

## Half

Her cold knees pressed against her ten year old chest. Her hot, pruned toes playing with the drain clog. In fourth grade and she still dislikes baths.

Don't assume she's a tomboy because she doesn't like baths and girly things. Just last year in PE, Eastview Kick was the game. It was just like kickball. She was talking to a friend in "the field" which was just the gym, and the red rubber ball came at her face after the biggest kid in third grade touched his foot to it. The next thing she remembered was getting up off the ground and facing the opposite direction of the game and everyone laughing. The fat kid, Jerry, apologized in the hallway later. He was in another class. As he walked towards the adjacent hallway where his class was standing in a line at the water fountain, he twirled around and fell to the floor, mocking her. Jerry had to get his laughs whenever he could.

She didn't take baths because she didn't think of taking them. Her thick blonde hair didn't need a lot of washing. Most hair ties she used broke because her hair was like a horse's tail. She used rubber bands.

"Honey, your hair is sticking to your head it's so greasy," her Mom would tell her as she left the supper table to play with her butterfly collection.

One summer afternoon, she spent what felt like hours catching a blue butterfly, it was so *pretty*. She put it in an old Dean's ice cream container. This was her younger butterfly catching days when she didn't think to put in holes or let it free sooner than the next day. When she pried open the lid, the butterfly flew right into her face and hovered around clumsily. The weird thing was, the butterfly was wet. Water wet, sticky wet. She turned the box upside down and it was like someone sprayed her feet with a hose.

“Laurel, are you almost done in here?” her Mom walks in and opens the cabinet above the sink, her drone voice pulling her back into the tub, waking her up in the morning for school, sometimes startling her, sometimes comforting her.

“Mom?”

Her mom didn’t hear her, but she starts to speak anyway, “Emily doesn’t like me anymore.”

“You just had her over last weekend,” she says in that up-and-down motherly tone.

“She thinks I’m trying to steal her boyfriend, Jake.”

“What do you mean boyfriend? Who’s Jake?” she asks, finally facing her from what feels like miles above her, close to the bathroom lights around the mirror. Lights like what movie stars have.

“Emily has a boyfriend. His name is Jake. He moved here a few months ago.”

“Do you know him?”

Jake sat in front of her since he entered the fourth grade class. She laughed at his jokes every day even when they weren’t funny. Usually weren’t funny.

“No,” she answers with a shake of her head.

“I’m sure Emily will get over it. I’m sure she’s just jealous,” she says and turns back to the cabinet to close it and leaves the bathroom.

This once, Laurel’s Mom wasn’t right. High school cattiness started early at Eastview. Laurel was never in a class with Emily again. Emily spread rumors about her. Laurel’s family moved, not because of Emily, but because her Dad was a professor and kept changing schools despite the fact that he taught overseas most of the time anyway.

That night Laurel stayed in the bathroom a few more moments thinking, *Emily is jealous of me. Emily is jealous of Laurel. Me. I'm prettier than Emily. I'm liked* as she turns on the faucet and rinses the grape shampoo out of her hair.

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Jordan asks Laurel, "Guess how many girls he's slept with?" while they're at work putting jeans on racks that were left in the dressing room of TJMaxx.

Laurel lets out an embarrassed, airy laugh, surprised by every question Jordan asks, then answers as carefully as she can, "I've never met him, how would I know?"

"Just guess!" Jordan's eyes flutter, a fake-annoyed borderline bitchy gesture that reminds Laurel of Jordan's age, which is seventeen.

Laurel keeps putting jeans on the rack and watching the sizes. "Four."

"No."

"Ten."

"Ten?! Woah!"

Laurel gives her a look like she's done guessing.

"Three. Only three, can you believe it?"

"I really can't," Laurel says, still watching her work. Jordan never notices her sarcastic remarks.

"Do you think that's good or bad?"

Laurel scrunches her lips into her mouth, knowing Jordan will take this as a "thinking" gesture but she's actually on the verge of an earth-shattering headache due to Jordan's cheap perfume inches away from her, the lighting in the store, and the hour: it's almost nine at night and Laurel was in class all day and up most of the other night.

Working with Jordan every day was like watching a montage of all the stupidest things teenage girls could say. She once asked Laurel, after learning how old Laurel's Mom is, "Were you a mistake? Why is she so old?"

Passing by Laurel among a herd of customers in earshot, harshly whispers, "I want to have sex!" thinking she's being cute or funny, Laurel couldn't guess.

"Last night I got drunk and my friend picked me up and dropped me!"

Jordan is harmless. She'd tell you how many times a day she goes number 2, her recent "crush," how her parents don't let her watch TV. You heard so much about her and yet you didn't know her, not really. Laurel bounced between hating this girl, to understanding her to some degree.

Laurel takes a bite of her sandwich. Eating too quickly, she puts her hand to her mouth and feels the food slowly sink down, stifling her breath. She glances at her Mom across the table to see if she witnessed her near choking incident. Her Mom is watching people being seated in a booth behind Laurel.

"I was with Ally this past Saturday. She took me to this party and it was like a reunion. There were a lot of people from high school there. But there was this guy from the class above us, I barely remembered him. When he went to hug me goodbye he sort of dipped me, like a dance move. He wasn't drunk, but..." Laurel gets lost in her train of thought.

"Why are you telling me this?" her Mom asks after a minute. It wasn't a harsh or rude tone, but a tone lacking anything at all. Like she walked into a conversation and wants to hear the main point and leave to do something else. Laurel thinks, *am I like Jordan? Bragging,*

*complaining, spewing out information no one cares about?* Laurel picks at her teeth with her tongue behind a closed mouth, looks at her Mom and then back at her half eaten Panini.

Later, Laurel and her Mom kiss each other goodbye outside of the restaurant. Laurel walks back to her apartment, clutching her brown jacket around her neck. It was about to rain.

*Why are you telling me this?* Her Mom's face, not looking at her but down at her food, flashes in Laurel's mind as she waits at a crosswalk. *Why am I telling you this? I'm telling you this because I thought you should care. Big or small, I want you to know.*

The light turns and she starts to walk. A drop of rain collides with her right eye. She starts to wipe it and watches the people coming from the other direction. Guys her age, mostly. Some of them watching her, like some of them sometimes do. *Some of the time, sometimes.* But today isn't a day she wants to be noticed. She smashes her fingers into her right eye socket, rubbing rain mixed with tears.

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"Do you like Lady Gaga?" Jordan asks, standing in front of Laurel at the register as if she were a buying customer.

"No."

"Do you like Katy Perry?"

"No."

"Just don't like her music?"

"No."

"Just don't care?"

"No."

Jordan asks to trade places with Laurel because she has nothing else to do. Laurel gives in, showing no signs of her annoyance, and starts putting away clothes from the dressing rooms. She hears Jordan's voice from halfway across the store, reading aloud something. Laurel gets just close enough to see a sex questions book in Jordan's hands. She's reading it to the other workers, right in front of the customers.

"Oh my God, this chapter is titled Butts!" Laurel hears when she turns away with a sigh. From the dressing room she makes out, "Some girls have hair on their nipples? Groooooossss!!!" When Laurel's in the shoe section, Jordan's voice echoes, "Some girls have third nipples."

As the others leave at closing, Kenny Luntz, the boss, is standing in the doorway of his office. A man in his late seventies, most nights he suffers the trauma of forgetting where he put his keys. Discomfort and loss pinch is old, pale face. Kind eyes, like buttons, ask for Laurel's assistance when she approaches him.

After they found his keys under a piece of paper on his desk, Laurel asks him, "I was wondering if I could change my hours. All of them."

Poor Kenny never fired anyone as far as any of the current staff could recall. She knew he wouldn't fire Jordan, so this was the only thing Laurel could do. She knew it was drastic, exaggerating, unnecessary, but Kenny was so pleasant and giving, why be around a hormonal parasite any more than need be?

"Ok, Laurel, ok Laurel!" her roommate's boyfriend, Adam, yells at her when he's just sitting diagonally from her, inches away. Adam resembles some sort of plant-eating dinosaur; he has spiky hair and pointy teeth. Her roommate invited friends and all their boyfriends too.

“Shut up, Adam,” Laurel gives a delayed, slurred response.

The room gets darker. The bottles between them are empty.

“You shut up, Laurel! You don’t make any fuckin sense...ever.”

She knows he’s teasing. She doesn’t remember what they were just talking about, but the tears come and she can’t control it. Quivering chin, swallowing snot balls.

“You’re mean, Adam,” her voice cracks like a three year old.

Everyone starts laughing. A girl’s voice from a distant chair around the table, “Laurel isn’t a fun drunk. She cries.”

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Laurel thinks it’s funny: you don’t end up with the people you expect to end up with. She knows couples who worked together for ten or more years, and then started dating. People who went to grade school together, but then one of them moved, and then they met each other again years later and started dating, not even realizing *hey you and I played in the sandbox at one point*. You don’t see someone and think *maybe?! That’s odd*. Borderline frightening.

Professor Fischer taught Biology. Laurel wanted to teach Biology. It began like any other semester.

She was one of three girls in the class. She almost dropped the class. That’s an exaggeration. She knew she had to take it in order to do what she wanted to do, but the class was beyond difficult. She thought Fischer had a bug up his ass because he taught from 6-8:50 with no breaks and few jokes and rare smiles.

Fischer was skinny and in his early thirties. Something about his head shape reminded Laurel of a peanut, especially from the back. He was bald, but even at the end of the quarter, Laurel was in her apartment brushing her teeth and couldn’t recall for the life of her, did Fischer

have that half-stubble hair and was just bald on top or was he completely bald? He had a big nose. He wore jackets or sweaters, always long sleeves even when it wasn't that cool out. He was an attractive man but he didn't become all that attractive until something happened between them. Laurel never liked anyone without feeling that *they liked her first, somehow, at least a little bit.*

It was the end of September when Laurel went to her apartment after Biology and dumped her book bag in her room before doing anything else. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have noticed she didn't have her Biology notebook. Tired and pissed off, she runs out the door onto the barely-lit sidewalk, across streets, towards the science building. Walking so hard she feels her ass and thigh fat jumping in her skinny jeans.

In the nearly pitch black hallway, she approaches the room when she realizes the door is probably locked.

"Fuck," she says, but puts her hand to the handle anyway, and it opens. She walks to her seat, her notebook under the desk. Laurel is reaching for it, bent over, when the lights turn on. Instinctively she wants to hide; stay crouched with her ass in the air even though she's blatantly visible right in between the desks. She spins meets eyes with Fischer. They stand that way for too long. Laurel isn't scared, but stares back at him as her eyes adjust, not fully aware in the moment.

"I forgot my notebook," she blurts.

"I forgot to lock the door."

Laurel feels herself giving that pity-smile that looks more like a frown. She starts to walk towards the door, towards him.



“How did you think you did on the quiz?” he asks, and it startles her. His eyes on hers. His voice saying something unclouded with science terminology.

“Pretty good,” her voice cracks, “How did you think I did?”

He smiles, showing his teeth, “I know how you did.”

“So...how did I do?”

They both laugh.

He’s shorter than she thought, only an inch or two taller than her, but she was five foot nine. She drifts in and out from his words about how the rest of the semester’s content will get easier. He says he’s always hard at first to get rid of the students who aren’t serious. They’re being personal together and at the same time, not.

She’s shivering and her heart is pumping as if she’s still outside running. Her heart lunging out of her chest, towards her apartment.

The next class, it was like Laurel was the only student. Before, she was the friendly ghost who couldn’t get called on to answer a simple question about alleles. Now she was the star pupil. They’d talk after class. They’d walk out of the building together. She couldn’t explain without sounding paranoid, without coming off as a *Jordan*, that Fischer liked her more than a student.

One night, they’d walked a little off campus together and heard the faint sound of a Spanish-sounding guitar. They stood and watched a man performing in the street as if their little campus town were a bustling up-all-night city. Only two older men joined in to watch. His scraggly black hair was pulled back in a messy bun and he was head banging with his guitar despite the tranquil, smooth sound of what came out of his wild hands. Laurel thought he looked

funny, and looked at Fischer while she laughed but he didn't notice. When he was done, everyone clapped and left.

Further down the unfamiliar sidewalk, Laurel grabs at his upper arm during a genuine, hearty laugh at something Fischer said. Laurel isn't a hugger and she doesn't touch her closest friends, but she touched Fischer, touched him purposely. He stopped walking, and so she stopped. For a second she thought she was going to hear him say *that was inappropriate*. The *I'm your teacher* speech, which both of them never forgot that fact. His face said what he was thinking, but as if Laurel were drunk (not her sad drunk, but a normal drunk) she took both his arms and stood close to him, belly on belly.

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"Laurel!" is called by an elderly woman's voice resembling a dying goose at the OBGYN office. Laurel lifts her head and drops her magazine, looks down both directions of the wood wall paneling hallway. She stands up but still doesn't see anyone. She sits back down and the woman appears.

"I'm sorry dear, in here!"

Laurel sits in the tissue-covered chair with nothing on but a piece of blue cloth and white tube socks. The Beach Boys are playing and twenty more minutes later, the nurse practitioner enters.

She starts describing hormones as little creatures living on a beach, as if Laurel were 11 rather than 21. Her voice is slow and low, interrupted by sporadic laughter, particularly when she was describing the hormone creatures and what they do when a woman starts taking birth control.

Then she starts talking about healthy eating habits. Laurel still nods her head but isn't sure how the information applies.

Then the nurse, nurse Betty, says, "I see you're like me. You're a little overweight so just watch your calorie intake. Don't drink soda..."

Laurel keeps her cloth held tightly together above her chest. She bites her lips at the nurse's words, her forehead smashed together in wrinkly confusion.

"I'm sorry, what's wrong with my weight?" Laurel interrupts.

The nurse stares down at her chart in silence, her lips pouted and baby-like, holding her head there so long Laurel thought she was going to fall asleep. Then she reads the chart from upside down. 240 was written for her weight.

"I'm sorry," Laurel finds herself repeating as if she really were sorry, "That's not right. I don't weigh 240."

She finally wakes up and her eyes are anywhere on her except her face, saying, "I was just going to say, you don't look 240."

Her words stopped like the noise was turned off in the room and Laurel finds herself holding her breath in case she started dying of laughter. What held her back was the fear that this isn't a legitimate practice, how could such a mistake be made? On top of the fact that this woman just looks fit for a straightjacket. *Signs I shouldn't be here.*

"You're probably 140," the nurse says looking at her chart again, as if looking for a line in a bad play.

Airless moments later, Betty provides her with more useless information, and then ends the session by asking her big boobs, not her face, "Are you sexually active?"

A question that should have been asked much earlier in the appointment, but Laurel still isn't prepared for, so she lies, "No. Just to regulate my periods."

"You should be proud of yourself. For having some self respect and not having sex."

Laurel must have just been staring at her blankly, because Betty adds, "Seriously, you should."

Laying stomach down in his bed. She can't see his face; can't tell if he's watching her or watching the TV practically on mute. He scratches behind her ear, like she's his pet. Pressing against him, naked and cold, his twig body provides no warmth. His incessant scratching giving her goose bumps. Her thoughts alarm and arouse her. *He is lucky to be with me. I'm younger, fitter. I'm better.*

The tires rumble onto the brick road, Lincoln Street. Like watching a movie you've seen a hundred times, Laurel spent junior high and high school here and yet feels uneasy about it. Not sentimental, the way some people talk about their childhood and "home." She turns to her Mom in the driver's seat and she seems uneasy also, probably because of her resentment about the black and Hispanic families having moved into the neighborhood. Regardless, it is still classically charming. No garage, the familiar heavy click of the key in the front door lock. Laurel jumps inside and calls for Winnie, their black and white family cat of eleven plus years.

"Winnie, Winnie," Laurel calls, her flats clapping into the kitchen. She opens a can of tuna and sets it on the floor, unaware that her bowl and towel are not there, next to the fridge.

Her Mom appears in the doorway, watching Laurel, appearing not to have shaken off the unease of driving in a neighborhood that "isn't hers anymore." After moments of getting herself

a glass of juice, sitting down, and calling Winnie again, Laurel sees something else in her Mom's flattened, empty face.

"Where's Winnie?" Laurel asks her Mom, taking her voice lower, more natural than its usual high place when she's around her.

"He got sick. Last month. I put him to sleep. I meant to tell you, but—

"No!" Laurel cries. Feet arched on the tile kitchen floor, ready to jump up and leave, look for Winnie, do anything but sit there and spend the weekend in an empty house. Just her and Mom. No Winnie.

Laurel stops herself after her second grape Smirnoff. The guy beside her on the log by the fire, Kevin, is talking about the weather in Arizona. He's been to these parties before. They both have. She nods her head and itches her scalp to the rhythm of his smooth, seductive voice. He's two years younger than her. In the back of her mind, she thinks he may as well be ten years younger.

"I like talking to you. Do you like talking to me?"

Laurel laughs at the strange, gentlemanness of the question.

"Yeah," she responds with a smile.

"You owe me another talk. You do the talking next time," he says putting out his hand to be shaken.

"Okay," and he pulls her hand towards him to hug her and she returns the squeeze.

*It was nothing*, she thinks as she walks back to her apartment in a clan of other girls. *I don't have his number, I wouldn't have to ever see him again.* Walnut Street approaches. His

street. His apartment is unseeable, *my lover's apartment*. She laughs to herself, quietly so the girls won't hear and question. Laughs so hard her stomach tenses, churns, and aches.

She wakes up with a zillion red lines on her face and arms, imprints from the stiff sheets of Fischer's bed. She wakes up when he does. Goes to her apartment while he goes to teach class.

Sleep is supposed to settle and relax a person. Laurel woke up with a headache. Laurel was in and out all night with all her dumbass thoughts. Things were always changing with Fischer. The first week was great. Then Laurel started sleeping over and it was as if Fischer didn't want to see her in the morning. He went back to ignoring her in class, but he'd make up for it by helping her with homework and studying afterwards. He laughed at something she said once, but when she said it a second time it wasn't funny.

That evening she decided to make him dinner, like it would make up for whatever was happening. Except Laurel couldn't cook. She was making homemade tortilla chips but had the oven on broil for too long; the chips caught on fire.

She watched Fischer put out the fire and curse at the floor. She wanted to run to her room like a five year old, but this wasn't her house.

Her eyes held wide when he asked through a near gasp, "Are you alright?"

She tried to relax her face, but she couldn't. When she was seven years old she spilled pickle juice on Thanksgiving dinner. She opened the jar and it was like she purposely made sure it sprinkled on the turkey, potatoes, bread rolls, and even the pies. Her Dad was home that year and threatened that she could only eat peanut butter and jelly for what she did. He didn't enforce the rule, but she was sent to her room.

Fischer was holding her clasped hands underneath her chin, looking into her face.

“What’s wrong? Everything’s fine.”

She was glad he didn’t make any jokes or say much else. She was appreciative of the bug up his ass; he was shaken up a little and gave her that disappointed Fischer look, the kind he gets when she didn’t do well on a test when he just lectured her the night before. What mattered was that he wasn’t angry.

Fisher was starting to avoid her. For a week, he made excuses for her not to come to his apartment. *It’s not my looks, not my age, not the tortilla chips. It’s only been two months.*

Laurel didn’t say anything to him. She wasn’t going to be a nagger. If he didn’t want her, she didn’t want him. She’d still wanted him for a little while, in her heart and in her groin, sure, but he was just a peanut head who loved Biology. She wasn’t going to show up at his door and see another woman, another man, a wife and kids.

Laurel was tired of the headaches. Sitting in class staring at him angrily. Other kids in class probably noticing. Probably laughing. *The blonde chick and Professor Fischer!*

Fischer called her the day she didn’t show up and asked to meet in a small park off campus that was not near his apartment. She spotted his bald head on a bench immediately. Yes, he is certainly bald. Not half bald, Laurel clarifies in her mind. He’s wearing that cream, puffy winter coat that goes down past his knees Laurel could swear was meant for a woman but she wouldn’t say anything.

“Laurel,” he says, rushed and confused, sounding like his tongue is stuck to an icy pole. She doesn’t face him.

“I haven’t been good to you,” he says after a moment, his mouth hanging open.

He tells her he has a fiancé. Her heart beats harder as if it could, scrunching her fists in her sea green mittens. He tells her she's been in another state getting her PhD and she's been pregnant for five months. He tells her they're moving to Philadelphia next year. Laurel thinks of the movie *Philadelphia* with Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. Her cheeks flush. She's hot in 20 degree weather. She can tell he's shaking. He tells her he cares about her. He's been stupid and selfish. She should be crying by now, but it doesn't happen.

She knew this moment was coming, like a slow burn. It was like she'd been asleep for half of her life and was awoken by one of those loud, annoying, beeping alarms, or when her Mom used to wake her up by turning the light on, that stiff old light switch in that first old house of theirs with the celebrity bathroom lights.

*Was it relieving that he at least felt bad? That he wasn't a sex driven monster?* Fischer a sex driven monster.

Finals were the following week and Laurel's eyes brushed over the A for Biology on her computer screen another week later.

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Laurel pushes through the glare of the glass doors and the first thing she sees is Jordan in front of the dressing rooms talking to a customer in that incompetent, high pitched voice. The voice was the giveaway, but Jordan didn't look the same. She had lost weight, it was clear on her tired, drawn face. Something about the way she looked was older, like Laurel was able to predict Laurel's appearance at age fifty five just by looking at her closely.

It was Winter Break. Schedules had changed again. Laurel darts for the register to take a coworkers place, not wanting to encounter Jordan for a second. It was none of Laurel's business why she looked like a refugee now, but Jordan would make her business known to her.



Customers flooded in and out. Jordan crossed paths with Laurel, told her a few stories, but said nothing about herself. Laurel was surprised. It was nearing closing and Laurel was forgetting Jordan was even there most of the time. Soon enough, Jordan approaches Laurel outside the bathrooms.

“How was your semester, Laurel?”

The first question Laurel can recall Jordan ever asking of herself.

“It was good. Yours?”

“Pretty good. I’m worried about next semester though.”

“Why?” Laurel is unsure why she asked; knowing that sort of a question sparks Jordan’s rants.

“I’m taking Biology 2. I took Biology 1 this semester and almost failed. If I fail next semester I’ll have to take summer school...”

Laurel thought without saying, *I’m sure you’ll be okay*. But Laurel instead said, “I’m a Biology Major. I could help you, if you need it,” Laurel’s face grows hot, thinking *what do I owe this girl? She’s been rude, she’s put extra work on me, taken longer breaks than allowed...*

“If you had the time, yeah. That’d be great,” she says with a smile, showing her teeth that overwhelm her face.

Was helping Jordan an act of pity? Laurel couldn’t be sure. Laurel couldn’t be sure why she suddenly felt differently about Jordan. Not a likeness, not even an acceptance, but a strange sense of obligation to a confused, helpless girl.

*I’ve been the dumb girl who didn’t get it; the dumb girl who slept with a man who was engaged with a baby on the way.*

*I'm the girl who is quiet when she needs to be, is loud when she can be, is funny when no one is laughing, forgets to shower and doesn't always wash her hands or brush her hair.*

*I was sleeping with half of a man, but there was some comfort in the forbidden thought that he was sleeping with half of a woman, too.*