Casey

They scrambled through bramble patches, they climbed the hill over the road into the forest and sprinted down the hill, dodging roots, wide eyed in the sudden shade. They were all limbs. They learned to let their legs go when running downhill, they learned to pick up their knees and let gravity pull them. They learned that if they went fast enough, they couldn’t fall. Their trips couldn’t catch up to them.

Here is how the park was set up: there was one big loop of trail, where they would run hill workouts, later. It was tossed down the hill with a stream running down its middle, so the whole thing was like a set of lips, the path a penciled outline and the stream like breath in its center. At the bottom, the rest of the forest started, climbing up and around like a big arm around the edge of their town. They didn’t go there much, because it was too far and one time they had come out in the graveyard.

Their favorite part was at the bottom of the loop, where the stream ran out under a bridge and joined a river. From the bridge, you could hardly see where they met, it was all lost in tangles of brambles like so much rough hair. The brambles and bushes had tunnels and rooms and chambers where the branches arched like they wanted to become ceilings, and they all opened onto the wide meeting of the streams. There, they could see their little bit of sky, their bit of sky framed by their woods and their feet cold in the water, the water like sky too, blue in the fall and grey in summer thunderstorms and iced like a refusal in the winter.

Sam and Casey staged revolutions. She could get his head under her arm if she used his hair to hold him still. He could pin her only if her legs were caught under something, so he staged sneak attacks. When they were on the same side, they built dams to keep everyone else out.
They were invincible. Their world was very big.

*

In high school, girls wanted their hair to look flat and thin. The barber’s shop in town had special scissors with serrated teeth that they would pull through your hair at the very top, and they would tug on your scalp like a headache and leave you with a ponytail the width of a finger. The way the town had emptied out reminded Casey of this.

In August, everyone had stopped at the diner on Route 3 on the way out, on the way to orientation at Castleton State, or UMaine, or to basic training in places so far away that they were flying there. Casey saw them all during her daytime shift, their cars packed with boxes and blankets and standing lamps shoved in sideways.

The day Sam left, the last week of August, was a popular day for leaving. Casey gave goodbye hugs to three girls on her soccer team before Sam stopped by. Each of them had an identically placed ponytail. Each of them would be playing for their respective state school. Each of them said, “You’re going to join us soon!” like there was nothing to worry about. Like it would happen no matter what Casey did. She imagined herself playing for all three teams at once, splitting her limbs between them.

When Sam stopped by, Casey was on shift with Ben, sitting on the counter in the kitchen while he stood over the fryer, picking pieces of batter off the cool edges. He always joked that he got hired because he could fry anything, so the kitchen didn’t need to invest in any other way to cook food. It was kind of true. The only things they regularly served that weren’t even a little bit fried were the pancakes and the creemes.

Sam came back to the kitchens without an invitation, pushing the door hard so it bounced back and squeaked again and again, back and forth. He was wearing khaki pants that stopped an inch above his ankles, ones Casey was pretty sure she remembered his mom buying
in middle school. His clothing looked hectic and his face looked blank, which was Sam for nervous. His eyes slid past Ben like he couldn’t see him at all. “Today’s the day,” he said to Casey. “Let’s grab coffee.”

They sat at the table in the corner without windows. She got him coffee, and he doodled on the paper placemat with the crayons in the wire bin.

“Why are the crayons all melted?” he asked.

“Ben melts them when he’s bored.” she said. “College?”

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “But anything’s better than here.”

“Sure,” she said. After a while, she asked, “Are you going to join clubs or anything?”

“What clubs would I join?”

She smiled. “I don’t know. Are there clubs for people who hate everything?”

He grinned back. “At college, everyone is happy,” he said. “The rest of the world is full of people who smile all the fucking time. Haven’t you seen the brochure?”

“So you’re going to join the club of happy people.”

“Sure. When are you going to leave?”

She tried to remind herself that this was why she liked him in the first place. He was direct. If he was asking it, everyone was thinking it. “I get out of work at five,” she said, even though that wasn’t what he was asking.

They sat for a while, him drawing, expanding a geometric pattern to fill the entire placemat, all in primary colors. He told her what he was taking this semester. Her world was standing perfectly still, so there was nothing for her to add. She just asked questions.

She thought she would leave soon. As soon as her brother wasn’t having so much trouble in school. As soon as work picked up at her dad’s shop. She thought about telling Sam this. She mouthed the words at the top of his blonde head. I guess I ought to leave soon. Casey
remembered her senior homeroom teacher telling her to come back for help with college applications. *Anytime*, the teacher had said, well-meaning and seemingly unaware of how greasy her hair was. It was all Casey could focus on, even though she knew the teacher was trying to help her. The part in the middle was perfectly flat and wide, an inch of exposed flesh running ruler-straight like she was going bald from the middle out. She had told Casey, *you are very smart, you shouldn’t waste all that*.

Eventually, Sam said, “I should go. Can you get me some pancakes?”

“Sure,” Casey said, knowing that he wouldn’t pay for them, already anticipating the look on his face when she handed him the box, kind of blank, like he was forgetting something. Like he was asking her to please not ask.

She ducked back to the kitchen, smelling of old oil and always too warm, even with the window over the sink open, and asked Ben to make a stack of pancakes. She stayed back there with him while he poured and flipped them, leaning against the wall. The counters were shiny with years of grease, rubbed in like seasoned cast iron. Ben’s face shined with the same accumulated grease, and shimmered in the hot air rising off the skillet.

He picked up as if she’d never left the kitchen to talk to Sam. “My girlfriend and I have been talking about moving to Oregon,” he told her. “There’s going to be a huge earthquake there soon. End of the world stuff. That’s where I want to be. You know. Start over.”

“That’s pretty intense,” she said.

“Yeah. There’s going to be a Tsunami all the way to Portland.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been doing body-weight training.” He paused, as if trying to remember what this meant. “It gets you really strong. And I’m going to keep bees.” He handed her a paper box with the pancakes, already dark with grease around the seams.
Sam left her with a big hug and a light smack on the head and not a single person came into the diner for the entire rest of the day.

There was nothing for Ben and her to do. Ben was twitchy, kept going out to smoke and chewing down his nails, which were so short already that the fronts of his fingers looked childishly smooth, nothing but flesh.

He kept telling Casey about his girlfriend. Casey wasn’t sure if he actually had a girlfriend somewhere, or if he made her up. She seemed to change day-to-day: she was a competitive climber, she was coming to visit, she was a research biologist about to save the oceans. Casey liked hearing about her.

“She’s doing a modeling campaign right now,” he said, “so I haven’t seen her in a while. She’s been in Europe. She’s been in Amsterdam. They’re photographing her in the boats. She’s beautiful. She’s more beautiful than the boats.”

“Wow,” Casey said, “it must suck to be away from her.”

“I’m thinking about moving out there with her, but Wesley would have to find another cook.”

“Right, that would be really hard on him.”

“I’m going out for a smoke,” he said. “Don’t turn on the fryer.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

* 

Sam came to visit on weekends, hitting the door into the kitchen harder than anyone else did, setting it swinging to announce his arrival. He had tattoos like living things, growing, hot and leaky, dots of ink gaping wide from the sewing needles he used to make them. One week he would have a blank space inside his elbow and the next week there would be shaky black stems
encroaching from all sides and the next week it would be a raised welt, shiny with antibacterial lotion.

His hair grew backwards into his head. That big blonde mess that she learned to french braid on, suddenly too short for even a ponytail, then cropped above his ears, then shaved into a short mohawk, messy around the bottom where he hadn’t been able to hold the razor straight.

The first time he came home with the mohawk, he stopped at the diner on his way out of town. He was wearing his winter boots, with the heels that tapped on the floor like the sound of impatience. That day, he waited around until she got out of work. “Let’s go for a drive,” he said.

His car, an old baby blue corolla, smelled like old bananas and stale coffee. He tossed the papers and old junk food bags into the back seat.

They pulled out of the parking lot already going too fast. Casey closed her eyes as he made the left turn onto Route 3, towards the pass, fast enough that she left her stomach behind. She could feel herself smiling. It felt like last winter, when he picked her up to take her to track meets whenever she missed the bus because of work, no matter how icy the roads were, saying, *four wheel drive is just a distraction, it gets you cocky, I could drive with one wheel drive, just get me studs long enough.*

When she looked over at him, though, he wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t smiling at all. He looked scared and angry. He looked older with all the hair gone, much older. With hair so short, she could see that his hairline was pulling back away from his eyes, leaving them looking lonely in his face. Lonely and squinted small to hold back tears.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I don’t fucking know,” he said, voice just a little shaky.

“Let’s go up to the pass,” she said, since they were headed that way anyways. It was where they had gone after she got her permit, after his dad died, after graduation. The pull-off
hadn’t been paved since the man on the mountain disintegrated, and it was quiet. Most of the tourists didn’t know what the now-blank cliff had been before, even the most eager leaf-peepers during fall.

They were silent all the way up, the White Mountains rising around them like shrugged shoulders. The spine of the Lafayette ridge rose on their right, knotted at the top like vertebrae.

He pulled into the turnoff with the same hard violence as the entire trip, making the turn so quickly that he bounced his own seatbelt-less body against the driver’s side door. His face was calmer now, though, and Casey thought she might have been mistaken earlier.

He turned to her and grinned. It wasn’t a full grin, because when he really grinned, his earlobes moved, and she would have been able to see that perfectly now that he didn’t have hair. At least he was smiling, though. “Man off the mountain,” he said. An old joke.

“Man overboard,” she responded.

They went out to lean against the rotting fence at the edge of the parking lot, looking out at the bald cliff.

“There was a riot at a pumpkin festival last weekend.”

“Why were people rioting?”

“Nothing better to do” he said, grinning. “They flipped a few cars.”

“At a pumpkin festival?”

“A bunch of tourists come, and they make a big plywood pyramid to fill with jack-o-lanterns. The next morning, it looked like they’d gutted something giant and left the insides lying on the ground.”

“Were you there?”

“Too hampered to know.” She must have looked worried, because he added, “I’m not dumb.”
“Not dumb enough to miss something exciting.”

“Never.”

They watched the cliff face as if waiting for another layer to fall off. The air was perfectly still and the highway was empty, as if time wasn’t passing at all. It was overcast and right on the border of twilight.

“You should come back with me,” Sam said.

“I’m working this weekend.”

“I meant, forever. You should come live with me.” He had sarcasm in his voice like a shield but Casey knew it wasn’t a joke.

“I’m working after this weekend, too.”

“There are other jobs.” He was looking at her chin, clenching his jaw, trying not to cry.

“Why do you want me to come?”

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine. It’s just a fucking offer. It’s not like you have people lining up for you.”

“No.”

“Don’t you want to get the fuck out of here?”

“Pumpkin riots aren’t really my thing”

“It’s better than here.”

“I’m working.”

“Fuck off, then,” he said. Casey wished he would just go ahead and cry, so the next thing could happen.

They stood there for a long time, waiting for the next thing to happen. He didn’t cry. She didn’t touch him. They didn’t see the sun set but after a while it had happened, and once they
couldn’t see the cliff face anymore, he drove her back to the diner, left her by the side of the road, and pulled a u-turn. He didn’t even pull into the parking lot.

*  

Ben lived in a big colonial up on a hill, with overgrown gardens all around and ivy sneaking up towards the second floor. It was painted blue, with dark purple trim, flaking off in squares so that the whole thing looked patterned. There was a huge wood pile under a blue tarp in the driveway, torn along old folds.

He had invited her over at the end of work one day. *Do you wanna*, he’d said, *I’m pretty busy usually though, just this weekend my girlfriend can’t visit.* She’d laughed and said, *sure.* Sam had stopped visiting and her weekends had grown full of sitting in her house during the days, waiting for her parents to come home, and sitting in the same place all night, waiting for them to leave. She felt everything had not sped up again after that slow sunset at the pass. The world was going slow just for her, like it was scared of fucking up or like it wanted to give her plenty of time to change her mind.

The front walk was a wide stone path. Wild rosebushes encroached from the sides and boughs of an old pine hung low from overhead. A wheelbarrow stood in the path like a centerpiece, as if it had wandered there of its own accord. The house looked big and happy in the middle of it all, like a child set free to make a mess of its own toys.

When she knocked, he answered right away, so she knew he’d been waiting. “Hey,” she said.

“Hi,” he said, his breath tinted with the smell of good, dark beer.

Casey walked past him, through the entranceway and into his kitchen. It was bordered with windows without curtains, and bright with sunlight. It was empty- no piles of dirty dishes,
no old food, no pizza boxes, just some canned food lined neatly along a stone counter. “Does anyone else live here?” she asked.

“My parents used to,” he said.

He offered her a beer, a nice one, Magic Hat’s fall special, in a tall dark bottle with a jack-o’-lantern on the front. Beer bottles like that always reminded her of root beer and state fairs.

It was warm for November. They played Monopoly in the front yard until they got bored, then switched to strip poker. Casey felt warm, like the beer had coated her insides with felt. They stripped to their t-shirts, then to their underwear. Casey had red lines across the front of her chest where her sports bra had stripped off her skin, and she wondered what Ben thought they were. He couldn’t ask, wouldn’t ask, his cheeks were too pink and his fingers were nervous around the lip of his beer.

The sky looked enormous, and far too blue. The wind had stripped all the leaves off the big maple tree in Ben’s yard, leaving the sun to stream through with that cool, distant feel that wintertime sun has. It cast a small shadow for each goosebump on their skin.

“There,” she said, laying down her cards, “now strip.”

He stood up and half turned away from her to take his boxers off, pulling the elastic away from his stomach and over his dick, then stepping out of them. He looked shy, almost childish. She stared at him, at his body, at the way his legs turned into his back with barely even a nod to an ass, at how his stomach was soft, pudgy in a defined line even after he took his boxers off. He was half hard, his dick tilting to one side. He turned back to her, blushing. She wondered if he’d ever had sex, but it seemed the wrong time to ask.

She stood up and stepped away from the picnic table, on the other side from him, to mirror him. They were outside the living room’s big picture window, which was a mirror in the
glare of the sun, and when she looked into it, she realized that she was grinning. She looked at herself, her body pale and tall. The house stared back, a wild thing, with Ben in the background like another one of its toys.

Her panties looked blue as the sky, sharp as broken glass. The corner where the elastic borders ran between her legs looked dangerous. She thought there was a poem about this, there must be a poem about this, about this fragmentary blue.

She remembered what Sam had asked. *When are you leaving.* She mouthed at the window, *fuck off.* She thought that if he was here right now, she would say, *fuck off.* The house grinned at her. The house agreed.

She turned back to Ben, who was looking at her body with eyes so wide she thought she could here every time he blinked, like a camera shutter. He was so small compared to the sky. She was sure she was much bigger than he was. She was as big as the sky and just as unknown. “You look cold,” she said, “Let’s get dressed.”

*

On the last weekend in November, Casey had a short day at the diner, and neither of her parents were home when she got back. When she opened the door, Archer sprang up and pushed past her, heavy with big dog smell, out into the yard. The cold air slipped in through the open door, ruffling receipts and papers and dog hair as if the whole house was breathing.

She stripped out of her black skirt and white button up and lay them across the back of a chair in the kitchen and joined Archer outside under the low sky. The sky was grey and glowing like early morning had lasted all day. The world was tiptoeing around the possibility of snow. Archer was doing loops around the house, sniffing along the baseboards. He followed her with a whistle.
The bank into the park was steeper than she remembered, impossible to get down without sliding or running, so she ran. When she hit the trail, she kept going, down the loop trail to the stream.

It was too cold to stop running. Up on the other side of the river, the trail got steeper and less well-kept. It spit her out, eventually, onto a dirt road- this was the furthest she had gone on workouts in high school, this dirt road that eventually wound back down to Main Street. Today, she ran along it for a while, past a pair of hunters with big bows and vests so neon they glowed, until she found another cut into the woods.

She went up, up, the trail unfolding around bends as if it hadn’t existed till she got there. It was still rough around the edges, tangled with roots and slippery with fallen leaves. Archer was behind her, his breath as heavy as hers.

She felt a rising feeling inside her. It felt like that grey light, like she had swallowed the sky, like she was alone and happy and would be forever.