

Test Strip

They like beer. They drink beer. They buy us beer, which we like to believe we like; they mix high-octane drinks to keep us drinking: cheap vodka and lemonade, vodka-infused rum and strawberry daiquiris—cracking good college cocktails. They throw parties and there's beer. Cans pile up in the corner.

One of us has been in love with one of them since the first semester of college. When she moves in sophomore year, she can't believe her luck. She does his laundry while he drinks beer. One of them plays lacrosse; one of them wears Pringle sweaters; the sweet smell of Mary Jane wafts through the hall, and one or another of them is perpetually stoned.

They're our neighbors. They ask us to type their papers because we're good at those things; they have fathers who run businesses they'll go into—do they mention their mothers? Right now, they're good at parties and beer.

They like using our phone so their pizza orders or drug deals or whatever can't be traced. They're on probation and we can protect them; when one of us says, *This is stupid*, the others say, *Shut up*.

One night, they take the party down the hall, a favor to the studious ones. One of us remains marooned at her desk, hunched over a Norton anthology in winter-poor light, the glare from a small desk lamp flooding tissue-thin pages. One of them, a neighbor, remains, too. He begins to distract, no annoy, no harass her—she should *give up the bullshit of studying for once and join in*. He's drunk, she thinks, easily shrugged off. Except for his hand on her shoulder holding her down where she sits, his breath homing in.

From the perspective of distance, she wonders: what were her options—the window? The door? Later, she moves out, moves on, but leans in as the years pass to bring her whispered stories, versions in which the drunk neighbor pulls out a knife.

Years later, she follows the Kavanaugh hearing, sees shots of the party calendars that have gone viral online, the antics of that strange trinity, *Tobin, and Pj, and Squi*. Antics that have, it's said, no bearing on the person this Supreme Court Justice-to-be is now. Fellow parishioners testify to his good works, his good treatment of women. In the Senate, the nominee can't remember if he ever drank so much he blacked out. He turns the question to the female senator known for her command of Midwestern nice: "Have you?"

A reporter writes: "The elite learn early that they're special— and that they won't face consequences." They master the art of deflection.

Sometimes she thinks of the voices of partygoers in the hall, the random whim that pulled the beer-loving neighbor away. She was wearing a miniskirt. She thinks how her silence still reverberates in that dorm room where, before he left, he tore the pages of her anthology, picked up a marker, and scrawled the words along her thigh while she sat, frozen in place: *slippery when wet*.

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Your first assignment in studio arts I: Black and White Photography is to create a test strip, to shine light through an enlarger onto photographic paper in increments that march from white through varied tones of gray to glossy black. It's a test of patience, of developing an eye—learning to manage the art of exposure you'll need to bring out shadows, details, texture: the scrim of sun along autumn leaves, the knotty whorls of bark, inked lines of weathered wood, the crisp fenestration of rust along the bed of train tracks. You lost the test strip long ago but carry the image with you—its model array of possibilities.

The lab runs late hours; you spend most of your nights there, dodging and burning shadows, bringing up silvered images in pans. You love the click of the shutter marking time, seizing angles. Then scrolling a roll of film onto reels, sealing the stopped images into a developing tank. You experiment with light and time to get the luster you're after, saving cash for the special film and papers that silver the light. You learn to work a wand. You scribble poems in the sunset glow of the safelight while the timer ticks to let contact sheets dry.

You love the certain uncertainty that comes with working in the dark—the senses swimming up, the world dropping away, the way the glossy husks of developed film hang in the air. Stuttering skins of time.

Class critiques involve “object studies”—of campus signs and album covers, beer cans and tickets and rugby balls. From the perspective of distance, it's no surprise the prof admires your work ethic, that you receive invitations. You join faculty and a few other elect student-artists who sit on stools in the dirt-bag tavern next to the art school downtown; there's talk of exhibits and projects.

Though you struggle to ask strangers for permission to take their portraits, you imagine your life as Shutter Babe, decked out in gas mask and Kevlar, snapping shots at the edge of a war zone. Ambition? One round in the mosh pit where you surface under the steely gaze of Joey Ramone will put the tin hat on *that*.

At openings bottles of burgundy and crumpled paper cups clutter the tables. The professor signs you up for an independent study in black and white. The way you're dressed, you *are* a study in black and white. You carry a tripod and a shutter release for night shooting; an Xacto to trim the edges of prints you mount and display. Those black clothes and keys to the dark room are a sign that you're serious.

But it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a possible good future must be in want of a mentor in the shape of man. It is the plot of the 1998 film *Guinevere*: flattered college grad adrift is saved from business school, thanks to the wooing of an aging photographer who nurtures her creativity as one in a long line of ingénues he “mentors.”

So you find yourself propositioned over a plate of pasta in Baltimore's Little Italy one night, an invitation arriving immediately his long-withheld praise for your series of prints, your *steady eye on the world*. Final grades aren't in yet, but you hear, *Of course you have an A*; the phrase meant to shuffle

you on the way from student to . . . something. You don't drink the second can of beer he ordered for you, *mansplaining*, you'd joke now, about the fusion of art and life.

Why not spend the summer in someone's flat, trade free rent for some nude shots, join a time-honored artistic tradition? You need to get back for exams but *the offer still stands*, he says.

Outside your apartment, you wrest yourself from the hand on your breast, the tongue down your throat.

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Years later, you remember how your poetry professor cut short your shared confidence. *You could report the photography prof*, she said, *but it probably wouldn't serve you well*. You nodded. The previous summer you'd used the cash your grandmother gave you for a college ring to pay for an independent study. When the high-profile magazine editor you worked with spotted Plath's *Collected Poems* in your satchel, he informed you her work was *a specialized form of hysteria*. *You should read this*, he said, handing you a worn paperback: a guide to tantric sex.

In the Smith College coffee shop between the freshmen English classes she taught, Sylvia Plath watched her male colleagues cast what we'd call a predatory gaze over their students, wrote wryly about the cycle where the elect would be elevated to faculty wives. You remember a party you attended (just one?) where a Famous Male Poet held court, musing about the bad boy writers of academe, the things one *couldn't get away with these days*. Whiskey swirled in his glass. The youngest woman in the room shifted a little closer to him. A fire crackled in the background.

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From the glass counter of the clothing boutique where you work, you glance at mannequins in autumnal corduroy and fawn-colored Fair Isles. Things have been slow today; co-workers peel off one by one now that it's dusk.

The door pings open; a man in a black overcoat paces among the racks of dresses, fingering the folded, stacked cardigans. He wants you to go into the back room to pick up the dress he's reserved for his wife. He says the boss told him the dress was ready. The log book says nothing about this. He's *insisting* you go into the backroom to pick up the dress. Is this assault or has the stranger simply managed the time-honored art of making a woman uncomfortable?

You should know that this happens *in the before*, back in the time when instantaneous contact by cellphone or text was unimagined, in the time when you pick up the receiver of a rotary phone, twist the dial seven times as the stranger looms before you. You wait for someone to answer but no one does. Finally, you hang up.

You're throwing your voice in a way you hope sounds convincing and authoritative as you dodge from counter to door. *The boss will be in early tomorrow. Reserves are her purview, she'll be in tomorrow*. You know nothing about this dress; he'll have to check in with the boss. She'll know. It's a strained stand-off, but he finally leaves you there, a shadow in the file of close calls and narrow escapes.

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When you enter these memories, are you dodging and burning, burnishing the textures of light so the darkness fades? Which shots will you choose to develop; which will you discard? Which images remain dormant, filed for later exposure? Which are the ones you dare not approach?

You have deliberately left out the late afternoon where August sunlight bounced like liquid metal off the dilute cobalt of the next door neighbor's pool. A cool color your strokes slice through.

You want to keep the composition clear of confusion—emphasize the silver tones that embody memory's radiance. You want to underscore the idyll of summer, not the friend's father fingering you as you both sit on his knee at the side of the pool, and not the way you wriggle away into silence and shame. You are eleven? Twelve? You and your friends have moved from frenzied games of Marco Polo to a kind of crackerjack boredom broken occasionally by pop music, popsicles. No one wears shirts emblazoned with the words *On Wednesdays we smash the patriarchy*. You are learning how quickly a body moves from being invisible to becoming a target, how parishes of silence build.

You've been taught about predators but can't connect them with someone who lives next door—a friend's father you've known for years. The questioning will be uncomfortable, neighborhood calm will vanish, a lens will be turned on *you*. Is it before or after that you'll settle into that problematic narrative mode: reluctance to disclose?

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A specialized kind of hysteria is how some envision assault and harassment. How many lives will these "victims" ruin? Executives are nudged to resign; friends of friends are defriended; chefs, actors, comics, clerics, and other luminaries are called out publicly. The collective function of the chorus is to comment on the action, to shift the thinking in another direction. It's the specialized work that survivors do. If you follow the logic of the test strip, you can measure the presence, the gradations of misconduct. You can listen to testimonies, bring out the textures, rethink the measures between darkness and light.