

## THE OLD MILL

J lives at the top of French Hill Road, and I live at the bottom. When he comes for me I can hear him coming. If I'm holding a cup of coffee when he gets in his car and starts it, my coffee cup will shudder in my hand. But when that happens I need only to set it down onto a table or near the sink. I put on my jacket and put my hands in the pockets.

One of us asks the other, "You hungry or anything?" and the other says, "No."

J complains about my makeup getting on his face, but I keep wearing it. Without it I look too much like myself.

When it's warm we party in a field, a ring of cars and trucks around a fire, and when it's cold we party in Stu's basement because no one else has a basement and Stu's dad doesn't give a fuck, and he comes down and shares his stuff with us. When we don't feel like the field or Stu's basement, we party on the river by the old mill.

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"This your girl?" Stu's dad asks J, jerking his thumb. Later I hear Stu's dad tell Stu that I look like a nice normal dick-loving girl.

When we party by the old mill, we have to walk through pine woods and down steep hills to the river. No one else likes the old mill anymore because it's slippery getting down and it's cold there, and once Stu fell in and almost got sucked under by the water. But J and I still like it, and we go there together.

Stu has an old dog, Old Bruno. Stu likes to smoke a joint and blow the smoke into Old Bruno's face. The dog gets dizzy and falls. His face used to be brown but now it's all white. He doesn't have much hair left on his tail, so when it wags it's a whip. Stu hates getting whipped and starts yelling and shoving the dog until the tail is tucked away and still.

I fucking hate Stu, that motherfucker.

Tonight J and I are going to the old mill. We get a bottle of pink champagne and two packs of cigarettes. At the store we suddenly feel happy and decide to buy Cheetos and Swedish Fish. Christine is working the register. I know she'll sell me the stuff, but she acts shitty about it. She likes J and keeps looking at him.

For awhile Stu was calling me in the middle of the night, leaving four or five messages in a row on my machine. I never picked up. He'd talk about when we were little kids together and shit like that. It got so that I'd lie in bed and not sleep. And when the phone rang I felt like I was falling into a place with no bottom.

The old mill used to be dark red, but now it's bright with all kinds of spray paint. Its windows are broken out with rocks. The wheel fell apart a long time ago, busted into pieces and drifted down river.

40 Stu brings one of his dad's guns to the field and sets up cans on rocks to shoot at. He drains his beers fast because he needs the cans. It gets dark, and he comes over to the fire. He wants to show me the gun, but I won't look at it. I keep turning my head away until he puts it against my cheek. Then I don't move at all.

J and I are going away. I pick out all my favorite things and put them in a suitcase. At the top of French Hill Road, I hear an engine revving.

The bottom of the mill stretches right down into the river, and the rapids shove up against it hard, like they're trying to tear it apart. I guess eventually they will.

We drive until dark, only stopping for cokes and to pee by the side of the road. It feels like we're being chased, but neither of us says anything. We turn the radio up. We're just having fun, doing something different, you know?

At the motel, they give us a bunch of coupons. \$1 Towards any beverage at our Twilight Bar & Lounge (Live Band Karaoke Fridays), \$1 Towards any entrée at the Family Restaurant OR Grill-Your-Own Texas Steakhouse. House Specialties: Iron Rich Baby Beef Liver. Roast Young Tom Turkey.

Roast Loin of Pork. Country Style Veal Cutlet. Freshly Made Chopped Steak. Stuffed Flounder.

I don't remember meeting J the first time. It's like he was always there but suddenly became brighter. Like staring at the ground an hour before you see your dropped earring and wonder how you could've missed it.

We pull our curtains tight and double-lock the door and sit on the bed, passing our little bottle. Just outside our door, late, a man's voice comes low and sad. At first we think he's talking to us. "Bill. Bill. Hey, Bill." Then he gets louder. "Bill. Hey, BILL." Then he's very loud, and J and I look at each other. "HEY, WHAT'RE YOU CRYING FOR, BILL? WHY DON'T YOU STOP CRYING? STOP CRYING, YOU FUCKING FAGGOT, AND LET ME IN."

J falls asleep but I can't. My back is very straight and my eyes wide. Channel 1: a Texas Ranger protects five college cheerleaders. Channel 16: series debut—a private investigator who is a vampire. Channel 24: a dorky teen attends a high school for superheroes. Channel 38: a grungy criminal and a teen queen magically switch bodies. Channel 40: a couple is stranded at a hotel. Channel 56: a tycoon offers a cash-strapped couple \$1 million. Channel 59: tale of racial prejudice between Indians and whites. Channel 60: rendered obsolete, a hardened soldier is abandoned.

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In the morning we will get in the car and drive. Maybe we will stop and drink coffee or eat a donut. We'll stay in another place like this. The scenery will not be much different. But the day after that, and the day after that for sure, I think things will start to change.

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The river coming over the big rocks at the old mill is loud—so loud! You can't hear anything but the river. You don't need to talk. J and I look at each other and do our talking that way.

Sometimes I get spooked and turn around quick, sure that someone's sneaking up. I stare into the woods, squinting, and the woods stare back, not telling me anything. And when I look too long into the dark circling water, it tries to pull me in. But I'll miss that place, and I hope I never see it again.