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The Girl through the Glass

When I was eleven, I spent the summer indoors. Normally, I would have passed the days by riding my bicycle in a lonely loop around the neighborhood, listening to other kids splash about in backyard pools while secretly hating my one friend for spending the season at camp. Then I would have gone home and waited for my parents to close their diner and return for the evening, secretly hating them for not giving me a sibling. It was unproductive. So that year—and if I'm being honest, it was the same year I discovered masturbation—I decided to insulate myself from disappointment by remaining inside.

I had video games, the primitive, blowing-things-up-in-outer-space type. I had action figures that I was beginning to feel too old to play with. There were comic books (my one allowed trip outside each day was to get the mail, and what a thrill to discover a comic wrapped in brown paper among the bills). And my penis, of course, which I bothered until it swelled up like a cobra. But generally I occupied myself by taking things apart and putting them back together.

It started with a broken cassette recorder that had been on the top shelf of the coat closet for years. Before it stopped working, I had used it to tape songs off the radio. Taking it apart was a no-risk job—I just unscrewed anything I could, using my father's Phillips-head. A mess of plastic, wires, and solder spread over the carpet as I worked cross-legged on the floor. Reassembly was a challenge; I had to force the insides back into the recorder, breaking off a piece of green circuit board in the process. There were screws left over. From then on, I carefully diagrammed my dissections, in pencil on graph paper, and putting things back together became much easier.

When, in July, I ran out of broken or unwanted things to take apart, I decided to test my skills on the countertop radio in the kitchen. I worked deliberately, finishing just before my parents came home that night. It was playing when they walked in, both of them tired and smelling like greasy aprons. My father, who cooked at the diner, went straight to the refrigerator for a can of Miller before his shower. My mother, as she always did, put off washing until after dinner, which she now began to prepare.

"Isn't that a little loud?" she said, meaning the radio. She closed a cupboard lined with boxes of pasta and lowered the volume. The dial

turned and turned beneath her finger, with no effect. Karen Carpenter sang, “Baby, baby, baby, baby, oh, baby.”

“That’s odd,” my mother said, and unplugged the radio.

By August, having worked my way through all the digital clocks in the house and most of my mother’s kitchen appliances—having even used my father’s tools to take apart his other tools—I was cocksure. I had begun leaving my initials in tiny permanent-black print on the insides of my conquests, and this hidden knowledge made me smile whenever one of my parents twisted a lamp on or snapped the blender to life.

Then, early one afternoon as I considered my next project, a girl about my age walked into the backyard. She moved slowly across the lawn with her head down, as if looking for something small in the grass. After every few steps, she scooped her blond hair behind her ears. She wore pink overalls that had been cut into shorts revealing brown knees. I watched her until my breath fogged most of the window. When she was nearly to the fence that separated our yard from that of our elderly widower neighbor, Mr. DiPietro, she stooped and grabbed something from the ground. I knocked on the pane, rabbitly-quick, drawing her attention and at the same time embarrassing myself. I could have ducked and drawn the curtains before she came to the window, but I didn’t. This girl, she was lonely, too.

She stood beneath me, her hands clasped in a ball. I was about to open the window, but the AC was humming down the hall, and in my head I heard my parents’ voices admonishing me for letting out the cold air. So I yelled to her through the glass, “What are you looking for?”

She answered unintelligibly, then repeated herself when I didn’t respond. “A little toad,” she said. She held up her hands, showing me she had one safely in her grasp.

“Do you want to come in?” I said.

She did.

We introduced ourselves, and she asked me if I wanted to feel the toad. She couldn’t show it to me for fear of it escaping, she explained. Instead, she had me wrap my hands around hers. Her skin was hot and so was mine. She smelled like candy buttons.

“Okay,” she said and gently shook the cage of our hands. There were two pulses within, almost imperceptible, like a heartbeat felt through a blanket. As I became aware of my burgeoning erection, she asked me if I could feel the toad. I told her I could. We put it in an old fishbowl, stretched plastic wrap over the top, and let air in with a knife. We gazed at the tiny creature, a breathing, rusty lump of metal.

It was lunchtime, and we were both hungry. I made us mugs of beef bouillon with egg noodles. We shared a sleeve of saltines, dipping the crackers in the broth and eating them while waiting for the soup to cool. We drank cupfuls of cold whole milk and belched and laughed. How had I never met this girl before? Because, she told me, she was only visiting her grandparents for the summer. Her mother had made her.

“Why?” I asked.

“She said it would be a good experience for me. To see a different part of the country. Even though here is just like home. Are there any cigarettes?”

My mother kept a spare pack in the junk drawer. I gave it to the girl. She lit one and began smoking. “Have you ever tried?” she asked. I told her I hadn’t, and she handed me the cigarette. I took a drag and coughed.

“When you suck in, say ‘Mama,’” she said.

I did and coughed less.

“Your parents are at work?”

“Yes, they have a diner by the train station.” I gave back the cigarette. The truth was, I didn’t like it. But I liked watching her smoke it.

“Have you ever stood behind the counter?”

“Sometimes. When they’re closed. My dad let me make pancakes on the grill once.”

“That must have been fun.” She exhaled the last of the cigarette and put it out in my mother’s giant lead-glass ashtray. “Your mom wears pretty lipstick,” she said. And then she leaned over and kissed me. The shock of her open mouth—I thought of a baby bird gaping—was thrilling. I licked her tongue; it tasted like the inside of my cheek. We kissed until drool ran from the corners of our mouths and her lips looked as if she’d eaten a raspberry Popsicle.

“Let me see it,” she said.

I exposed myself and lay down on the kitchen floor. The linoleum was like ice. I let her shake it. She pushed it inside out and watched it reemerge. “You’re smooth,” she said. My tiny penis throbbed upright. She licked her palm, which I’d never thought of, and quickly made me quake. “You must be empty,” she said when it was over.

She lay beside me, undid her overalls, and slid free of her clothing. She kept her T-shirt on, and I noticed for the first time the small bumps of her breasts. A muddled mix of sexual panic filled me, notions gleaned from who knows where: I’d have to touch her butt, spit inside her.

“Kiss it,” she said.

“I can’t,” I said, because I thought she was talking about *my* it.

“Yes, you can, you just kiss it.”

“Kiss what, though?” There was nothing but a fringe of light brown hair.

She pointed between her legs. “My cunt.”

My tailbone shivered on hearing the word, though its meaning was unknown to me. It was what my father had called my mother the night she threw her ashtray at his head. She’d missed but had taken a chunk out of the kitchen wall. Even as I lay there I could see the patch in the wallpaper where the pattern was slightly off. My parents fought often—it didn’t matter about what—and it terrified me, like a loud noise does a small animal.

“Let’s do something else,” I said, sitting up. I buttoned my pants.

Her face was red, as though she had been caught doing something bad. She dressed quickly. “What do you want to do?”

“You want to help me take the TV apart and put it back together again?”

The television had been too daunting for me to attempt alone. I needed an assistant, another pair of eyes and hands to observe and take notes. This was when every TV had cathode ray tubes and a big bump sticking out the back—that’s where I started, loosening the deep-set screws and handing them to her. As I worked the panel free, she commented on the warning decal: a yellow triangle shot through by a black lightning bolt.

“It’s not plugged in,” I said, and showed her the dangling cord. That’s the last thing I remember before being electrocuted.

I awoke on a stretcher in an ambulance with a medic talking into a radio on his shoulder and Mr. DiPietro hovering above me. He made the sign of the cross over his body and touched his moustache to the gold crucifix that hung around his neck.

I felt the earth rolling beneath us at an alarming speed. “Where are we going?” My voice sounded tired and hollow beneath the oxygen mask. My head was pounding, and my hand felt like fire.

“You’re going to be okay,” the medic said. “We’ll call your parents when we get to the hospital.”

“Where is she?” I said. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” Mr. DiPietro said, somewhat curtly. “She went home.”

Late the next night—after a battery of tests and hours of observation determined that I was okay, aside from a concussion and a burn on my hand (the plastic haft of the screwdriver had melted in my grip)—I went home, too. There was a smell of fresh paint when we walked in the door.

While my mother had stayed with me at the hospital, my father had plastered the dent my head had made in the wall. Apparently, the shock had thrown me a good five feet. My father gave me the screwdriver as a souvenir. My parents' relief precluded them from punishing me, I suppose. Mr. DiPietro had surely told him about the girl, but to my relief, they didn't ask about her.

Our toad appeared to be dead. I took the fishbowl outside, my bandaged hand luminous in the floodlight, and dumped the lifeless thing into the sprinkler-wet grass. Miraculously, it stirred and hopped away into the darkness.