

## 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

v  
e  
n  
g  
e  
a  
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c  
e.

\*\*\*\*\*

### 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

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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.

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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## 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

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.

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

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

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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  
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

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my head and hope  
the opossum comes  
back so I have something  
besides the air to pound on.

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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,  
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  
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 step-  
dad, Amber's has been  
caressed by every guy who

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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,”

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

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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 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.

“You don’t know that,” Wynn says.  
Something cracks outside the  
window. Amber’s breath catches.

“They won’t believe me,” I say.

“Amby, shhhh,” Wynn hisses.  
“Let her rest.”

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

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

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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.

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.

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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, 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

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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.

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

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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  
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!*

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.

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Appeared in YARN, April 2104

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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

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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  
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,"  
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-bandaged 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

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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  
just wanted you to be  
safe, Kat."

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

"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."

"Me too," Amber says, looking at me.

"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.

"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.

"Should we do a blood  
oath?" I ask.

"There's been too much blood already," Wynn says.

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.

|

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