

Michelle Truitt's lips tasted like cheap beer. And they were ridiculously soft. Heaven.

But the softness disappeared, replaced by the hard smash of tooth on tooth. Blood—mine—mingled with the taste of Michelle's mouth. And that taste, in the moment before the fist registered, was the culmination of my entire seventeen and a half years of life. Girl, blood, beer: all the elements required to deliver a boy to manhood.

But then a regression: suddenly I was sliding down a hill in my fuzzy costume dodging a flurry of knuckles and boots. Benny's head tumbled after me, its bucktooth leer flashing as it rolled. As the proud mascot of the Fighting Beavers of Brookdale High, Benny had a look that was supposed to project fierceness. But it was really more like the vacant smile of the criminally insane.

When Benny's head came to a stop near my own, I slid it on for protection. I knew what it must have looked like, there on the edge of the lawn, this poor beaver getting the holy hell beaten out of him, all the while grinning and bearing it—enjoying it even, from the looks of that maniacal smile. Someone happening on this scene would have probably assumed some sort of fetish. I shielded myself best I could, praying for a quick and merciful end. Through the eye slits I saw celestial bodies burning away in the night sky. Maybe it was just my own brain shooting neurons in response to each blow.

Either way, this wasn't how I'd imagined the evening going.

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Video games in the basement again, deep in the scent of mold and funk that my parents had given up trying to rectify years earlier—around the same time my father had given up on pretty much everything: his wife, his son, his dreams of happiness on the open road. As a result, gutters hung precariously for months at a time; roof tiles littered the front lawn, half hidden in

unkempt grass; the wood pile had turned into little more than shells of cored sawdust and papery snakeskin.

I played *Berserk and the Band of the Hawk*, a game that even to my male teenage brain veered into gratuitous violence. The old Dad would have yelled at me to “stop playing that shit.” But these days he just mumbled and sighed.

It was my mom who pulled the controller from my hand and ordered me out of the house.

“You’ve graduated. It’s officially summer now. Surely there’s some place you can be . . . go do drugs, go impregnate someone. For God’s sake, do *something!*” Her eyes rested on a days-old yogurt cup with a wadded tissue in it. “Get out of this stinking, disgusting room. Go!”

I’d already considered it. My imbecile friend Randy had called three times, imploring me to get off my ass, that he and our friend Doug were headed to Michelle Truitt’s party. I could picture the pantomime Randy was going through as he told me this, making rounded mountains of his chest, sign language for Michelle’s breasts, legends since the 6th grade. I wasn’t immune from lustfulness myself, of course, but Randy’s overheated, eye-popping idiocy kept me rooted to the couch in the basement instead of in the back of his car while he and Doug blasted Body Count, a band that did nothing for me apart from make my eardrums bleed. When I thought about the way he—and every other guy in my class—reduced the entirety of Michelle Truitt to her chest, it made me, well . . . *sad*. But try articulating that to hormonal teenagers; there may be no better formula for getting your ass kicked.

After her mom died when we were in the 7th grade, Michelle turned into some kind of new specimen, a beautiful and rare creature in a cage or aquarium that we could gaze upon but could not touch. When it was eventually gleaned, many weeks later, that in fact Michelle’s mother hadn’t died but rather had left her family for a truck driver and moved to Nebraska or

Kansas or somewhere, Michelle lost all her female friends. They'd collectively decided that she had betrayed them with her dishonesty and prevented their natural rights to console her. She then became one of those girls who had only boy friends, and then boyfriends, a steady parade of them (which made the girls in their jealousy hate her all the more). All that time, I longed to be one of those boyfriends, through every phase Michelle entered and then left: when she started riding motorcycles and played the electric guitar, when she cultivated the Catholic private schoolgirl look, when she shaved the left side of her head and dyed the remaining flop purple.

But before all of this, in the immediate aftermath of Mrs. Truitt's "death," it was me who found Michelle alone and crying in the bottom of a school stairwell. She was crouched in the corner, head in hands against the wall, a mop, bucket, and two barrels of that green powder they throw on top of puke crammed into a corner. I was on my way to the bathroom when I heard the whimpering and stepped closer to check it out. I watched her, mesmerized.

When she realized I was there, she scowled and snapped, "The fuck you looking at?" and sped away.

There are few opportunities in the 7th grade to actually *see* a person, to strip away the external defenses and glimpse a soul. And so bearing witness to that sadness and to that fury—both, within mere moments of each other, well, there is no other way to say it: I was in love.

Now it was five years later and we'd just completed high school, everyone gleefully partaking in the ritual of tossing every shred of paper—every test, every essay, every quiz, every spare doodle—into the air as we ran like mad for the exits, fresh off the final countdown. It's only now, looking back, that I see the cruelty in this, the way that even the teachers smiled indulgently at this ritual while it would be left to the school custodian, an ancient black man

named Mr. Harrison, who went by “Ace” and perpetually sucked a toothpick, to clean everything up.

The graduation ceremony had been called off because of a bomb threat. So far no makeup plans had been announced and everyone more or less gave up on it ever happening. “Well, at least we went out with a whimper and not a bang” was the running joke.

But Michelle Truitt was having a major blowout. Truth is, I had planned on going, until Randy started calling. “Truitt, dude. Mi-chellllle Truitt,” he repeated and I was certain he was sculpting again, so I hung up on him.

But now my mother was threatening to throw away the video games unless I left. This was serious.