

Undercurrent

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Lorie is the kind of person who doesn't think you needed a college education to go on adventures. I guess I kind of agree with her, in the end.

Home is a picturesque sort of place; Suburbs on the fringe of St. Louis, with enough diversity to make you cultured and enough white people to still be cinema perfect. The lawns are trimmed, maybe a little spotty with yellow grass if Green Control hasn't gotten out to spray down fertilizer and pesticide and god knows what other probably carcinogenic substance. My parent's house is a one story ranch, five bedrooms, two baths, and a liquor closet that they never lock- or so my two older brother's claim. One of those rooms is mine, walls still painted mint green, bed still wedge up between two walls, desk still cluttered like I've never left.

Lorie claims she has an adventure every day, and I believed her. You know, for the most part. She'll catch hold of me any time I'm in town, and maybe we'll spend the day smoking hash and hookah in the beat up little apartment she is sharing with her boyfriend, his mom and his youngest sister. She's sixteen, named *Madeline*; and I got yelled at one day for offering her the joint after taking my own gas house worthy hits. That was four years ago.

'You can't give a twelve year old weed, Christ, are you an idiot?' Lorie had said like she wasn't dating a dealer— like it wasn't his little sister— like Madeline didn't know then what weed meant, or stoned, or dub.

The kid liked me though, still does. Then she would sit in my lap and I'd brush her hair, put it up in braids, compliment her *Avenged Sevenfold* shirts. They were always her brother's old

ones, always too baggy. I think we might have felt it the most, when they broke up, and nothing really ever was the same after they got back together. Madeline sure wasn't.

It's the middle of fall break, or maybe thanksgiving, and Lorie texts me wanting to go out. It's the first clear day after maybe four or five days of rain and I'm not sure why I even said yes. I'd sworn off any drug that wasn't 80 proof a month ago after investing a little too much in dryer sheets and toilet paper and possession charges and going hungry for a week. We don't drive out to the apartment, which maybe is a relief, but instead took a few back roads and head out to the parts of the suburbs that are the boonies or the forest or the real blue collar dodges in town.

There are signs saying the river has flooded. Lorie's never seen it flooded, even though she's taken a swim once or twice in it at night after hours, even though she came along with me on my brother's Boy Scout trips when we were younger.

'I just want to see the damn thing all flooded and bloated,' she says changing CDs- because she's the only person I know who still uses CDs- and glaring down another yellow pop up yield sign.

I've never seen the river flooded either, but I've heard all the stories. I knew Ricky J. from our high school senior class took a night swim, like everyone always does, and got sucked into an undercurrent and was missing for three days. When they pulled him out he was stinking messy of bloated rotting flesh and river weed- or so Lorie says. She was there, and Madeline was there, and Lorie had just broken up with that guy. Sometimes I wonder if that's why Madeline's so quiet. If watching Ricky get pulled out of the water like some dead body off of CSI kind of

shook her. I know death shakes a lot of people, Lorie knows it too. Someone died every year since sixth grade. We've become accustomed to death, and I know better than to go in the river.

We drive for hours and don't find anything. Lorie's little Subaru eats up all kinds of white and yellow lines on pitch tar road like cake and icing.

'Madeline bakes now,' Lorie tells me. She'd brought me a sugar cookie in a plastic bag when she'd picked me up curbside. It was in the shape of a turtle with green icing and a red smile and everything. I feel bad for shoving it into my back pocket and sitting on it for a few hours now, but I started that paleo-diet thing. The one where you only eat foods a paleolithic person would eat. I miss pizza.

'Yeah?' I always feel like an ass these days. I never have much more to say than some perfunctory little word here or there, always asking for more information because I'm so out of the loop. Mom says it's normal to lose friends when you leave for college.

'Yeah. She's pretty good too. Took classes this summer and everything.' Lorie only curses at the radio after that, as it skips around on the scratches on her CD.

'I guess she's happier, huh? That's good,' I'm not losing friends, I'm just losing my place here. I don't which is better.

I kind of miss the trees. I told this to Lorie once and she told me I was stupid, that there are trees where I am too. There *are* trees, but the ones down south aren't the same as the ones here. Less, cut out to make room for fields and fields and fields of wheat or corn or soybeans or whatever it is that's in this year. Whatever nitrogen rotation they're at. Sometimes I hate that I know that, mostly I'm ambivalent.

‘Still in school for poetry?’ I ask. Lorie was always a good poet, writing sharp little sonnets and posting them in the bathroom stalls until Principle Geller found out it was her. Ok, and maybe a little bit me too. We skipped double detention and went straight to in school suspension. I think it was because one of the poems waxed poetic about Mrs. Finley’s clit. She taught freshman history.

‘Nah, took a year off,’ Lorie gives me this look like she knows what I’m going to say—like maybe I say it every time I’m in town. I’m not going to say it.

‘You should come visit. Write about all the grasshoppers,’

I lied.

Lorie laughs and snorts something about if she had the time or money or both, under her breath. I like the grasshoppers. They talk a lot about nothing, liven up all the dead yellow grass and make it seem beautiful. I like that sort of thing. Lorie used to be like that, before so much of the weed and maybe some of the other things. The pills she takes and doesn’t think I know about. I know. Madeline texts me sometimes, mostly when she’s stuck in math homework or scared—but mostly scared. Lorie had to go the hospital early this fall, an overdose or something. She won’t tell me, probably doesn’t think there’s anything to tell, but Madeline already beat her to it anyway. I don’t think she wants to be here anymore, Madeline, and not in the cosmic kind of ‘here’ but in the fresh cut lawns and powered washed white siding and water-treated wood porch kind of ‘here’. I’m not sure I blame her.

I pick at the tape holding down the warped and water stained piece of paper on her dash. It’s one of her poems. It’s an old one, and I don’t need to read it to know what it says. I used to memorize Lorie’s poetry. I thought it’d make her proud.

water can bloat you
more than carbohydrates ever will
and it takes three minutes to drown
just three
two much water weighing down on your chest
one feeling of being unable to breath

It's not my favorite poem, certainly not even close. Lorie used to write about birds, about flying, about roads and going places. I always wrote about the trains. I memorized all her poems though, even the ones I didn't like. I wish she'd replace this one, wish I could forget it. I wish she hadn't stopped writing.

More yellow pop up road signs make Lorie twist her hands around the wheel and suck on her teeth in excitement. We have to pull off the road to get gas first though. It's a little BP out on the corner of cracked cement and thistle weeds.

Lorie pulls up to the pump, shoves her debit card in my hand.

'Get some snacks,' she says, we exit the car together.

She has to kick her door closed, has had to since she bought it, and I close my door watching her stomp on the silver metal with her midnight blue vans. She didn't say what kind of snacks, and last time I got Hostess but Hostess went all AWOL on us as a nation so I guess Little Debbie will have to do. I'm halfway inside when I think Lorie might need her card for the gas, but she didn't say anything and I'm already here. I grab a package of powdered donuts, a granola bar, two cokes and a water. Lorie used to write peoples essays and get paid in powdered donuts and coke. Sometimes drew a tattoo or two.

The cashier looks at me like I'm familiar, and I look at him right back. We could have gone to school together, he's young enough, and those sunken acne scarred cheeks look familiar. He rings me up without even looking at the product.

'It's the hair,' he says.

'What?' I turn the card over in my hands.

'You're hair's different, I almost didn't recognize you,' he leans on the counter. The register beams out 7.47 in green alarm clock numbers. I used to have blue hair, and red, and green, and an orange Mohawk once, in high school. Never went more than four months without changing it. Never really knew what color the roots were.

'Oh—and gas pump five, please,' I hand over the card and he kind of just wrinkles his eyebrows at me. I already know the pin. I've known it for years.

Lorie's outside, already putting the pump away and leaning against the car, lighting a cigarette she told me she quit months ago.

'J...ustin?' I ask when he hands back the card; I was always shit at names. Sometimes. If we never really talked. He raises his eyebrows. I scoop up our snacks, my jaw unwinding in a stupid move. 'What university you at?' I always feel like a douchebag when I ask this back home, and then I have to remind myself I'm not at Harvard or Penn State, so I'm not a douchebag. I'm just a jackass.

'Community,' Justin-maybe-not-Justin says.

'Cool,' I say. He looks at me like I'm a jackass.

Back in the car, back on the road, Lorie confirms that that was Justin—Justin Schwartz—and *he* is a jackass. He's got a baby on the way. Girl's in senior year of high school, his dad owns that BP, he used to be friends with her boyfriend before the EMT thing. Her boyfriend got in, Justin did not.

'He's an EMT?' I ask.

'EMT's smoke weed too,' Lorie flashes me a look, piercing eyes and a frown that folds into a smile. 'It's not just drop outs and business majors,' she says.

'Marketing,' I mutter under my breath, play with the air vent that's half melted from a roman candle war. 'Hey, you still draw tattoos?'

'Sometimes,' Lorie blasts cold air to get me to stop fiddling, then shoves her hand in the Tupperware behind her seat looking for a new CD. 'Why, you want one?' She asks, plucking up two and looking at them as she drives with one hand. She picks a band I've never heard before over the *Breathe Carolina* one Madeline and I got her for her Birthday one year. She chucks it into my lap instead and switches CD's out.

'I want to be a Chief Editor,' it's another way of saying no.

Lorie rolls her eyes, and I set the CD in the glove box. Fortune Five Hundred here I come, is what I used to say at this point. Used that joke to make friends my freshman year too. Now it just seems to strange on my tongue, makes my mouth feel vacant. Instead I hum to the music. Lorie nods her approval. I don't listen to this kind of stuff anymore. Screaming, and heavy bass, and screeching guitar strings. I listen to *The Rolling Stones*, *Aerosmith*, *Kansas* and *The Eagles*, and all the new age bands that sound like them. Lorie doesn't need to know that.

Lorie scoffed at me when I sat under the porch with her dad, drank watered down bourbon in the rain and listened to Eric Clapton's heart felt crooning.

Madeline listens to classic rock. I know because I found a couple of CD's stacked under her bed when I was fishing around for a sock for Lorie to borrow last summer. The good stuff too, *Blue Oyster Cult* and Don Henley right there, wedged between a bin of hair supplies and the shoe box she hid money in—saving up for a Monroe piercing. Except piercings wouldn't suit her long brown hair and chocolate eyes, which I told her once. I think if it had been any other summer she would have been pissed; instead she just smiled.

Her brother sometimes took a few bills out here and there for weed or codeine or Percocet or whatever else was cheap on the market. He always said he'd pay her back *with* interest.

'My mom's calling,' I barely realized we'd been gone all afternoon, just driving, looking for a flood. Lorie doesn't say much and I think maybe three o'clock at home isn't any brighter than three o'clock at college. I used to think it was.

'Lorie, pull the car over, my mom's calling.' We're a mile outside suburbia and I think I was supposed to do something like pick up dry cleaning.

'You left a note, she knows you're out,' Lorie turns the stereo up. Lorie doesn't hate my Mom and my Mom doesn't hate Lorie. Sure Mom doesn't like the black thongs Lorie wears high on her hip bones, or the tattoo of a dead crow on her shoulder, or the way Lorie hates her Dad and loves her Mother who admittedly is bit of a bitch; but my Mom doesn't hate Lorie. She just doesn't hug her the way she hugs me, or Madeline. Like hugs are the only thing keeping us from going and staying and not coming back for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner.

‘Pull the fucking car over.’ I’m glaring, holding my phone out in front of me like a goddamn snake that might bite me. Lorie slams on the breaks. I catch myself on the dash and wrench out of the car.

‘Shit,’ I say. ‘It went to voicemail.’

Lorie’s leaning on her side of the car, arms folded and head rested on them. Her unwashed auburn waves pulled back in a sloppy bun.

‘Fuck her, she knows you’re out. You’re an adult.’ She has a slim smile, twin lip piercings sparkling in the dying sun.

‘No fuck you. You don’t know, that could have been important.’ I run hands through my hair; it’s longer than it used to be. It’s also a dirty blonde color that surprised me when I finally let it go natural. Lorie watches me with a tight face, and I shove my phone back in my pocket, motion to the car.

‘Drive’ I sigh.

‘I know this is going to be it, I can tell,’ Lorie makes me eat a donut, and I don’t think about how I’m breaking my diet, or how I can actually understand *The Eagles* when they sing, or how Nestle Purina might have sent an acceptance letter for their internship and maybe that’s why Mom called.

We don’t ever find the river flooded out around the streets or trees, just a little high. Lorie shrugs, pulls the car off the main road and asks if I want a smoke. I only say yes because of the highway and the screaming music giving me a headache. So we sit on the hood of her car and she pulls rolling papers out of her pocket. Lorie never smoked out of a little ceramic cigarette.

Not like so many girls, and some boys, in high school. She said those were for pussies. She is the only person I know who could roll a joint, little pink slug of a tongue coming out to touch the paper and seal it closed.

We lie up on the hood of her car; watch the sun go gray and inky blue. Lorie claims she can see more stars out here than she can in the suburbs and I think maybe I agree, but secretly I'm thinking of the drive to College. How many stars you can see above the fields, how I always pull off, lie on my car for a half hour give or take and just take them all in. They're all different colors packed on top of each other, begging for attention. Caught up in the black abyss we call sky, and that brief refractory period for the sun that we call night. Time. Sometimes I think about how Madeline doesn't talk very much anymore, or how she sends me pictures of report cards rather than telling Lorie to tell me. Sometimes I don't think at all.

'God,' Lorie breaths, 'It's awesome,'

'Mhmm,' but I'm not sure we're seeing the same sky, wedge together on her cooling radiator. She has her haze and her suburbs and her big dipper, and me... I've got the memories of mid-west highway nights, of fields of stars over fields of soybeans.

Lorie smells like weed, and stale cherry shisha, and I brush powdered sugar off my pants—rubbing hard when it tries to stick.