

Girl in a Dirt Yard

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In the dirt yard out back of the old burger joint, a mile past the highway, stands a girl—a stranger—with tattooed shoulders and cropped yellow hair. She wears a tight black tank and the tops of her breasts are startling in the sun as it cuts through the trees in jagged lines. Her arms are extended and her fingers shoot from her hands like the first growths of spring as she rocks from side to side. A few feet beyond her, watching her, is a boy of four—his cheeks aflame with sun and heat, his tennis shoes caked with mud. He moves toward her slowly but not shyly, wondering perhaps what is painted on her body, wondering why she moves that way. Is she dancing? Is she pretending to be a tree in the wind?

The yard in which they stand is a hundred square feet of dirt, enclosed on three sides by a tall wooden fence and open on the fourth to a ravine where a shallow creek flows in the spring. On the other side of the creek is a field that runs to the base of the hills beyond. It's the place we used to go in college, remember? The time we all sat at a picnic table in the sun and got drunk on cheap beer and carved our separate initials into the soft wood. And then you and I crossed the creek in bare feet and ran through the field. The grass was long and sharp and you tackled me. You said my name—*Rebecca*—but only once, and I wondered if our friends could see our baked, naked limbs moving in the sun.

Now is a Saturday like that Saturday of ours—hot under a dome of blue sky, the field across the creek laid with a carpet of green. Who would guess at the nettles, the thorns, the discarded condoms hiding there? We didn't use one, the two of us, that time or any other, and there would have been a baby once, but by then you had gone to join Sara in Spain, where she'd been waiting all through that fragrant spring and that long hot summer. I went alone to the clinic and I never spoke of it. I never got the chance.

The picnic tables still stand—their ancient initials carved over with new names, hearts, other symbols of union—but a dozen blue-striped umbrellas dot the landscape now, and the dirt yard has been taken over by families from

the nearby suburbs. They are wealthy, these families, but not overly so; they are clean-cut and satisfied with the lives they've made up for themselves. They drive mini-vans; they wear khaki shorts and clean T-shirts and leather sandals and although it is barely spring, they are already tanned and complete in their belonging. They drink pitchers of micro-brew beer and eat peanuts and wait for their food in clumps at the far end of the yard.

They watch the tattooed girl as she raises her arms over her head, her thumbs and fingers forming a perfect oval. Her legs beneath her short skirt are shapely and luminous, and hiding her feet and her toes—and her toenails that must be painted the color of a new bruise—are black suede boots that rise up to just below her slender knees.

She drops her arms slowly. She bends and whispers something in the little boy's ear. He smiles and leans in close, whispers something back and then darts across the yard to his mother, whose name is Rebecca, who has been watching warily and waiting, who wonders now what secret her son shares with this girl, this strange girl with her tattoos and her showy black boots and that brazen dark line between her breasts. Rebecca wears khaki shorts and takes tiny sips of beer from a frosted mug and pushes the stroller that holds her sleeping daughter back and forth with one sandaled foot. Her toenails are clipped and bare, her hair, once long and untamed, is cut expensively around her shoulders. Her husband sits beside her at the picnic bench—a shorter, slighter man than she'd imagined, a man whose good qualities have been affixed in her mind like a spelling list and carefully memorized.

The girl begins to follow the little boy, then as he climbs into Rebecca's lap she stops, her body held still like a small animal at the side of the road. An uncertain smile plays at her lips. Rebecca rearranges her own face and looks the girl hard in the eye. The girl's smile fades and she turns away, her body silhouetted against the field across the creek. All at once, Rebecca is overtaken by a memory—a roll in that grass under a dome of blue sky, the weight of his body, his reckless hot breath in her face.

She takes a swig of beer, then refills her mug from the pitcher and downs it without waiting for the foam to settle. The sun is hot on her shoulders and on the

back of her head. The girl is far across the yard now—she is heading toward the gate, she is gone—and Rebecca knows right then she will make the phone call that has been lingering in her for a decade. She must get it back—that pitched yearning, the old speeding car with the top down and the long days drinking in the sun. She knows how to find him. His number is listed. She's checked a dozen, a hundred times in the decade that has gone by since those months they spent together.

But she doesn't call. The winds come back and then the rains and another year, then two go by, and a third baby is born and fed and weaned, and after all that time she sees it—while she sits with her family in the breakfast room eating cold cereal—three small lines of type in the class notes at the back of the university's alumni magazine. He and Sara have had a child; it has been born on her birthday, and they have named it Rebecca.

For a long time she sits, unmoving, watching the morning light fall in shards across the breakfast table. Then she stands and clips the tiny paragraph from the magazine with the kitchen scissors and wonders where to put it. It cannot be stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet; it cannot be stashed in the junk drawer or pasted into a photo album. So she puts it in the pocket of her bathrobe and leaves it there, and that is where it stays, through many seasons of washing and fingering, until truly, it is nothing.