

CROSSWIRE BEND

My Step-dad's Pick-up Skids Against The Stones

stops at the woods' edge,
and from my hiding spot
among the trees, I stop breathing.
Become dried leaf, hollow stem, a dormant
branch. "Katherine!" His voice vibrates the
tree trunks, makes the leaves
rattle. "Get out here!" But I can't
move. Not after he's found out what
I've done. Not after I've let his secret out.
I am stiff and still as the trees. I am musty
mulch microscopically composting, the
silent seep of carbon dioxide, the
slow release of methane.
"Girl, you're so in
for it. I'm gonna
kill you." My heart
tries to jiggle free
but I'm immobile
bone set to
the spot, a carbon
once-girl to be
found a million
years from now,
her ugly story unknown
and pooling in
a puddle of
oil.

I Don't Breathe For Forever

and finally, the truck pulls away. I stop hearing
my step-dad's heavy breathing. Stop imagining
his scent of weed and sweat is all around me. Stop feeling as if he's
right by my ear with his scorching whispers. *Just hold still.* Still,
I don't move. I've run from him, but now I don't know where to go,

what to do. Just know, I can't go back home. I've crossed a line with him this time. And my punishment will be something I may never recover from.

It Was a Simple Photo

my cell set to snap three minutes after he snuck in. It never takes long. I waited and listened past his breathing for the tiny click that offered a perfect explosion of proof. And when it came, even with the pressure of him there, with the force of the tears that always pushed at my ducts but refused to fall, my lips jerked up in my night-dark room, a fleeting half-grin floating on relief and

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When I'm Away From My Step-dad

and not inside my house, I'm a fricking powerhouse. I've pummeled the faces of so many girls. And even a few guys'. Three days ago I turned Carly Creshnick's head into a ragdoll's, like that now-scraggly Raggedy Ann my grandma sewed me when I was three or my beat-up Barbie. Carly made the mistake of coming out of her house next to mine and spewing insults in my direction, making the buzzing in my head start immediately.

I shoved my hand against her head. Her hair, like a loose, matted mitt, covered my fingers, and I began the clench and slam, let myself go, her face not hitting my stained, flowered comforter like my dolls do. Instead, she got

the grass and the dirt all packed down and hard
as hell. She's a hundred times heavier than Barbie, but I always become
a hundred times stronger as I
clench and slam,
clench and slam.

My jaggedy pulse of anger grew, that wicked loud
buzz that blends and bursts and rises higher as I
sweated from all the movement and the screaming
shouts of everyone around - all those
watching kids freaking out and thinking
I'm some spawn from hell. But still, they swarmed around
the blood like little screeching sharks.

All that noise bursting from them and from
my brain was like a steady
stream of acid rock in my
head, a wicked cool movie
soundtrack as I
clenched and slammed,
clenched
and
slammed
knowing my best (and only)
friends, Amber and
Wynn, would step in
before I went
too far.

I love that feeling --
being high,
high,
higher
than I've ever
been, the scream-buzz
growing
louder
and louder.
My body
thrusting
and hitting
faster and faster.
Until I float
on whack-mad
control.
An indestructible
no-feeling

robot girl.
A goddamn
super
hero.

If Only

I could do that
in my own house.

If only
I was unstoppable and
crazy-brave when I really
needed to be.

But Even When My Step-dad

is not in my room, he is a sweating, breathing threat. Sometimes, sitting in the close-to-shredded recliner, stoned, holding his pistol between his open legs, his black eyes following my mom and me like we are automated clay targets. My and Mom's voices rise higher. Our faces sprout nervous smiles. Mom somehow snaps from emotionless, touches me more, actually looks me in the eye. To show him we are human, alive, dripping fake happiness, reeking with faux innocence.

Eventually, my step-dad gets up, goes to bed, the gun still hooked in his fingers. And Mom and I drop the smiles. She goes straight for her Bible, her lips moving as she prays, her face flat. And I head out to sneak a cigarette from where I hide them under the porch, relieved I am still skin-bound and whole even though my insides have shattered and blown (again) like a thousand clay targets.

Mom Didn't Always Ignore

me. Or my little brother, Ryan. She used to be protective. Swathed bandages over our scrapes. Kissed our foreheads before bed. But she

Mom used to turn to Ryan and me, tell us we were her light. But soon, she gave in, let my step-dad take all the power, and

married again, my step-dad filling the house with a coal-thick darkness that made it too hard to move, him stoned and giant, no space left for our muscles to bend toward each other, for raising a hand to help, for cracking a smile that meant anything.

she stopped turning, clung to scripture, held fast to God, our house too cave-like for any light besides blind faith and hope to slip in.

The Photo Would Make Her See The Light

I was sure proof would make my mom believe, show her this is more than gun-threat dangerous. And belief is all my mom talks about. For years now she's said if Ryan and I don't believe hard enough, pray long enough, God will curse us, strike us down in some ways that are subtle and some that will bring us to our knees. But Ryan was only two when my step-dad hit him the first time. Hadn't even developed enough brain power for an *Amen* or a *Hallelujah*. And I like to think I was once innocent. No. Prayers are never enough. Trying to

believe that things will get better is bullshit. Otherwise, Ryan wouldn't be in juvie now at only 10 years old for knifing some kid at the corner store. And I wouldn't be known as the bully bitch who teachers, the principal, everyone on our street says will "crash and burn" before sixteen. Believe me, Ryan and I wanted to believe in the power of good. We screamed to God with all our might. Still, we were struck down, brought to our knees over and over. And were never, ever allowed to get back up.

So, This Morning

I put the photo on the driver's side seat of Mom's beat-up

Chevy Cavalier. I was sure it
would be my ticket to her
senses. Sure she would finally
accept that the little bits of nasty I
sometimes let slip out are actually
real. Photo paper is more tangible
than God. No faith needed
when the truth is that graphic.

She found it while I stood
behind her, picked it up, slowly
turned to face me, the photo
tremoring in her fingers, and my insides
billowing with hope. Her eyes
lifted, looked black like all those
billions of words on her wafer thin,
white Bible pages. But then she
wadded the photo in her fist, shifted
to head-cocked and uppity like
I'd done something wrong, like
I'm the sinner. For not trying hard
enough. For not doing enough to make
this untrue. Her cheek was like some
high arch of forgiveness

let the wicked...

...return unto the Lord...

...our God...

...he will abundantly...

...pardon...

...judge not...

...and ye shall be forgiven –

Her thin, cracked lips
moved over and over, her
prayer sickening and
whispered. My hope burst,
cyst-like and rancid. Because
her prayer used the proof against
me, judged me wicked, slapped
him with forgiveness.

The way it's always been.
God damn her.

The Opossum is Pissed

The sun's gone down and I'm

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in his spot. He stares at me all
beady-eyed and whiskered-up. I
hiss at him. He grunts, lopes away,
leaves me under the bush, under the
blanket of leafy-death, under the grungy
film of terror my step-dad's words spewed
all over me. And under it all my hand travels
down to that soft spot between my legs, holds
there, covers that fragile place up. Because it's
throbbing from just thinking about him. About the
wire hair on his legs and the sour just-smoked weed
on his breath. About the hell I'll get if I ever go home.

And my head starts
drowning in that crazy,
angry scream-buzz.
It flash-floods away
the cricket chirps,
the insomniac cicadas,
the barking dogs down
our dead-end street. I can't
hear my heart. The wind is
gone. Can't think about
anything else but the screeching
buzz growing to tsunami-size, a
migraine pain, a stake to my temples,
a never-ending landslide in my brain.

I press my palms to my
head and squeeze like a giant
zit I can push the infection out of. But it
howls, begging tears, taunting me.
Cry, Baby! Cry!
But I won't. Can't. So instead,
I open my mouth, set my vocal
chords on blast and
scream until my
lungs hurt and my
throat burns. Instead,
I scream just to hear
something above the mess in
my head and hope
the opossum comes
back so I have something
besides the air to pound on.

When I stop screaming

I hear a twig crack against
the ground, hear the pushing
of brush, hear someone
coming
at
me

I go back to frozen
be the branch
be the bush
be the wind and fly away
before he gets to me

Did Mom tell him to come?
With all her unseeing,
unbelieving. Still convinced, “He’s
the dad. He knows what to do. He’ll
take care of things. God will
guide him.”

Another stick breaks, then
another, cracking like
bones. My heart
whacks against my ribs like
a wrecking ball. The moon
skirts behind a cloud. Feet
rustle toward me.

Stay still. He’ll go away.

My skin prickles, the ground
suddenly stinking of danger, like
the spray of a skunk, a defense
mechanism on my behalf, a sudden
spew of rot
that says
stay away from her
please
please
stay away

But he is right next to me,

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knows it.
In my mind, I can see
his face smiling loose and
crooked before he moves
his hands to touch my
back beneath the shield
of leaves.

Shit!
I should have run.

Do it now!

And like a bat,
I spasm up
and flap
into the air.

Wait!

“It’s us!”
The moon busts
out from behind its
cloud, sends spotlights on
Amber and Wynn. They
come at me with
arms open,
tears falling.
I drop into them, drop
to the ground with them,
and rock,
rock,
rock
as the night
and the earth
breathe a sigh
of relief
all around
us.

It Takes Them Both

to carry me out of

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the woods, their hands underneath my elbows, my feet barely touching the ground. They drag me down the darkness of Crosswire Bend – our dirty, dead-end street, the smudge of dirt road dividing our town. The Hamptons to the North. The Slums to the South. Crosswire dangles in the middle.

Most people never leave this street once they move here. It's like a spider's web that keeps us stuck, prey to this life, still alive and kicking, squirming, but waiting and wondering when some dark thing will come and snuff us out. Amber, Wynn, and I, we've sworn with a hundred blood oaths since we were five that we'll leave. Somehow, we'll get each other away from here, earn enough money to make it on our own, get an apartment that's clean, safe, away from all the dark things stuck and squirming way, way behind us.

But until we leave, we've sworn to stick together, have each others' backs, even though mine is streaked with the grubby prints of my stepdad, Amber's has been caressed by every guy who double-takes her way, and Wynn's back is always covered and purposely kept at a distance from any guy who might be interested. We have different scars, different demons, but this street, like a combat zone, equalizes

everything. No one gives a
shit about their differences
when the bombs start to drop.

“He Found Out About The Photo”

Amber states the fact, doesn't ask. Her fair
face and white hair look like
porcelain in the moonlight. “But your
mom didn't do anything?”
My nostrils flare in response.
“You should go back home.” Amber gives me
her straight-as-hell look, the one she
gets when she talks about her own crap life.
She's one tough bitch. I admire that.
“You should face him. Speak your mind. Accuse
him in front of your mom.”

Wynn is shaking her head, her curly
auburn hair flinging against one cheek,
then the other. “I don't know, Amby. That's
some scary shit right now.”

“But, Wynn, if she goes home later
instead of now, she'll get it worse.
Totally way worse.”

Wynn reaches up, pulls a twig from my
matted brown strands, trickles
her fingers down my face like I'm two. “It'll
be worse whenever.”

They're like Angel and Devil on either
side of me, arguing it out. But really, they
are both my saviors, if I even began to believe
in that shit. If it were real at all, they'd be my
perfect, at-the-hip, unconditional-no-matter-what
saviors. “What do you want to do, Kat?” Both
look straight at me. But I can't make choices
right now. All the options bite. I decide
to stare at the ground rolling
past below me, slump harder so
their sturdy fists dig into
my armpits to keep
me up, decide to follow
whichever one doesn't
let go of me

first.

“Let’s go to your house”

Wynn says to Amber. Amber’s full bottom lip tenses. “Mom brought a guy home,” she says. We nod, know that means her mom is wasted, probably drugged to the hilt, bouncing off the walls, into whatever dude she’s chosen to sleep off the high with.

Amber’s on the same track, only with no drugs – at least not yet. She eats boys like berries. Spits the gnawed pits of them to the side before grabbing the next one. She breaks hearts and doesn’t care. Numb in many ways like her mom. But one day, Wynn and I hope the right guy will come, refuse to be spit away, will see beyond Amby’s oval eyes and smooth, white skin and body like a Victoria’s Secret model, and see a girl who digs dogs, dreams of being a nurse, cooks an awesome rare steak, will be the first one to rip her shirt into a bandage when a friend’s arm gets sliced in a fight behind the movie theater.

We all suspect my step-dad has given Amber’s mom plenty of drugs, that she still owes him money. We’ve seen him leave her house, probably demanding payment, in one way or another. And when he looks at Amby, his foul tongue rolling in his half-open mouth, even in front of him, my fear sloughs away and the scream-buzz comes, my fingers curling into claws, and I can almost feel my hands rip into his neck at the simple image of his fingers on her skin.

“It’s ok,”

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Wynn says. “My house
then.” We nod, knowing
Wynn’s house is the lesser
of our residential evils, veer
toward Wynn’s long driveway, her
house set far off the road, away from
the others. Piles of junk sit like
drunken soldiers in the back, by
the garage, by the front door. Stray
cats loop through the trash, dart
away as we walk closer. And I know
inside is even worse, the stink unbearable
in some rooms, the stray cats turned
to mice, to cockroaches, to maggots under
her mom’s many levels of collected waste.

Wynn’s mom
is an elementary school
teacher in our town, dotes on her
students at school then spends all her free
time garage-sale-ing, grabbing up stuff at curbs on
garbage days, adding to her collection. Wynn says sometimes
she feels like a piece of junk, thrown to the side, making way
for new trash, as good as the next scratched vinyl record or
moth-eaten garment in the eyes of her mom. But Wynn
doesn’t get how much Amber and I look up to her, how we
never see the trash swirling around her, how we can only see
the straight, clean pillar of who she is – grime-free, college-
bound if money appears, and in so many ways, unbreakable.
The only hope, really, of the three of us.

Wynn Pushes
Amber
and
Me

through her bedroom window, tumbles us onto
her vacuumed carpet, next to her tightly made
bed. Her mirrored door closed to the mess
outside, guarded by two tidy bookshelves
on either side. A plugged-in air freshener
fills the room with Summer Rain instead of
sour milk, mold, cat urine, and whatever else

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wafts beyond Wynn's door. She pulls back her bed blankets, holds them open. "Get in. We should sleep for a while." She and Amber settle me between them, guarding, holding me close. Wynn's sheets smell fresh-washed. The skin of Ambers legs is shaved and smooth against my stubbly limbs.

Wynn links her fingers through mine, says "I'm dreaming of Paris, sipping strong coffee in some café somewhere."

We do this. Play *Where I'd Rather Be* as often as we can. Because we never want to be on Crosswire Bend.

"I'd rather be in a cabin in the mountains," Amber says. "With all of you." She kisses my cheek. "What about you, Kat?"

The answer is simple. "I'd rather be any other fucking person besides myself right now."

Wynn's eyes glisten in the dark as she stares at me. "You should tell someone." Her words make me stiffen. "Someone at school," she says. "It's time now."

My head shakes against the soft pillow, my mind flashing to the stern faces of Principal Mackler, VP Staubly, the guidance counselor. They've hauled me into their offices so many times, sat with me for detention 'cause I was smoking in the bathroom, making out with some guy in the janitor's closet, keeping a water bottle filled with vodka in my locker for sips between classes. Their eyes wrinkle with disgust when they look at me, with defeat and resignation. After all, I'm their worst lost cause.

"They won't believe me," I say.

"You don't know that," Wynn says. Something cracks outside the window. Amber's breath catches.

"What if he comes here looking for you?" Amber whispers, throwing her arm over my torso, holding me tighter.

"Amby, shhhh," Wynn hisses. "Let her rest."

But they know, I haven't rested for years.

My Gaze Holds The Ceiling

until just before
dawn. I listen for
my step-dad's feet
outside the window, think
about how Wynn's mom
looks at me sometimes, like
she knows, like she can see the
grubby prints my step-dad has
left on me. But she never
asks me, knows my
step-dad knows about her
hoarding, the filth of her
addiction, knows he'll tell
anyone and everyone in the
school district if she makes
trouble for him. She knows
she could lose Wynn for the
vile way she and her daughter live.

You should tell someone.

Wynn's words flap over
and over like a wind-strewn flag
in my brain. I almost told once. Not
for me. But for Ryan. When his beat-downs
by our step-dad were at their worst. When
seeing him bleed brought me closer to
crying than anything. But now, with Ryan
locked up, what stops me most from telling
is how people would look at me if
they knew. Other asshole kids feeling
bad for me instead of stepping out
of the way when I walk down
the hall. Fuck that.

I could leave, hit the streets
of Detroit. Head to Ohio. If I
could learn to stomach prostitution,
Toledo, I've heard, is a Mecca. Maybe
sell drugs, get by until I'm
old enough to get a real job.

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But Amber lets out a soft
snore, rests her head against
my shoulder, her white
hair smelling like forest and
lavender. Wynn's fingers, still
locked in mine, involuntarily
squeeze. How can I leave them?
We promised each other we'd
stay, blood streaming from our
palms, swearing our support.
Until the end.

Finally, I Untwine Myself from Them

Get up from the	bed, watch them
shift in sleep,	fill the space I've
left until they	are curled against
each other,	warm, safe. They'd
be ok if I took	off for good. They'd
still have each other.	But I'd miss them like
crazy. No matter	what I do, I want my
phone, need that	picture on it. If I do
leave this town,	that dark image of
that dark act will	remind me why I
ran. And if I stay,	it is still proof.
Maybe some	day, someone
with a little	authority and
enough balls	will believe.

I crawl

out the bedroom window, slip past the five houses between Wynn's and mine. The sprinklers in the golf course across the street have already kicked on. Morning's close. The giant fence in front of the course stretches next to me as I move through the dark. The fence's metal loops keep us from invading the golfers' perfect landscape, keep the golfers safely separated from our slumping houses, our dirt driveways, the look of broken and bitter in our eyes. They don't know Amber, Wynn and I jump that fence some nights,

scale it in the moonlight, push our toes into their perfect, plush grass, run through their quenching sprinklers, as if we could be nourished by them, grow up perfectly pretty,

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maybe one day fit in on their side as rightly as we now belong on this one. Until then, the golfers won't make eye contact with us, even as we sell them back their balls they've hit over the fence, raking in a dollar here, fifty cents there, enough sometimes to buy a Coke and chips at the convenience store for the dinner we wouldn't get otherwise.

Just Before My Front Porch

I stop, stare at the house that has broken me.
On the day Ryan knifed that kid, before the cops
caught up with him, he stumbled
back here, bloody and crying. He knew what
he'd done. Felt bad instantly. That's how I know
he can be saved.

Because sometimes, I don't feel bad
at all for drawing blood. Sometimes, I need
to feel fist-to-face, to splatter someone's
insides to feel better, to feel
whole and alive.

But Ryan, he knelt against
the wooden steps of our porch, his shorts
exposing his bare knees, his hands
and arms held out in front of him and coated
in blood, and he cried, looking up
at our house, as if God were going to
come springing out of it like some
divine Jack-in-the-Box and
scare the life right out of him, take
him to heaven, or strike him down
and make it all go away.

Instead, he was hauled away by the city's
newest sparkly cop car, leaving
me to scrub the blood off the steps, leaving
me to face this house all by myself.

I'd Put My Cell Phone Behind The Garage

before I ran, before my step-dad
tried to chase me down just hours
earlier.

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I think about going to grab
his pistol, seeing if he put
it in his tool box the way he
does sometimes when he's not
holding tight to it.

But I want the phone first. Prioritize. Head
to the dried-out bush I'd put it
under against the garage's
back wall.

I bend to feel for the cell,
but a hand grips my neck, stops me.

Just hold still.

His voice is frigid. His breath
is sour, rank with weed and
whisky-bitter. He flips
me, pushes my back and head
hard against the wall.

The dying limbs of the bush dig
into my shins. I realize
birds have started singing, sweet
and strong.

For them, today is like any
other, anticipating
the sun will rise, eating,
flying, singing some more.

They have no idea
how much danger goes on
right next to them, they have
no sense of how hard my heart
is flapping, beating
and slamming against
the fragile cage of my ribs.

My Step-dad Hisses

“Not smart, Kat,” his face so close
the flaked skin of his chapped lips drags

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against my cheek when he speaks. “You told our little secret.”

No point in denying it. I feign bravery. “I thought others might be interested to know.” My voice is distorted with his hand gripping my throat, with my frothing fear.

His free hand flies up, thwacks against my temple on one side, my jaw bone on the other. Sparkles fly behind my eyes. The birds whistle louder. My tears push but don’t fall. In the distance, I’m sure I hear Amber and Wynn whisper my name.

*Don’t come here, I think.
Don’t see this.*

They know, have known for a long time. But seeing it is different.

“Kat, Kat,” he purrs. “How am I going to convince you to keep your fucking mouth shut.” His glassy eyes narrow. His head lolls to one side. His free hand reaches up, grabs my shorts at the waist, rips the flimsy material to wide open and humiliating. Rips until I’m bare.

*“Kat?” Wynn’s voice wafts
like wind from my front yard.*

I’m sure he hears her too, will stop, can’t have witnesses. But he’s drug-deaf, anger-crazed. He keeps his grip on me.

*“Kat?” My friends’ calling streams
through the air again.*

Don’t come! Stay away!

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They'll see me naked, see what he
does to me. See how weak
I am.

The scream-buzz in my head builds, volcanic
and fiery. His hand clasps the hollow
between my legs, and I don't think,
the buzz acid-hot and raging. My knee
jerks up, hits him hard between
the legs, and he buckles forward, giving me
a tiny chance
to escape.

I Run

toward the front yard, take two
giant strides, then three, before
I'm tackled, my face ground
in the dirt, worse than Carly Creshnick's
when I clenched and slammed
her too close to death. My nose
snaps. I grunt.

He flips me over. Rears his fist
back to punch my face, not even
caring this time who will see the bruise.
But I create fists of my own, start to
flail, know my friends are
close, want to show them I'm
not as weak as he wants me
to be, let the wicked-loud buzz
inside me out. Finally fight when
it really means something.

“I think they're back here!” Amber's voice
bleeds through the chaos.

He is oblivious, too revved with rage, too drug-dumb. His fist
hits my cheek. The metallic taste of blood fills
my mouth. The birds are roaring, discordant and random. My head
is screaming, urging me on. I can only get my eyes
open part way, see him hovering, the air
around him turning from black to gray with
the growing morning. I try to push him, to kick

his body straddling my torso. But he's heavy, so huge, immovable.

“Where? Where?” Wynn is close.
“There!” Amber is closer.

And I expect to hear them gasp at
what they see, expect to see
them bolt up next to me. Instead,
the sound of a gun explodes
around us.

I Think I'm Dead

it's so silent. No birds.
No buzz. No whispers.
And the weight is off me,
freeing.

But then the throbbing
in my face kicks in.
My ass is pressing
bare against dirt and grass.

I bolt up to sitting, strain to open
my eyes. My step-dad
has fallen beside me, his arms
akimbo, his legs fetal, his fly down.
The slow seeping of blood covers
his white-shirted chest, the wound
just over his right lung. He moans,
but doesn't move.

I twist to find Amber and Wynn,
horror-wracked and eyes wide.
My mom is between them,
the pistol in her hand, her eyes closed,
her mouth moving in a silent prayer.

Amber and Wynn Fly To My Sides

Amber pulls her shorts from her as she moves.
T-shirted and underwear-clad, she slips

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her shorts over my legs, covers
me. Wynn pulls my hair away from my
face, assesses the damage, lets loose
an angry growl that makes me love
her a thousand times more.

The birds restart their singing,
but above them, I hear my mom's voice,
rising. She hasn't moved. Her eyes stay closed.
The gun still points our way. His way. But her voice lifts,
over and over, the same prayer.
let the wicked...

...return unto the Lord...
...our God...
...he will abundantly...
...pardon...
...judge not...
...and ye shall be forgiven –

And I realize, as she stands there, the rising
sun slicing across her face in bright
white and yellow, that her prayer
for forgiveness is not for him. Or for me.
It is for herself.

And my tears finally push through and fall.

The Cop Escorting My Step-dad

is the same one who took Ryan, drove
him to juvie that last day I saw him. He
has red hair, freckles all over that look
more like age spots on his over-forty
face, a messy flush in his cheeks
like someone spilled cranberry
juice into a still vat of water.

I hated him the day he took
my brother. Wanted to rip his sunken, blue
eyes out as he pushed Ryan's head into
the vehicle. Wanted to knee him hard in
his beefy balls when he approached me
outside the grocery store last month, thin-lipped
and gruff, accusing me of stealing the
cigarettes I was smoking. "I'm watching you,"

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he'd said, his fat finger pointing at me like
I was already in one of his line-ups.

Now, I watch the red-haired cop handcuff
my step-dad to a stretcher, direct his partner to ride
along in the ambulance as an armed guard. The cop puts
his thick, pink fingers on the stretcher's end, his other hand
on the top of my step-dad's head, helps the EMT guide
my step-dad into the flashing vehicle, pushing against
that sweat- and weed-scented skull like it's a giant
button that expels toxic waste from a distant
shoot. Pushing farther and farther, until
those prickly haired legs, the shot-up
and now-banded shoulder, those
chapped lips and black eyes
disappear into the dim
bowels of the vehicle,
until the entire
wickedness
of my step-dad
is pushed away
completely and
finally
gone.

One Second Later

the cop is next to my mother, her body
shaking as the medics check
her over, her pale lips still fluttering in prayer.
The cop's wide hand strokes her back, gently, sincerely.
The same way Wynn and Amber are
touching mine. He leads my mother toward
a fellow cop's car, cradles her elbow with his palm as she
positions herself in the back seat to be taken in
for questioning.

His sunken blue eyes turn on me, and then
he stalks my way. My best friends grip my
fingers, don't let go as the cop hovers over us.
But he doesn't say a thing. Doesn't
point. Doesn't accuse. Doesn't console. Just stares. And for
a fraction of a second, I'm sure he really
sees. The proof all over me, foul and screaming, more

graphic than any photograph. He gives a nod, doesn't
touch me like he touched my mother, definitely not like
he touched my step-dad. He knows
I've been touched enough. Then he gets
into his vehicle and follows
the ambulance until he and my step-dad are
far,
far
away.

My Nose Is Taped

Two teeth are chipped, and my
muscles are pissed. But I feel
better, stronger than I have,
maybe, ever. I scale the golf course
fence right behind Wynn and Amber
just after midnight.

It's a new day now, and the sprinklers
are on again, will only spray
for twenty or thirty minutes, so we
hurry, slough off our clothes to our
bras and underwear, fly through
the heavy spray that fans to fine mist, meet
on the other side, wet and with the dirtiness
of what's happened washed away
a little.

We lie flat against the plush grass, stare
up at the waxing moon, almost full, at the stars
that look brighter somehow on this side
of the fence than in our own backyards. Wynn clasps
one of my hands. Amber grips the other.

"You were going to leave,
weren't you?" Amber
asks, keeping her eyes
on the sky.

"I was thinking about it," I tell her the
truth, like always.

"We would have
understood if you took
off," Wynn says. "We

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just wanted you to be
safe, Kat.”

“No,” Wynn says, tugging
my hand, making me look
at her. “I wouldn’t want you
to. I’d be happy if you got away.”

“Then we should agree,” Wynn
says. “If one of us escapes
Crosswire Bend, we aren’t
bitter. We let them go.”
Amber and I nod our heads
against the grass.

“Should we do a blood
oath?” I ask.

We slip into silence, and when
the sprinklers shut off, we stay
there and slip into sleep, knowing
when the large mower near
the clubhouse in the distance kicks
on at the crack of dawn, we will
have to leave. It will push us
back over the fence, back onto
the dirt smudge of Crosswire Bend –
for now, the only place
we belong.

“I know.” I find the North Star, trace
the big dipper with my gaze. “I would have
come back for you both. Eventually.”

“Me too,” Amber says, looking at me.

“And when we each leave this fucking street, let’s
agree to never set foot on it again,” Amber says.
Wynn and I let loose hums of agreement.

“There’s been too much blood already,” Wynn says.