

One

She, light-streaky out of the corner of my eye. It's that game, the one called Bloody Murder, the name itself sending tingly nerves shooting buckshot in my belly, my gut, or wherever nerves may be. It's so late and we shouldn't be out at all, but we don't care.

Voices pitchy, giddy, raving, we are all chanting that deathly chant that twists, knifelike, in the ear of the appointed victim. *One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock, five o'clock...* And it's Evie, she's it, lost at choosies, and now it will be her doom. But she's a good hider, the best I've ever seen, and I predict wild surprises, expect to find her rolled under a saggy front porch or buried under three inches of dirt in Mom's own frilly flower bed.

Six o'clock, seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, the cruel death trill we intone, such monsters we, *ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, MIDNIGHT! Bloody murder!* We all scream, our voices cruel and insane, and we scatter fast, like fireflies all a-spread.

I love the sound of our Keds slamming on the asphalt, the poured concrete. There are five, maybe ten of us, and we're all playing, and the streetlamps promise safety, but for how long?

Oh, Evie, I see you there, twenty yards ahead, your peach terry cloth shorts twitching as you run so fast, as you whip your head around, that dark curtain of hair tugging in your mouth,

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open, shouting, screaming even. It's a game of horrors and it's the thing pounding in my chest, I can't stop it. I see you, Evie, you're just a few feet from the Faheys' chimney, from home base. Oh, it's the greatest game of all and Evie is sure to win. You might make it, Evie, you might. My heart is bursting, it's bursting.

It was long ago, centuries. A quivery mirage of a thirteen-year-old's summer, like a million other girl summers, were it not for Evie, were it not for Evie's thumping heart and all those twisting things untwisting.

There I am at the Verver house, all elbows and freckled jaw and heels of hands rubbed raw on gritty late summer grass. A boy-girl, like Evie, and nothing like her sister, Dusty, a deeply glamorous seventeen. A movie star, in halter tops and eyelet and clacking Dr. Scholl's. Eyelashes like gold foil and eyes the color of watermelon rind and a soft, curvy body. Always shiny-lipped and bright white-teethed, lip smack, flash of tongue, lashes bristling, color high and surging up her cheeks.

A moment alone, I would steal a peek in Dusty's room, clogged with the cotton smell of baby powder and lip gloss and hands wet with hair spray. Her bed was a big pink cake with faintly soiled flounces and her floor dappled with the tops of nail polish bottles, with plastic-backed brushes heavy with hair, with daisy-dappled underwear curled up like pipe cleaner, jeans inside out, the powdery socks still in them, folded-up notes from all her rabid boyfriends, shiny tampon wrappers caught in the edge of the bedspread, where it hit the mint green carpet. It seemed like Dusty was forever cleaning the room, but even she herself could not stop the constant, effervescing explosions of girl.

Alongside such ecstatic pink loveliness, Evie and I, we were

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all snips and snails, and when permitted into her candied interior, we were like furtive intruders.

You see, knowing Evie so well, knowing her bone-deep, it meant knowing her whole family, knowing the books they kept on their living room shelf (*The Little Drummer Girl*, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook*, *Lonesome Dove*), the banana bark chair in the living room and the way it felt under your fingers, the rose milk lotion on Mrs. Verver's dressing table—I wanted to sink my face into it.

I couldn't remember a time when I wasn't skittering down their carpeted steps, darting around the dining room table, jumping on Mr. and Mrs. Ververs' queen-size bed.

There were other things to know too. Secrets so exciting that they were shared only in hushed giggles under the rippling flannel of sleeping bags. Did you know? Evie whispers, and tells me Dusty is named after the singer whose album her parents played sixteen times the night she was conceived. It is thrilling and impossible. I cannot, even in my most devilish thoughts about the hidden wickedness and folly of grown-ups, imagine Mrs. Verver turning her child's name into a lurid, private wink.

Not Mrs. Verver. Living next door all of my life, I never knew her to laugh loudly or run for the phone or dance at the drunken block parties every July. Tidy, bland voice as flat as a drum, she was the fleeting thing, the shadow moving from room to room in the house. She worked as an occupational therapist at the VA hospital, and I was never sure what that meant, and no one ever talked about it anyway. Mostly, you'd just see her from the corner of your eye, carrying a laundry basket, slipping from hallway to bedroom, a fat paperback folded over her wispy hand. Those hands, they always seemed dry, almost dusty, and her body seemed too bony for her daughters, or her husband, to hug.

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Oh, and Mr. Verver, Mr. Verver, Mr. Verver, he's the one always vibrating in my chest, under my fingernails, in all kinds of places. There's much to say of him and my mouth can't manage it, even now. He hums there still.

Mr. Verver, who could throw a football fifty yards and build princess vanity tables for his daughters and take us roller-skating or bowling, who smelled of fresh air and limes and Christmas nutmeg all at once—a smell that meant “man” to his girls ever after. Mr. Verver, he was there. I couldn't remember a time when I wasn't craning my neck to look up at him, forever waiting to hear more, hungry for the moments he would shine his attentions on me.

These are all the good things, and there were such good things. But then there were the other things, and they seemed to come later, but what if they didn't? What if everything was there all along, creeping soundlessly from corner to corner, shuddering fast from Evie's nighttime whispers, from the dark hollows of that sunny-shingled house, and I didn't hear it? Didn't see it?

Here I was knowing everything and nothing at all.

There are times now when I look at those weeks before it happened and they have the quality of revelation. It was all there, all the clues, all the bright corners illuminated. But of course it wasn't that way at all. And I could not have seen it. I could not, could not.

Sometimes I dream I'm playing soccer with Evie again, all this time later. First I'm alone on the field. It's all green-black and I'm knocking the ball around between my feet. My round little legs beneath me. My funny little thirteen-year-old body, compact and strange. Bruise on my thigh. Scab on my knee. Ink on my

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hand from doodling in class. Wisped hair pressed by cool girly sweat onto my forehead. Arms like short spindles and stubby fingers protruding. Barely buds under my shiny green V-neck jersey. If I run my hands over them, they will hardly notice. Hips still angular like a boy's, rotating with each kick, passing the ball between my feet, waiting for Evie, who's there in a flash of dark heat before me. Breath splashing my face, her leg wedging between my legs and knocking the ball free, off into the dark green distance, farther than she ever meant it to go.

When I remember Evie now she is always slipping through shadows. Big, dark, haunted eyes rimmed with red. Running across the soccer field, face flushed, straight black sheet of hair rippling across her back. Running so hard, her breath stippled with pain to go faster, hit the grass harder, move forward faster, like she could break through something in front of her, something no one else saw.