

A Threadbare Towel

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After we pull into Wooden Planks Nature Resort, my parents cheer me on as I strip off my clothes on the back seat of the car. It's our third time camping here. Perspiration rivers my spine on this steamy June morning, a day promising to be blisteringly hot and humid. I gnaw my bottom lip, trying to contain my excitement. When we park, Elise is already waiting on the stoop outside our rented cabin. I study her lean, freckled body, her naked bottom nestled against a threadbare towel.

"Finally, Iris," Elise says, thumbing glasses up the bridge of her wide nose.

Elise is a full year older than I am but shorter by half a foot. Her eyes are mocha brown and the thick lenses make them bug out. There's a space between her top teeth that causes her to whistle when she speaks.

Mother says, "We'll unpack. Go have fun with your friend."

I know why they both let me go. Elise is my one and only. Most kids push away from the ones who are different: those who natter about trains, the ones with gimp-legs, and those who are pudgy. I fall into the last category.

Father sighs. "Mind the sulphur spring. We've had a lot of rain."

A sun bonnet covers Elise's short hair. Cherry and yellow polka dots explode like confetti from the hat's fabric. Her forehead shines big and bossy from beneath the bonnet's brim. Like a shy, red fox that's been spotted, she darts ahead. By the time I slip a pebble from my shoe,

I lag in her dust. Elise soars, pushing for the woods, her bare bum offering a curly smile. The soles of my runners soon become tacky.

Up ahead, she squats near a fallen log, a blanket of lime-green moss coating it.

"I'm telling," I say, swatting at the swarm of mosquitoes that probe for my blood type.

She frowns before a rush of pee streams from her thighs. "Know what I think?"

I wait for more. Only she never says.

My parents think I don't know they refer to Elise that way. The retard. I admit, she isn't always too bright and she talks funny but she brings me joy. Besides, who else is there?

Her lips are oddly shaped, like slices of pear left to rot. When she smiles back at me, green chunks and pockets of dough sandwich between her teeth. I wonder when she'll acquire some manners.

"Follow the leader," Elise calls.

Spotty clouds cast a shadow. Elise turns blurry before she evaporates at a sudden twist in the path. She's light on her feet, I'll give her that. I sprint until a knot hardens in my chest. Cursing my size, I bend and rest against my knees to catch my breath. She's vanished. My head tilts like a hound listening for clues. A soft bird voice calls from a nearby branch. I venture forth and around the bend. The hush of the swamp pillows me, its carpet floor deadening the usual clatter of the forest. I consider calling out but sneer at the senselessness.

A faded cigarette packet flutters from where last year's cattails poke. A rotten plank stretches between me and the sulphur spring. The perimeter is spongy beneath my shoes and a

stench of rotten eggs belches from the water. I thumb my nose at the putrid smell. I've heard it said that the spring is bottomless and can fill thirty bathtubs in two minutes. It's hard to comprehend how somebody knows this.

The sulphur smell reminds me of skunk combined with burnt coffee. Bubbles gurgle along the water's edge, an elastic cauldron of beige foam. At the heart of the spring the water yields black velvet, a gasoline puddle skimming its surface. Silver algae undulate with feathery grace; rose-coloured orchids and pitcher plants explode nearby. My nose adjusts to the acerbic air before I think: where *is* she?

I hold my breath until a twinge urges me to exhale. A heap of terry cloth sits to my left; glasses sparkle from the wilted towel tossed away in a hurry. I survey the gurgling water again, looking for Elise. Yellow sunlight springs off the damp hair of a pelt emerging from the effervesce. It's her.

I cry soundlessly, dragging the heel of my palm against my mouth. A mouldy rail between me and the spring pitches with my weight. I consider jumping in but fear chokes me. My non-existent swimming ability chills my urge. Instead, I pivot and fly along the trail, back to the resort, the half-logs slick with humidity under my feet. On legs as determined as a fawn's, I battle past gullies and underbrush before throwing myself at the mercy of the rented cabin, my heart pounding.

They're both there. Their bare bottoms line a scarred wooden bench. One of them sips from a mug while the other draws smoke from a cigarette. They gaze at me as they ~~you~~ would anyone going about the business of the day.

Father says, "What have we here?"

I clear my throat of phlegm. They both stare at me, their eyes speculating at the source of my dismay. I stand in silence with the look of someone haunted, charcoal soil caked to my palms. As soon as I open my mouth to speak, mother drags me to a basin. My voice is weedy against the rush of water streaming from the faucet. Exhausted, I lean against her strong body while silence fills the air. When I take a fleeting look at the bathroom mirror, I recoil as Elise's pasty image mouths, "What took you so long?" She stands dripping, smiling gappy-toothed and smug, clutching at her threadbare towel.