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I Stop Somewhere

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To the girls who survive,
To the girls who are found too late,
To the girls who are never found . . .
You are beautiful.
You are loved.
You are **believed**.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from
the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your
boot-soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what
I mean . . .

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

They call the houses "zombies," and our town is full of them. Empty places where people used to live, where there were memories until life and all its broken parts happened.

Homes caught between the living and the dead. People can't afford them and the banks don't want them. So they rot, turning into something ugly. It feels like there are hundreds of them in Hollow Oaks, even if that's probably impossible. And there are even more in the towns beyond us.

So many places for a girl to disappear.

I suppose this is a fitting place for a girl like me. I disappeared before I actually did. And now, I'm trapped here. Forgotten.

This whole town is full of ghosts.



PART ONE

chapter one

She came in here with her brand-new shoes. Happy. I don't know her, but I'd seen her at school.

I think her name's Rebecca. Maybe Rachel. Something with an *R*. She was a freshman. A year younger than me. Maybe she's still a freshman. I don't know how much time has passed; I don't know how long I've been here.

"Please," she begs, but he doesn't stop hurting her.

It never stops.

I wish I felt more for her. I almost wish I could feel it the way I used to. Could suffer her fear alongside her, but I can't anymore. I can't let myself feel it.

There have been seven girls since the night I came here. To this room. This forgotten place for forgotten girls.

The room is a box. There's nothing on the walls. No posters or pictures or even a tacky wreath. Nothing to make it more than a room. The walls are just place markers. Beige and boring and broken. The holes came later. With the damage that fills the room.

"Please," the girl says again.

There's gum on her shoe. That's what I look at, because

otherwise, I have to look at him. His familiar and confusing smile.

The gum's on her left shoe. They're brand-new, looking like they just came out of a box, but the soles don't care. There's a giant wad of gum smeared across the bottom. She would've been mortified if she'd realized it. I mean, before. I don't think gum's a priority now. Still, it bugs me. The way it got onto her new shoes. The way it took something good, something beautiful, and slowly ruined it without her knowing. I hate the way these unseen things damage us in secret.

It was pink, although most of it's grime now from being on the bottom of her shoe. In the cracks, though, in the places where the dirt couldn't reach, pink still sneaks through. I hope for the pink. I wish for it, because I have to focus on gum.

"Please."

She's so pretty. Of course she is. They're all pretty. I suppose it should be flattering, to be one of them. It means I'm pretty, too. That was all I thought I wanted. To be part of something. To be special.

I don't feel pretty. I don't feel special, either. I don't feel much.

Keep looking at the gum.

I don't want to look up. I don't want my eyes to travel to the tops of her shoes, to her blue-and-white socks, up her pale legs. I don't want to see it. I've seen it so many times now.

I can't let myself look at him. Don't want to remember how his hands felt. All the things he said to me. The way he touched me. The same way he's touching her. That invasion of something you don't know how to hold on to. I force myself to forget those things.

Just think about gum.

So I try, instead, to remember gum. I remember how it was,

even if I can't taste it. I remember the first day of school. How we carried it like a weapon. We walked into classrooms, challenged our teachers with the knowledge that we carried it. It took maybe a day to realize the teacher didn't care anyway. Why would they? It was only gum.

But every so often, there'd be one teacher who agonized over the residue stuck to the underside of the chair when they went to flip it over, as they put the classroom back into its evening state of waiting.

I miss the pettiness of it all. The way we think when the world still makes sense and spins altogether for us. When gum is nothing more than gum. When it doesn't cling to the shoes of a girl who's crying.

Oh, God, I need her to stop crying.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks.

He doesn't answer. He's a cliché. He looks for the young ones, the pretty ones.

The weak ones.

That's it, though, isn't it? He thinks we're all weak.

He takes off her shoes and there's nothing left to stare at. Nothing except him. With her. His hands are clean today, but they were so dirty that night. He hadn't even bothered to wash his hands for me.

Without the gum, without anything to distract me, I close my eyes and pretend not to know what he's doing. While she cries, I ignore her. Try not to hear. Try not to remember how he laughed. I try not to feel the way the carpet scratched my skin.

I wonder about the people who lived here before. They left furniture, boxes. Most of what made them a family. All the things that made this a home. When they left, they probably thought someone else would come along. That someone would make

this house a part of their lives. Maybe exist like they had. I don't think they imagined this.

Would it have changed anything if they'd known? I've seen how some of them leave. Strangers forcing them to choose which things to keep. What to save. What parts of home aren't linked to that sense of place.

"You're hurting me," the girl cries, interrupting my thoughts.

Shut up, I think, dreaming about the ghosts. The ones who were here until it was forgotten. I wonder if they had kids.

I bet they cried when they left. Not for the reasons Rebecca/Rachel is crying. They cried because it was their home. Sure, maybe there was another house somewhere, but a house isn't the same as home. A house has walls and rooms and a roof. Home is the annoying rattle the pipes make in winter when you get up before school to brush your teeth. The rattle that you miss when you stay somewhere else. Home is knowing exactly where the trash can is.

There was one time—several years ago now—I watched the people across the street as they lost whatever fight they were trying to win. We stood on our front lawn, like the rest of our neighbors. We were helpless while the sheriff's department dragged them from the house. Changed the locks as they watched. Separated them from everything they were. Because the bank said they were out of time.

When I was younger, I didn't understand. It was sad and it bothered me, but I didn't feel it the way I do now. Seeing what someone's home becomes. What the banks were saving. This room is what they created.

Hollow Oaks, New York, is an impossible town. It's impossible for people to stay here, just like it's impossible for anyone to find me.

I wish I could remember when I came to this room. I remember gum, but not time. I don't know how many days or weeks or years have passed. I don't know how long ago the people who owned this place left. I don't know how long I've been here or how long it will take until they remember I'm missing.

But I do remember before. Vivid details and memories of even the smallest things. Gum. The smell of rose petals. The way it felt crawling into bed after the sheets had just been washed. Yet I can't remember how long it's been. I only remember after. A perpetual state of after.

"No," the girl says.

I just want her to be quiet. I don't want to be here, but I can't seem to get away. There's only folding myself into before.

There has to be an end to this. There has to be a finite number of girls. There has to be a limit to how many times I can hear the word *no*.

There has to be a limit to how many times this can happen.



chapter two

There's that nursery rhyme. You know it? All about what makes a girl. We're sugar and spice and everything nice, but that sounds like a cookie recipe. It doesn't sound like the composition of a person.

I wanted to be pretty. That's part of what makes a girl, I think. That inherent need to be pretty. Pretty is important. Pretty is good. Girls who are pretty are likable.

Pretty is power.

I didn't think I was pretty. I thought that was why people hated me. Early in middle school, it was awful. I grew up too fast. I stood in the bathroom outside my fifth-grade class and cried, because the boys thought it was funny to snap the back of my bra. The girls said I was a whore because I couldn't stop myself from growing up.

There was a book they passed around. They used to list each girl's defining features. Some were pretty. Some weren't, but they were funny. I wasn't those things. I was a slut. I was poor. I was dirty.

I was only eleven. I didn't want to be defined by these words.

It didn't last forever. Maybe a year. Eventually, other girls had

boobs, too, and I was just someone else. They never said they were sorry, though. They never welcomed me. I was still on the edges of the world, but eventually, it wasn't constant. It was only a remark here or there. But I couldn't forget the names they'd used. Even if they'd stopped using them, I knew that, once, they'd thought those things of me and so, somewhere, it must have been true. It put me outside of them, even if they seemed to have moved on to other things.

I don't know if it would have been different if my mom had been there. There was only my dad because she'd left right after I was born. She tried on the name Mother, but she couldn't juxtapose it with being Sierra and so I was down a parent right away. She doesn't call. She sends birthday cards once a year. Sometimes even in the right month.

Dad and I used to go fishing in the summer. It was before the whispered comments about my body. Before they asked if I should really be eating that second piece of pizza at lunch given what I looked like. It was before I cared about being pretty.

We were like criminals, creeping out into the stealth of dawn, already on the water before the sun came up. We stole the day and it was beautiful.

I was only allowed to drink coffee on those mornings. Coffee wasn't something for kids, he'd say, but when we both found ourselves yawning, he'd pour a little into the top of his thermos and pass it over to me. A secret. A promise. I didn't like the taste of it but I loved it for being a part of us.

"Can we watch a movie tonight?" I asked as I sipped at the coffee, the acrid burning both terrible and sweet.

"Sure, Ellie, what do you want to watch?"

I never wanted to watch anything in particular. I simply wanted him to stay awake.

I loved my dad. I *love* my dad. Still.

These were our moments, and we'd make plans under the sun and we believed them. After dinner on those nights, we'd put in a movie, but he'd be asleep before the opening credits finished. He tried. He meant to stay awake; he just couldn't.

But on those mornings, he did. It was something for us.

I miss those moments the most.

It's not clear why we stopped going. Maybe he got too tired. Maybe the boat rental cost too much. I don't know. It just was, and then it wasn't. Like most of the things that happen in our lives.

Still, I wonder how much it has to do with what happened the last time.

We were out on the lake that morning, our lines cast. We never caught anything. It wasn't about actually catching a fish. It was about us, and about secret illicit coffee, and about the plans we made that we believed we'd follow through on.

"Look at these jerks," he said.

Their boat had a motor and shone brighter than the sun on the water. They owned it. They owned everything.

"They're going to kill the damn fish," my dad complained.

They were riding through the lake, the boat spearing the waves, and the guys were tossing bottles over the sides. They were barely older than me, also with their dad. Their music cut through the sounds of them taking the lake away from us. Because that's what they were doing. They took the lake from us. They reminded us that the mornings we had weren't ours, that they were only borrowed time.

"Why are they doing that?" I asked my father.

"They think they can do anything."

"But there are rules," I argued.

He shook his head and packed up the things in the boat, taking in the lines. "Be careful with people like that, Ellie. They have it all, but it's never good enough."

I tell myself that's why we stopped going. The fish were going to die anyway, with the bottles bobbing on the surface of the water. It was all ruined by someone else's noise and carelessness. Maybe they never would've come back, but it wouldn't have been the same.

It's poetic to frame my life with them. With the lake. If I walked to the end of the driveway from this house, kept going past the trees, I'd be able to see the ghost of that boat still on the water.

I told myself it was okay. I was getting older anyway. Pretty girls didn't wake before dawn and go fishing. I wanted to be pretty, so it was fine.

Later, I remember how my dad would stand in my doorway, watching me. Trying to reach me across so little space, yet so much. He stared at me like you look at a museum display or a creature in the zoo. I was the coelacanth, and he was awed by my strangeness.

"I brought you something," he said, holding a bag out across the threshold to my bedroom.

My room was an experiment. Posters and magazine pages and images covered the walls and the vanity and my dresser. All the people I wanted to be, wanted to look like. They were the people who mattered. I stared at myself in the mirror, hating how I looked. I hated how the curves made the boys poke me through the back of my chair in class, and how they made the girls call me fat. I hated how far the people in the magazines were from me. I thought I would never count, because I wasn't them.

"What is it?" I asked my dad, gesturing toward the bag he was holding.

"I thought you might like it."

It happened every few nights. He'd show up, presenting an offering in a plastic bag. Makeup. Clothes. Hair bands. He tried. He tried and so I tried, but the discount stickers said it all.

They were marked down, because the lipstick was too orange. The tank top wasn't cut right. The hairpins would have been perfect for a girl my age—ten years ago. But I wore them for him and he smiled, because he didn't know the difference.

"Thanks, Dad. I love it," I lied.

"You're beautiful, Ellie."

I was a markdown girl.

I did know the difference.