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Supersonic Man

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In Biology II, with the burning stench of formaldehyde in my nose and a fetal pig splayed in front of me on a rusty silver tray, I was told my favorite teacher would not be returning to school. The collected data was a rumored series of naked photos, a fake Facebook profile, a student, and his claims of ignorance. A handful of girls knew better.

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The scientific act of dissection is the taking of a once breathing, squealing being and peeling back it's layers, splitting it down the middle to cut a path to the inside. We look at the stilled heart, the crystalized veins stretching to the half-moon lungs. We study the surface of the fatty tissue warped black and blue and grey like a row of fresh bruises. We try to understand the processes of the body long after they have stopped: its wants and needs, it's uncontrolled actions of surviving. We search for reasons why things happen.

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My friend pressed the scalpel against the white-pink skin of the piglet on the metal slab in front of us. It's little ivory hooves pointed towards the ceiling, its ears melted and folded into the top of its head. I thought I could see it's big eyes moving underneath even bigger, paper-thin eyelids.

"You heard that?" I asked her as I pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

The skin on the pig's belly puckered as she added more pressure to the knife in her hand. "I didn't hear it," she said. "I read it."

"But it's a Twitter thing. A rumor blog." I touched the pig's nose, bent and angled to the right, squished and misshapen because of packaging. We had pulled it out of a plastic bag like a loaf of bread, followed by dark yellow fluid that dripped on to our lab table.

"That everyone reads."

With a grunt, she stabbed the scalpel into the skin. The pig's chest split like mitosis. We both jumped, surprised the little thing didn't squeal at the slice. Then she slowly started sawing down to the legs, its preserved skin tough like leather.

"It's a lie, a joke," I said. "He didn't do this."

She finally looked up at me. Her hazel eyes that have always reminded me of tumbling stones were eroding. "Yes. He did."

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There is a by-product plant forty-five minutes from my family's farm. There are horror stories about how the stench of rotting animal flesh and the sound of churning and crunching bone can be sensed from miles away. Piles of dead piglets reach the tops of buildings, half-hanging from their mother's wombs; bloated cows lined up on their backs, stocky black and white and red feet sticking up to the grey, battered sky; horses with broken legs and bullet holes corralled in pens with muck and mud splattering their fur.

While the stink was bad, I couldn't smell it until Dad rolled down the window on our truck to ask a worker with stained coveralls where to drop off. It reminded me of old food in the back of our refrigerator.

"What ya'll have?" The man answers. He has a pure white handkerchief sticking out of his chest pocket, almost shining against his uniform.

"Calves. Two of them."

"Put 'um 'hind Building Three."

That morning, a cow was supposed to have twins, but she walked into the milking parlor alone with afterbirth hanging beneath her tail and milk dripping from her teats. We found her babies hidden in the tall grass in the field, one of them much smaller than the other. They were curled up together and for moment, I pretended they were sleeping. I thought of my sister and I sharing a bed when we were younger and waking up to us holding hands. When Dad went to put them in the bed of the truck, he couldn't untangle their long legs, even with the rain slicking down their flushing white skin.

Dad drove slowly through the plant. There were already several other animals outside the building, some in misshapen positions as if they fell, and some are laid down with caution, their legs curled up underneath them and their heads tucked.

I didn't watch as he pulled the calves off the truck, but feel it lift slightly without their weight.

We don't let things go because they used to be something good. We let things go because they aren't anymore. No matter what they might have been or what we wish they could be, we must take things as they are. Farmers do this everyday with their crops, their animals, their own sense of self. I had to. If it's not healthy, if it's not helping us grow, we must choose to let go.

When Dad got back in the driver's seat, his hands were covered with mud and what looked like blood. He wiped them on his jeans.

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I close my eyes and I can see the day all the music students were corralled into the band room, all of us sat on the floor, shoulder to shoulder, bumping knees and elbows. I can smell the tangy scent of unclean brass and sweat. The principal rubs his dry hands together, a dry, rasping sound like a cough, as he starts to tell us what we all already know.

“I am sorry to inform all of you, but your teacher has chosen to resign from his position at this school. We are currently looking for a replacement that will finish out the school year. If any of you would like to talk, we have—”

I stood in the middle of his rehearsed speech, almost tripping over the kid squished in front of me. I climb over legs and arms, and girls starting to cry, and boys with red faces, clenching their fists. I tumble into the bathroom down the hallway and slide to the floor. Beside a broken mirror, I listened to a toilet run, and I finally start to cry.

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A group of girls created a fake Facebook page with the pictures of some bright blonde girl that had a Tumblr blog full of naked photos. When pictures were shared back and forth between this woman and my teacher of raw skin, they knew they couldn't keep their findings to themselves. They anonymously posted information to a Twitter profile created to share secrets, thinking it would be a good laugh.

Look at this pathetic old man. Look at the whites of his eyes and the thinning hair and the wrinkles around his red, wet lips.

What started as a joke turned into a police investigation. Which led to the confession of several students that have claimed to have been sexual harassed, and one student claiming more, manipulated into meeting him at his house, stuck in his office in between classes.

So many girls.

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My great-uncle coaxed the bull to the front of the trailer, his long, wrinkled fingers itching a blotchy white star underneath it's chin, a .22 rifle dangling from his other hand. My other uncle took the rope hanging from it's halter and tied it to one side of the trailer's opening. Dad did the same with the other side. The bull went to take a step forward and found its head pushed back. It grunted and blasted air through it's gigantic nostrils, shook its bulbous head. Its eyes started to bulge nervously.

My great-uncle backed up and started to lift the gun in the air. Then he spotted my sister and I watching tensely from the side. This is the first time I've been included in this part of the process. I've always seen what came after: the slabs of beef hanging from the basement walls. I've never seen the living, breathing bull before.

My great-uncle nodded at us and we were herded below the barn by our grandma, into the milking parlor. I leaned on a wheel barrow that almost tipped under my weight. My sister stared at the ceiling, swinging her arms. We are both in coats that are way too big for us, but have holes and stains and tears from barn life.

She turned to look at me suddenly. "Maybe you should cover your ears."

Before I can, we hear a gunshot. And a thud that shakes the barn walls.

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He wasn't wearing his wedding ring, that golden band that told me he belonged to a wife that brought him picnic lunches during the day. He asked me to stay a little while after a Monday night band practice. I thought, maybe, hopefully, he would tell me that I was going to get field commander the next year. That's what I had wanted to be since he brought me up from middle school to march with the high school.

That's what I wanted. I saw he had been giving time to other girls: time alone, time with him telling them how good they were doing, how talented they were. He had a way of making me not only feel seen, but like I was the only one being seen.

But the way he was looking at me, his hands in the still air between us, almost reaching out, I think of the first bull I was allowed to help butcher on my farm. All the soft words, all the gentle touches, couldn't take that look of uncomfortable, twitching suspicion of something bad from its eyes.

"How about starting private vocal lessons with me, Ellie?" he whispers across the miles, inches, between us, his skin, my skin, the ice-cold bridge of what might have happened, but didn't. "You have real talent."

"Really?" A squeak, nothing more.

A nod, a smile.

"Don't tell anyone, Ellie. We don't want anyone getting jealous."

I pull away from him. A part of me felt as if I was giving up a dream of mine or a hope. His blue eyes dimmed like someone turning off a light, and I knew that something changed between us and would never be the same. It broke my heart.

“I have to ask my dad,” I said.

His voice turned monotone and deep. “Let me know what he says.”

I never asked my dad. I never talked to my teacher again about those plans.

I never said anything to anyone.

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He showed me a John Cage song one study hall where I slipped into his office to practice a show choir piece, but instead listened to his stories of how college is so much better than high school, how his friends majoring in opera would speak to him with a robotic voice on their phones to save their singing. He always hinted at a funny story about a couple students that he would tell me once I graduated.

I realized a couple weeks after he left that I will never hear that story.

That song he showed me—I think of it when I think my teacher, when I think of that bull, when I think of me and them. It was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of absolute silence.

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Four days later my teacher’s office was stripped bare and naked. Stepping into it felt open and wrong like we were trespassing on his private property. Faint brown lines on the yellow-white walls were the only remains of a diploma and a teaching degree that is now useless. It was more than just pictures. It was feelings. It was desires. It was bad choices.

I tried to think of anything good about him, and my mind was full of images, swirling around and around, over and over again like staccato notes blaring: locking practice room doors; yelling; piano keys; I can’t see his wedding ring; blue eyes; Burt’s Bees chap stick. I try to think of the last words he said to me and I can’t really remember them.

My friend stepped in after me, walking towards the corner where his desk used to be, the one that used to hold copies of torn choral music and a photo of his tawny, sloppy smiling dog in a Valentine’s Day picture frame. Her feet crinkled the carpet like she was walking on plastic wrap, making the whole place seem like a crime scene.

“You know the first thing you forget about someone is their face,” she said softly. “The less you see them the more you tend to dream up the details, coloring in your own lines, until it is a totally different made-up person.”

How could I create a made-up person when I had no idea who they were in the first place?

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Most of my Friday nights in high school were spent on the stands of a football or basketball game in the pep band. I sat shivering one night deep in October behind the field goal, cradling a lukewarm hot chocolate over the cymbals in my lap. My teacher stood in front of us, ready to turn around and direct an impromptu fight song if our school’s boys wrestled themselves into a touchdown. He had just said something hilarious and we were all still laughing.

“He is so great.” I don’t know why I said it, why I felt like people had to know this. “That’s why he’s my favorite teacher.”

The girl beside me looked away from me. Months later this girl would be the one to take the fall for her friends “If you knew what I know, you wouldn’t think that.”

“What?”

She chugged the last of her drink and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. “Can I tell you something? It’s—”

“No.” For some reason, my stomach felt like it had the hand warmers in it that I had stuffed into the toes of my marching shoes. I thought of the talk about voice lessons and for a moment I know what she’s going to say and every part of me wanted her to keep quiet.

Words are so powerful. Why say it out loud? Once it’s there in the still air, syllables and letters tripping over hot breath, once I finally heard it—I couldn’t convince myself anymore that what I’ve seen, what I’ve felt and suspected, isn’t real.

The Styrofoam cup in her hand crumbled in a fist.

“It’s just... We might have to play soon. I—”

What I couldn’t tell her: I didn’t want to know because I liked pretending he would always be my favorite teacher. He had been the only older man other than my father or my uncle to tell me I had talent, who had looked at me like I wasn’t another grade on a piece of paper or a student stuck in a seat, but a person that could achieve something, create beautiful art, fall in love with music even if I couldn’t play it. The way he looked at me may have sometimes been wrong, but it made me feel special. I didn’t want that to go away.

The crowd erupted so loud, I jumped and barely came in time to start playing the song with the rest of the band.

Afterward, she acted like the conversation never happen. But in all honesty, I did, too.

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For months, going to school felt like a bad dream, but when more girls came forward, I understood that I was waking up from one. It was when I saw his face plastered on every newspaper in our small town, the story composed mostly of his eyes and his verdict, that I comprehended that this man was manipulative, cruel, and most of all, inexplicably broken. I could hardly tell what color his eyes were in the low-quality blur, but to me they were burning bright blue.

“A lot of the behaviors on his part were not technically criminal, but are egregious by any standard looking at a teacher,” the judge disclosed.

I had to look up that word: egregious. The definition, please. Egregious: outstandingly bad; shocking. Please use it in a sentence. What this man committed was egregious in the eyes of the law, egregious in the eyes of his students, their parents, me.

“A wrong has been done and people’s trust in the teaching profession, the school and each other has been harmed and so we turn to our legal system for justice,” said a father.

My friend said she didn’t think she could trust a male teacher again. He helped her with homework, ate dinner with her family and sisters. He looked at her every day over music stands and coffee mugs. How could she not see it? How could any of us not see it?

“I apologize. I apologize to everyone,” he said to the court, to the newspapers. “I regret it and I’m sorry for what I’ve done.”

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In the basement of our house, we carved the meat from the bull into different piles: steaks, hamburger, roasts. There were three old bikes covered in cobwebs shoved in one corner. Big slabs of beef taller than I was hung from the ceiling with twine. Willy Nelson’s song, “Always On My Mind”, played softly on the radio stationed at the top of the stairs.

My job was to sit at the end of the butchering table, my back to shelves of empty Mason jars and rusty hubcaps, and wrap up pieces of cut beef in freezer paper and then write on them with Sharpie what kind and if they were going to my grandmother’s house or staying in the basement. Sometimes I doodled on the side a small cartoon cow with a stretched smile.

This meat is fresh and clean, no chemicals, no preservatives, and we will eat off this bull for the next year, maybe more.

One thing I have learned from growing up on the farm is that sometimes there must be pain so there can be strength. Sometimes animals don't get to live as long as we want them to because of sickness or hurt, but we can still use them. Goodness, healing, can come from doing the best with what you have and moving forward.

When I think of what has happened to me, my family, my friends, my school, every time, I choose to move forward.

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My teacher did it out love. I believe he did it out of the idea of love. Not physical, though newspapers and rumors both say that's what it was all about, but emotional.

The home basketball game was against our biggest rival, Pirates verses the Hawks, and it was getting louder, so loud I flinched every time the buzzer sounded and the pep band played a piece of our Fight Song, a battle in the stands of who can be louder. I had quit band after my teacher left, and I missed it sometimes even when I said I didn't.

"He had a bad childhood, leaving home the moment he turned eighteen," My friend said, piling her black hair into a ball on top of her head. "He said he would encourage any kid to leave if they wanted to."

"What?"

"His family called him gay, you know, all kinds of things."

We were passing out tickets; I was doing a very bad job at it, taking their money and forgetting to pull off the paper stub.

"Why?"

"Because he liked music. Because he liked being in plays." She looked at the floor, at her seat, at somewhere far beneath our feet. "He told me a couple days before he left."

We always said he left. As if it was his choice.

"It was heartbreaking," she continued saying. "It just all came out. He didn't even stop to breathe when he was telling me."

So he went to college and never even thought about heading back. He was always craving that home, that community. When students looked up at him, claiming he was the greatest and the best

person in the whole world, I think he mistook that for love. Because when he finally felt acceptance and respect, he had no idea what to do with it.

That is no excuse for his actions, but it does help me explain them to myself. He was my supersonic man: untouchable, invincible, powerful. In a way and for a time, he was my hero. I wouldn't have had the courage or confidence to study my loves in college: writing, music, theatre. I would never have learned to believe in myself and in my talent.

But for supersonic men, there is always a time when they must take off their masks. They have to face the human aspects of their character. They need to sell their rockets.

I hope one day, wherever he is or ends up, he hears a melody that reminds him of a girl that never stopped believing in his ability and strength to be a brave, honest person, even after all that has happened. I hope in that same moment he chooses a chance to be good.