

## I AM A SOUVENIR

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The roof next door fell off while I was sleeping. It came down in a single sheet, taking the ceiling with it, flattening a corner of the porch and the overgrown azalea. My mother said that I slept like a dead person, that I could have slept through house fires and nuclear war. But with this noise I was awake. My room was dark. I was in my underwear. Now that my father was in charge, sleeping in pajamas—along with homemade lunches and vacuuming on Sundays—had been abandoned.

I ran into the living room, a comforter wrapped around my shoulders. My father, a man made up of droopy, narrow parts, sat reading.

“What happened?” I asked.

“What, son?” he asked back.

He always called me son, as if I were a pleasant surprise. I had turned ten two weeks before; he was a month from sixty-seven. His jowls were loose, deflated. His bottom teeth jumbled and yellow. He went back to his book, looking up again when he guessed that I hadn’t moved.

“What was that noise?” I said.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

Then came the sirens, the chatter of neighbors outside. Fire trucks barreled down our street. We went to take a look.

Neighbors huddled on the frozen street. Mrs. Chico wore shabby slippers and a robe that made it plain she wasn’t wearing a bra. Meredith Johnson held her yapping dog. The Dimples, with too many kids, and the Hollsteins, who were always drunk—they were outside too. Warning lights on the fire truck pulsed. Bystanders were lit up in pops of color, then dark. I spotted Pierre in the crowd.

“The whole roof came off,” Pierre said, as I slid up next to him. “Everything.”

The ground was blotched with snow. Breath spilled from mouths.

“It’s cold,” I said.

I wore my comforter like a cape; Pierre wore a tank top. He liked wearing tank tops. A cloud of dust from the chalky, severed ceiling hovered around the house and yard. The roof sat in a single piece, jutting onto the street like a proscenium. It was pocked with holes and patches of rot. Its shingles were a speckled gray.

The red lights gave Pierre a sinister look. He was a year older, but in the fifth grade with me. He was tiny, muscular already.

“I guess so,” Pierre laughed.

Along with the tank top, Pierre wore shimmery shorts. His shins were pink with scabs.

“We’re going in there,” he said, motioning to the house with his face.

“Now?”

“No. Not now.”

“When?”

“When it’s time,” he answered. “When it’s time.”

The house, sandwiched between Pierre’s and mine, had been abandoned for over a year. An old woman who liked to rake her lawn had lived there before. The less coherent she got, the more she raked, until one day she was raking without bottoms on and taken to her daughter’s in Poughkeepsie. The house was not sold but condemned. Within weeks, holes like punched-out teeth hung where windows had been. The siding loosened and fell off in strips. Vagrant cats lazed on the porch in lascivious gangs. Winter came, muscling everything down with snow. The roof started sagging, until that night when it came unmoored. It sounded like a meteorite hitting, I thought. Pierre had thought it was a missile.

“We’ll go when it’s time,” Pierre repeated, watching firemen scurry in and out of the house, flashlights moving with apoplectic attention.

When I woke up the next morning, my father was gone. A note was scrawled on an old envelope. *Son—At work. Call if our roof falls off too. Your Father.* His cereal bowl from breakfast was still on the table. The milk was out, warm and sour smelling. I went to find Pierre.

Pierre lived in the smallest house on our street, invisible behind the hulking trees in its front yard. His father caught

snapping turtles for sport. His mother's face was marked from chicken pox she'd gotten as an adult. Their windows had no screens.

I knocked for five minutes before Pierre answered, in the same outfit he'd worn the night before.

"I'm not dressed," he said. "Wait a minute."

He didn't invite me inside. This was typical. I'd only been inside his house once, when I'd locked myself out of my house and had to pee badly. There was a hallway lined with laundry and fishing gear. Talk radio was on in the kitchen, though no one else was home. It was a few months back, just after my mother and someone named James had decided to move to Rochester together.

Pierre came back in a sweatshirt and jeans.

"Now?" I asked, staring at the house next door, the roof on the front lawn roped off with caution tape.

"The police were there this morning," Pierre said.

"Are they coming back?"

"I suppose they are."

"So I guess not now," I said, tentatively.

"No," Pierre answered. "Now."

We went in through the back door, walking into the kitchen first. Rusting pots and utensils covered the counters; the linoleum curled like fruit skins. We moved through the living room, stepping carefully to avoid clumps of cat shit that littered the floor. Then the dining room, with china in wobbly piles. Snow that had collected inside windows had hardened. We went upstairs.

"End-of-the-world gray," Pierre said, pointing to the creaking, painted staircase.

"Blood-of-Jesus red," I answered, moving my fingers over the flaking wallpaper. We liked to name colors so they sounded ominous and important.

Upstairs was sky where the ceiling should have been. The walls, top-heavy with crumbling moldings, leaned in.

"Mrs. Chico's ass," Pierre said, walking into the bathroom painted a gluey beige.

The walls were freckled in stains; mold spread across the baseboards like shadows.

A large mirror hung on the back of the door. Its glass was

untarnished, shimmering. I stood in front of it, staring at my spindly arms and legs. My hair was a sallow brown. Pierre was behind me, wanting to see his reflection too. The fuzz over his top lip was beginning to darken. His nose came together in a precise point. Mine was rounder, a stubby knuckle. Everything on my face was less remarkable—my precious mouth, my pale eyebrows that were almost camouflaged. But I had my mother's eyes—a tropical blue people commented on, a blue I thought looked mysterious and European.

"You're white," Pierre said, grabbing onto my arm.

"So are you."

"No. But, you're really white. Snow white."

Pierre touched my face with his fingers, my cheek jiggling as he tapped it. He lifted his other hand so both my cheeks quivered. His fingers were warm. I started laughing. He was laughing too, leaning close, his hands on my face, the shower curtain behind us shifting in the wind.

I was watching television when my father got home. He had on new glasses. He lifted them off his face to show me their intricate marble pattern, the durable lenses.

"These are from Italy," he said.

My father was an optometrist. When my mother lived with us, he got new glasses once a year, talking about them like a geography lesson. The owlish pair was from Paris. The ones before from Cologne. The Italian pair was the second he'd gotten in the last four months.

"I like the color," I said.

"Yes, son. A good color. You eat yet?"

I shrugged, dreading another night of runny scrambled eggs that no amount of ketchup could save.

"Good color," he repeated, walking into the kitchen, cracking eggshells against the lip of a bowl.

"The house next door," I said.

Butter sizzled in a pan. My father whisked.

"Come again?"

"Next door," I repeated. "The roof is still on the lawn."

He glanced at me, blinking fast. His eyes seemed paler, myopic; his hair a true white, though I still imagined it as brown and gray. I understood why people mistook him for my grandfather, why they looked bemused in the grocery store when I called out

“Dad” and he answered. He could have a heart attack at any moment. It might take hold of him in his sleep, with only me at home to save him. But I wouldn’t hear it. I’d be asleep too.

“How’d it happen?”

“Well,” he said, “roofs can rot.”

“Oh.”

“And it was old.”

I pulled out plates from the cabinet. Two forks and paper napkins. He walked to the table, fry pan swinging so the eggs bobbed in their watery bath.

“You didn’t make toast,” I said.

Toast was my dream then. It didn’t even need butter. Jam would have been too perfect to have imagined.

He scooped eggs onto the plates without answering me. He might go deaf, and I wouldn’t know for days.

The next day Pierre and I went through the old lady’s bedroom. A bed frame sat in the middle, ornate and rusting. A cat from the porch, with mottled, orange fur and skin hanging loose at its belly, followed us up there. The window was still intact. It even had curtains. There was a closet full of clothes—bathrobes in thick, moth-eaten terry cloth, blouses with tiny buttons. The cat mewled, winding around the bed frame. Pierre examined each item I pulled out.

“I never saw her in any of these,” he said as I showed him a series of dresses.

“These are for parties. She didn’t go to parties.”

“Why she have all this then?”

“Maybe she went once,” I said. “When she was young.”

Pierre scoffed at the notion.

“Man,” he said as I pulled out a gown, tutu pink, its beaded top glinting. “That’s fancy.”

It was fancy. Through its moldy stink and water stains on its sleeves and hem, I could see that still. I moved closer to the window so the beading on the dress caught the light.

“Try it on,” Pierre said.

“Right.”

He smiled. Not squinting as he usually did, as if I was funny without knowing why. His eyebrows lifted. I could see the dark slivers between his top teeth, the bottom ones overlapping.

“Really?” I said.

“You’d look fancy.”

Pierre went to the closet, taking out a pair of red velvet-toed heels. He kneeled down to untie my shoes, slipping them off so I was in socks on the ruined floor. His fingers gripped tight under my arches, too firmly to tickle.

He slid the dress over my head. I inhaled its awful smell, felt its heaviness. The old lady who raked had worn this once when it was clean and new. She had found it in a store, had probably paid too much. It had made her happy.

I looked down at its sparkly top, the tips of the shoes peeking out under the skirt. I clomped around, walking closer to Pierre.

“How do I look?”

Pierre nodded.

There were parties my parents had gone to, my mother in makeup letting me sit on her bed as she got into a silk blouse, doused her shoulders in perfume. “You clean up good,” my father would say. She’d roll her eyes, which were more striking with mascara. There was a babysitter who brought Twinkies, talking to me about how lovely my mother looked, how my father at his age was a lucky man.

I spun. The skirt ballooned; the beadwork ticked. I felt a hand on my ankle. Pierre was lying on the floor, looking at me upside down. The skin across his cheeks pulled back, exaggerating the lilt of his eyes. His top lip hung tight against his teeth and gums. Pierre slid under the dress like a mechanic tightening an axle. He made noises as if I had nothing on underneath, as if I weren’t in jeans he’d seen a hundred times. He gripped my ankles tightly. I wished for a mirror, so I could see how the dress had changed me, how it looked with Pierre underneath it, how I cleaned up good.

My father wasn’t home at eight o’clock. I’d been happy at seven when I ate cereal for dinner, finishing almost two bowls without pause. Instead of starting homework I watched television, sitcoms with saucy teenagers and ham-fisted parents. It was dark outside and I was alone.

At seven-thirty I checked the phone to see that it was working. I walked through the house—the den, the guest bedroom, the upstairs office with my mother’s sewing machine, her fa-

favorite novels in a hard-creased pile—turning on lights, wasting electricity. I opened cabinets for something to do. I walked out the front door.

The abandoned house looked flat against the sky. I saw straight through it in places, light from Pierre's house glowing on its far side. The front steps let out a lingering wheeze as I moved across them. I went inside the ramshackle house, sitting behind its front door watching traffic pass, checking the shapes of headlights, listening for engines slowing down. Car doors closed and opened. Conversation rose and fell like a faraway storm.

A car with boxy headlights I recognized slowed down. Light slinked across the front of our house. I saw my father's stooped shoulders, his baggy paunch in silhouette. He fumbled for his keys, expecting the door to be unlocked.

My eyes grew accustomed to the dark living room. A chair sat against a wall, its cushion scratched to smithereens. There were clean squares of wallpaper where pictures had been. My father moved past each lighted window in our house, going through the second floor quickly. He came outside again, hands on hips, his feet shuffling.

"Martin," he called. "Son!"

His voice sounded frail, mawkish.

"Martin."

Stay where you are, I thought. Make him look for you.

"Martin," he said again, his voice cracking with nervous agitation. He moved down the driveway, on his way to check with neighbors, about to cause a fuss.

Let him have to confess that he was just now getting home. That he hadn't kept an eye on me.

"Martin! Son! Martin! It's your father."

He paced at the foot of our driveway. He kept saying my name until I couldn't listen to it anymore.

"Dad," I said, jogging to meet him, his silhouette falling away as his wrinkled brow came into view, his lips wet with spittle.

He stared at me with surprise. I thought he might hit me, that it wouldn't be so bad. He didn't hit me, but moved his hands into his pockets as if he was trying to appear casual, the two of us bumping into each other by chance.

"Where were you?" he said.

“At Pierre’s. Where were you?”

His new glasses were too small. He looked out of breath.

“Inventory,” he said, irritated. “Like I said in my note.”

But I hadn’t seen his note. I wasn’t sure he’d written one.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“No,” I said, looking at our house with each window lit up.

“Not hungry.”

I heard it first during kickball, with all of the fifth-grade boys piled into the gym. Voices echoed against the cavernous ceiling. Bouncing balls thwacked against the painted cinderblock walls.

“Where’s your dress?” Todd Stalmer asked after I struck out for the second time.

I moved back to the end of the lineup, slouching behind my teammates, counting freckles on my arm, hoping I hadn’t heard him right.

“Maybe he’d play better in high heels,” Markus Wright said next.

Boys chuckled and exchanged looks. Pierre was on the other team, covering second base. I went up one more time, kicking the ball so it flew through the air in a high, lazy arc and was caught easily.

“Out!” someone shouted with angry enthusiasm.

“We got a princess on our team!” Todd said, and Pierre couldn’t help but share an accomplished smile with him.

By lunchtime, the girls in our class had heard about it as well. Some giggled when they saw me, others just stared.

Pierre couldn’t keep a secret. His friends at school, the boys who lit matches just to see how long they would burn, got the details. Me in the dress, clomping around in old lady shoes. The way I shook my ass. The way I seemed to like it. I did like it—Pierre’s hands on my ankles, the look of his face upside down. How he climbed under the dress like I was something to see, how we stayed like that for minutes.

He didn’t talk to me on the bus. A second-grade girl came up to ask me if I wanted to borrow her headband. She spoke in an uneasy, practiced tone. Pierre and Todd Stalmer, four rows behind, laughed like they were being tickled. The seat in front of me was covered with curses and scribbles. I glared at Pierre. It

was his idea—the dress, the shoes, the dancing around. He had been alone with me. I could tell everyone how he slid under the dress, touching me, how I was sure I saw a hard-on. But no one would believe me. It would seem desperate, a last-ditch attempt, like I was trying to get even.

“Hey,” I said when we got off the bus.

Pierre kept walking until he was hidden by the trees in his front yard, until the bus turned the corner.

The next morning, my father shook me awake. I was startled to see his face first thing, so close and eager. My room was bright. The heat ticked. He wore a green necktie.

“Up and at ’em.”

“It’s Saturday,” I said.

“I have a surprise, son. Put on something nice.”

I thought about the dress, the way Pierre walked away from me the day before.

“Something nice?”

“Well, something at any rate,” he laughed.

Dirty clothes from the last three weeks were piled in the corner. I slid into a turtleneck and the green corduroys that swished when I walked.

I was halfway down the hall, the smell of coffee strong, my father moving fast in front of me, when I figured it out. Mom was back to visit.

I saw her feet first, in pink sneakers, as I came down the stairs. Then legs, long and narrow. She wore a short skirt. She slouched on the sofa.

“Morning, babe,” she said, her face brightening.

My mother was a nervous beauty, slouching as if she were trying to look awkward instead of pretty, her marvelous fingernails chewed until they were rimmed in red. And she was so young. I had forgotten. She looked ten years younger than the thirty-five she was. She had an artless laugh and precious, adolescent arms.

“You’ve got on your favorite pants,” she said.

They had been my favorite. I hated them now—their swish, their woodsy green. My father came in carrying coffee, smiling stupidly. He wore the new glasses.

“Isn’t this a surprise,” he said with animation.

His smile and enthusiastic inflection made me determined to say nothing important, to play it cool. I plopped into an easy chair.

“Are you taller?” she asked.

“Taller?” I answered.

“I think he *is* taller,” my father said.

Taller than when, I wondered. He had seen me the night before. We had watched cop shows and stayed up past eleven. I had climbed into bed without taking off my shoes.

“My pants still fit,” I said.

Both of my parents laughed, hers easy, his presentational. Light draped across the floor. Shadows from trees bounced in the wind.

“Want some chocolate milk?” my father asked.

“Or some breakfast?” my mother chimed in.

“How’s Rochester?” I said.

My father looked down at his steaming coffee. He sat stooped, his mouth hanging open.

“Fine,” she answered.

“James?” I asked next.

I wanted my father to sit up straight, to point out his new glasses, talk about their perfect color. I wanted him to get angry.

“Breakfast then?” she said.

She had brought muffins and pastries with chocolate baked into the middle. My father carried them out on a tray, along with plates and cloth napkins. I was starving but ate nothing. I watched as they nibbled, as they talked about food and the weather. I didn’t get up to turn on the television, didn’t eat or pee. I wanted her to see me angry, hungry, unable to laugh or smile or find distraction in cartoons.

“That’s something, next door,” she said.

“It killed a dog,” I answered. “Meredith Johnson’s.”

My mother, about to take a sip, held her cup in midair.

“No it didn’t. Her dog is fine,” my father said, offering an apologetic smile.

“Dead,” I continued. “Crushed while she was walking it. One minute she was thinking about books she wanted to read, waiting for her little animal to pee. Next there was like crazy noise and a leash with a whole roof on top of it. Missed her by inches.”

“Martin,” my father said.

“She could hear it screaming, dying. She started pulling—”

“Martin,” he repeated, standing up.

“Pulling like crazy! Only made it worse.”

“Martin.”

“And then she was screaming and like snotty and everything, because all she ever thought about was that dog, like when she was at work and talking about books, she’s thinking about her dog and what it might be doing then.”

“Martin!”

“No, it’s fine,” my mother said, biting her lip, closing her eyes as if penitent. “Let him talk.”

I stared at her, shrugging. I was crying before I knew better, before I was able to stop it. The pastries were half eaten, the coffee cold. I pressed my face into the pillow.

“I think I should go,” she said, standing. Her narrow mouth pressed down at the corners, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

Even playing dumb she looked beautiful. Her arms stayed at her sides, implying heaviness, her legs stacked so close that her knees were touching. Her heels rose as she shifted the weight onto the balls of her feet so her narrow calves lifted into tapered, tight muscles, like she was trying to keep her feet from falling asleep, or waiting in a line without remembering why.

“I’m sorry, babe” she said. “I left my new address and number with your father.”

I wouldn’t accept her apology, her offer to be a pen pal. I turned, facing the pillow completely.

Three days later, the roof was gone. As the bus pulled up to our stop, kids leaned to get a look. I stayed in my seat, oblivious to the commotion around me, trying my best to remain unnoticed. Pierre was standing next to me.

“It’s gone,” he said.

I ignored him at first.

“Hey. The roof! I said it’s gone.”

I stood up, almost tripping as the bus pulled to a stop. Stumbling out, I hardly noticed comments about my ball gown, younger kids calling me Cinderella.

The lawn was empty. A rectangle remained—bleached-out

brown—where the roof had been. The porch was empty too, caution tape covering its stairway. Pierre ran onto it anyway.

“We can’t—” I said.

He crouched under the caution tape without slowing down. I followed him inside.

The rooms remained untouched. The sofa was still pushed against the wall. A pair of cats stretched across its dilapidated cushions to lie in patches of light. The dress was on the bed frame, just as we had left it. The shoes were tucked into the corner. Pierre lifted up the dress, undoing the back zipper, moving it closer to me.

“Put it on,” he said, smiling.

I shook my head.

“You mad?”

He smirked as he said this, a look so awful that, at that moment, I was sure I’d never recover. Pierre leaned down to my ankles, untying my shoes. I tried to step away, but he held on. He was small but strong. I lost my balance, almost kicking him as I fell onto the floor.

“Put it on!” he said, on top of me, grabbing the scruff of my neck. He was determined and I envied that.

Pierre pinned my shoulders down. He couldn’t hold the dress and me both, so I squirmed, feeling splinters from the floorboards across my back as I tried to get free.

“Fuck,” he said, his face bright. “Put it!”

I pulled to the side, slamming my head against the bed frame. Blood spread across my forehead. Pierre, looking like he was about to cry, let go of me.

“Your face,” he said, pulling a yellowed blouse from the closet, holding it to my forehead to stop the bleeding.

“You told everyone,” I said.

Pierre closed his eyes. He was lying next to me, breathing hard. We stayed there for minutes, his breathing loud, irregular; the dress slumped at our feet.

“Am I still bleeding?” I asked, dropping the blouse.

“No. You’re not bleeding.”

“Is it bad?”

“Not bad. You want to look in the mirror?” he asked.

“No. Show me on you.”

Pierre moved his fingers to his forehead, squinting, beginning to cry. “Where does it start?” I asked.

Pierre took his thumb, marking the exact spot where the cut began, another finger where it finished. It wasn't big at all. I put my hands on his forehead, replacing his fingers with mine as I sat on top of him.

"I could cut you right there," I said.

His eyes opened, moving wildly. He nodded. I could have taken a chunk of glass from the floor, pricked the skin, drawing a narrow red line to mirror my own, so everyone would wonder about the two of us.

"I could," I said, my hands pressing down on his wrists, Pierre breathing like a trapped animal.

I could have cut his whole face. Gotten him to put the dress on with nothing underneath, grabbing his ankles, making noises, and staying under the gown because there was something to see.

The first time I met Pierre, a year earlier, I thought he was French. I asked him about the trains over there, going one hundred miles an hour so that towns were colors more than shapes, whole forests a smear.

"Never seen the trains," he answered. "I'm from Vermont."

"I've been to Vermont," I said, kicking stones in the driveway.

"My dad's from Canada," Pierre continued.

"That's sort of like France," I said.

I thought about the drives my parents and I took on the Northway, my mother singing quietly, looking back every few minutes to see if I was bored or felt sick, the window open enough so her delicate hair flapped and spun against her forehead. Even for short car rides she'd pile me up with Mad Libs and books on tape, juice boxes half frozen. And my father would make comments about the license plates. For each state there was an anecdote. For Quebec there was always the same joke as he read the slogan lining the license plate. "*Je me souviens*. I am a souvenir." It was one of the only jokes of his that I understood.

My father's car was in the driveway. The house was quiet.

"Dad?" I said, walking up the stairs, the cut on my forehead fresh and stinging.

The office was empty, the bathroom too. His bedroom door was closed. I opened it without thinking.

He was sleeping in his underwear even though it was the

middle of the day. Blue veins mapped his legs; his toenails were thick and scaly. He started snoring, loud enough that it woke him up.

“What?” he said, glaring at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Why are you sleeping?”

“I’m tired, son,” he said rubbing his eyes.

He put one hand on his belly. He seemed unaware that he was mostly naked.

“What happened to your face?” he asked.

The question made me aware of my cut again, made it feel tighter, acerbic.

“I just fell down.”

“You should clean it. With disinfectant.”

He rubbed his eyes. His hands looked pruned, had knotty knuckles.

“It’s in the medicine cabinet,” he said, moving to get up.

“I know where it is.”

“Oh,” he said. “Good.”

He stared at me, his eyes open wider. He looked so different without glasses.

“Hungry?” I said.

It was close to dinnertime. I would have been happy to eat eggs, to hear news on the radio, my father reading the paper, his hair combed and clothes on.

“I’m sleeping,” he said.

The shelves in the medicine cabinet were packed with Q-tips and loose Band-Aids. Pills in orange bottles were stacked two rows deep, some prescribed to my mother, some with warnings about dizziness, instructions to take with food. The ointment on the top shelf was too high for me to reach. I pulled a chair in from the hall, kept standing on it even after I’d smeared ointment across my gash, the blood turning a watery pink. I saw over the shower curtain and could have touched the corners of the ceiling riddled with cobwebs. On my tiptoes, my neck stretching, I got a look at the top of the medicine cabinet, where I’d once caught my mother reaching for a pack of cigarettes she’d hidden there. I expected cigarettes to be there still, and earring backs, notes from James written in elaborate code. The shelf was empty apart from a thick film of dust and cotton balls grown gray from disuse.

Through the small bathroom window, I saw the lawn where the roof had been. The grass was dead and colorless. Pierre and I could rake it come April, when it was warm again and grass couldn't help but go back to green. We'd use my father's mower to keep it short, collect rocks to line the edges of the driveway like tiny teeth. And the cats on the porch—who were always trolling and licking and sleeping in piles, who let out pernicious sounds if we got too close to them—they would watch as Pierre and I trimmed and raked and pulled weeds from cracks in the sidewalk. They would be so curious as to what we were doing.