

Little Sinners

We weren't bad girls. When we were little we played Church, flattening soft bread into disks, singing the hymns from stolen paper missals: *Our Fathers chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free, how sweet would be their children's fate, if they like them, could die for Thee*. We set up carnivals and lemonade stands, collected pennies for UNICEF on Halloween. We bought trees to be planted in our names in forests purged by fire. We drew elaborate peace signs on our notebooks, and watched the Vietnam War on television every night as children, scanning the faces of the soldiers for our babysitter's boyfriends. We included everyone in our neighborhood games, even our irritating younger siblings, even the girl, Sally Moore, who was clearly a boy, the boy, Simon Schuster, who was clearly schizophrenic. They were cast as the frog in our production of "The Frog Prince," or played the dead boy in our Haunted Woods. We would grow up to understand, perfectly, what was expected of us—and still, when it came to you, none of this applied. We were feral, unequivocally vicious, like girls raised by the mountain lions that occasionally slunk out of the wilderness of Massacoe State Forest, between the swing sets and the lawn furniture, into our tended backyards.

It was May when it all started, and the air was still sharp and the forsythia waved its long arms of bright flowers. My friend, Valerie Empson, and I had been stealing our parents' Pall Malls and Vantages, hiding them in clever places in our bedrooms. I'd taken off one brass finial and slipped the cigarettes into my curtain rod. At pre-arranged times we'd retrieve them to smoke in the woods, and one day we put on clothes we found in my basement first: my mother's pleated plaid high school skirt (Drama Club, *The Tattler*, 1958), a cocktail dress (Wampanoag Country Club, 1971). We put on her old winter coats,

camel-hair and cashmere smelling of mothballs, her satin pumps, and black patent-leather slingbacks. We went out walking about in the woods behind my house, pretending we were someone else. We were too old for dress-up—this was our last fling. We put on the clothes and assumed other personalities with accents.

“Blimey, this is a steep path, I say.”

“Where are we headed? Isn’t that the clearing, Darling?”

The woods were comprised of young growth—birch, maple, and pine saplings, a thicket suitable for cottontails. A brook ran through it parallel to the houses, filled with brownish-looking foam that may have been the result of the DDT misted over us each summer. The planes would drone overhead while our parents sipped whiskey sours, and we lay on our backs in front yard grass like unsuspecting sacrifices.

“Oh lovely, I’ve gotten my shoe wet.”

“Look at that, the hem of your skirt is muddy.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

We walked along the brook’s bank, and I slid down the side in the high-heeled shoes and toppled into the water. The brook wasn’t very deep, but it was fast-moving, its bottom a variety of stones, and I struggled to stand. Valerie watched from the bank, doubled over laughing with her hand between her legs. Pee streamed down onto the trampled Jack-in-the-pulpit, wetting her chiffon skirt, probably dribbling into her pumps. I felt the icy water soak into my coat. We were too busy laughing and peeing to notice anyone nearby. If it had been a boy we’d have been embarrassed. But it was only you, the weird neighbor girl, with your doughy cheeks, and your intelligent eyes. You looked at us laughing, and I sensed a sort of yearning in your face. That you were watching only made us laugh harder.

“You’re going to catch something from that water,” you said, matter-of-factly.

We’d met you years ago in elementary school. You were younger, consigned to the kindergarten playground. You carried a blue leather purse and were always alone. Drawn to your oddness, we broke the rules to sneak over to talk to you.

“What’s in your purse?” Valerie said.

Your lips tightened with wariness. “None of your business.” Your hair was cut short, in the pixie style my mother once foisted on my younger sister. You were thinner then, almost tiny, a dollish-looking

girl. We laughed at nearly everything you said, most of it mimicked from a grown-up and strange coming from your mouth.

“Why can’t you just be nice and show us?” I said.

You knew that you should be nice, and you did like the attention from us. Finally, one day you undid the snap of the purse and opened it up. We looked into its depths. There was a small change purse, the kind we made summers in Craft class at Recreation when we were little—imitation leather, stitched together with plastic. Yours was blue to match your purse. You also had a handkerchief, a tiny pink one, and a bottle of *Tinkerbell* perfume. Valerie reached her hand in quickly and grabbed the change purse before you could snap the purse shut. Your face hardened like your mother’s probably would when someone did something wrong at your house.

“Give it back,” you said.

“I’m not taking it,” Valerie said, dancing off a ways. “I’m just looking. I’ll give it back in a minute.” She opened it up and looked inside. You had quite a bit of change in the purse—silver, not all pennies. We glanced at each other. This would buy a few packs of gum, or the little round tin of candies we loved, *La Vie Pastillines*, in raspberry or lemon.

If you hadn’t seen me fall into the brook, spring would have progressed into summer, and nothing of the business would have transpired. Maybe I’d have seen you riding your purple bike in lazy circles at the end of the street, but that shapeless figure of you wobbling on your Schwinn, those annoying plastic streamers spraying from each handlebar grip, wouldn’t have prompted it. That you occasioned to show yourself, that this triggered my thinking of a way to involve you in some deviousness, was purely accidental. I’d climbed out of the brook and stood dripping on the bank.

“Go away,” I said. “We’re meeting someone and we don’t want you around.”

I took out the cigarette I’d hidden in my coat pocket and lit it up. Valerie did the same.

Your eyes widened. “Who are you meeting?” You took a careful step closer, pretending our smoking wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

Valerie put her hands on her hips. Her coat opened, revealing her new breasts. “A boy,” she said. “Charlie.”

We held the cigarettes out in the Vs of our fingers.