

*Hunk*

1.

Hunk, he calls as he pulls my sister close and loops his thick arm around her—flesh and angular bone, his mottled elbow, her pale neck and narrow shoulders. She's a pretty girl—too pretty, I think—tall and lean; smooth, pale skin; dark eyes; a gypsy forehead that, when it furrows, makes her seem older than almost-sixteen.

Hunk, Hunk, Hunk. He musses her hair then bites into her or pretends to bite until she screeches and laughs, leaning into him, leaning in and not away. Raspberry gloss coats her lips; her smile tightens. I love my sister's laughter. It's as deep as a secret she hides inside, and, as it runs through her, her entire body shakes. Her head bobs forward, a mass of long chocolate curls. Her head bobs back, gently, like a buoy.

Here in the kitchen, the light shines brightly through the worn curtains, exposing fine particles of dust in the air; here the day is beaming and beaming more, the hot, sticky August sun promising never to go down. The air pushes so insistently through the screen doors. My sister laughs when he whispers something in her ear. Beyond her, the house remains almost quiet; a fan hums, pulsing on and on and on. There are fans all around the house, in hallways, in bedrooms, set up in strategic places to circulate and cool the air.

*Who's my favorite? What does the favorite get?*

2.

I am the baby of my family. Eleven years younger than my sister, I am an accident, the grand failure of a breaking condom. Life pushes forward, I joke to people years later. I am happy to be alive, I say, and I mean it.

Here in the corner of the kitchen, I sit at a rickety table with legs that always wobble, my own legs never touching the ground. I lop up too-sweet cereal with a spoon, lick what runs down my chin. At five I am all yellow curls, all sweet chunky cheeks. Jealous little thing, I want to be the favorite. She is mine, I want to say. I watch

the intricate weave of bodies, the play of skin on skin, like wrestlers or like dancers twisting in both graceful and violent maneuvers.

She is mine and mine and all mine. I have woven my hands into that mass of hair, nuzzled against each curl, threaded my fingers through her fingers, pressed my lips to her lips, a goodnight kiss, a good morning kiss, a glad to see you, to be alive kiss. She is my sister. I have breathed her and felt her and been her, and she is all mine, right down to the bones and blood.

My sister, still in a stranglehold, looks over at me, winks in assurance, and says, Hey, Goldilocks, what does Goldilocks do? And I know then I am to hunt for bears—my sister has made me fierce, telling me exactly how I must be: I am to be the hunter and not the hunted, which is what she tells me when she doesn't want me to be afraid. It also means I am to go to my room and stay there and be quiet and wait for the sound of closing and opening doors again. It means I am to look under the bed, search through the closets, poke around the dusty corners for things that might devour me.

Okay, my sister says. She looks down to the floor, at the forget-me-nots springing from woven baskets, and she laughs. She looks out the back door, to the yard and trees, to my brothers who are outside in the sun, enjoying the day, and she laughs.

I do not know what her laughter means.

3.

Yes, there are boys. They are tough-and-tumbling brothers who wrestle at night, who give each other bloody noses over yard work. Outside, on this particular day, they rake crunchy leaves that have fallen down early—a drought in August—and then throw the leaves up in the air, out of their arms. The boys spend all day outside. The boys *are* the outside, wild, unkempt down to the last hair. They smell of warm breezes and sunshine. They wear the wind on their backs, have tree limbs for arms.

Later, after they finish their work, they will dangle themselves from branches, falling backwards without concern for the smallest injury. They will burn insects—ants and katydids and cicadas in this summer when the cicadas awaken. They will burn them all with magnifying glasses, just to see.

The brothers aren't exactly hunks, though they are lean and muscular—almost, but not quite, fleshy. They do often hunker around,

though, practicing Travolta moves in the driveway—a little hip, a little lip—a routine from *Grease*. Their smiles widen when girls in the neighborhood ride by the back yard on bikes, all curvy, shiny knees and floppy sandals.

4.

Years have passed since I've seen my sister. I am thirty-two now, and, mostly, I am alone. There are several reasons for my aloneness. I like to be alone; I am used to it. And I am difficult to know. Impervious, deliberately so, I push most people away.

There is a woman I know who wants to be my friend. She is a beautiful woman; she has long, thick hair like my sister's. She keeps her hair cut squarely, bluntly, though, just as everything about her is blunt—her forehead, her smile, her manner of speaking. My friend loves the truth. She's as relentless with it as a sewing needle, threading and threading bits of truth into something substantial. She tells me not to hunt for bears, but to chase down the words instead.

We exchange stories, hers always truth, mine always lies. Because I prefer the idealism inherent in lies. I tell her: I don't see the point in truth, and I mean it. It's never served me well. I bring her stories about wooden legs and warring roommates and people who want rather absurd, funny things—things they have no hope of getting—like pet cows and love that will never leave them. I write all this so I don't have to write about my sister. My friend reads my stories, finds in them the one or two slivers of something that sounds like me. She finds something else, and suddenly there is a pattern. She is stitching me together, putting me on the mend, which I suppose is an act of true friendship.

5.

Many times I've thought of writing about my sister because I often miss her. But I don't know what I would write about, or how I could keep her from becoming just another fiction, just another character I invent to pass lonely days, to have someone to talk to who understands without all that saying. It's been twenty-six years since I've seen her. The amount of time that I've known her has been eclipsed by the amount of time I have not.

Once, with the very first man I dated seriously, I tried to speak about her. I said: This happened, and she left, just like that, up and disap-

peared. I was far less circuitous in those days, much more haphazard with both my love and intentions. I would tell anyone anything, if only they seemed as though they might listen. If only they asked.

When this happened with my boyfriend, we were at dinner, a fancy place with white linen—he worked for the government and had a lot of money. As I spoke, he cleared his throat and glanced around to see if anyone else might be listening. He leaned forward and said: No one wants to hear that kind of story. He said: Tell me one about a man who battles the enemy and wins the foxy lady. You know: action and blood, secrets and death. Maybe a rhetorical flourish or two. Now *that's* a story.

6.

My sister is so insistent, though, so small in what she offers me. The secret to beautiful hair, she says, is to lather and repeat. You've got to coax the shine into it.

She has just come from the shower, and I have heard the doors closing and opening again, heard her secret knock at my door—five quick knocks, a *bumpity-bump-bump* rhythm, a language she and I share through the walls at night. I have smelled aftershave and lotion and sensed my sister's salty tears. I have searched the corners of my room but come up empty-handed.

She sits on my bed. She sits bundled in a robe, even though it isn't even dinner time. No bears, Goldilocks? She inquires. When I say no, she growls and tackles me, tickling my sides until I laugh. She lets me roll her over—she is so easy, my sister, so gentle in her rolling—she lets me go bang-bang-bang into her heart with my fake gun.

Oh, she says, covering her forehead with her arm. I am dying. As she leans back, her hair falls, the soft skin of her neck exposed, the faint impression of raspberry marks under her ear.

Don't die, I say, suddenly regretful. Come back to life, I tell her. I plant a kiss on her cheek. I coax her with another kiss, but her eyes are closed and she does not answer. She lies perfectly still. I push at her shoulder. I nudge her a bit, check her heartbeat and pulse like doctors do on television.

7.

September pushes life on and on. I feel it pulse through me, like wind scattering the dead leaves. September is also the month of Aunt

Judy's pumpkin bread, sticky on the mouth's concave roof, sweet on the tongue, melting like butter. She stops by to check on my father, to see if there have been callbacks on jobs. Laid off from the textile factory, my father has been home all year, and people are starting to worry, notice small things, changes in demeanor, a certain quietness that has settled over the house. Is he depressed? She wants to know. Are things okay? Does he seem all right to you girls?

My sister and I rally around him. We are his girls—we are such good girls. We stay inside, neglect friendships, help out around the house. My sister does not ask to drive, though I know she wants to. She has a secret love, a kiss me love, a boy from school named Scott. Sometimes Scott prowls by the house late at night, waiting to catch a glimpse of her. He coaxes her with promises of weed, tiny pills, and beer. He throws small stones at her window. Come out, he whispers. Can you come out?

8.

We prepare for Halloween, a full month early. We are secretive in our preparations; my sister holds clandestine meetings in the basement, telling me exactly how the skeletons must look. When we finish our cuttings of cardboard and charcoal, we hang the skeletons on the front door, a warning to those who enter—Beware! We plant gravestones in the front yard, speak of death and goblins, ask Aunt Judy if she knows what it's like not to sleep. It's not Judy but my sister who seems most tired, those half moons under her eyes, her hair barely combed. She cracks lame jokes, anyway, parades around the living room, dancing like a zombie.

Girls, Aunt Judy says. You girls, always living in a fantasy world. Can't you ever come down from your clouds? She tells my sister she's surprised at her—almost sixteen now, and still talking nonsense. Silly, she says. Your mother needs your help. She's been working so much, trying to keep up. There are important, adult things going on, you know.

Aunt Judy is silly. She wears entirely too much makeup: blue eye shadow and peach lipstick, and her red hair always shellacked. Her clothes are too tight for her round body. She believes she can be twenty again. What is sillier?

9.

There must be a mother. I open the white shutters of her closet, step into the mothballed air and inhale until my lungs hurt. There are pretty shoes lined up against the floorboard, long dresses hanging on metal wires. I go a-hunting through the house, down the long corridor that leads to the kitchen, where scorched stew has been left on the stove too long. I run my hand across the curtains on the ironing board, the ruffles hanging over the edges. I find dictation in the living room, take-home work from the office, her almond-shaped reading glasses lying atop a mass of papers. In my room, I find clothes laid with exacting detail in the places body parts should be: a yellow Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt lying just under the pillow on my bed, a pair of brown slacks under it, a braided belt in between, socks under the cuffs of the slacks, clogs on the floor. And then, I sleep.

It is not my mother but my sister who kisses me goodnight, who tucks flannel blankets all around me. It is my sister who tells bedtime stories. Before she pulls up the covers, she lets me drape the sheets over both of us. This is how we tell stories: under the sheets, hiding in ourselves. If someone were to look in through an open door or window, if ever there were open doors and windows in this house, they'd see us bunched up, flashlight barely seeping through the fabric. We are like ghosts, my sister and I, already disappearing.

10.

My sister ignores the knock at the door. We are busy, go away. She intones: It was a cold night, just like tonight. She pretends to shiver. She has just taken a pill, one that will dull her senses, one that Scott gave to her the night before. I listen more to the sound of her voice than to her actual words. Her voice is light, like a song waiting to be lifted, full of its predictable, often sorrowful, rhythms. I try to braid my sister's hair—she has left it looking wild—but it tangles so easily. She pulls me from her, in no mood for my wandering fingers.

It was going to snow, my sister continues. It was just about to snow, actually; the sky was black and the air so cold it hurt. The mother pulled her entire family out of bed—two boys and two girls—and she scooted them outside in their housecoats and slippers, their jackets still open. The children thought perhaps there was a fire, but there was no smoke. The children wondered where

the father was, but he remained inside, sleeping. The mother piled them all into the car. She had packed a suitcase for each child, my sister says. There were icicles hanging from the door. A brother broke one off, just for something to do; he carried the icicle in his bare hands. The mother started the engine running to warm everyone up, but then she just sat there, crying, not knowing where to go or what to do. The baby slept through all this, my sister says. The baby was only three, going on four, and she had curly blond hair, just like yours. She looked like an angel, sleeping like that. I bet the baby doesn't even remember.

11.

My friend frequently speaks about lies and how bad they are, though mostly it is with regard to the government and politics and the flow of information. My friend's brother died in Vietnam, and she is still very angry with the government, particularly the current administration. Truth, she says, is the only thing that can save us, restore our voices, our common humanity.

Sometimes I think she speaks the truth so much in an effort to remember her brother. Maybe, in speaking the truth, she soothes some hurt, calms some grave injustice. I do not know for certain. I rely on speculation, innuendo. In that regard, I believe I am like my sister. We are not easy girls, my sister and I. We leave out the most important things, rely on pauses and hesitations, which we also look for in other people. But, even then, intuiting, what can we say we really know? I will never be like my friend, who searches for truth and seems disappointed when she can't find it. Even the smallest pieces of my knowledge are fraught with complicated interpretations, large gaping holes, lies.

My friend and I sit at the kitchen table. We drink wine and smoke cigarettes. We read tarot cards and palms and laugh hysterically when we say that we'll never lose our beauty and luster, or that we'll be rich and famous.

What was your family like? My friend asks later. She is still trying to get to know me, still piecing me together. She is so intent on uncovering anything I hide.

Mostly, I say, we were a normal family. This is not a lie. I love my parents. They are my parents, after all. And my father and mother took reasonably good care of us. We had warm clothes every year,

breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We went on picnics in the park. We took vacations to Florida. My parents had friends, people who visited. In the winter months, my father would take us all sledding. He waxed our sleds with candles. He made sure we bundled up. He warmed the car before we got into it—he always did that for us—and he drove us to the highest hill in the neighborhood, where he'd wait as we got out, one after the other, and flew away on our sleds, screaming. Then he drove down to retrieve us and drove us back up again for another go. He did that for hours, which was very nice.

That is nice, my friend agrees. But it seems to me that this is not enough for her, that she is still waiting.

Most of us, these days, don't have much of a relationship, I tell her. We hardly speak, if you want to know the truth. My brothers, they moved far away too.

She looks at me sympathetically. Of course you all have a relationship, she says. Even if you don't speak at all.

I would like to believe this. I would like to believe that's how all love is—that love is carried with us, on our shoulders and inside our bellies. I would like to believe this about my sister, especially, even if it is rather foolish.

12.

Hunk, Hunk, Hunk, my father calls. He wants her to come and clip his toenails. My father is a slack man, with skin that is like leather treated too long. My father is also extremely superstitious. Did I mention this? He believes he once saw a ghost. He speaks of his own mother casting spells that could bring the dead back to life.

Hunkie, he calls my sister. Hunkie, the people of Eastern Europe. Or Hunk, a slab of meat. He praises her gypsy good looks. Hunks can call each other Hunks in affection or recognition, in the way that another friend, years later, would talk about calling her sister Dirty Irish, or in the way that my friend, Bill, would call his lover Queen or Queenie or Louis, you fag.

13.

In January, we pour a new basement. My sister has been living these days in her room with the door locked, and my *bumpity-bump-bump* coaxing doesn't bring her out. Even Scott doesn't draw her interest, coming to her window, offering up weed and small tokens of his



affection. What is wrong with her? Aunt Judy wants to know. Come down, she calls. Come down now.

My brothers, Aunt Judy, and I help my father mix concrete that will turn hard and crumble. My brothers call each other *goofball* and *moron* and *dumb ass*. They throw cement into each other's hair, claiming peanut butter gets anything out. They laugh when Aunt Judy chides them.

My sister finally comes down to help. She is dressed in sweat-pants and a T-shirt that exposes her thin arms, the paleness of her skin, the fine dark hairs that travel over her and stand on end. My brothers tease her, tease her tiredness, her aloneness. They smear wet concrete on her back, to try and egg her on.

We mix and pour and level things off until everything about the room seems gray and cool, thick and wet. We move backwards, edging our way to steps that lead upstairs to the kitchen, to the light, to the cranking heaters. We leave no footprints. Right before we finish, my sister bends down, and, at the landing, she writes in big, chunky letters: The Hunk. Years later, after my sister has left, my mother will cover this up with ugly fragments of carpets that do not fit anything. And my sister, what is left of her, will disappear all over again.

*Who's the favorite? What does the favorite get?*

14.

Time passes and life thaws outside the window. Things push on and on. A full summer later, after the summer of closing and opening doors, the summer of bears and more bears and raspberry kisses and briny tears, I walk into my sister's bedroom and find her packing a small duffel bag, with only the basics: shirts, jeans, underwear, a bra and panties. She is so willing to leave everything behind. She is so willing to go. She tells me: I'm sorry, Baby, but I can't take it anymore.

I do not understand what my sister's packing means, just as I do not understand her laughter or tears. There was a mother, I know, who packed things and only made it to the end of the driveway, so I am not too worried. I watch as my sister packs, as she takes a family photo and cuts our two faces from it—same pale skin and hooked nose, same deeply set eyes. She holds us up and says: I'm going to keep you with me forever.

Years later, in her one and only letter, she will send this photograph back to me, worn and blached and wrinkled. She will send it to let me know she hasn't forgotten, to remind me of her promise and to break her promise all at once, to both lie and tell the truth, simultaneously.

15.

For a long time—years in fact—nothing happens, which makes me sometimes wonder about my sister. Before I leave home for college, she sends a letter to me, along with the photograph of us taken years before. In the letter she says horrible things. She speaks of doors opening in the middle of the night, marks left all over her body. She says so much that I have to skim over large portions of her words, skip entire passages, block out pieces of information.

These days I never read the letter, but I know exactly where it is, in the third drawer of my lingerie chest, buried under fishnets and garter belts, lacy bras and other things I don't often wear. That is where I keep my sister, and that is where I keep her words.

I have learned so much from my sister about the importance of walling myself off from the world, of keeping things inside. And I have been clever, in my own right. At twelve, I took up voodoo. I turned Goldilocks into a witch, magically. I practiced the evil eye. I could tell my sister: One inconsiderate look and I was at the needle, stitching away, making dolls from old scraps of clothing, spitting on the face. I left the dolls in strategic places, their hearts stuck full of pins. I was never labeled the favorite. No one ever called me Hunk, though my father, to this day, calls me a witch.

My parents are now very old and they live alone without any friends. They never speak of my sister. Her name, like the clothes of the '70s, has fallen out of fashion. Each year, their house becomes darker and quieter, their reasons for celebration fewer.

If ever I mention my sister, on days when I am feeling brave or those days when I just need to remember or piece things together, my mother is always the one to say: There are two sides to every story. Your sister was smoking so much pot in those days; she was taking pills. She would run off in the middle of the night. You really don't even know the half of it, my mother says. You were too young to understand anything, so I don't appreciate your tone.

I do not tell my friend any of this, just as she rarely speaks about her brother, except in fragments.

16.

It is so unlikely that my sister will ever read this. It is so unlikely that if we ever passed on a crowded street she would turn her head in the smallest recognition.

Still, I hold entire conversations with her in my head. I could tell my friend this, but frankly, why should I? Like my mother and the government, she would only arrive at too-quick answers. I am practically a lunatic with all my chatter. I am like Goldilocks on speed, held up in some abandoned building with a gun, trying to formulate a plan that will let me get to her. Because I sense that my sister needs me, that she is lost somewhere and hurt and in need of resuscitation. Only to find her, I have to murder many people, and say things no one likes to hear, particularly in stories. What order could possibly come from such chaos, what happy ending? Already I hear the blazing sirens down the road, anticipate the disaster that is us, that wreck of my sister and me.

Sometimes I like to imagine that I bump into her somewhere, on a street or train, or in a coffee shop. She recognizes me immediately, even with my hair dyed jet-black, even with all the angularity my body has taken on in recent years—hard edges around the chin and cheeks, arms that frequently cross when I am speaking. She recognizes that certain pout of my lips, that quality of sameness in us. I know you! She exclaims. I'd know you anywhere, you, oh you.

We sit down, at a table or in a nearby restaurant. Even though I have aged, my sister, miraculously, has not. She appears tall and her hair is still long and full of shine. I say: What have you been up to, all these years? Start slowly, take your time. I've got all day. I've got forever for you, actually. You, I say, are forever in the present tense.

But my sister does not answer, as if she herself doesn't know what happened to all the time. I thought about calling, she says vaguely. I wrote you that letter, but you never responded. Scott said maybe you were frightened, but I told him you were so small—you were really just a baby—you probably blamed me for everything. It's good to see you don't.

No, I say. I don't blame you at all. I never blamed you.

She seems as though she wants to touch me, perhaps my knee or my shoulder, but she keeps her hands planted firmly on her lap. Only her body leans slightly forward. You held up pretty well, she says. I bet you're a real fighter; I can see it in your face.

Maybe, I say. But I'm not as brave as you. I do not know whether my sister has been brave or not, but it seems to me this is something you tell people you love who have been through a great ordeal and continue to live. I had it pretty easy, I say. The bears never got me. I moved far, far away. I also mastered the evil eye; it does wonders in a pinch.

Funny, she says.

I confess: Sometimes I try to write about you, Carole, but I can never make the words fit. I leave out entire passages and all the big moments. I keep abbreviating everything.

Then you lie, she says. About the bears.

I don't know, I say. It's true I have had to forget things. I do not tell my sister that part of this means forgetting about her at times, that part of this means having to let her go. It's amazing what you can live with, I tell her, if you just commit to it.

Oh, I know, my sister says. Then she says something a little stupid and hokey, something like: I understand you, really. You never have to explain to me. She leans forward and plants a tiny kiss on my cheek, one that is terribly light and breezy.

Thanks, I say. I needed that.

My sister leans back, smiles. You girls, she says, imitating Aunt Judy. Always making up stories, always living in a fantasy world.

Yeah, I say, imitating Aunt Judy back. Can't you ever come down from your cloud?

Then, suddenly, we laugh. Can I tell my sister how much I love her laughter, how much I've missed it? Or how much I've longed for her? In a few seconds, my sister will get up from the table and leave—magically, just like that, she will disappear—because that is also how my sister is: full of comings and goings. But for now we are both alive and well and laughing. We laugh to cover the silences, to cover the tears and all the years between us. If I strain, I can hear under our laughter the smallest fractures and sense the greatest losses, those spaces in us where nothing fits anymore.