

THE TOWN WHERE IT HAPPENED

He went back to the town where it happened and tried to pretend it hadn't. He thought he could ignore her, but she was everywhere.

He walked the streets he used to walk and tried to think about the things he used to do but her spit was on the sidewalk, her gum and her cigarettes were in the alleys. One of her shoes was stuck in a drain. Her toes were rolling in a crosswalk.

He went to the coffee shop where he used to work and ordered the coffee he used to love, but flakes of her skin were in his mug. When he bit into his bagel, he chipped his tooth on one of her teeth.

The town where it happened was darker than he remembered. The clouds were damp and brown like used bandages. He went to the park where he used to run bare-foot in the summer, but the soft grass was spiky with bits of her bones. The bay where he used to watch lazy ships drift from dock to dock was angry with whitecaps though there was no wind. The air was stale and smelled like her sweat. The water was dark purple with her blood.

When evening came the street lamps glared down on him like interrogators. He went to the bar where he used to drink with his friends but none of his friends were there. People he'd never met stared at him with cold eyes and then leaned in and whispered urgently to each other. He ordered a beer but the bartender handed him her heart instead. It pumped fast like a small animal's, spurting red all over his jacket.

He called his friends and they agreed to meet him at their favorite restaurant. But they showed up covered in her hair. Dense mats of it stuck to their clothes like cat fur, blonde from when she dyed it blonde, red from when she dyed it red, and some strange new hue from however she was dying it now. His friends tried to talk to him about sports and the weather, his job and their jobs, but her hair was all over their faces, clinging to their eyeballs, sticking to their tongues, and when they all went outside to smoke they left piles of it on the chair next to him.

So he left the restaurant and wandered out into the dark streets of the town where it happened. He saw one of her legs sticking out of a dumpster. Her favorite bra hung from a stop sign; her breasts lay in the middle of the street. Her entrails ran down the sidewalk, long pink ropes leading off into the darkness, so he followed them. There was more blood as he got closer. Elaborate stains on the white concrete, scenes and signatures painted with a finger, love notes and hate notes. He noticed people

walking alongside him in the shadows, heads bowed and hooded in their sweatshirts like holy pilgrims.

Her entrails led into an old house. It used to be the house where she lived. Now it was the house where they kept her head. He shouldn't have come here. He shouldn't have come to the town where it happened, and he shouldn't have come to the house where they kept her head.

The house was full of people. Some of them he recognized: his friends and her friends, arranged in a circle in the middle of the room, some of them facing her head as if to worship it, some of them facing him as if to protect it from him. There were so many of them. And there were people he didn't recognize, too, ugly men in black hooded sweatshirts, crawling around sniffing for meat. Gobbling up scraps of her skin, licking her blood off the floor.

He pushed past these creatures and forced his way through the throng of worshipers. Her head rested high on a pedestal in the center of the room, bathed in soft light from an overhead lamp one of her artist friends must have set up. The pedestal loomed over him, rivulets of blood streaming down its pure white marble and onto the floor, then into street, then the bay. Her face was pale and sad, but it was beautiful. It was the only thing still beautiful in this town, which he hoped would evaporate com-

pletely when he left, leaving nothing but her face in soft light.

He looked at her face and it looked at him. He opened his mouth and took in breath for words. Her eyes watched him, waiting.

He released the breath. He closed his mouth. He left the town where it happened and never went back.