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Boy Scouts

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BOY SCOUTS

We wondered what Kevin Wilson's sister looked like naked. We wondered what *every* girl looked like naked, but in particular we wondered about Wilson's sister. Caroline was a freshman, curtain of blond hair, pretty in a way that seemed like a promise. Maybe one or two of us had *actually* seen a girl without her clothes on, but in our excitement and confusion, and in the darkness of the room, we'd forgotten to take a good look.

It was Saturday night. The television in Turner's basement was muted, tuned to a zombie apocalypse where all the non-zombies were tan, in ragged army jackets and Ray-Bans, tearing across the desert on dirt bikes. Turner passed around a bottle of Evan Williams and the five of us talked about Wilson, how he'd dropped acid before track practice the previous week and raced up and down the bleachers while the rest of us ran sprints. The assistant coach let him do it because he said it was good exercise. Wilson was the only one on the track team who was cool—he was the only one who knew where to get acid—and earlier that month he'd quit varsity basketball to run track in both fall and spring. That was how little he cared. He'd stopped caring in January, after his father hit a patch of ice on Rivermont and ended up at the bottom of the ravine, the car crumpled like a beer can.

At practice Wilson wore a neon pink sweatband that said *EXERCISE!* in white letters, and he called all of us *gentlemen*. "Is he like gay or whatever?" Dieter asked, and the rest of us told him to shut up, not because we had any idea if Wilson was gay, but because we doubted that you could be cool and gay and have a dead father at the same time. It was too many things. Nobody could be so many things at once.

We passed around the bottle of Evan Williams a second time, a third. The bourbon was warm. We closed our eyes and pretended like it was August, like we were stretched across the flat rocks by the river, like Caroline's head was on our chests and we were raking our fingers through her yellow hair, the sun in our eyes, the water lapping at our feet.

Turner punched the buttons on his phone.

"Who're you texting?" we asked.

“Wilson’s sister,” he said.

“What about Wilson?”

Turner pressed *send*. “What *about* Wilson?”

“Nothing,” we said. “Never mind.” If there was one thing we knew, it was the difference between texting a girl and her texting us back.

We waited. We wondered how Turner got Wilson’s sister’s number in the first place. We finished the Evan Williams and pretended to smash the bottle over each other’s heads. We watched the zombie apocalypse on TV: a girl climbed a water tower, each step rusted to the color of blood. Her black hair was wild and shiny, her camo t-shirt reduced to shreds. Hundreds of zombies swarmed the desert beneath her, rotting from the inside out. Turner hit a button on the remote and the sound returned. We heard the girl’s heavy breathing, her combat boots ringing on the steps, the zombies moaning like dying animals. There were two types of girls in zombie movies: the ones too pretty to die, and the ones too pretty to live.

Turner’s phone buzzed right as the zombies had figured out how to climb the ladder. He looked at the screen and grinned. “Caroline,” he said.

*

Turner had theories about girls.

1. Girls liked arms. As runners, we would never have the right kind of arms, so we’d have to find other ways to make up for it.
2. They drank vodka. It was clear, so it seemed pure, so they trusted it more.
3. They disliked being called “uptight.”
4. Calling a girl “uptight” was not necessarily a bad way to get what you wanted.

*

Caroline knocked on the basement door an hour later. She wore a green shirt with tiny gold buttons that looked like prizes, her cheeks flushed, the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail floating around her face. She and her friend each held a plastic water pistol. Caroline's was clear, her friend's was blue. "We got lost," Caroline said, "but we found you." She aimed the water gun at Turner's mouth. "Vodka?"

"That's genius," Turner said.

"Dana's idea," Caroline said.

Dana wove past them and settled next to us on the L-shaped couch. We recognized her, not from school, but from the dollar theater and the Sip n' Dip and different parking lots around town. She was pretty, dirty blond with bangs, the kind of girl who always looked like she was loitering. She held up her water pistol. "Anyone?" she asked.

We shot vodka into our mouths. We felt disoriented from the alcohol, from the sheer good fortune of being so close to those girls. We double-checked our math: there were five of us, including Turner, and two of them.

Across the room, Turner took Caroline's gun and aimed it at her heart. "Bang," he said.

"Your friend likes her," Dana said.

"Does she like *him*?" we asked.

She shrugged. "She likes that he's a junior. And that her brother doesn't like him."

"Does Wilson know she's here?"

"Definitely not."

"Did you guys sneak out?"

Dana looked at us for a second before she answered. "Caroline's dad is dead. She can do whatever she wants."

We looked at Caroline, studying her face for signs of grief. She was laughing, trying to grab the water pistol back from Turner. We remembered what we'd heard about her father's accident. How it had taken the county two and a half days to haul the car from the ravine and another day to

confirm the identity of the body. How the damage was so bad that Caroline's mother had decided to have her husband cremated. The urn was the size of a paint can. We tried not to think about it. Mr. Wilson, all six-foot-one of him, sitting around in a goddamn paint can.

Turner had taken hold of Caroline's wrists, now, and she was laughing like crazy, twisting away from him, the bottom of her t-shirt rising to display a pale slice of her stomach. "She seems okay, right?" Dieter said.

"I don't know." Dana twirled her water gun around her finger. "What's the difference between okay and not okay?"

*

It was easy to tell the difference between drunk and not drunk. We were drunk. We could tell because we tried really hard to act sober, and because if we sat still we thought too much. We thought about our mothers, the way they'd started to look at us like we were strangers who'd already disappointed them. About our stepfathers and their grubby toothbrushes in our toothbrush holders. About Wilson sprinting up and down the bleachers like a sad, high, tireless madman while Mr. Wilson sat around in a goddamn paint can. We thought about Dana's t-shirt, how the cotton was so thin that we could see the outline of her bra underneath it. At first we felt guilty for thinking about her bra. Then we decided that she could have worn a thicker t-shirt.

Dana tried to refill the water gun from the bottle in her purse and spilled most of it on the couch. She drank straight from the bottle. "I wish I had a straw," she said.

"You ever see Wilson?" we asked. "At Caroline's house?"

"Sure," Dana said.

"How's he seem?"

She passed the bottle to Dieter. "He takes things apart," she said, "with a screwdriver."

"*Things?*" Dieter asked.

“The lamp in the living room. The microwave. He took the basement door off the doorframe.” Dana shrugged. “Caroline’s mom says it’s part of the grieving process, but Caroline thinks he’s going crazy.”

We pictured Wilson bent over a microwave, twisting a Phillips head—setting the door, the display panel, and the vent on the counter, laid out like an assembly diagram. We knew plenty of people who smashed things when they were angry, but it made sense that Wilson would do something different. It made sense that he would take apart a microwave. Or, at least, it made as much sense as his dad dying.

“Weird,” we said. We wanted to ask if Wilson planned to reassemble everything, but Dana’s attention had shifted to Turner and Caroline. They were on the big recliner in the corner of the room. He was in the chair, and she was perched on the arm next to him. It was hard to tell if he was drunk, but he had a higher tolerance than all of us, which meant that he had a much, much higher tolerance than Caroline. “I have the spins,” Caroline said. She held the back of her hand to her forehead and pretended to faint, sliding into his lap. “The spins like spinning.”

Turner put a hand on her forehead, like to check her temperature, and whispered something into her ear. She laughed.

“Caroline,” Dana said. “Want some water?”

“No,” Caroline said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re fine,” Turner said to Caroline. He looked at Dana and smiled like they were best friends. “She’s fine.”

*

Dana said the one thing better than drinking was drinking in a hammock. “There’s one in the garage,” Turner said. He pointed to the door, decorated with a poster of Uma Thurman in a skintight yellow jumpsuit, holding a sword. “You can get it, if you want.” Dana got up and three of us followed her. Dieter stayed on the couch with the rest of Dana’s vodka, tapping on his phone, pretending not to look at Turner and Caroline.

The garage smelled like fertilizer and cigarette smoke. Dana flipped on the light, and for the first time we noticed how small she was, how her shoulders were as delicate as bird bones. We wondered what it was like to take up so little space in the world. We wondered if we should offer her our sweatshirts, and then we wondered if our sweatshirts would smell bad to a girl.

We picked up the badminton racquets propped against the wall and sliced them through the air, fencing. Dana stepped around a bag of woodchips, an air hockey table covered with a blue tarp, an ancient-looking Christmas tree, and tossed us a birdie. We swung and missed. “Nice shot,” she said.

“We’re runners,” we said. “We don’t really hit things.”

She picked up a football helmet and put it on. “Where’s the hammock?”

We shrugged. We’d spent hundreds of hours at Turner’s house, but we’d never seen one.

“I don’t know about your friend,” she said.

“Turner?”

“He’s arrogant. My mom says arrogance is the worst quality in a man.”

“Turner’s not really a man,” we said.

She shrugged, like that was obvious.

“What about Wilson?” we said. “Girls like Wilson.”

“Wilson’s not arrogant.” Dana pulled off the helmet and set it on the floor, smoothing her hair. “He’s unhappy, which makes him interesting.”

“We’re unhappy.”

“Everyone’s unhappy, but Wilson’s the right kind of unhappy.”

“The *right* kind?”

“He’s tragic,” she said.

If one of us had been alone with Dana, maybe we would have tried something. She was pretty and interesting and the way she talked—honestly, without politeness—thrilled us. Instead, we stood there. We

decided that if there was a zombie apocalypse and we were forced to leave everything behind and retreat to the garage with her, building a fort with the tarp, surviving off woodchips, weaponizing with shovels and anti-freeze, we wouldn't have minded that much.

Dana sighed and placed a hand on her hip, looking around the room. "There isn't a hammock," she said. "Let's go back inside."

*

Turner and Caroline weren't in the basement. "Where are they?" Dana asked. She walked to the recliner and picked up Caroline's clear plastic water pistol. The zombie apocalypse had started over again on television. The five remaining humans had regrouped in the abandoned chemical plant: a black guy, a white guy, an Army officer who'd lost an arm in Afghanistan, a blonde girl, and a brunette. They were tired but determined, glistening with sweat, the fate of humanity in their blood-smearred hands. The fate of humanity was always, somehow, in the hands of really good-looking people.

"Seriously," Dana said. "Where'd they go?"

We sank into the couch and saw that the door to the laundry room was closed. We pointed.

Dana walked to the door and tried the knob. "It's locked."

Two things occurred to us just then: if Turner was locked in the laundry room with Caroline Wilson, he'd never let us hear the end of it. Also, Dieter was missing.

Dana knocked. When no one answered, she turned and looked at us. "I'll scream," she said. "If that door doesn't open, I'll wake up everyone in this house. I'll wake up everyone in the neighborhood, if I have to."

"If you're so worried about her, why'd you leave her alone with Turner?" we said.

"I *didn't* leave her alone." We could tell, though, that she was wondering the same thing. "Your other friend was with them."

The door to the laundry room opened and Dieter walked out. He moved uncertainly, like the floor would collapse if he stepped on it wrong.

In seventh grade, Martin Riviera had had an asthma attack during gym class and our teacher, Ms. Galloway, had raced to his side and repeated *Jesus Christ* over and over in a way that had nothing to do with prayer. That's what Dieter's face reminded us of.

Turner was right behind him. "Give me your phone," he said, and Dieter barely hesitated before he handed it over. That was the thing with Turner. It was easier to do what he wanted.

Dana slipped into the laundry room as Turner tapped on the screen.

"What're you looking at?" we asked.

"You'll see," he said.

We looked at Dieter. "What's going on?"

He looked at the floor, shaking his head.

Dana came out of the laundry room. "Caroline's not wearing a shirt."

Turner looked up. "She wanted to take it off. Was I supposed to stop her?"

Dana's voice shook, but just a little. "She doesn't take her clothes off when she's drunk. She either throws up or she falls asleep."

"Look, she obviously has problems," Turner said. "But you need to calm down." He said it like it was a fact, like everything was fine and would continue to be fine if Dana calmed down. And we believed him because we wanted to. If we had stopped to think about it, we would've realized that Dana was already calm. She was calm as she snatched the phone away from Turner, and she was calm as she looked at the screen, biting her lip.

A few seconds later, our phones buzzed in our pockets.

*

Later, we found out that Turner sent the video to everyone in Dieter's phone: forty-six people including Dieter's mom and stepmom, his stepmom's mom, his piano teacher, and a pretty college student from Korea who tutored him in physics. The video was fourteen seconds long, and Turner liked to say that it was nothing compared to the stuff you could find

on the Internet. In a way, he was right. In the video, Caroline sits on top of a washing machine, unbuttoning her green shirt to reveal a white bra. She pulls off the shirt, drops it to the floor, and leans back against the cinder-block wall, closing her eyes. That's it.

"I mean," Turner would say. "I don't see what the big deal is." He claimed that Caroline had known that Dieter was filming her, but whenever we asked Dieter about it, he never said much of anything.

When we watched the video—and we would watch it many, many times, always on our phones even though it ended up on the Internet—we'd sometimes pretend that she was meditating. Other times, we'd pretend like she had asked us to sit with her, just to keep her company until she fell asleep.

*

Caroline walked out of the laundry room before we had the chance to look at our phones. Her ponytail hung loose over her shoulder, and one of the gold buttons on her shirt was unbuttoned. For the first time that night, she looked like a girl whose dad had died. Not that she was crying or anything, but it was there on her face, like she was really, really tired. We wanted to tell her that we understood what it felt like to be that tired, even if it wasn't true.

Caroline walked straight past Turner and Dieter, past all of us. "You ready?" she asked Dana. Dana looked at Dieter as she slid his phone in her pocket, daring him to say something, and followed Caroline out the door. We couldn't have said why, but the three of us went after them. Turner and Dieter stayed in the basement.

In the backyard, the air was cool and the light from the neighbor's porch threw shadows across the lawn, which needed to be mowed. Caroline walked through the grass to the swing set and sat on one of the rubber swings, attached to the wooden frame with two fraying pieces of rope. "Just for a minute," she said, and Dana sat on the swing next to her,

and we stood around them in a half circle. No one talked for a while. The girls drifted from side to side, and we dug our hands into our pockets. The air smelled like mulch. The smell must have drifted over from the neighbor's yard, because Turner's dad never did anything to the lawn.

Caroline reached to the ground and pulled up a handful of grass, and for some reason it reminded us of Boy Scouts: of collecting different types of moss and building wind chimes that didn't chime and mistaking every bird for a woodpecker. We remembered pressing our hands to tree trunks, studying the imprints they left on our palms. We remembered our Scoutmaster, a bearded guy named Theo, who wore a bandana tied around his forehead and carried a hunter green Swiss Army knife. He had wanted us to remember two things: that it wasn't his place to say if there was a God or not, and that nature was important because it reminded people that there was something bigger than themselves—that everyone was tiny and insignificant. Even then, as eleven-year-olds, it had seemed weird that anyone would want to be reminded.

Caroline dropped the grass into her lap. She pulled up another handful, and another, and another. She started to use both hands, working slowly and mechanically—like she would be there all night, if she had to—building a pile that eventually spilled over her lap, forming a new one at her feet.