

Moriah Hampton

The End

Acres of woods grow near the local high school on a secluded stretch of land. They are bordered by roads, sidewalks, and paths that leave any follower at the moment of discovery, stranded. Meanwhile, the numberless pass through the woods alone. I can show you how to find them, but then you'll never do so on your own. Which is the real way to find them after all? It's up to you to decide. Come now, no questions please, walk in front of J.T.'s Garage, empty except for rusty car parts, far-flung hubcaps, and shattered beer bottles lying in the dirt. All over grey paint peels from the mis-matched boards nailed as if to cover holes shot one by one through the building. Always in a state of disrepair, the garage seems on the brink of collapsing, its blown-out windows shielding neither wind nor rain from crossing the entryway. Follow me around the side, past restroom doors labeled men and women in bold letters curling under, out into the field, the overgrown field that spreads underneath your feet. It's not much to look at, clumps of coarse grass matted to the earth, bunches of weeds tangled and rooted, ever thriving, and further on a lot more of the same. From this spot, you will think the field a miserable sight that never changes. Keep going anyway. The woods—you can't see them yet.

From off in the distance, the woods appear, confirming what you've known all along without understanding why. What the eyes see once always dies when seen a second time. Woods: the area marked prime on every developer's map. Does my definition match what you see? What do you see? There amid the pine trees goes someone who might tell you. Movement flashes and fades into shadows cast by falling trees that never reach the earth. You glimpse a brown coat, blue jeans, back pack, and then nothing but the lingering impression of what is now gone. Only a fool would point and say "I saw something there," believing in every single word. Mocking the certain, the woods become still, eerily quiet. You doubt that someone is approaching the edge of the woods as each step lightens the darkness across a face until at last she stands fully in the sun. You see her looking past you down the field. Nothing about her tells you where she's been this afternoon, not the step she plants on the earth, nor the hand that disappears into her coat pocket, nor the look she gives in passing, brown eyes already drifting away from yours, before she finds her way through the field once more. A few paces away, you notice one of her pant legs dragging behind in the dirt.

Outside the school window, a lone figure watches with a look of understanding, one that asks for nothing. And wants nothing in return, from her, the student, seated a part from all the rest, her face turning towards the glass streaming wet and rain-splattered. Someone less perceptive would confuse her for a shapeless thing, every movement rubbing away her outline. Yet as if recognizing a face once familiar, she watches her outgrow a former self, the glass a picture perfect window. Perfect for capturing her inside out. Perfect for revealing her silently. What she sees, few look at in the same way: her face, a placid pool, after they drew near and nearer. A pair seated before one textbook, their shoulders gently touching. A ripple

spreads just below the surface. Nearer and away from her. Something is sinking into waters that grow darker and darker until it disappears. She watches her sigh, shoulders rounding, stuck that way. Only she knows when it hits bottom, the dull thud breaking them apart, turning her attention away from the window. When her head bows and eyes close, the rain keeps falling just the same as before. Her eyes soon open; she opens her eyes.

The bell will ring at any moment; at any moment the bell will ring, throughout the halls, in every classroom, outside the buildings, and upwards in the gym, so that anyone sitting on the highest bleacher will hear the bell ringing. For now, she sits upon a wooden chair. It is the only one of its kind in the room, an odd ball chair—heavy, bulky, and straight-backed. She chose this chair, after noticing other students pass it over, and it became hers on that day and ever since. Her chair. She clutches each side of the seat, her grip tightening, locked, as students everywhere fidget and squirm, ears already ringing. The moment will arrive soon enough, the moment when her classmates scatter, one by one, a pair here and there, all trooping off to the next class—led by a silent command—in order to reach someplace else after that and so they troop. They will troop onward, no one noticing her still seated and gripping the chair. She knows it will always be so, nodding yes to herself, feeling already tremors spreading across the floor. Troopers will stop at nothing; nothing can stop troopers. For these reasons, she grips her seat and because of something else too, something more. The chair feels hard against her back bones digging into the wood.

Slicing through the hour is the bell ringing. It jars her, still, leaving a metallic taste in her mouth. If no other person but her stood before the bell, she would ring it loud and long. She would. Until the bell sealed every crack and every sliver, silencing the hour. All around her, commotion breaks out, shuffling papers books pounding scrapping sliding chairs zip zip feet stomping and dragging and skidding chatter and

goodbyes. Here she sits, listening to classmates' voices and footsteps being carried off by the passing crowd. Off somewhere, they troop, following a course that takes them away from where they started. Far away, never looking back, always forward and sometimes high above their heads. On the counselor's door hangs a poster that inspires every trooper with these words, "Reach for the stars!" Far away, some farther than others, with anyone who falls behind lying trampled face first in the mud. This she knows absolutely and believes even more. Evidence appears imprinted smoothly across her back. Somehow comfortable in her chair, she becomes aware of the room's emptiness filling her like crumpled balls of scratch paper. Here she has sat many times before. From afar, troopers often tell how things will turn out in the end, for her: A wasted life. A life that will amount to zero. A life that leads nowhere. Many times before, listening.

In between classes, any, maybe all, a part of the student body passes through the hallway like chewed-up food slowly turning into shit. Her there, that one's better off staying home. Before school, everyday, she washes and then forgets at this moment having done so. A sticky film covers skin visible to fresh-faced students nearby who want, she senses, to keep their distance. She pulls at her limp hair, the oily residue more reason for them to stay away. If she spoke to anyone, their eyes would dart to the crusty corners of her mouth, dissecting layer by layer milky flecks. The moment of recoil that follows surprises her now, but not always, as she withdraws further into herself, hiding. There goes a mindless body just taking up space. Dirt collects in hard-to-reach places, behind ears, underneath nails, along the soles of feet walking around her hiding place. She hears shoes shuffling, feels pressed forward, and sees only the back of densely packed heads. Off towards the next class goes the student body, steadfast and resolute. Not even the threat of being trampled will scare her out of hiding. Through a break in the crowd, she appears walking briskly,

assured that every step will lead to the next. She turns a corner and bounds down the stairs. Her eyes have followed every last movement.

Her disappearance matters little while sitting in class because on school grounds she roams, arriving to watch always at the right time. She might be any of these people—spectator, spy, peeping tom, eavesdropper—or none at all. You check the box on this masterless quiz. Square tiles line the classroom floor where she sits quietly motionless today, only because of her. Who is she? Where is she? What is she? Questions such as these never form on her lips that have been pressing together before she appears and long after. Never far, she goes unnoticed by the student body trooping towards some better place where upon arrival each has become the person always meant to be. A stop-time presence to her whose silence she speaks wordlessly.

She stands before the concrete-block wall, bolstered against the mighty din resounding throughout the cafeteria. Indistinct voices hover over tables and chairs, ready to pour over the student body in one long stream. Across the packs and pairs, she looks at her seated alone, the table splotched with dried ketchup, the floor sprinkled with cold, dirt-covered fries. Her hands, setting a fish sandwich back on the plate, seem already empty, as she chews motionless, eating nothing at all. Spit forms at the corner of her mouth. She sees it from across the room and waits. For the bead to become strings stuck to her widening lips—unbroken by a voice hanging mid-air.

Turing towards one another, students select partners without having to ask aloud. Something in the air assigns the pairs who exchange knowing looks. No one faces her in back of the class seated beside a trash can

where a piece of crumpled paper has fallen to the floor. Inside its shell gleams pink chewing gum, teeth-marked. Flavorless in her mouth. They've swapped gum again; the look on her face she recognizes.

Teenage girls stand around the locker room, some half dressed, others naked, a few baring skin as if alone.

Torsos curve and swell, twist and ripple before sharp-edged lockers, cold to the touch. Along benches sit girls, the outline of their plump bottoms appearing through cotton panties. Clean gym clothes flash white, pink, blue and green, the folds flying open and the creases falling out. Flung in darkened corners of bathroom stalls, sanitary napkins curl open to show padding streaked with blood, now brown and layered thick. Off to one side, she faces an open locker, the narrow door used to hide her from view without doing so. She becomes aware of her there in the room, somewhere close, and begins to slide out of her top, slowly, pulling an arm through the sleeve that she then crunches against her chest. She remains that way, skin covering skin, as eyes trace the length of her back, caving inward, breaking into pieces endlessly. Now beholden, she tries to avoid being seen undressing by anyone but her.

Cautiously she places one foot in front of the other, with arms plastered to her sides, so as to avoid touching anyone, so as to avoid anyone's touch. Somewhere the drum major pounds beats for every trooper to follow. Left, right, left. Troopers wearing custom-made boots march left, right, left. Keeping perfect time. Down the hall, a life-long trooper looks back and shouts, "You're far behind. Give it one more try." When will she fall in line? The last person leaves it to the rest to decide. That one's lucky she has a place at all. A member of the student body slugs along, barely keeping up, ready for the day when she won't have to

bother. When the student body troops off and scatters on command, each chasing after something, a secret no one whispers. The dearly departed. The dearly loved.

A Valentine for the Student Body on Graduation Day

We stand at a fork in the road. Out of love, I will show you the best path, because you've known it is the only path, if you promise to hold my hand when night falls.

Follow my directions exactly as written and ignore any signs you may see along the way.

A born traveler may cross your path, but he cannot lead to where you want to go.

Only I can.

And if you come upon the one who clears the path,
then pass him by without another thought.

Walk the path just as I tell you and all of your birthday wishes will come true,
even the one never spoken. Candles burning, wicks burnt, hardened tight.

Will I be with you that day?

Cross your heart. I won't believe you, not after...

Here we stand, together, near the Great Oak
that preserves my heart, pulsating still.

Everyone knows whose birthday is today. We call her Sunshine. For her, the student body will fan into the world's largest flower across the front lawn. Because to look into Sunshine's face is to find it already open, already receptive, now and always. Everyone wants to look at Sunshine; Sunshine wants everyone to

look. See her smile dispel every dark spot. Not yet, with the student body blocking the view. All around, the voiceless taunt her with these words, “You’re gonna miss your chance to look at Sunshine.” Cowering, she shrinks to half her size, lost amid the crowd pushing down the long hallway. Why does the student body always plot to keep Sunshine away from her? Adorable Sunshine. Precious Sunshine who draws everyone near with her winning smile. Picture perfect every time. That one there will only make Sunshine cry. A sight all would hate to see twice. Ssshhhhh... Nobody whispered anything about the thinning crowd. Silver, blue, and white ribbons appear bursting from Sunshine’s locker. From above SURPRISE fades, leaving a trail of multi-colored glitter drifting down on Sunshine and all her friends. Someone hung a Happy Birthday banner across the locker door. Someone tied balloons to the handle, a silver and white bunch pulling high the strings. Someone did all this for Sunshine, maybe more. Sunshine has never looked happier. Every freckle has nearly disappeared from her rosy cheeks.

By now, her freckles must have re-appeared as if painted on dot by dot, the way she likes Sunshine best. Before it all, she knew how much Sunshine’s birthday would mean to her.

Everyday in 9th period, Mandy nudges her to pass a note to Heather, and everyday she does so right away except for once. Between the two she sits. To look left is to see Mandy, to look right, Heather. Mandy. Heather. She stares straight at the letters covering the chalk-dusted board, letters overlaying more letters written with a felt-edged hand. As if the smeared words mattered and not Mandy and Heather. Certainly not Mandy and Heather. Their silent ways matter nothing at all. These words, she memorized only after, *after taking the note from Mandy, the note written especially for her. After clutching the note Mandy had written for*

someone special, her. After passing the note, at Mandy's insistence, the note too special for her. Their silent ways matter nothing at all. Her eyes drop. Nubby pieces of chalk lay scattered in the metal tray. Lower still. An eraser has landed flat amid a poof of dust. She feels not the powdery paste but Mandy's eyes—they're fixed on her, clear-set eyes telling her what to do. She passes the note to Heather without either sensing her hesitation as soon as it presses into hands formed perfectly for this very note. What they miss she always notices about her sitting half-turned then front ways baring the only grease-streaked face in the room.

Raise your hand if you have no place to go at the end of the school day. Anyone? Speak up if you don't know the meaning of home. The classroom stands empty, the door open wide. Gone before rising. Already home steps from the school yard. Up and down the hallway troopers shuffle, their prints blending into the sole-marked floor. Somewhere the class President crosses out his name, the drum major's baton flings through the air, and a pile of school records is set ablaze. Inwards every trooper feels the same coins rattling against tin-foiled depths. Except for her whose insides must have been looted like no other wishing well. The contents strewn in some deserted place, a classroom after school let out. Her head turns straight ahead without anyone noticing. On each side, in front, in back press troopers, their shoulders nearly touching through the thin air. Bulked-up troopers can take on the world even in their off hours. Drifting—weightless as a dull reflection—nearer to the classroom with the oddball chair upon which she sits peering back, peering back, peering back at her.

After turning away from the window, covered with whitish film after the morning rain, she begins walking through the school yard as if a muted version of every student easily overlooked.

A line, uniform in every way, crosses the open field. Through it she winds imperceptibly past herself and with each step leaves more of herself behind. Today, she decides, every last school day amounts to one. Ahead a sapling has reached full height in an hour's time. Above a newborn blue jay, soaring high, spreads its mighty wings. While across some distance walks the student body wearing caps and gowns. She turns to see every face radiant, every smile proud, especially the last face lost amid the shifting trees.

The woods fill her entire world but for glimpses of blue high above the trees. Following a sign, long-since faded in every sky, she slogs across the damp ground aware of muck thickening underneath pine needles, twigs, and leaves. Then she favored her forearm streaked with muck as something precious, a one-of-a-kind. Now she leaps across a muck-drawn line, ageless after touching earth. Who would recognize her walking directionless through these woods? A look-a-like upon meeting? She stoops below a shoot angling off a nearby branch. She jumps over a log, its rotting underside flashing before her mid-air.

She digs her soles into the earth, climbing up and over a hill. The farther she wanders, the denser grow the trees, coloring much of the surrounding space with bark and leaves. Already, she is plodding through the overgrowth, pulling back vines and sidling between trees. Foliage hangs where she once walked, her brown coat barely visible through the leaves. You who look away and back again will wonder how she disappeared.

Boulders—oblong, round, and flat-sided—rise in the center of a clearing. From every vantage point, they bulge irregularly upwards level by uneven level towards peaks and mounds. For a moment, every shape loses distinction, gleaming silvery white against the full afternoon sun. If ever too bright, she would screen it by shutting both eyes, over-planning what will never come true. An effort to salvage her routine,

perhaps. A last-minute change to ensure that she follow every other step. The first one comes easily. Turning her head towards the sky, she yells, "I'm here. I'm here." Then again, louder, surprising no one. Before it grows silent, she has begun stomping around the boulders, pounding the earth off beat. She continues stomping, one foot after the other, circling the boulders, again yelling, "I'm here. I'm here," her plain face, radiant. Immeasurable time passes. You see her standing before a smooth-faced boulder upon which are printed these words in blue: "You don't exist."