

Developed

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by Tiffany Hauck

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I spent the summer of my twelfth year typing out the lyrics to Def Leppard's album *Pyromania* on my Apple IIe. It was 1983, and MTV had just swept through America like a rock and roll brushfire. I'd moved past the kiddie records of my childhood, past the early influence of my sisters, who were six years older than me. Now, I watched the parade of music videos on television, hypnotized by the cheesy effects and video feedback, and made my own choices about what bands I liked. This made me feel empowered and grown up, even though I'd just finished elementary school. In the fall, I would attend junior high, where recess and juice boxes would give way to school dances, pep assemblies, and the anxiety of navigating hallways and the cafeteria with eighth and ninth graders.

I grew up in Vancouver, Washington, where our house sat on a dead end street, our property threatened by an untamed wilderness that began where the street crumbled into dirt. I loved that wilderness – I'd ridden my bike through its brambles, had climbed fearlessly into its trees – but developers had since quashed the sand dunes and vegetation with a housing development. New families moved in, and with them, an influx of kids, many of whom I became quick friends with. The Baxters lived kitty-corner from us, their house the first on our street past the visible sign of fresh sod that marked the new properties from the old. They had three children: Bobby, who was my age; Kellie, two years younger than me; and Mary, a thirteen-year-old about to enter the eighth grade.

Mary and I grew close that summer, her friendship a welcome distraction from the uncomfortable silence that permeated my home after my older sister, Darcy, had dropped out of high school and moved away the previous year. I tiptoed around the house afraid to ask questions about what she'd done and where she'd gone, and no one, not even her twin, Dina, would talk about what happened. Since the Baxters had arrived after the last day of school that spring, Mary knew no one but me. I saw

her friendship as an opportunity for me to branch out toward what would become a new life in junior high.

Our parents worked. Mary's father hauled goods up and down the I-5 corridor in his semi-truck, a job that kept him away several days at a time. I spent most of my summer at their place, bare feet hanging over the edge of Mary's bed, listening to Z100 on the radio or watching MTV in their living room. Sometimes, all three kids tuned their stereos to the same station and opened the front windows of the house so we could lounge in the shade of their front yard and listen to music. Their home became a safe-haven, a place I saw as inhabited by a normal family where all children were properly accounted for.

One day, I reclined on a lawn chair while Mary painted my toenails, something I'd never done myself. As a perennial tomboy, I preferred dirt-bikes and stickball to nail polish. Until the housing development had sprouted up like a field of mushrooms the previous year and the Baxters moved in, my only girlfriend had been Wendy Morgan, a girl my age who lived up the street. While Wendy was definitely more of a girl's-girl, we'd never put makeup or nail polish on each another, which made my friendship with Mary seem unique.

Mary and I lounged on the front lawn and The Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams" pulsed through the front windows of the house. Mary screwed up her face in concentration, trying to keep the bright orange polish on my toenails and off my skin.

Just then, a cute boy rode by on his bike and waved at Mary. His light brown hair hung into his eyes, the tips of the strands blonde from the summer sun.

"Hi there!" she called with a smile.

My eyes followed as he banked his bike around the corner and disappeared behind a house. Though the development had been there a while, not all the houses were rented or sold yet, and many of them stood empty. Of those occupied, I knew all the kids around my age – but I didn't know this boy.

“Who was that?” I asked. My eyes locked on the location where he’d disappeared.

“Joe Watson,” said Mary. “He’s spending the summer with his uncle who lives over there.” She waved her hand in the general direction of the far corner of the development, beyond a large tree that shadowed his departure. “He’s Kellie’s boyfriend.”

“But she’s only ten,” I said. My sudden interest in him intensified once I knew he belonged to someone else. Though only twelve, I already had a habit of setting unrealistic goals for myself. I knew even without Kellie as competition the chances of me snagging a boy like Joe were slim. Though both Wendy and Mary had meticulous hair teased high with Aquanet, I had yet to discover hair dryers or curling irons, let alone makeup. With my unruly dark hair, I tended to appear as if I had just rolled out of bed and crawled into my summer uniform: dirty shorts and a t-shirt.

“He’s thirteen,” said Mary, still concentrating on my nails, “but he saw Kellie and snapped her up right away.”

As a perennial tomboy, I preferred dirt-bikes and stickball to nail polish.

I glanced over to where Kellie sat on the Baxters’ front stoop, playing with Barbie dolls in quiet animation. True, Kellie had natural beauty and long blonde hair that ended in ringlets, but at only ten, she seemed childish and reminded me of Cindy, the youngest Brady girl. As Mary beautified my toenails, I leaned back in the lawn chair and thought about the mystery

of Joe and Kellie. I wondered how he had snuck into the neighborhood without my knowing, and how she had come to be the girl he’d chosen to spend his time with, even though I felt sure he could never want a ruffian like me. As only an adolescent girl can, I went from oblivious to fascinated to jealous to self-criticizing in the span of only ten minutes.

That Saturday morning, I walked across the street to see Mary. Mr. Baxter, home from a week on the road, stood in his driveway spraying hose water onto his gold Cadillac. Whenever Mr. Baxter was home I’d see him out there, wearing nothing but a pair of short cutoffs, cleaning the car and buffing it with wax until the coat shimmered in the daylight.

When I walked up the driveway, water from the spray landed on my bare legs and sandaled feet. Childish for a moment, I splashed in the soapy puddle that had formed on the cement. Mr. Baxter turned at the sound.

“Hey, Tiffany,” he said. His attention startled me. Though I spent significant time with his kids, I didn’t often interact with Mr. Baxter privately. He seemed nice, but sometimes made me feel wary. Whenever he spoke, I found myself staring at the thick gold chain nestled in the excessive body hair that grew up his neck like uncut grass. He embarrassed me once during a Baxter family dinner when he singled me out and asked why I didn’t have a boyfriend. When I stuttered to answer, he laughed and said, “It’s probably because you look like a boy.” Before I cast my eyes down, I noticed Mary and Mrs. Baxter exchange an uncomfortable look. They’d seemed as mortified as me.

“You coming to the lake with us today?” he asked. He gestured to a red speedboat that sat next to the garage. “Gonna take the boat out. Supposed to be hot.”

I’d gone with them before. Mr. Baxter would park the boat in the middle of Lacamas Lake and we kids would dive off the sides to cool ourselves in the water. The fact that he asked me directly instead of going to my parents made me feel momentarily grown-up, as if I could make decisions for myself, so I said, “Sure.”

“No plans with your family today?”

I looked over my shoulder at the empty driveway in front of my house and shook my head. Since Darcy had left, my family had grown distant, divided by the gaping hole where my sister used to be. Her room

sat empty as if she might walk through the door any day. Every once in awhile, when no one was around, I'd sneak in and sit on the floor. The pink and green striped wallpaper my mother hung when Darcy was young seemed somehow offensive, and I imagined I could empathize with Darcy's desire to escape. I noted the darker squares on the paper where posters of Cheap Trick and Boston had once decorated the walls, and I tried to slide into Darcy's shoes and understand how she'd felt living here and why she'd gone. I could barely stand the uncertainty that filled the space she'd left, which drew my attention whether I wanted it to or not, and so I didn't like being at home, especially not when I could be on the lake with my friends.

"No," I said to Mr. Baxter. "We've got no plans at all."

After Mr. Baxter drove us to the lake that afternoon, he popped a Rainier beer and turned on the transistor radio he kept on the boat. Mary and I dove into the undulating waves and played tag. Lake water ran off my forehead and into my mouth when I laughed, momentarily forgetting the off-kilter uneasiness I wore from Darcy's absence.

Bobby was away with Mrs. Baxter, and Kellie sat by herself on the boat's bow, feet dangling into the water as she stared into the murk.

I watched her for a moment while I treaded water, then asked Mary, "What's with your sister?"

She rolled her eyes. "My dad made her break up with Joe. Said she's too young to have a boyfriend."

I remembered Joe's new single status the next week when I encountered him sitting on the curb in front of his uncle's house, flipping through a stack of baseball cards. He looked up when I rolled to a stop in front of him.

"Hey," I said. "You're Joe."

He nodded. "You're Mary's friend."

"Yeah."

The two of us looked at each other for a moment almost as if our meeting had been planned. I broke the gaze first and felt stupid. He had to know I liked him. How could a cute boy like him want anything to do with me, a girl who couldn't even apply her own toenail polish or makeup? I shook my head a little to myself, thinking, *Stupid*, then put a foot back on my pedal, readying for escape.

He jerked his head at the house behind him. "Wanna come inside?"

He stood up and I followed, dropping my bike on his front lawn then trailing him through the door of his uncle's empty house. And that's how Joe Watson and I began going together.

A face full of saliva, two mouths wide open in the inexperienced 30-minute French kiss of adolescence. Joe and I spent a week of afternoons like this, side-by-side and horizontal on his neatly made twin bed in the dim interior of his uncle's house. I have no recollection of a first kiss, no memories of meaningful conversation, no idea how the two of us ended up the way we did. Our make-out sessions involved zero passion, none of the groping and grinding that would come later with teenage boys pumped full of unpredictable hormones. Sometimes, Joe would smoke pot out of a small wooden pipe he told me he'd made in shop class. I shook my head when he offered it, and he said, "You don't know what you're missing."

Between make-out sessions, we turned on MTV and he cooked us lunch – Kraft macaroni and cheese, the cheap kind with small noodles coated in orange milky powder. Then we kissed some more until the afternoon when my parents and his uncle were due home. The next day, I'd show up at his house late in the morning and we'd start all over again. I'd made out before with other boys I had "gone with" in the fifth and sixth grades, short couplings made all the more dramatic by our youth, but I'd never stretched out in a boy's bed or made out for such extended periods of time. I'd never been so unsupervised.

My parents had no idea where I spent my days, nor did they ask. Their jobs kept them away most of the day. When they finally arrived home, they separated – my mother crashed out in front of the television, my father with a beer and a paperback at the kitchen table. They trusted Dina and I enough to leave us to our own devices, and I remember them now as more exhausted than disinterested. On occasion, when I'd pop in at the house in the middle of the day, Dina might ask where I'd been. She'd toss the question to me as a courtesy, something she felt entitled to ask since my parents left her in charge in their absence. As I ran past the family room door on my way out, I'd yell to her, "Nowhere," or "at a friend's," or (depending on my mood) "none of your business." Any response she had to my disrespect got buried by the sound of the front door when I slammed it shut and the echo of my tennis shoes slapping across the pavement as I ran back to Joe's.

Because most of my friends were boys and I preferred sports to more feminine pursuits, the boys at school tended to overlook me when they searched for girlfriends. The popular boys wanted girls who already wore bras and liked to kiss, like my good friend, Wendy Morgan. Once those girls used the boys up and passed them around, someone like me might have a chance. Wendy would promote me to boys she'd already burned through, remind them I might not be pretty, but I was open to making out, and they'd give in for awhile, until, I imagine, they decided that being with me was less palatable than being alone. The thing about Joe was I got to him first. Sure, he'd gone with Kellie for a while, but I guessed by the amount of time I'd seen her at the Baxter house she never snuck away for entire weekdays to make out with him as I had. True, no one knew about us – not even Mary, who I'd been avoiding to spend time with Joe – but he wanted to spend time with me, and that made him special. My heart fluttered whenever I thought of him, and I figured this could only be love.

During the second week of our whirlwind romance, Joe and I broke up. One afternoon, after we made out on his bed in the usual fashion, he stood up to take a break. He walked across the bedroom to his desk and took a hit of pot.

"So," he said, his voice tight from holding his breath. "You wanna do it, or what?"

He blew out a long stream of smoke.

"Do it?"

"Have sex."

Of course. I should have known he would want to move further than whatever base we'd been lounging on. After all, he was an older boy. He took another hit then lay back down on the bed. He put his hand on the side of my face, his eyes hooded with shallow lids.

"What do you think?" he asked. He reached down to tug at the snap on my jeans.

I panicked.

"Uh," I started, trying to buy myself some time. I sat up with such violence that Joe jumped back, letting go of my pants.

"I've got a rubber," he said, then he shrugged. "It's up to you."

I wasn't opposed to having sex. I'd seen *Coming Home* at the drive-in with Wendy, and Jane Fonda didn't seem scared in the sex scene I'd seen through the panicked fingers of Wendy's mother, who hadn't anticipated the nudity and tried to cover my eyes. Sex seemed like something you just did, like making out. The stupidity of the moment, the thing that made me hop out of Joe's bed and stammer my way to the door, was the dirty underwear I had on – big, white, granny style underwear, the only kind my mother ever bought me. There was no way I was going to let Joe see me in those underwear.

"I'm...just...I gotta go," I mumbled, resnapping my jeans. I grabbed my shoes, ran out the door, and never returned.

Later in the week, I stood in the middle of our street on the manhole cover that served as second base during stickball. Even though more than a year had gone by since the road had been a dead end – a natural location for a stickball field – we still played in front of my house, moving out of the way whenever a car needed to pass. The batter at the plate had just struck out when Mr. Baxter backed the Caddy out of his driveway with his boat in tow. Mary and his other kids were gone, up to

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Seattle to visit an aunt and uncle, so he was by himself. It was not uncommon for him to take the boat out alone to fish on his days off.

“Hold up,” yelled my eighth-grade neighbor Geoff, putting our game on pause. Mr. Baxter split us in two as he maneuvered through our playing field, our small group parting like an open zipper. I saw the glint of his gold neck chain through the windshield, and thought he winked at me when he passed. After he turned the corner onto 40th Street, everyone fell back into place.

“What’s up with that guy?” asked Geoff. He stood next to me playing second base, his uneven brown hair sweaty at the temples, his braces catching the sunlight. I was careful to keep one foot on the manhole cover as we talked. “He’s sort of weird, don’t you think?”

I shrugged. Mr. Baxter had a gruffness about him, a certain abrasiveness I’ve often encountered in East-coasters. Though generally kind to me, he sometimes said things that made me curl up into myself, as I had when he’d said I looked like a boy. Once at the lake, he’d appraised me sitting on the bow of the boat and said, “Man, Tiffany, don’t you ever shave your legs? Jesus.”

Neither my mother nor my sisters had ever explained leg shaving to me, and it never occurred to me this was something I needed to do. When he said that, I felt redness crawl up my neck then averted my eyes before I rose and jack-knifed into the security of the water. When I’d

gotten home, I stole my mother’s razor and ended up taking a full layer off my shin on the first stroke, the skin sticking in the razor like a piece of bacon.

On the street, a new batter whiffed at a pitch and Geoff continued to talk about Mr. Baxter.

“He’s always washing his car in those short cutoffs, and when I ride by, he watches me.” Geoff rolled his shoulders and scrunched up his face. “He just creeps me out.”

Just then, a yellow tennis ball sailed overhead and Geoff took off after it. I bounded forward, my dirty tennis shoe pounding the third-base curb in front of Ryan Simmonds’ house. When I ran across the empty pizza box that served as home, to the hoots and hollers of the boys on my team, I reveled in the moment, unaware of the slow change that percolated around me: real estate developers had stolen my safe-haven, the mile of untamed wilderness where I’d played as a child; they’d ruined the simplicity of our stickball games that once went for eternity without the intrusion of traffic. My experience with Joe marked the beginning of a new era – the days when I put no thought into my underwear choice were behind me. While I jumped up and down, celebrating that run, such a small victory, I forgot about the ghost of my sister that floated through my house, not twenty feet away. More importantly, I forgot all about Geoff’s curious assessment of Mr. Baxter.

The next Monday, after my parents left for work, I opened my front door to find Geoff standing there, fist raised mid-knock.

“Check this out,” he said. He pointed to a notice in the local newspaper. “Mr. Baxter got arrested.”

I quickly scanned the article. Mr. Baxter had picked up two teenaged boys at Lacamas Lake and they’d accused him of “inappropriate sexual contact.” He’d been released the night before on bail.

“Jesus,” I said. Though Mr. Baxter sometimes put me on the defense, I never imagined he might be a pedophile. I scanned the rest of the article and thought of the times I’d sat on the boat alone with him, catching my breath or taking in the sun, while Mary, Bobby, and Kellie swam in the lake. Had he been eying me hungrily, while his children provided a safety net I remained oblivious to? I let out a low whistle and handed the paper back to Geoff.

“I knew there was something wrong with that guy,” he said as we both glanced at the Baxter house. “Fucking faggot!” he yelled at the house.

Geoff wanted to play stickball, and by early afternoon, the two of us had rounded up enough boys to get a game going, and we convened on the street in front of my house. By then, the news of Mr. Baxter had saturated the neighborhood, and everyone seemed to have a personal experience that made them an expert in having known of Baxter’s sexual perversions before the police did.

“He’s always checking me out,” insisted Geoff.

“I swear his hand brushed my ass,” said Mikey.

“He invited me into his house once,” confided Don. “I mean, nothing happened, but I could tell he wanted me to suck his dick.”

Though they had only read the police blotter as Geoff and I had, the story of Baxter’s arrest grew. Before long, the story went that the boys hadn’t been looking for a ride – he’d befriended them, plying the underagers with beer on his boat. Then, he promised them a ride, only to pull off onto a secluded dirt road, where he told them they needed to blow him to get the rest of the way home. The boys barely escaped his attack, running into the wilderness and all the way to the police station. All of this or none of it could be true. For my friends, only their close brush with perversion mattered, and the fear that Baxter’s victims could easily have been one of them.

We were taking a break from the game, passing around the hose in my front yard, when Baxter came out through his garage, bucket in

hand, wearing his usual cutoffs. He turned on his own hose and began to wet his prized gold Cadillac.

The boys started to whisper then found confidence in numbers.

“Goddamn queer!” yelled one of them.

“Baxter, you faggot,” said another.

They jeered him while they moved across the street to stand on the edge of his property, and I followed. I heard my voice join with theirs, a sheep in a flock bleating with self-justified anger and dismay. Baxter glanced up for only a second, then dropped his hose onto the wet pavement of the driveway. He reached into the bucket and grabbed a large soap-soaked sponge, which he wrung in his hands then wiped across the hood of the Caddy, slow and methodically. I sensed a mix of embarrassment and anger simmering just beneath his calm exterior.

“Is that how you wanted those boys to stroke your dick?” asked Geoff, and the group erupted in laughter. A few of them picked up fist-sized pinecones off a neighboring lawn and chucked them in Baxter’s direction. One bounced harmlessly off his shoulder and he tried to ignore it, concentrating on the sponge, which he moved in angry wet circles, trying to wipe the car spotless.

Mary and Bobby came out of the house to see what was going on. I saw her disappointment when she saw me with the group of attackers and I took a step back, as if a foot of separation could remove the offense of my presence there. In all the excitement, in all of my ridiculous drama with Joe, I’d forgotten about my friend, whose world had likely imploded in the last 24-hours with her father’s arrest and the accusations in the paper. When Geoff had shown me the article, I didn’t think of how the situation might affect Mary, the girl who had befriended me and provided a consolation of friendship when my own family felt on the brink of collapse.

“Go back inside,” Baxter said to Mary and Bobby. He dropped his

sponge into the bucket.

“Leave my dad alone,” said Bobby. “He didn’t *do* anything. Those boys were lying!” He blinked back angry tears.

“Sure they were,” said Geoff, and when he winked, Bobby tried to make a run at him only to be stopped by the big hook of his father’s arm.

Baxter said something softly to his son, squeezing his shoulder gently with his hand. Bobby turned and left, small shoulders rolled forward in surrender. Baxter turned off his hose and walked toward us to the edge of his driveway where he dumped the bucket of soapy water at Geoff’s feet.

Geoff jumped back too late and water soaked into the soles of his Reeboks. “Fucking asshole,” he said.

I wish I could wash my memories in a spin cycle and have them come out shiny and clean.

“You kids need to get the hell out of here,” said Baxter, though his eyes had locked on Geoff’s. The closeness of Baxter and the way he singled Geoff out silenced the boy and the group fell silent with him. Baxter abandoned his car washing and headed back inside, calling for Mary to follow. Her eyes met mine before she turned, and I raised my hand in a weak greeting. Though still surrounded by the group of boys, I felt exposed with Mary’s eyes on me. When she needed me most, I’d failed her by giving in to the mass hysteria of the boys and their vigilante bullying. It would take me years to realize that, even though I didn’t have sex with Joe that summer, I lost my innocence anyway. I lost it the moment I stepped forward with those boys and betrayed my friend without once thinking of the consequences, and our friendship evaporated the instant she saw me in the melee. I sensed the full depth of her disappointment as a shrinking in my chest, even while the tips of my fingers barely moved in the air to acknowledge the moment. Without responding, she disappeared into the dark interior of her house.

Some time later, the paper published a short article that said the charges against Baxter had been dropped. The boys who turned him in retracted their statements and said they made the whole thing up, but the damage had already been done. Many people – not just us kids – wondered if the boys had only changed their story because they didn’t want to go through the ordeal of a trial, not because things hadn’t happened exactly as they said. After all, they’d known about Lacamas Lake, they’d described the red boat and the empty Rainier beer cans in the foot-wells of the gold Caddy. I knew that, for whatever reason, those boys had been in that car. In the end, none of us would ever know the truth. The whole incident only highlighted the little things about Baxter we’d never been able to put our fingers on but that bothered us, nonetheless – like the way he looked at my 12-year-old legs and told me I needed to shave them, transforming a peaceful moment of my childhood into one of shame.

By the end of summer, the Baxters had moved away. Mary and I never got to enter junior high together as we’d planned. In fact, after she saw me with the boys harassing her father, we never spoke again. Until the day she left, I only saw her in passing, she, Bobby, and Kellie playing in their yard, now quiet and subdued as never before. Every time I saw Mary, I felt the subtle tug of my conscience, a flash of that moment in front of the Baxter house when I had turned traitor to our friendship.

The events of that summer whorl around in my mind like debris in a dirt devil, forever connected by the timeline they shared. Those events were the change I thought I’d been waiting for when I’d stepped out of elementary school ready to take on the world, and I wish I could wash my memories in a spin cycle and have them come out shiny and clean. Instead, I see the way they feed off one another, the way my home was shaken as if by a giant hand, dumping me out on the Baxter’s doorstep, pushing me into Joe’s bedroom. I see the cables that bind them together, cables that wrapped me up like a hostage, pulling me toward adulthood like an undertow dragging me out to sea.