on a tack⁸!* we used to sing at Bible school. That was probably the biggest load of bullshit in all religion: how much you had to pretend to be something you weren’t, or feel something you didn’t. Wasn’t that lying? And wasn’t lying one of the worst sins
130 in the book? Mariel pulled up right where she’d left me. I had already started crying.

“That bad?” she asked when I slid into the passenger seat.

“It’s not Peaches. It’s a guy.”

“Some guy died?”

⁸ *sit on a tack*: go away and stop bothering me

135 “No. He’s alive. He just doesn’t want to be with me, and his ex-girlfriend had an abortion and –”
“Is he a Christian?”
“I don’t know. I don’t care. Is that really your first thought? Jesus.”
“You shouldn’t curse.”
“And you shouldn’t fall in love with girls, but here we are.”
Her cheeks got red.
140 “I don’t love girls.”
“Just me, then?”
I didn’t care anymore about pretending, about secrets, about lies.
“It’s an abomination,” she said, the closest she’d ever come to a confession.
“There are worse things,” I said.
145 She looked like she was thinking about it.
“I don’t know if I believe in all the stuff they tell us,” I said. “That’s probably worse than anything.”
Just then my phone buzzed. A text from Jordan: *where did u go?*
“That him?” Mariel asked.
150 “Jordan,” I said. “He’s twenty-three.”
I thought about how to reply to the text.
“That’s way too old for you,” she said.
“Thanks, Mom,” I said, rolling my eyes, my thumbs poised above my phone.
“You need me to take you somewhere?” It was the first non-judgmental thing I think she’d said
155 her entire life. I knew she was still judging, inside, but at least she was trying. I felt strangely proud of her. I slid my phone into my jacket pocket.
“Nah. I’m starving. What’s for dinner at your place?”
“Probably takeout. But you’re welcome.”

160 Mariel’s house was a huge brick Tudor⁹ with a pool and cabana in the back, a perfectly manicured lawn, and a top-of-the-line security system. There’s no way she could get away with anything. The cameras watched everything like God above. Her mom greeted me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She smelled like vanilla cake and aerosol hairspray. Her dad came out of his office when he heard us talking. He was tall and tan and handsome and terrifying, the picture of a conservative politician. We ordered pizzas. Mariel and I talked to her parents about our day while we waited on
165 the delivery. She seemed weirdly excited to tell them that we had seen someone actually going in for a procedure. They said they were so proud of us for doing the Lord’s work. Mariel beamed. I fakesmiled. The food came, and we all sat down in the dining room.
“Let’s say grace,” her dad said from the head of the table.
The steam from the pizza rose up and swirled around his face like a holy fog. We all bowed our
170 heads and closed our eyes. While he rattled off thank yous for our many blessings, I felt Mariel reach for my hand. I hesitated a second, confused, but then I let her have it. I squeezed. She squeezed back.
“Amen,” her dad said, finally, looking up at all of us.
“Amen,” we repeated, letting go.

(2016)

⁹ style of architecture