

## Fast Girls

That morning in West Virginia, the birds held their breath. I waited on the front porch, shaking in the cold as the sun bled orange above the trees. Slowly, the light illuminated the fort my brother and I built from leftover planks, the flower beds my mom planted now covered in leaves. My warm bed was just a memory. I talked myself out of going back two times.

The screen door across the street screeched and the shock of hair, brown with red streaks like flames, appeared in the crack. She turned to shut the door, quietly, a backpack strapped to her, and I ran—down the hill, into the street, up the driveway to her house. She stopped and I threw my arms around her waist. “Christine, take me with you,” I begged.

“Nessy, I can’t . . .” she said, like I’d woken her from a dream. I stepped away from her, unzipped my own backpack, showed her the treasure of green bills. She cocked her head back, looking so much younger than 18. I held my breath to stop time, so she wouldn’t say “no” to my 12-year-old face. Instead of looking at me, she was listening, and I heard it, too, the thunder of feet across a floor before the lights inside her house blinked on and the front door shot open.

“Run,” she told me, and I did, pumping my arms and legs until they were numb. Two houses down, I stopped and turned back. Her dad with his coveralls and sooty fingers loomed over her, hand raised. He brought it down across her body, and she didn’t fall, she let it happen, the sound of the slap reverberating through her into the sharp air. I knew then that what he did didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that he yelled, “If you go, you can’t come back!” It didn’t matter if we didn’t know how we’d get to Baltimore. She held up her hand and dropped her car keys in the driveway as she walked away.

When she reached me, she grabbed my arm. “Keep moving,” she said.

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I didn't know exactly when Christine had changed—stopped being just my babysitter and got that flicker in her eyes. It was probably the car. The purple Mustang appeared in the driveway last summer, a gift from her dad.

“I'm not even gonna take it out that much,” she'd said, arms crossed over her chest. “He's just trying to make up for stuff.” I ticked off the bruises I'd seen peppering her body.

Eventually, she drove it. She learned to make the engine growl before she put it in drive, how to jump in the rolled down window without opening the car door. Her arm muscles tensed as she gripped the frame, head tossed back.

My mom shook her head, peering through the blinds as Christine peeled out. “She better watch out,” she said. “Nothing good comes from fast girls.”

There were boys, too, who drove their own cars, red, yellow, black. They parked in front of our house, engines running, exhailes of smoke surrounding them like clouds. Christine disappeared into them and they'd take off. Away from the potholed roads and battered houses, the parents who never did what you needed. I always followed for a block or two on foot, wishing I wasn't left behind.

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When we reached the bus station, the whole world was shaking. By then, the morning sun's rays pierced our eyes and the rumbling engines echoed off the terminal's enormous spine, jiggling my insides. My feet hurt and my lungs burned from walking so fast, but I was giddy and light, a bubbling root beer about to explode. We were so close to doing this.

I started to skip, my backpack bouncing on my shoulders, wishing I could hurry, get on this bus, catch up to the rest of my life. The smack of a palm grounded me. “Calm the fuck

down, Nussy. I mean it.” Christine talked through clenched lips. Nothing she did was low key, even when she whispered.

My shoulders slumped. I waited for her to pass, then turned in step behind her.

Through the bus station windows, flickers of movement beckoned. At the doors, Christine stepped to the side and leaned down so close I could taste her cinnamon toothpaste.

“You better remember what we went over,” she said.

I nodded. I reached around for my backpack and held it to my chest. “We have enough money for two bus tickets, though,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter. I want as few people as possible connecting you with me.” She reached out her arm and I passed the backpack to her. I’d found the bills stuffed in a plastic grocery bag in my mom’s sock drawer—she’d stopped believing in banks. Christine slipped out a few and zipped it back up. Her eyes were fire. “You almost ruined everything this morning,” she said. “It can’t happen again. Understand?”

The bus station smelled like nacho cheese and Old Spice. I unzipped my coat but sweat still soaked my collar. Christine walked up to a window and came back with a ticket.

“Bathroom,” she murmured, and we ducked our heads, wading through the maze of people.

Once inside the bathroom, I watched the door while she searched the trash—waded-up paper towels, old soda cups. “Ah ha, got one!” She held up her arm, triumphant, in her hand a slightly crumpled bus ticket. Her smile exposed her left front tooth, the one angled back and turning brown—the spot in her otherwise perfect face somehow made her more beautiful. She was bashful about it with everyone but not me, and in that moment, it didn’t matter that I was 12 and she was 18. Before someone came in the bathroom and Christine’s eyes shot to the floor. “Me first,” she mouthed peering through the door into the station.

Behind the sign reading “Baltimore,” a crowd of people bunched, coughing, wheezing, chattering. Christine and I stood in line, not speaking. The doors opened and the driver led us to one of the shuddering buses.

Christine stepped up, holding the ticket she’d bought on top of the one from the trash. “Hi, how are you today?” She nudged my body behind hers. The driver had an enormous belly and I marveled he could see the tickets. He grunted.

She cleared her throat, lashes batting her cheek bones. “I get sort of car sick sometimes,” she said. “Where do you think I should sit?”

Since she’d chopped off her hair, she looked like an actress, someone everyone recognizes but can’t quite place. Once the driver looked at her, he didn’t bother with the tickets anymore and we crept onboard. The seats had thick fabric like carpeting with swirled colors. Bird poo smeared the enormous windows. Christine stopped at a row in the middle, gesturing for me to take the window. I scrunched in, pulling my knees to my chest.

The numbers on Christine’s phone read 8:08 as the bus hissed and we started to move. No one at school would notice that I was gone. I could see my brother calling “Nessy?” at the foot of the stairs; my mom storming into my room, calling my dad, wherever he was, going to the cops. Tears running down her face as she told them, “We just miss her so much.” I shivered, but I wasn’t cold. The other picture in my head showed my mom as a lump still under the covers.

Outside the bus window, motion turned the land into stripes of colors—yellow and blue. Trees poked up like tinker toys as we rolled from hillside to hillside. I’d never understood what it meant to be from West Virginia until a sign said, “Maryland Welcomes You” and everything was instantly gritty. Brick buildings crumbled on riverbanks and barges puffed out big clouds of smoke, turning the air gray.

I pulled on Christine's arm. "Tell me again," I whispered.

Her eyes stayed on her phone. "My friend Stevie has an apartment. In a warehouse. I'm working the bar downstairs."

Life after the next four hours was a row of question marks. It thrilled me but I felt empty—the same feeling as when my dad left or when my mom came back from the hospital looking like a vase made of thin glass.

"What am I going to do?" I asked.

"You'll be our good luck charm." She ruffled my hair, scraggly, not quite grown out from where I'd taken a scissors to it. I kept holding her arm and buried my face in her neck. Her smell surrounded me, the heat from her body entering mine. I didn't stop myself, I tilted my head and pressed my mouth against hers, lips tingling as they touched; before she moved her head away. "Nessy, don't do that," she whispered, pulling her arm back. I stared out the window, watching everything race by.

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We were in my mom's room. Christine's clothes lay crumpled on the bed, jeans, string panties. School had started and she was staying with us for the weekend. After my mom locked herself in her room for two days and wouldn't come out, she'd gone away for a while.

I crept into my mom's room when I heard the water running in the shower and held Christine's bra to my cheek, fabric so thin I saw my hands. It smelled like her, like a bonfire. I pulled my tank top over my head and slipped my arms through the bra's straps, reaching behind my back to snap it into place. In the mirror over my mom's vanity, the fabric in the cups gaped. I ran my hands over my chest and a firecracker burned at the space between my legs.

The water shut off, and the shower curtain rippled. I reached back to unfasten the bra, pulling and pushing the sides. They wouldn't come free. I wiggled harder. The bathroom door screeched. The mirror's reflection caught Christine, torso wrapped in a towel, hair slicked back.

She closed the space between us in two steps. Her arms covered me as she reached behind and undid the bra, her fingers tickling like spiders as she slipped off the straps. Her hand was still on my back when, *whoosh*, the towel fell.

We stood there. Her eyes danced with laughter. I stared at her body, taking in her nipples, the round muff of hair at the top of her legs. I wasn't that much shorter than her now. My body was hot and I wanted to touch the space between my legs where the firecracker burned, just like I wanted to at the gas station with the magazines on the top rack with women in bikinis. This felt different; Christine was real and so was the heat traveling from between my legs to my fingers, controlling my hand, making me do things I didn't plan. I reached out and touched one of her breasts, round and doughy, the nipple hard like a pencil eraser. Her heartbeat murmured in my hand.

Her hand pressed on top of mine. She tilted her head and leaned it forward until our eyelashes brushed. I closed my eyes as our lips met, soft and urgent, and her tongue flicked between my teeth.

A rumbling sounded from the stairs. "Christine!" my little brother shouted. We leapt apart; the towel went back on and so did my shirt.

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The road sign read "Baltimore 150." When we heaved to a stop, Christine murmured, "Stay here." My eyes were spotlights on her plaid coat bobbing into the station. I reached for my backpack, unzipped it, checked the green bills inside.

New passengers lined the aisle. A woman with short curly gray hair and a collar sticking out of her sweatshirt smiled at me—Grandma going to see her grandkids, maybe.

“You a long way from home, hon?” she asked.

I nodded. I opened my mouth, then shut it when I saw the plaid coat making its way up the row. The lady followed my eyes to Christine before she walked past. The welt, fresh and swollen from that morning, made one of Christine’s eyes squint.

Christine held two aluminum foil mounds. The burger inside was gray and jiggly and the cheese hadn’t melted. “Did you bring ketchup?” I asked.

Christine rolled her eyes. “Goddamnit, Nesy, no I didn’t,” she hissed. I bit into the bun, wishing my eyes would stop watering. I swallowed, but the lump kept bobbing in my throat. Christine’s phone lit up with another message, but instead she reached for my cheek and swiped across it. “Crumbs,” she said. I wanted to kiss those fingers, stick them in my mouth.

When we finished, Christine stretched a piece of gum between her teeth as she scrolled on her phone. Every few seconds, her pink velvet tongue glinted between her lips.

My body slid down the seat, curling into itself. Someone had left the bathroom door open and it smelled sickly sweet. The sun blared in the windows, bright and insistent, and I squirmed, breathing through my mouth, unzipping my coat. Finally, I stood up.

“Nesy, seriously. Only two more hours.” Christine’s voice was pinched and high.

“I gotta pee,” I fibbed. She hesitated, then squeezed her legs up to let me out. I walked down the aisle, along the bobbing passengers’ heads. When I turned, Christine had grabbed my backpack and her arm was inside, riffling to the bottom. I knew what she was doing though I told my eyes they were wrong.

A few rows back, the grandmother lady in the sweatshirt had a pink crochet needle in her lap. She smiled when she saw me, and I followed her eyes to my pajama pants, spotted in gray dirt, mud caked along the bottoms. My scalp felt oily and I kept my arms glued to my sides so my armpits wouldn't smell.

She held a candy in crisp cellophane out to me. I slipped its peppermint sweetness into my mouth. "You going to Baltimore?" she asked, corners of her eyes crinkled.

I nodded.

"What's there for you, hon?"

For a moment, I couldn't answer, but I remembered what we'd rehearsed on the way to the bus station. "Our cousin is sick, in the hospital," I said.

"That's a shame, a sad reason to travel. All on your own and there's heartache on the other end." She patted my hand. "Where are your parents?"

I held on to the seat as the bus swayed. "They're already . . . they're coming later."

"Oh, well, do you need a ride to the hospital? My nephew is picking me up. Is your cousin at Hopkins? That's not far." Her hand was still on top of mine.

In the side of my eye, Christine was watching me. During the best of times, I used to catch my mom staring at me, a softness to her face that made me know I was loved. I wanted Christine to look a little like that. She just looked mad.

I shook my head and took a step back, loosening the grandma lady's grip. "No thank you," I said.

I retreated back down the aisle. The heaviness of Christine's arm circled my shoulder as she pulled me into the seat. "We've gotta stick together, Nussy," she said.



We stayed folded into each other, but my body was stiff like cardboard. Christine fell asleep, her arm like a weight on my shoulders, her head knocking against mine.

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A few days ago, we sat in my mother's broom closet; knees pulled to our chests. The bruise punched onto Christine's bicep had turned mustard yellow. The word clanged in my head over and over: *leaving*.

"You're a big girl, Nesy," Christine said. "You don't need me."

*But I do, I do, I need you so bad*, my heart said, as I leaned into her chest. I thought of all the times she babysat me and my brother, the stuffed animals and second-hand magazines she gifted me, the time she took me to get a cavity filled after my mouth swelled up. Life without her was like losing my pointer finger. I wanted her to stroke my hair, my arms, everywhere. Instead, she patted the bruise. "My dad's a shit bird," she said.

"My parents are too," I said.

"No, yours are just . . ." I waited. We didn't know how to talk about a mom who cried all the time and a dad who wasn't there.

When I squeezed her hand and said, "Please," she shoved me off and squeezed out of the closet.

Two days later, I knocked on her door across the street, holding my excuse—her mom's empty casserole dish. When I asked her when she was going, she said, "Tuesday morning, early," like it was no big deal.

I woke at 3 a.m. so when I saw her walking down the driveway of her house, I would already be standing outside mine.

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Baltimore grew slowly. At first, it was short and stout buildings, then they got taller and smashed together. Cars lined the roads and a constant hum surrounded us even though I put my hands over my ears.

The bus moved slowly, wedging between tall buildings. Now that Christine was awake, she seemed lighter, bobbing her legs up and down, shaking our seats. Seeing her excited made me turn a thought over in my mind. Finally, I got the courage to ask: "Is Stevie a guy or a girl?"

"Guy."

I swallowed, but spit kept flowing. "Do you like him?"

Her head snapped around to me. "He's my boyfriend, Nussy. Of course I like him."

My chest stung, her words landing like rocks.

When the bus gasped to a stop, people scrambled to their feet, crushing into the aisles. Everything blurred with movement, and I was stuck, trapped in the window seat.

As bodies shuffled, the grandma lady appeared above us. "Is this your sister?" she asked. I nodded. Christine beamed at her, but the lady didn't seem charmed.

"You sure you don't need a ride?" she asked.

I counted the seconds, but Christine didn't answer. "The story," I murmured, keeping my lips motionless. "Oh!" Christine said, coming alive with the lie. "No, we're fine, our parents are meeting us there."

The grandma lady didn't say anything. *Please don't let her remember*, my brain repeated. The line started to move.

When a space cleared in the aisle, Christine nudged my shoulder and I got up. "Give me your backpack," she said. I did. "Wait for me by the bus when we get out," she said. A pimple had started to bloom on the tip of her nose, and her forehead was greasy.

Outside, I stood by the bus engine, inhaling the poison exhaust. Christine's plaid coat flickered through the crowd and into the street outside the station. My backpack bobbed at her side. She shrank into the crush of people, her body becoming one in the jostling mob.

Across the street, the grandma lady talked to a cop. They stared at me and he reached for the radio at his hip. Then there were two cops with the lady, walking towards the bus.

Christine in her plaid coat found the boy in his leather one. She was far away, but I knew like the back of my hand the way the corners of her mouth were lifting, her eyelids batting. He smirked sheepishly before encircling her with his arms. They pressed together, her head swallowed by his.

When Christine and the guy separated, they looked at me, then the police. In my head, I saw Christine running for me, shouting at the cops, grabbing their attention. Instead, she stayed frozen, our eyes connected, before yanking on the guy's arm; oh, how I wished that was my arm. I jerked my head to see the cops walking faster. When I turned back, Christine's face was gone. That empty space hit me, strong enough to knock me over. I understood—this was what it felt like to lose.

My feet began to move, picking up speed as I dodged people and buses. The thudding in my chest matched the sound of my feet. The cops' feet pounded behind me, but I kept going. If I was fast enough, I'd skip it all, run right through it. I'd make it to the future and never stand still.