

Katherine Forbes Riley

### IT COMES IN THREES

After Anna rode her bike down a hill with no hands and hit a parked car and knocked out her tooth, she crawled under the car and picked it up. It had horns and was almost as long as her thumb. She went knocking on doors until two old ladies let her in. They took the tooth and stuck it in a glass of milk. They stuck her in a chair by the door with the glass in her hand and she wondered if it would fall or she would. Her mother and sister sounded like birds coming up to the screen. They drove to Aunt Elizabeth's office and she gave Anna a Valium and she gave Celia one too. She put Anna in the dental chair and tilted it flat and strapped a mask over her nose and told her to breathe normally. She put Celia and Christa to work sponging away the blood while she picked the asphalt from Anna's chin and put her tooth back in. It should have hurt but it didn't because Anna was riding a fast train. It was all tunnels and air and when it whistled Aunt Elizabeth turned up the gas.

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On the first day of eighth grade the scab on Anna's chin was the size of a quarter. It was craggy and mountainous and purplish-black. She said she wasn't going to school but Celia said "oh yes you are" so she put foundation on it and it ended up craggy and mountainous and purplish-black crusted with tan. All day she covered it with her thumb and pointer, seeking rifts in its valleys and cliffs. In Home Ec she had to use her hands but Gunnar, her partner, didn't notice it. He was too busy singing the same song over and over, and by the end of the period she had memorized it too.

(*One lonely beastie I be, all by myself without nobody*) She sang it walking between classes with two fingers on her chin even after the scab fell off, because it left a scar, like a stain, purple with black specks that were bits of asphalt still trapped beneath the newly puckered skin. She sang it before class while the other kids clustered around the desks, and afterwards while the clusters reformed and drifted out the door. If it had been seventh grade she would have clustered with Tammy and Jenny. After school they would have rode the bus to Swissvale and scurried in a tight trio past the Rottweiler that broke its fence a little more each time. They would have crowded on Jenny's bed in a circle, backs to fronts, secreting tiny friendship braids in each other's hair, wrapping the ends tight with colorful string. But over the summer they wrote her a letter, signed by both with the same loopy 'y', saying they didn't want to be her friend anymore. That's when she rode down the hill with no hands and hit the parked car.

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"My brother loves that song," Marissa said one day, swiveling in her seat, and Anna quickly brought her fingers to her chin. "Do you know all the words?" Marissa asked, and Anna nodded, lightly squeezing. "I know all the words to *Greatest Love of All*. Do you know that one?" Anna nodded again. Everybody knew that one. Marissa began to sing it softly with her long black eyes half-closed.

Pretty Marissa. She wasn't smart but no one in the whole school was nicer. You couldn't think of her long though without thinking of Jane, who wasn't pretty or nice but was very smart. Jane and Marissa. They were like puzzle pieces, fitting perfectly. Even their names fitted perfectly, like peanut butter and jelly, like sun shine. They lived in Edgewood, like Anna did, and she often saw them when she was going somewhere. They walked with their bodies turned together, as if they were the only ones in the world.

Marissa walked with Anna to lunch that day. She waited politely while Anna got chocolate milk and a frozen strawberry éclair and then smiled when they reached the table she shared with Jane. But Jane didn't smile, so Anna skipped a few chairs before putting down her tray, to let them know she wasn't sitting with them if they didn't want her to be. She propped up her book like a border line and finished it between bites of éclair. The other girls didn't talk but they ate their lunches in unison, first their triangulated sandwiches, then their cut up fruit and finally their homemade cookies, and afterwards Jane took out her own book and

Marissa flipped through a *Seventeen* magazine. The book was *O Pioneers!* and it had a barn on the cover and “F Ca” on the spine, which meant it came from the adult fiction section of the library, where Anna got her books too, or had until her bike accident, when she hadn’t wanted to leave the house and so had to start reading the books she found in her mother and sister’s rooms.

“What are you reading, Anna?” Jane’s eyes were narrowed, accusing; she’d caught Anna looking. Anna’s gaze shifted quickly downward, bouncing off Jane’s protrusive nose and downy black mustache before landing back on her own book. It was a lot thicker than Jane’s, with *The Valley of Horses* boldly written in blue and a tall tanned woman facing mountains with a spear in her hand. Her body was strategically draped in furs and golden hair fell in waves down her back.

Jane returned the book to Anna a few days later. They didn’t talk about it, not the slow rollercoaster certain passages had set off low in Anna’s belly, nor the way her eyes had stuck to words like ‘cleft’ and ‘member’, but Anna kept handing off her books to Jane as she finished them—*Clan of the Cave Bear*, *Mists of Avalon*, *Fear of Flying*—and their tacit mutual knowledge created a gravity around the lunch table that held her firmly in its orbit, until Jane called one evening and said, “I’m not allowed to borrow any more books from you.” She sounded as if she’d been crying. She said her mother wanted to talk to Anna’s mother and Anna’s heart beat like a trapped bird the whole time. But Celia barely said a word on the phone and when she got off she just laughed and called Jane’s mother a book burner.

Anna was a nervous wreck wondering where to sit the next day, but when she got to the lunchroom Jane wasn’t even there. Marissa said she was sick. She said a lot of things that day. She talked about the new Whitney Houston video she’d seen and the dances she knew how to do and she showed Anna her pink and black jelly bracelets up close. At the end of lunch she gave Anna one of each color and asked if she wanted to come over after school.

Her room was bright and airy, with a life-size poster of Whitney Houston on one wall and a tall thin mirror on another. “Are you allowed to wear makeup yet? Jane isn’t,” she said. “I am,” said Anna, and then blushed the whole time Marissa was putting it on her because she stood so close and Anna could smell her, a warm yeasty smell that made her want to inhale. Marissa rubbed at the scar on Anna’s chin to get the dirt off until Anna explained, and then she covered it up with concealer. “Now it looks like a chin dimple,” she laughed. “It looks just like mine.” She did her own makeup and when she stepped back they gazed upon

themselves and they were beautiful. She put on Whitney and they danced and sang with their mouths wide and trembling and their heads tilted back just like hers.

*(Oh I wanna dance with somebody, I wanna feel the heat with somebo-ody!)* After that Anna went to Marissa's house every Wednesday when Jane had violin, and she sat with them every day at lunch despite what Jane's eyes communicated. Then in January Jane had a sleepover birthday party. She invited Marissa and Anna and another girl named Kathy from her violin group. When Anna arrived she wasn't late but it seemed like the other girls had been there a while because they were already halfway through a pizza and a game of Clue. Anna had to sit and watch, and whenever Kathy got up for more pizza or Coke she offered Jane and Marissa some but not Anna. And when they watched *Back to the Future* Jane and Kathy flanked Marissa and took up the whole couch so Anna had to sit on the floor. And at bedtime they all ran for the bathroom and when Anna tried to get in Kathy snapped, "There's not enough room!" Her bright eyes were the last thing Anna saw before the door slammed shut on her finger. It didn't hurt; it just felt hot, but the girls on the other side screamed, and when they opened it again the first knuckle of her middle finger was hanging down the side. Jane's dad put it back, like a hat, and drove her to the emergency room. Celia came in just as the doctor was pulling the last black stitch tight and he had to drop Anna's hand to catch her because she fainted. That's when it started to hurt. The pill he gave Anna kept her awake all night and the one he gave Celia made her so sleepy Christa had to drive them home.

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When the stitches came out, Anna's middle finger was crooked. Everything above the first knuckle always stayed bent. Christa said it looked awful. Celia said something about plastic surgery later and let Anna get contact lenses a year early. Anna learned to keep it hidden, tucked behind the adjacent fingers or folded down onto her palm. But sometimes she messed with it under her desk, trying to get it to go straight or at least to not get any more crooked, which it felt like it was wanting to do. That's what she was doing when a folded paper triangle hit her desk. "Let it grow and paint it red!!!" the note said. It wasn't signed but after class Danielle stopped beside her desk and said, "Like, wouldn't that be the best fuck you ever?"

Danielle was the hottest girl in ninth grade. She was also one of the smartest but pretended not to be. She was the only girl with a dyed blonde perm *and* huge breasts. She wore full makeup every day, including liquid foundation with a powder finish that she touched up at the start of every class. Anna rode the Swissvale bus home with her after school. She used three different keys to unlock the door and said they had to be quiet because her dad was asleep. The living room smelled of stale smoke and spilled beer and there were ashtrays on every flat surface overflowing with cigarette butts. The kitchen table was a card table and it was littered with dog racing forms. Anna sat on one of the two folding chairs and watched Danielle with a furtive intensity that grew bold because she didn't seem to mind. Danielle did everything with her fingers splayed, protecting her fingernails. She heated oil and poured circles of batter from a bottle and flipped. She slid a perfect stack of pancakes onto each plate and then sat opposite Anna and started buttering hers, a lengthy process involving one fat pat in the middle of each cake and four more around the circumference. Next each cake got its own heavy spiral of syrup, and finally the whole stack was carefully cut into triangles. Only then did she eat, inserting bites between her teeth with her lips retracted to protect her lipstick, which immediately upon finishing, she reapplied, Anna again acquiring every microscopic detail: the spread lips, the pucker, the massage, the stray frosted flakes pulled off with two red fingernails.

Her room was plastered with posters of Robert Smith. Chalk-white skin, bloody leer, pitch-black explosion of hair; his eyes glittered like dead things from every wall. Once her door was locked she lit a cigarette and turned her boom box on low and they sat on the floor with their heads near the speakers while she painted first Anna's nails and then her own with two fresh coats of cherry red. The mingling of music and menthol and polish vapor with the aftertaste of syrup and dough made Anna feel sick, but in a good way, like medicine.

*(Show me show me show me how you do that trick, the one that makes me scream, she said)* Sometimes Gina came along. Gina had big breasts and lived with her dad too. Anna wasn't sure but thought her mother might be dead. Danielle treated them both the same but Anna still liked it better when she and Danielle were alone. The best thing about when Gina came was that she and Anna would walk back to Edgewood together afterwards. It took forty-five minutes and there was a gas station where a pack of older boys hung out and called things that made Anna's face burn, like "pussy" and "cunt." They split up behind the elementary school, but first they'd sit on the wall behind the playground and smoke. The first time they did

it, Gina said, “I don’t like menthols,” and took out a pack of red Marlboros. Celia and Christa smoked white Marlboros. Anna took one and felt each sensation sink into her bones: the tug of the pack, the weight and spice on her lips, the grind and flare of the lighter, the sudden invasion of smoke. When the head rush hit, sitting on that wall in the evening sun with Gina felt almost as good as being with Danielle.

Danielle went to her mother’s up in Youngstown for Christmas break, and when she came back she didn’t eat pancakes anymore. She ate four bananas and four Oreos and four glasses of milk a day, plus a quarter bottle of Nyquil at night so she could sleep through the hunger pangs. And she wanted to join the cheerleading squad. “It’ll be a blast,” she said, but Anna wasn’t so sure. She didn’t have big breasts and didn’t know if she could memorize the moves or perform them in front of a crowd, but since Danielle and Gina didn’t seem worried, she didn’t say this out loud.

After the first practice, Anna got tongue-kissed. His name was Richie and he was the kicker and he did it as a favor to Danielle. His eyes were fixed on Danielle’s chest as she stood on tiptoe and whispered it in his ear, but he nodded dutifully and led Anna behind the bleachers. When he bent his head she tilted hers to the left—being left-handed, it was instinct—and they crashed noses. She apologized but he just took hold of her jaw and tilted it the right way. He plumbed her mouth with soft darts of his tongue and felt for her breasts with his free hand. She stood perfectly still, hoping he found them.

*(Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a beautiful day)* Three weeks later, Danielle decided to quit cheerleading. Anna, blissed out by the unexpected release, invited her over after school. She spent the rest of the day worrying that Danielle would be bored, but in fact she was as excited as a child exploring the sprawling old house, the living room and dining room and piano room and kitchen, the stained glass balcony and the secret staircase and the dumbwaiter; they even went down to the basement and poked around a little. When they got to Celia’s room she disappeared inside the walk-in closet and came out again clutching a pill bottle. “Your mom hides perc’s under her sweaters!” she said. She asked if Anna had anything to drink with them and laughed when Anna showed her what was in the fridge. She found a bottle of vodka in the dining room cabinet and they snuck it up to the attic under her sweater so Christa wouldn’t see. It took five shots before she said she felt it. Anna didn’t know if she felt it until she tried to stand. Awareness after that came in strobes and flashes: something hot in her mouth, something wet on her head, Christa coming in, Danielle leaving, her frosted lips whispering, “Tell her you’re sick.” Anna didn’t remember the hospital at

all, but the search for a vein turned her forearm black for a week. Celia said they did it on purpose. “They knew you were drunk right away. They looked at me like I was such an asshole, Anna!”

*(You're delicious, screaming, slack-jawed, green-eyed, rub my nose in icing sugar)* She was grounded for a month, stuck at home with Christa smirking and Celia yelling at her for anything and nothing. She holed up in her room with her headphones on, pretending she was still at Danielle's. Since no one knew she'd quit cheerleading, she went there every day after school, although this was less of an escape than a desperation move because a distance had sprung up between them. All Danielle and Gina talked about was the upcoming REM concert, to which Anna, being grounded, couldn't go. She was desperate to go, was possessed by it, but it was Danielle who finally came up with the idea. For a week Anna made herself Celia's personal slave, fetching her diet Cokes, finding her cigarettes, rubbing her feet while Christa looked on quizzically, and then begged to be allowed to cheerlead a fictitious Saturday night away game. It worked. Celia said Anna had to be home by ten o'clock, but Danielle said just say the game had run over, or the bus needed gas, or there'd been traffic; all that mattered was that she could go. And when at the last minute Celia got suspicious and decided she wanted to talk to another parent, Danielle convinced her dad to lie. She told him Anna's dad knew the truth and her mom was just being a bitch about it, and somehow she knew this would resonate so closely with his own experience that he'd agree to do it.

If the concert had started on time. If they'd remembered where their car was parked in the pitch black madness of the stadium parking lot. If the nameless faceless guys who drove them there hadn't been drunk before the concert started and totally wasted by the end. Anna had crammed with Danielle and Gina in the back of their beat up heap and stood in the cold crush of their bodies breathing Iron City fumes with an arm around her shoulder and a hand groping for her breast, but once Michael Stipe started singing she forgot them all, even Danielle.

*(I am, I am, I am Superman)* She held onto the flying feeling all the way home; it fed her in little pulses even after she found out the time. Surely, she told herself, Celia would be asleep, and she could sneak in and later say the game had run over and the bus had stopped for gas and there'd been heavy traffic too.

But Celia was waiting on the front steps. The car caught her stone face in its headlights while it was still two houses away. “Oh shit,” someone said, and the car jerked to a halt and then took off again as soon as Anna was out, with a screech of tires that would have been comical in other circumstances.

The coal of Celia's cigarette crackled and flared, and for an instant in the wheeling dark Anna's fear of her was nothing compared to her craving for a cigarette. Then Celia exhaled. "I called your friend's dad back," she said, and fear towered and fell, heavy waves crashing and unfurling as Anna imagined what their conversation must have been. "Forget cheerleading. Forget friends. You're grounded forever." Her cigarette sparked and tumbled in the street as her body receded, large against the night, and the fact that she still somehow didn't know Anna had quit cheerleading seemed ludicrous in the face of her fury.

Inside even Christa looked scared. Anna moved to go upstairs immediately but Celia made her sit in the living room while she detailed her punishment: No phone, no TV, no leaving the house except for school and there will be chores, dishes and laundry and you will scrub the floors and change the sheets, you will do everything I tell you to do when I tell you to do it. She was thinking it up on the fly, sunk in the couch twirling her hair through her knuckles like a torturer spinning his instruments, and each time a new penalty struck she would grind out her cigarette and light another with pleasure fierce and in equal measure to that which she imagined Anna having experienced through the act of humiliating her. "You must really think I'm an asshole!" she kept shouting, and Anna couldn't tell her what her hope had truly been because in that moment her mother would have enjoyed crushing it—if it wasn't already dead, or as good as dead, for how could anything survive this? Her spirit crouched in the small space left to it taking the fading pulse of her heart's desire, and when finally dismissed, she trudged upstairs, vaguely surprised she still propelled her own legs. "Leave it open!" Celia shouted as she reached her bedroom door. "From now on you don't have any privacy!"

Long after the house fell silent Anna slipped from her room. The mirrored door above the sink opened with a creak and she paused for a full minute before taking hold of the Tylenol bottle and sprinting with it back to her room. Silently, by infinitesimal degrees, she closed her door and locked it. With a sense of wrested liberty, of careening freefall, she put a handful of pills in her mouth and chewed.

She woke with a start and a terrible weakness in her limbs. Her mother was banging on the door, her voice sounding harsher than the night before, as if her anger had spent the night fomenting in her dreams. Anna didn't think she could get out of bed, but slowly she rose, and dressed, nausea making her whole body tremble so that it took multiple tries to get anything on. As soon as she heard her mother and sister go downstairs she staggered to the bathroom and threw up. There was nothing in her stomach except twisting

threads of saliva flecked with white; still, the urge to gag kept coming, and she stayed there until her mother came looking.

Down the stairs she slipped, and left the house by the kitchen door, a single thought repeating (*hurry*). Inside the garage she searched the shelves (*hurry up*), heedless of the mess she made, wasting precious minutes before finding a length of rope. She stood on an old milk crate, tied one end to the rafters and the other around her neck.

“Anna!” called Celia, slamming out the door. “What the fuck are you up to now?”

Anna saw her coming through the high windows and jumped.

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The summer before tenth grade, Celia bought the building in Squirrel Hill that housed her art gallery, and they moved into one of the apartments above it with her boyfriend. Anna didn’t want to. It wasn’t the boyfriend part or the switching schools part she minded as much as the moving part. She couldn’t imagine *being* without her old Victorian house, as if its many rooms and secret spaces contained her in some vital way. They were at Aunt Elizabeth’s office getting their teeth cleaned when Celia broke the news. She told Christa too, but Christa didn’t act surprised, and neither did Aunt Elizabeth. So Anna knew at once how serious it was. With a terrible sense of already knowing the answer she asked about the dogs.

“They’ll go live with other families,” Celia said. “Out in the country somewhere.”

Aunt Elizabeth nodded. “They’ll love it out there.”

“They’d hate that apartment,” Christa added, but she didn’t sound like she cared. She was starting college in a week.

“I’ll tell you what,” Celia said quickly. “We’ll get you a kitten.”

Anna pictured deep woods and rambling lanes until Christa, home for winter break, let slip that Celia had really just taken the dogs to the pound. And even then she imagined Muffin adopted; he was so cute and friendly. But Taffy was the ugly one with the gimpy leg who nipped sometimes. She had shown up in the backyard one day when Anna still had the bandage around her neck, and late at night in her new bedroom Anna imagined her waiting out the whole month in her cage before getting the needle. “Just one,” Anna

wished she'd said, and the scar that encircled her throat like a necklace pulsed with the certainty that she could have won that much if she'd tried. "Just Taffy," she should have said, "because she's the one who will die otherwise."

Anna named her new kitten Mephisto. The first day she brought him home she snapped a leash to his collar and tried to walk him up Aylesboro Street. But he alternately froze and bolted so she picked him up and stuck him inside her coat. Her goal was the benches, a small concrete park on the corner of Forbes and Murray Avenues where the local kids hung out and mostly ignored each other. Music surrounded it like a force field, punk songs trickling from a boom box so low you couldn't hear it from the sidewalk. It was a place she could sit awhile and feel herself emitting a certain cachet because no one knew her. But that day Mephisto betrayed her, struggling under her coat like a pounding heart, forcing his nose through her collar to sniff the air with frantic breaths.

After his trip to the benches, Mephisto took to living in Anna's closet. She bought him an alarm clock and set it ticking under a soft towel. She'd lie on the floor and put her hand inside while she did her homework. When she went to another room she'd pull him out and drape him over her shoulder. He liked it up there, would purr and flex his claws so she barely had to hold him. She never took him to the benches again but she continued to go herself. If no kids were hanging out she'd continue on, past Paul Mitchell's Hair Salon where the dryers hulked like head shrinkers, past West Coast Video with the poster of Jodi Foster's moth-covered mouth, past Baskin and Robbins and Bagel Land and Gullifty's, all the way to Eat n' Park. There were always kids at Eat n' Park, crowding the booths in fours and sixes, and sometimes seeing them in the window was enough. Other times she'd go in and order a Coke, and knowing they were watching made each step to the counter feel like space travel. She'd stare at the sugar granules on the muffins under glass until they grew to the size of boulders and then walk back out with a sense of almost bursting, eyes locked, cheeks hot, lips on the straw like red balloons.

Once, in the early darkness of winter, someone followed her. She looked behind and looked behind but was halfway home before she recognized him in the illumination of a red light. It was the kid who was always there, hanging around with one group or another, but never settling for long. Sometimes he got into fights, rapid verbal uprisings followed by a flurry of blows, over so fast it wasn't clear who'd won. Sometimes he stood by himself with his hands in the pockets of his black trench coat and sang in a soft falsetto. He was

dark-haired and white-skinned and there were always a few botched pimples standing out like bite marks amidst the stubble and the pale. He was skinny and kind of short and he held his eyes wide open like they were full.

*(I'm not a woman, I'm not a man, I am something that you'll never understand)* After that night if she walked past Eat n' Park and Sean was in the window he would bang on the glass. It scared her the first time and made her mad the second time and the third time she turned and glared and he grinned and beckoned for her to come in.

She ordered food first, for a shield and a reason; she bought a chocolate shake and French fries, and as soon as she sat down he started eating them. Pretending not to notice and not sure if she cared, she took one for herself and dipped it in her shake.

There were three other kids in the booth. Brittany, the girl, was next to Anna. She went to Anna's old school, had been a prep when Anna last saw her but had cut her hair since then. It was buzzed on the sides now and long on the top and dyed white. "Gross!" she said, and made a gagging motion. "How can you eat that?"

Trigger-quick Sean leaned over the table and pulled the neck of her turtleneck up over her face. "Now you look like a zit," he said. "You're a dick," Brittany said, pulling it down, but she smiled as she said it like she knew she was pretty no matter what he did, and Anna realized in a rush that made her blush that Sean made her feel pretty too. This made him seem cute, cuter than his friends, who were actually a whole lot cuter than him. Neil, on his left, was tall and lean, with the most beautiful nose Anna had ever seen. Lou, on his right, had deer eyes and soft shaggy brown hair falling into them.

They sat for an hour affecting carelessness, drinking coffee and smoking, putting out their butts in the smears of ketchup on Anna's tray. Neil drummed constantly, in polyrhythm, each hand beating a different pattern on the table while his feet kept time underneath. Sean said Neil and Lou were in a hardcore band together; he said the three of them went to CAPA, the magnet school for the arts, but was vague about what his own art was. When Anna asked he answered with a song lyric, as if it said it better than he could. Then he said he was going to be kicked out anyway, had already been kicked out of Anna's new school.

*(Here lies the future our parents envisioned, here lies the future our parents envisioned)* When Sean said they should go get a bottle and chill somewhere, Brittany put her cigarettes away. "Sounds great," she said, rolling

her eyes, “but I already have plans.” On the way out she asked Anna if she could call for a ride from her house. She carried a backpack with her track clothes in it, said she ran from Edgewood every Friday. After that she started running to Anna’s house, and they’d walk to the benches together. She never wanted to go off with Sean and his friends, called them losers when they asked and aped their stuporous expressions when they returned. The guys would just laugh, blowing smoke at the sky, but the pleasure she took in being cruel made Anna not like her very much. In truth, Brittany didn’t seem to like Anna much either. Her best friend went to St. Lucy’s, a private school in Squirrel Hill, and after a while she started coming to the benches on Fridays too. Now all three sat together and smoked and flirted without seeming to, and Brittany and Leora sometimes played a game of sorts, picking out random people to deride and guffawing at each other’s cracks like raucous crows. Because Anna never laughed they mostly left her alone, but had no mercy for anyone else. Once, right in front of Sean and his friends, Brittany made a joke about Leora’s breath smelling like shit and then Leora made a joke about Brittany’s lower lips being so loose they flapped when she walked.

Physically the three girls set each other in sharp relief. Leora was the most noticeable, being six feet tall. She wore a leather jacket and combat boots and was always smiling. Her long brown hair was tinted red, her nose was prominent with a convex bridge, and her top lip was wide and full. If Leora was fire, Brittany was ice. She had a runner’s body and a face like a china doll, with big blue eyes, a tiny nose, and a rosebud mouth that, unless it was laughing, never smiled. Next to them, Anna was earth. She was archaeology, with her scar necklace and crooked finger and dirty chin and the sun-bright dreadlocks threading her hair, their ends still wrapped in faded bits of string.

Socially too, they were distinct. Anna was the quiet one, and though both Brittany and Leora were voluble, only Leora was demonstrative. She would run her fingers through Brittany’s hair and suck the fleshy tip of Anna’s nose. She would sing Van Morrison at the top of her lungs as they walked to the benches. (*We were born before the wind, also younger than the sun*) She wouldn’t go off with Sean and his friends either but she brought her own whiskey in a hip flask. She and Anna would pass it back and forth until it was empty and then she’d sing them home again. (*And it stoned me to my soul*) Sometimes she brought a skinny joint and they’d smoke it hanging out of Anna’s bedroom window, furtive until they forgot why they were supposed to be. Brittany would watch them do it with small eyes, malevolent until they sobered up a little.

Then they'd tiptoe into Anna's kitchen and toast English muffins piled high with cheese, and back in her room they'd stay awake until dawn cracking up in explosive bursts they muffled in their pillows. Not that they were likely to wake Celia. Her boyfriend had broken up with her shortly after they moved to Squirrel Hill, and on weekends she stayed downstairs in the gallery until late talking it over with her girlfriends. When she came upstairs she'd go straight to bed without even brushing her teeth and nothing woke her. Weeknights, when it was just the two of them, she'd draw Anna into her room with alcohol-laced entreaties. "I miss Christa so much," she'd start, and soon she'd be weeping, "Everyone could see he never loved me," and then Anna would have to convince that he did, and if the logic didn't make any sense it didn't matter, because all Celia wanted to do was invoke him.

They seemed an unlikely circle of three, and this disparateness united them. But as the months went by, Brittany and Leora grew bored of Squirrel Hill. They sat the benches like royalty now, tossing around the idea of other places, other people, and no longer bothered to maintain the delicate balance of attraction and rebuff that kept them for so long from being seen as a promise that never delivered.

"Don't be pussies," Sean said one night when they rose to go. "Don't go home yet. It's barely ten o'clock."

"Mrowr," said Brittany. "Do you even have a home to go to?"

He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his black trench coat and said, "My dad's dead and my mom doesn't care what I do."

His words pulled a cord, and Anna stumbled forward a step. "We could stay," she said. "My mom won't know."

Brittany and Leora swiveled as if they shared a single brain. Leora widened her eyes and shook her head. "Don't be stupid, Anna," Brittany said.

"We could stay," Anna repeated. She swallowed. "If you wanted to."

Brittany cocked her head like a bird, her eyes going hard and shiny at the implied challenge. "That's a pretty necklace, Anna," she said. "Maybe we should all get one."

Leora laughed, a single chortle, before covering her mouth with her hand.

Sean handed Anna a tiny square of paper. "Put the sugar on your tongue," he sang. They walked until the night filled with color and their bodies grew wings and then they flew. They flew inside a throbbing room (*I never thought too hard on dying before*) and then Sean was kissing her (*I never licked the side of dying before*) and Neil was too (*of what it is to be a man*) and she thought about One and she thought about Three and there was no difference between them because numbers had no meaning anymore.

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