

The Towns Where Everyone Is a Heroin Addict

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We grew up between factories and farms. The factories made different things, obscure car parts we never had to purchase or plastic tool handles, but they all smelled like burnt coffee. The farms were dairy farms. We all remember the milk trucks, with purple cartoon heifers down their sides. We all remember the yellowness of raw milk, how we thought it came out rotten until farmer Jude fed us a drop off his finger. It was warm; we remember this, but we don't remember if Jude's touch had warmed it or if it had been that way.

We all remember leaving a rolling suitcase of Barbies in Jude's field. We cried all night because some of the dolls were naked, and we were sure they would freeze to death. We don't remember what girl accused Jude of molesting her, but we remember she said it happened in that shed, the one Jude decorated with our drawings.

We don't remember entering beauty contests at three or four years old, but our mothers have the pictures to prove it. We were all princesses. We all won.

We all remember Balloon Bob, that old man who collected pop cans and inflatable animals. He tied pink dolphins to his porch, alligators to his car, Halloween cats to his roof. Our favorite was the whale, the one that floated in his pond like a real whale. When we picked blueberries near his house, he'd say, "Hey, see that whale there," as if we didn't know it was fake. This went on until either someone said, "Sir, we are eighteen years old," or he died. We don't remember which. Someone said he had cancer of the brain, that he had it for years.

We remember eating homemade doughnuts at the Amish auction, the one on Main Street. Someone's father said the Amish liked root beer. We forgot this for years, until we got a job at the buffet, where each Friday, after the auction, the Amish families ate. They did like root beer. And Sprite. And iced tea. But they hated chicken

wings. They tried to scrape the hot sauce off and would leave with reddened nails. We had to clean their fingerprints off the quarters they paid with.

At our second jobs, we were gardeners at the cemetery. We remember standing outside “the shovel shack” and talking about the heroin deaths. We remember tallying the overdoses on a poster in the cemetery bathroom. It was a poster for one of the beauty contests we don’t remember entering.

We remember our older friends, they were neighbors mostly, and how they let us paint our nails Cherry Pie Red even though we got it on the walls and carpet and our own faces. We remember their mothers scrubbing the polish away and saying, “Beauty is pain.” And then, “You look like Bloody Mary with hands like that.” We don’t remember their mothers drinking Bloody Marys or mixing their tea with singed spoons.

We remember Jenna, that fat girl who dyed her hair pink for breast cancer awareness. We remember how she was afraid to change in gym class, how she’d try to hide inside lockers she couldn’t fit in. We remember she died in December, that she wasn’t the driver, that she was going to church, that her seat belt decapitated her, that the principal did not say this on the announcements, but that the secretary told everyone who asked. And we all asked.

We remember Lou Ann. “The town whore,” our parents said. Or “The Dolly Parton.” We remember thinking she was beautiful. We remember that she gave us a nub of eyeliner. We remember putting it in our underwear drawer and taking it out for sleepovers. We remember one of these sleepovers, the last one. We had the TV on, and Jude was on the TV. We don’t remember which girls got anxious, so anxious they threw up the peppermint ice cream. But it happened. The carpet was stained.

We remember our first boyfriends. Jake. Josh. John. Jess. Jude. Rob. Ross. Rick. They were a syllable of our lives, but we can’t forget them.

We got accepted into college with no scholarships. At dorm

mixers, we'd swish our root beer and say, "Yeah, everyone was a heroin addict at home." And whoever we were talking to would respond, "All small towns are full of heroin addicts." We didn't want to believe this, but gradually, we realized we weren't unique. At some mixers we'd ask, "Anyone else win homecoming queen?" We were all homecoming queens. We said, "Ever know a girl who got decapitated?" Everyone had.

No one would listen to our stories, so we learned to lie, but even our lies were predictable, so we learned to be quiet, to let the boys tell their stories about their hometowns, their footballs, their fathers, who only cried once (when the dog died). And when they got to the heroin part, we held our tongues. We didn't say, "all small towns are like that," because we remembered how much it had hurt to know that. We were quiet as we wondered how many other girls had heard our boys' stories. And when our boys touched our lips, we tried not to think of Jude's warmth or the familiarity of the taste building in our throats. Sour like unpasteurized milk. Sour like a puke stain on a white carpet. Sour like an eyeliner pencil melted into white, lace panties.