

Swap

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'Thou'rt by no means valiant;
For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork
Of a poor worm.'

– William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

In her grade, there were Kathryns, and there were Caitlins, and Katies, but she was the only Kate. There was a succinct, unflinching toughness in the name. It became her: this she knew from careful self-scrutiny. Kate would stand in the bathtub – far enough from the mirror that she could see down to her knees in it – and marvel at the way growing-up was attacking her body. It was like living in a carnival freak show. Her shoulders were far bigger than her hips; she had stretched out her thumb and index finger from one shoulder and counted how many hands it took to get across.

Her junior high school sat on a small, green island, around it empty hectares of yellow scrub, a highway off-ramp, the tops of houses abutted against the grey concrete noise barrier. When a girl grew big hips here, you heard about it, way out of proportion to the actual girl's actual hips: 'Child-bearing hips,' boys would shout – and girls. There was a boy, Cole, whose long-running gag was to throw himself against a row of lockers when a girl passed close by him, and cry out, 'Damn, look out for those huge hips!'

Other than that he was kind. He was her first boyfriend. Cole did not seem to notice her colossal shoulders.

In antiseptic prairie brightness, Kate was walking along McKenzie Lake Boulevard. Not really a street for walking, it was an endless broad track, in the summer resembling a wasteland cattle trail and in the winter the unpeopled tundra. Desolate, it would have been, but for the irrigated lawns and the young trees.

She was thinking about her own body – not its ungainly shape, or the flaws, but whether it was normal enough to work the way she needed it to work today. And whether she was sweating too much as she walked, or stank.

She passed the sign for Mount McKenzie Drive, then Mount McKenzie Place. Corners were rounded as though eroded. The motion she pictured, of driving these streets, was a gentle slalom, rounding the corners without slowing. And cars did this. You took care crossing the streets. Mount McKenzie Drive, Mount McKenzie Place; she anticipated Mount McKenzie Road, Mount McKenzie Crescent, Mount McKenzie Gate. Kate didn't know if there was a Mount Mckenzie, out in the world; here was all flat plain, begging to be developed. There was an idea she was beginning to understand, that a narrow street was somehow better than a broad one. It meant the people were close, couldn't help but see one another every day; it meant good, and poor-but-happy. A narrow street was a noble street. She liked the idea of nobility, liked the word mostly. From what she knew of Calgary, it seemed made entirely of wide streets like this, houses sprouted far back from the road.

It was the end of June. Summer – defined by not waking up for school – had just

begun. In summer, if you couldn't yet drive and couldn't get a ride, there was only one bus, one lonely capillary into central Calgary. Hourly it went by, half-hourly at peak times. Other than that, she would be marooned in McKenzie. Parents still got up in the morning and drove up the six-lane Deerfoot Trail to work. Older siblings with cars – child despots – fled as the sun arched higher. Between June and September, the whole spread of land around the artificial lake was an adolescent no man's land.

It was because of the swap that Kate was walking along this boulevard. Involved in the swap, to some extent, was Cole, but Cole was not here now because his parents had taken him on a road-trip. She would honour her part in the swap. Kate felt, but would not have been able to articulate, that her height and her big shoulders entitled her to talk about things like honour, and nobility, and not sound ridiculous.

Mostly, the swap was between her and Tristan. Tristan sold weed, and Cole had bought a certain weight from him. Cole had bought it cheap, to sell on. He kept it in a tin that once held hockey cards, and he thought he was clever keeping it to smoke himself. 'Who's he going to complain to?' Cole had bragged to her. 'He can't tell his mom that I haven't paid him for the weed he sold me.'

Kate was not entirely sure she disapproved. It had a certain antiheroic sheen, something out of Robin Hood or Roald Dahl.

Tristan she did not like. He was going away to school in Toronto in the fall, or was hoping to. 'Need a good grade on the English diploma,' she'd heard him say. 'There's a big essay you have to write: you know, get your three body paragraphs – bang, bang, bang.' Tristan needed to score over eighty to get into business school. To score what he needed to score, he said, 'Write about characters overcoming things. Hardships, adversity, all that good shit. Or going on journeys and discovering their fucking selves.' He planned to write on something that was called *The Kite Runner*. 'I read on the internet that it covers any topic they could ever ask about on the exam. Also you get to write about suffering and the repression of women and that – in Afghanistan.' He played the audiobook of *The Kite Runner* on his iPod. Tristan had everything figured out.

He said this while he kept her waiting. He had a trampoline in his back yard and he was sitting cross-legged in the middle of it, regaling three other boys with his plans. As she walked up that day, it was like seeing him through an underwater camera: she could only see his head above the surface of it, and underneath, caped in black fabric, the bony shapes of his legs and his bottom. Sitting cross-legged, slightly off the ground, he looked like a levitating bodhisattva; he ruined the image by bouncing so much.

She was walking the same way now. Both times, even under blue sky, she had felt grim and sick with adrenaline.

When she'd come to see him on the trampoline, it was because she heard a rumour. She had one or two friends, who also haunted these lawns and anarchic playgrounds. Cynthia had said, 'They're going to kill Cole.'

'Or not kill him,' Cynthia conceded. 'But, you know, kick his ass. Tristan has a lot of friends who'll do it.'

Kate could not picture Tristan having a lot of friends. But she could picture Tristan amassing enough kids who owed him money to do some real harm to Cole.

Both days, she had locked up, put the key under the third brick along the garden path. More reliable than carrying it. Her mother taught spring classes at the univer-

sity, as far across the city as one could go. There were some things Kate didn't know about the split. It had happened when her mother and father had both been young university instructors, she tenured and he striving for tenure. Barry, her father, had done something so terrible it was never spoken of, and her mother – who was close with the dean of his department – arranged it so that he was not given any further classes to teach. The dean in Calgary of course knew the faculty in Edmonton, and Regina, and Winnipeg, and Barry had to go most of the way across the country, to a town that was called London but was in Ontario, for another university that would hire him.

They had fought a lot leading up to it, but the act itself was surrounded by days and days of silence. Pauline, her mother, knew what she was doing, knew her reasons. Barry knew who had dug the knife in. He must have known the reason, too, but did not say. He merely got some suitcases and boxes together, packed up the car, and drove. Most of the packing time was spent making two piles of books. The first pile were the boring books. The boxes of them he labeled with stinking squeaking black marker, things like 'Critical Theory – Althusser, Barthes, Derrida.' All Kate could recall about herself at eight years old was that as Barry sorted the piles of books that last night, she had gone into her room and would not come out. He had ideas about respecting 'her space,' and after a pleading hour at her door he left the second, interesting pile of books against the wall. She heard the thousands of pages slapping down against the carpet. It was two or three armloads he stacked against the wall. The pile wobbled and he divided it in two. There was a note about in what order Kate should read some of them. *King Arthur and His Knights*, then *Tales from Shakespeare*, and so on.

When she heard the plot against Cole, she knew the story. She had big shoulders and knew what heroism was, and she marched down this same long expanse of road on her quest to save him from certain bruising. She had not told him she was saving him; that wouldn't have been in keeping with heroism.

In the winter, there were trucks that drove up the boulevard, dusting the packed snow with sand and gravel. The same trucks would come by in summer and sweep up remains. But for now, the road she walked along was bordered with a long ridge of dust and grit. On windy days, like the first time she went to see Tristan, it scattered across the sidewalks, the lawns – sometimes it got in your eyes and mouth.

She had schemed, on the way there the first time, how to get Tristan to tell her the plan. But after he had finished saying how he would beat his exam, he just told her. He bounced himself up and down, still with his legs crossed, as he spoke.

But Kate had known it before he said it. Cole's folks were taking him out of school a few days early to go on vacation. Before he was to leave, Tristan had arranged for some kids to jump him. 'Going to put him in the fucking hospital,' Tristan bragged.

Couldn't Cole just stay indoors? Couldn't she tell his mother, or stop this some other way? Yet it was inevitable, as were all the plans they devised. If Cole was going to get jumped, walking home through the dusky park or even on his way to school, then that was, inexorably, what would happen. It seemed fitting, so far from the city, basically out on the prairie, for this brutish justice to be exacted. Only the swap could help him.

Kate had read this same story so many times, but she was shocked to see it actually appear, in the scraggly suburbs, in her own life, and – this shocked her most of

all – thought up by Tristan. It had burst out of his mouth, something he knew he wanted to say and had no other way to get out. As soon as he said it the other boys, who were both seventeen, tittered and turned away. One of them walked off across the yard, slapping his thighs. ‘You’re a virgin, right?’ said Tristan.

‘I’m thirteen,’ Kate answered.

‘Right.’ He bounced closer to the padded lip of the trampoline. ‘When’s your birthday?’

‘What does it matter?’

‘Well if you’re almost fourteen our ages are closer.’

‘Closer for what?’ But she knew.

‘It’s in July,’ one of the other boys trumpeted. ‘My sister was at her birthday party.’

If that was what he wanted, she had decided, Kate would make him say it. She wasn’t going to be merciful and guess.

‘I’ll forget about your boyfriend’s debt if you have sex with me.’

She had looked at the grass then. It surprised her that he didn’t hesitate before he said the word, or stutter. Even knowing it was coming, it was a huge thing. She didn’t even think of the movements of it, only the bargain she would have to make. If she were to have sex with Tristan – whatever that was like – he could still do something to Cole afterward. Her mind ticked through all the plotlines she knew, all the television episodes, teen novels, stories and plays Barry had left in the stack.

‘Only after Cole is on vacation.’ Otherwise what was there to stop Tristan cheating on the deal.

‘Horseshit,’ said Tristan. ‘You wouldn’t really.’

‘I keep my word,’ she said. She squared her big shoulders, stuck her chest out, and glowered at him.

‘Whatever.’

‘So you won’t touch him.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Tristan. ‘But if I don’t...’

‘Yes.’

Also, it was better for Cole that way. It was better him not knowing, and she would never tell him what she was doing for him.

And yet, couldn’t Tristan tell people? She knew that game too: if Tristan told what they had done, only Kate would suffer. Virginity was such an electric, radioactive word. She would lose Cole, who she had saved from pain, and she would be tarnished – or would appear so to the group of kids who prowled the southeast cul-de-sacs in the brief, intense summers. It came to the same thing.

But he could say that anyway, couldn’t he? How would anyone know, except to know that she was good and Tristan was a creep?

So she was walking.

Tristan’s parents, she assumed, would not be home. She had her school bag, in it an old beach towel. She understood she might bleed. She didn’t trust Tristan to know what to do with stained sheets. Coldly, logically, she had thought it all through. She came to Tristan’s house, in its aluminum-siding armour. There were younger kids playing in the park across the street. They were eight or nine. She knew what houses they lived in. To them, she hoped, she was another giant, indiscernible teenager.

There would be nothing weird about one teenager going to visit another teenager.

A security guard, probably hired by the strip mall across the Deerfoot Trail, had parked his bulky Chevy Impala on the street. His skin was not white but not very dark, and Kate could see that he sculpted his goatee every day or so with an electric trimmer. The hair on top of his head shone wetly and stood up like hundreds of black stagmites. He ate salad from a Styrofoam bowl; its cellophane outer packaging wafted down the street.

She texted Tristan. She couldn't ring the bell, because if his mother was actually home – if Tristan had planned on them doing it surreptitiously in the basement, making no noise, scared of every creak of the house – Kate would probably just turn around and run home. It would be awful, even for Tristan, and she couldn't stand on the stoop and meet his mother, and not blurt out all these awful things about her son. Kate wanted him to come to the door, preferably the basement door, and to not know how many things could go wrong.

Tristan, when he let her in, was wearing a polo shirt with the collar sticking up, and long khaki shorts. His hair was still wet from the shower. Kate paused at the threshold, listening. There seemed to be no parental noises.

'I didn't think you'd have the balls to come,' he said. The basement was dark, lit only by the large windows that faced the back yard. It was very much Tristan's space. There was a wall lined with videos. The black tree roots of game controller cables were spread across the carpet. Even when he moved to Toronto, if that's where he was bound, he would not really have moved out. Tristan would still be here, in the summers; he would see her.

He took her hand. Tristan's fingers slid in between hers. He led her through the basement. There was a pool table with a great gash across the green felt. The door to his room had a large crack, shoulder-high, where someone had punched it or had their head banged against it. In his room, which was no messier than hers, he led her to the bed. On it was a polyester fleece blanket, and printed on the fleece a picture of Calgary Flames captain Jarome Iginla. It looked like he was skating up towards the ceiling. The background was a large, black and yellow number 12. Kate sat on the very corner of the mattress. Tristan wove around her, flopped into the middle of his Jarome Iginla blanket. Kate unzipped her knapsack and unfolded the towel. She spread it on one side of the blanket and lay down on it. Tristan looked like he was going to say something, but didn't.

He kissed her, and she guessed she was sort of kissing him as well. It was part of the swap, and she was going to do it properly. She put her tongue in his mouth first. Tristan's hands hovered over her breasts. The hands were on her big shoulders to begin with, but she shrugged them off. The fingers of each traced down the straps of her bra, as though the item itself was what he was seeking. When he had her breasts cupped in his hands, even then his fingers followed the seams of her bra. The two of them had ceased kissing then.

'Are you scared?' he asked her. 'Don't be scared, okay?'

'I'm fine.' The kisses were good, actually. His tongue tasted like sugary cereal and milk. But as she said this, her body was hardening cement.

Both were breathing hard. Kate was looking at his eyes, which were on the ceiling. He looked confused at the thickness of the material, the paltriness of actual

breast underneath. He slid a hand behind her back, fingers cold under her shirt. He fiddled with the bra until the hooks came apart. And then both cold hands were on the actual flesh of her breasts.

'You're too cold?' he asked, or stated. She shook her head and he slid her shirt up to her armpits. 'Your tits have goose-bumps.'

'So what. It's chilly down here.'

He was studying them closely now. Shouldn't Tristan have been well acquainted with these? Weren't there hundreds of tits in the twelfth grade? 'They look like frozen chickens,' he said, squeezing.

She had thought of not coming. Having got her part of the deal, Kate could have stayed away, withheld her virginity. But then she would be as awful as him – Tristan, with his stupid groping hands. She would do what she said she would do. It was right, and 'right' was a thing beyond the tennis courts and the wide streets and all of McKenzie Lake. It was in the stack of books that she had in her room. It was a thing from far away, out of myth, she thought. She put her fingers in his hair. She kissed him.

He had a hand inching down her bare stomach. She knew where the hand inevitably had to go. He was probably just easing her into it. Maybe he wasn't so cruel.

And then he stopped. 'Do you know what you're s'posed to do?' he asked her.

'What do you want me to do?' For a moment she thought maybe he really didn't know what to do with a girl. But that was not possible. It couldn't be.

'Don't you know? God, you really are a kid.'

'I said I would do it with you.'

'Some girls, like, take out a guy's dick and blow on it,' he told her.

'I don't think they actually blow,' said Kate. 'It's just called a blowjob.'

'How would you know?' Tristan seemed almost hurt.

'Is that what you want?' She slid off the bed. The Jarome Iginla blanket made a sleek, polyester whooshing, like a slide whistle, as her body slid along it. She took a slow breath and reached for the button of his shorts. 'I know what to do. Take these off.'

'Ha. You were actually going to do it,' he chuckled.

'I have to,' she said. She slid her shirt back down and Tristan pulled his hands away.

He shook his head and got to his feet. He looked out the window, at magpies that were cawing in the back yard. 'I wouldn't even want to have sex with you.'

She walked out of the room. Her elbows stuck out like the helpless wings of a large, flightless bird as she fumbled with the clasp of her bra. She straightened the rest of her clothes, stepped out into the brightness of the day.

Her feet crunched the dry grass. She didn't know what she had done wrong, but when she looked back, the curtains of his bedroom window were drawn. The guard looked up from his lunch and his newspaper and smiled at her.