

All the Bitten Apples

My father had just started circling our back yard with the push mower and was already spraying a steady wave of grass in our direction. The day was over for the rest of us. My mother cowered on the bench of our round picnic table, the image of a woman who expected her husband to shower her with clippings. My father, a veterinarian, was generally too tense after a day's worth of pets and farm animals to bother with pranks, but Mother was rapt with despair that entire last summer of my brother Lennis's life. I sat on a chair near her with our old mama cat, Ootie, kneading my lap, while Lennis pranced around us, a few inches out of reach of the falling grass.

I sat scratching Ootie behind the ears, watching Lennis cavort around the yard. He hadn't played boisterously in weeks, and I wanted to tell my slumped mother, See? He's going to live. Look at him run. But that summer was so heavy with jinxes and bad luck that I suspected that saying such a thing could make him fall dead on the ground. I said instead, just to say something, "If Daddy had started cutting the grass in the other direction, he would've thrown it all over your four o'clocks."

My mother didn't look at me in surprise for explaining what was in fact a practice of long standing with my father nor at a single one of her flower bushes that ringed our yard nor at Daddy trudging around us. She looked at Lennis. He was running on tiptoe in an odd, delighted way, never straightening his knees, and there were moments when he appeared to flutter through the air, though he must have weighed a hundred and sixty

pounds.

Lennis was thirteen and literally outgrowing his heart. We'd known all along that it was likely to happen, we'd been warned when he was still a very little boy, and we had worked at readying ourselves. But for all that, each day of that summer seemed to do nothing more than fail and collapse into the next.

I had just turned fifteen in July. At night I'd lie awake for hours, breathing the dank dark air, listening to the grinding crickets that were rubbing me raw, and pining over boys whose looks I liked. I brooded over their hands and faces as much as I did over Lennis and his heart, and I felt so guilty for doing it that around midnight I couldn't be sure that I'd be sorry if I woke in the morning to find my brother a cold corpse in the bed across the hall. I felt certain that when he was gone I would quit thinking about him. I could abandon myself to lips and eyes and sure, hard hands, a whole world full of them.

Often I'd get up and go through Lennis's room to his window. Through the screen I could sometimes smell the four o'clocks, and beyond their delicious mist the stars shone, so many in a cloudless sky that they seemed more like spilled white sand than lights. If I looked at them long enough I could relax sufficiently to cross the room and look at Lennis.

He would be lying on top of the covers on his back taking brief, shallow breaths, and as often as not his face would be bubbling up with sunburn. In the dimness his tawny hair was gray and his body seemed not to be made of flesh somehow. I had the feeling that if I touched him I'd smudge him.

On those nights I would try to gauge Lennis's value. His mind, obviously, was next to nothing, and his person was far from beautiful. Once or twice he'd even had an erection, the only ones I'd ever seen, and the stump in his normally slack drawers had made everything that much worse. But in those cool morning hours while he was still fresh from his evening bath, if he

didn't wet his bed, he gave off a smell as candid and voluptuous as summer. I loved my brother then in a way I'd ceased to in the daylight.

Ootie sprawled across my lap, her purr a smooth, perfected echo of my father's lawn mower. I slouched in my chair with my bra slipping up my back and gaping in the cups. I felt unusually tired. The night before, while I was looking at him, Lennis had suddenly begun whispering his own name in his sleep. Though I could see his lips move, the sound had seemed to rasp up through the cracks in the floor, through the window screen, or from an electrical outlet. It was as though something were calling him, and I'd hurried back to my own bed, my feet writhing, without waiting to see if he would wake himself up. It seemed that I'd dug my fingers into the edge of the mattress for the rest of the night, swaying in and out of consciousness.

After a while Mother quit watching Lennis as he pranced crazily around the yard. She turned her face in my direction, but she was focussing on something behind me. I glanced back, but there was only our clothesline, bristly with pins that I'd left clipped there from whenever I'd last done our laundry.

"Look at the bird," said my mother finally, and then I could see it — a grackle on a branch of our neighbors' maple. We had stopped socializing and barely spoke to our neighbors, but the branches of their tree hung over Mother's four o'clocks and we still watched the birds that liked to perch there. The grackle my mother had asked me to look at was shaking its black tail, then splaying it like fingers, then shaking it again. "That bird's a nervous wreck," said Mother. "God, Hesper, I know just how it feels. My nerves are vibrant. They give off a whining sound, like a drill. I *cannot* lose the noise." She tipped her head to the side, as though trying to pour sound out of her ear.

I wanted to ask straight out, "When is Lennis going to die?" And it was almost as if she knew it, because she looked at me then for the first time and seemed to

clamp her jaw against saying something aloud.

Lennis flitted over to us, to the picnic table actually, and began tasting the apples that my mother had brought out in a bowl. My mother eyed all the bitten apples, but she said nothing. My brother's face was very cheerful that evening, his face that always looked as though he were pressing it against glass. He gasped contentedly for breath and joyfully squeezed the apples in his blue-nailed hands. He was the only happy one in our family.

"Take that bag of Cheetos over to Hesper and let her open it for you," my mother told him at last.

"Yes, they're good," said Lennis, and after a few moments he found the sack on the far side of the apples. Bearing it in his arms as though it were a baby, he came over to me, and after I'd torn it open he stood in front of me, smacking and snorting as he ate. Ootie went to sleep across my thighs, and my mother perhaps fell asleep too. Her eyes at least were closed, and for some reason, with the lids drawn over them, they seemed as big as plums.

Lennis had romped around the yard enough to work up a sweat, and the breeze carried his smell, mingled with the faintly rotten scent of Cheetos, right into my face. Before he'd gotten his growth the winter before, he had never stunk. I got up, pushed him down in my chair, and resettled Ootie, dozing but distrustful, into his lap. "He's not going to pet you backward," I told Ootie. "Lennis!" He looked up. "Rub the cat from the ears to the tail."

Then skirting my father's flying grass, I went into the four o'clocks and dragged out Lennis's inflatable wading pool, that sagging old skin. Before me the blossoms were opening into soft mouths that moistened the air with perfume. The nipple on the wading pool tasted like a dirty thumb, but I started blowing. I hoped that by the time I got the pool ready, Lennis would have eaten his fill of Cheetos, or at least he'd have eaten them all.

Within a couple of minutes of sighing into the wading pool, I had almost gone to sleep on my knees. Then Lennis was pushing my shoulder. "Mama wants you," he was saying. I looked around, still stunned with relaxation, and saw that Mother was jabbing her finger toward the corner of the house.

A boy wearing only jeans and boots and a red billed cap stood there with his legs apart and his hands curled around something small. Though I knew everyone in town, I couldn't call his name, but I could make out his nipples, buff-colored and pebble-like, from where I knelt by the flowers. Then I remembered that he was Eric from the junior class, and I got up to see what he wanted, conscious of my luscious background of four o'clocks but also of my brother, poor thing, so ugly, so fated, so chokingly smelly. Lennis, confused with the pleasure of having company, hurried to get in front of me and then walked too slowly. His meaty reek wrapped around my face like a veil, and I wished I could just run over him.

When we finally made it across the yard, Eric spread his hands enough to show us a skinny baby rabbit. Crouched in his palm, its ears wilted to its back, it looked like a deflated dun egg. "I found this a couple of days ago out by our fence, but I can't get it to eat."

People often brought my father wild things to doctor, turtles that had been cracked by a station wagon, sick birds spread flat as a fan, baby rabbits like this one, sagging with hunger. Few of these collapsed animals lived, but I didn't say so to Eric, with his bare chest, or in front of Lennis. Sometimes when Lennis learned that one of our father's animals had died, he would bang his face in his own lap for hours.

"Our cat is Ootie," Lennis said to Eric.

"Yeah, well this rabbit hasn't got a name," said Eric. "Heal him up, and you can give him one."

"Tootie?" asked Lennis. Blushing to the waist, Eric offered me the rabbit. His buff nipples didn't darken, and against his bright skin they turned to pearls. Hot

with dread that my brother would remember his only other rhyme in the world, pootie, I thought of saying, Lennis, play the quiet game. But I found that I couldn't bring myself to speak to him, even sternly, in front of Eric.

I reached into Eric's hands and lifted the limp rabbit by the scruff. "I'll drip some vitamins into his mouth right now and then some formula," I said. "We always keep something like that in the refrigerator. Do you want to watch? He might just lap up two or three eyedroppers full of food."

"Dang," said Eric. "I would, but I need to go someplace."

I wish Lennis would go someplace, I told myself as Eric walked through our side yard, out of my evening. Then I noticed that the rabbit was paddling in my hands. It had strength enough to scratch the skin of my palms. "Hey, this one's full of vinegar," I whispered to Lennis, surprised out of my displeasure. When Eric glanced back to wave from the front end of our house, I held the rabbit upright so it would look perkier. I had a sudden conviction that the rabbit would be one in a hundred, but when Eric had disappeared around the corner of our house and I turned it around to examine it, it had drooped over my fingertips.

I almost yelped, I was so taken aback. The rabbit was utterly extinct. Its ears even swayed when I gave it a tiny shake.

I rolled the rabbit over in my palm, trying to figure out why it had died so abruptly. Perhaps I'd squeezed it, or, what seemed more likely, its heart had failed when I'd suddenly turned it upright. I looked under the rabbit's chin, along the sunken abdomen, and under the tail, hunting for some sign that I hadn't been at fault, but all I found that I hadn't seen earlier were the dull urine stains on the hind legs.

Lennis crowded up to me, reaching to stroke the rabbit's flat, thin ears, and stinking. If he were to realize that the rabbit was dead, my parents and I all to-

gether might not be able to keep him from pounding his lips and nose bloody. I slapped his hands back. "You can't pet it now!" I said. "It's trying to sleep."

I dodged my father and his lawn mower and scurried past Mother. "Keep Lennis busy for a minute," I called to her, and I went into the alley and took the lid off our garbage can. My mother had thrown away some panties, and the rabbit in the midst of lace and shiny, over-worn fabric looked pampered, though somehow even more misused. I fidgeted by the garbage can for two or three minutes, trying to imagine a way to tell my parents that I had not only killed something but had done so in the presence of my afflicted brother. That the rabbit had been almost gone in any case seemed mockingly irrelevant.

"What was that about?" Mother asked when I returned. She had her arm around Lennis, and he was eating Cheetos again.

Shrugging my shoulders, I leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Eric gave us a dead baby rabbit." My mother drew her head back and stared at me. Then she cut her eyes toward Lennis. I leaned over again. "*He* thinks it was sleeping," I told her. "I put it in the trash. I'll go blow up his wading pool, and he won't think about it again."

"Well, God help us," said my mother finally. "What does Eric think we're doing here anyway, autopsies?"

As soon as he'd made enough passes around the yard to put plenty of distance between himself and the four o'clocks, my father swiveled the mower around and began circling in the opposite direction. Back with Lennis's pool, I had already puffed myself into semi-consciousness again, though of a more austere kind, and I wasn't paying attention. All of a sudden a fine spray of twice-cut grass fell over my head and down my collar like a drove of fleas.

"You got dirty," said Lennis from behind me. I stopped shaking myself and scratching and looked back. He stood there dangling his bag of Cheetos from his

hand. He had Ootie hugged up against his shoulder, and she was licking orange Cheeto dust off his mouth.

"I was *got* dirty," I said. Catching Ootie by the scruff, I almost pitched her away before I recalled what I'd already done to one animal that evening and swung her more or less smoothly down to the grass. A rush of thankfulness poured through me as I thought of how Lennis didn't know sleep from flaccid death and of how Eric assuredly would never return to reveal that I had dispatched his rabbit. And toward Eric I also felt glutted with aversion, knowing that whenever I'd see him, I'd be remembering his nipples and what I'd done under their sway. "Turn on the water," I told Lennis, "and bring me the hose."

By the time I finished inflating the pool, Lennis had come back, holding the hose at arm's length so his Cheetos would stay dry. I let him squirt my head and back to flush away the grass clippings. "Wash your mouth," I told him, and while he was busy holding the hose to his face I took the sack of Cheetos from his hand and slipped it under the wading pool.

"Hesper. Hesper," my mother called to me, but when I looked up she only frowned at me. After a few moments she said, "Lennis, come eat an apple."

I held him there long enough to rinse him under the arms, while I had the chance, and then I laid the end of the hose in the pool. We walked back to our mother.

I found an apple with only a small bite out of it, opened my jaws wide so my tongue wouldn't touch anything soft, and tore away the brown scar Lennis had left. "Hesper has cleaned up an apple for you," my mother observed. Lennis accepted it, and my mother leaned back against the picnic table, breathing in moans.

The pool was big, and it filled slowly. The sun set, reddening the remaining daylight. My brother's hair turned a tender brown, the clothespins on the line seemed like pale beige birds, and the grackles rested

in the neighbors' maple, as still as dire black fruit.

Ootie wandered over and jumped up in my lap. My father, tiring, pushed the mower more and more slowly in its circle around us. Something in the lessening light or the cooling air made the mown grass smell like watermelon, and the four o'clocks poured out their scent. My brother chewed rings around his apple until my mother took the core from his hand. Then he came over to pet Ootie. The two of us rubbed our hands down her head to her hips, faster and faster, and the cat purred so vigorously that I thought she just might vibrate up into the space above my lap and hang there like a hummingbird.

The water started spilling over the sides of the wading pool, but none of us made a move toward the faucet. I breathed my brother's smell once again, his sweaty smell that gradually grew more various, carrying the ghosts of dust and urine and flowers.

My father came close enough to us that the bruised green of the falling grass stained the light and the sound of the lawn mower smothered any other. As though boosted by the noise, Lennis suddenly broke away from me, his hands slipping away from my hands and Ootie.

He started to whirl, stretching out his arms. I held Ootie on my knees, knowing that soon enough thousands of white stars would come out and heap the night with sand. But for a little while longer Lennis spun, somehow keeping his feet. And with the green spray flying out behind him, my father went on mowing the lawn, drawing the tidy circle of cut grass tighter and tighter around us.