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Virgins

THERE WAS THIS guy who slept with my roommate the summer we turned twenty. His name was Johnny Walker. We loved that name, Johnny Walker. We thought he'd invented it, but no, he showed us his birth certificate, which for some reason he kept in a chest in his closet. His mother was Edith Walker, his father David.

Johnny would come into our room, which was across the hallway, to borrow soap. He wore a towel wrapped around his waist so that my roommate, Tonya, could see his chest. We agreed it had just the right amount of hair on it, and that he was fit but in a way that didn't look like he was too vain. Boys in that house were always coming into our room, lingering. They came for Tonya. She had the face of a supermodel; classical, lovely, interesting. Her eyes were bottle green, and her hair, when the sun lit it from behind, was the auburn of expensive chocolates. Someone was definitely going to write poetry about that hair, someday. I was happy enough with my looks, but I had to admit, it would have been something to switch off with her for a day. I'd get a lot of free stuff, and people would just assume I was soulful; they wouldn't have to dig.

Anyway, I was feeling annoyed with her one day because a boy I liked had met us for pie at the diner and he was smitten.

"You didn't have to wear the pink tank top," I told her. She blushed. It wasn't her fault. She was that old-fashioned word, fetching, when she blushed.

"You could have said something to him, Bea," she said.

"I did. But as soon as he saw you were there it was like you were lit up from beyond. All *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. I hate it. You don't even look bad in bad lighting."

And then of course Johnny Walker was standing in our doorway. You could see he'd heard our conversation.

"Hey Tonya," he said, "I'm going to campus. Come with?"

She didn't. We walked to the corner store and Tonya bought a dime bag. I felt embarrassed when she did that. At home, I'd been born again. I drank, but that was about it. We walked along the side of the winding road, talking. We talked about God, about hell. I didn't believe in it, but wanted to live as if it were real, because, I said, you should be good for the sake of being good. Tonya believed in hell, but didn't know why. It's a matter of faith, she told me. She said she had faith in hell. These were the kinds of conversations we liked to have, figuring everything out as we talked. The light was turning the old Polaroid golden that came with the fall before twilight. We weren't worried about being stuck in the dark. Tonya kept a flashlight in her backpack. She pulled it out and walked ahead. I stumbled over a pebble. I felt a little drunk and sad. I wasn't drunk, but I felt that way.

"I think I'm in love," I said to her.

"With Toby?" she asked.

"I don't know. I can't even talk about it. I guess I'm not. But if he walked me along the water, and sang a song to me on his guitar, and even touched me, no, even grazed his hand against my shoulder, or brushed my hair with the tips of his fingers, I would be."

"Oh, Bea," she said, "You're such a romantic."

Tonya and I were far from our homes, and we fell into the rhythm of each other's lives almost immediately. We shared

toothpaste; we traded clothes. We knew one another's childhood secrets, and treated them tenderly. She'd told me about the time she'd heard her father having sex with her mother's friend Judy, when she'd come home from band practice early one Saturday. The creepy part was that he'd kept calling Judy his little girl. My deepest secrets, the ones I'd never said out loud before I knew her, were about my brother peeing on my head when he was angry with me, and the fact that my mother would bite my fingertips and call me a damn nuisance when nobody else was around. My brother was a pretty good brother overall, but my mother; well, it was hard to explain. She was decent, but distant. Tonya agreed. She's a refrigerator mother, she explained. Our childhoods were something we were to overcome, before we graduated and moved into glamour. We would live in skyscrapers and drink mimosas in the mornings with famous men. These men would never know that Tonya had once played the tuba, or that I spent my prom night playing Trivial Pursuit with my brother.

We hated each other's enemies, wrote papers together, read the same poetry. We decided Emily Dickinson was too exquisite for words, and Ashbury was overrated. We wished we'd met in junior high; no, in kindergarten. We spied on the professor who'd fucked her, then bumped her from his class. We broke into his office and put shoe polish on the seat of his chair. We were going to be famous, but we told nobody else, because it sounded arrogant. Neither one of us had ever had a best friend until now.

Back to this night I was talking about. At the end of that walk, we came upon Johnny Walker sitting on the porch. He stared at Tonya. He took a match and lit it with the sole of his boot, keeping his eyes on her all the while. This was always a hard thing for me to read; either Tonya wanted me away, and fast, or she wanted me to make up some excuse for her to get away. She hated to be mean. I didn't care.

I left. I went upstairs and read Madeleine L'Engle. I read about Meg, a girl who wore glasses and traveled through dimensions. That was another secret we shared, love of young

adult books. We had been lonely adolescents, something I'd found difficult to believe at first. How could someone who looked like Tonya ever be lonely?

She woke me before sunrise, opening all the windows.

"You did it with him, I gather," I said.

She opened our little fridge and pulled out powdered donuts.

"Let's go to the Vanderbilt Mansion and read the New York Times today and talk," she said, "I don't want to see him again just in case this feeling goes away."

And she told me about the night before, how they'd been held together by an invisible force, how everything he'd said to her made sense in a way that nothing had ever made sense to her. He'd played a mixed tape, filled with songs of love and redemption, and he'd tried counting the smattering of freckles on her shoulders, but gave up, deciding they were infinite. It was like counting the stars in the sky.

"Sounds like the drugs talking," I said.

"Don't be a pill," she said.

And then he'd played that Eric Clapton song for her, the one about a girl who combs out her long blonde hair and asks how she looks, and Eric Clapton says she looks wonderful tonight. Tonya had left him sleeping on the mattress, and he looked like a little boy, with his head buried in his pillow.

That day I felt jealous, but I couldn't tell why. I thought Johnny was kind of a cheeseball, but I wouldn't tell her that. We rolled down the windows, played Cyndi Lauper, and talked all about how great it was to be. I felt a contact high; I wanted this thing with Johnny to last for a while, to be hard and heavy. I was a virgin and I wanted to fall hard, too, but I wanted to learn about it first. Tonya was good at preparing me for things. She'd taught me a lot, about how to look sexy without looking slutty. Like, keeping two buttons undone with a push-up bra, and either wearing eye makeup or lipstick, but not both. About how to

highlight books in the first read, before you formed your ideas for papers. Even how to fold socks so they didn't lose their shape.

We sat under a knotted old tree, on a checkered blanket, talking instead of reading. "It's like when you wake up from a really good dream," she said, "And you know if you don't write it down you'll forget it." We talked about Johnny, about his brown eyes and his thick sweet voice, and, talking about him, I started to see him in a way I never could when I was looking straight at him.

A few nights later, Johnny came home with a freshman. We heard them giggling.

"Go out there," Tonya said, "but don't let them hear you."

"He giggles like a hyena," I told her.

I could see the black light go on under the crack in his door. And then that song, the Darling You Look Wonderful Tonight song, started to play.

When I came back to our room, Tonya was vomiting in our toilet. I sat on the edge of her bed. She flushed, washed her hands. I listened as she swished with mouthwash. When she came out she was smiling.

"I heard moaning," she said.

"Yes, there was some moaning."

"I wasted it," she said.

"You didn't know," I told her.

Every Saturday, he played the song. It got to where Tonya would duck her head inside the car when we pulled up if he was in the yard. She'd get home from class, or work, and go straight to our room. She didn't even use the kitchen anymore.

"I don't know why you are doing this," I told her. She cried every night, wringing her pillow with her fists until they turned purple. She never made a noise.

"Shh," she said, "he'll hear you."

It was just that he wanted to fuck her, before the others did. That's what she said. I told her it was okay. I told her it probably wasn't true. And Johnny Walker, he was just a guy who liked sappy songs and maybe even thought he was sincere.

We decided to move out at the end of the semester. Neither one of us could afford to fly home for Christmas, so we were going to have the house to ourselves. We painted a Christmas tree on the wall, and cut out colored paper from magazines. I made paper angels and pasted movie stars' heads on them. She made a mosaic, a portrait of me, out of cut-up magazine pages. It looked sort of beautiful, in oranges and blues. She used newsprint for my eyebrows, which arched starlit style over swimming pool blue eyes.

We worked double shifts at the diner, and then spent our money on booze for me and pot for her. We spent the whole break watching old movies. We discovered Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, and decided it was the most perfect film ever made, ever. Ever. Tonya dyed her hair blonde; well, we meant for it to turn blonde but instead it turned tomato red. Which looked great on her, a little punk. The bright red turned her eyes into emeralds.

We discovered Billie Holiday. She sang as if she were singing her heart out of her body. We, like Billie, felt love was a great big bruise. We went for long drives, blasting songs about men who must be loved. Next semester, Tonya met Johnny Walker's brother Tim at a townie bar. She took him to the movies, kissed him on the fifth date, and broke his heart.

I gave Toby my virginity under a railway bridge. It was cold, so we kept our clothes on. In the dark, he could have been anyone. I held onto the sleeves of his bomber jacket and wrapped my legs around his waist as tight as I could, but he kept slipping out of me. He said my name, rasping, and when he said it I felt like someone else. Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice.

After, he asked me if I was cool. Cool as a Hitchcock blonde, I told him.