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Half-Truths

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Half-Truths

I am sitting next to him at a desk in his darkened room, the blue light from his computer screen reflecting off both our faces. “Listen to this,” he says. He recorded it last weekend after spending a few hours fooling around with the equipment. The guitar sounds lovely but his singing voice is only okay. Though I’ve never heard the song being covered before, I say it sounds better than the original. “It’s getting there,” he says. I do a small (and what I think looks like an interested) smile. He turns and looks at me thoughtfully, as if deciding on something. I look right back at him with equal intensity. Then he pauses the music and leans over towards me.

I am anticipating this, so when he kisses me I’m thinking more about how I won than the actual kiss itself. I don’t remember if it was long or short or if he tasted like toothpaste or chapstick or if I was brave and put my hand on his neck or shoulders. I don’t remember what I was wearing or what he was wearing. All I remember is that at that moment, I got exactly what I had been chasing after.

This is not a story I want to tell.

I guess the first reason would be because I am not sure what my point in telling it is. Every story should wrap around itself and create a cocoon of security for the reader. It should cave inward and break heavily on its own weight to reveal some truth. Ah, I see what you mean. I get it now. Epiphany.

I haven’t had an epiphany yet. It’s been six years, two months, and nine days since this story began and a different version plays out in my head every time the memory is brought back.

I guess my other point should be that I’ve never told this story aloud in a normal state of mind. Maybe in a vulnerable or drunken moment I’ve

mentioned certain details to my closest friends, but it never goes beyond that. Some defense mechanism inside me tells me to shut this part of myself off from the outside world. The words will start to come out but then my throat closes in and turns to sandpaper. They shrivel up inside my mouth and I swallow them back down, safe.

I have a vision sometimes about the day that I'll finally tell the truth. It goes something like this: I'm outside sitting on a grassy hill with someone I love—it's not a family member—a best friend, maybe someone I've slept with. It's midday, bright and sunny. The air is so clean that my city lungs feel like they're breathing oxygen for the first time. *Wow this air stuff is great*, he says. *We've been missing out*. Anyway, I'm sitting on this hill with a loved one getting high off the air and suddenly I realize he needs to know this thing about me. He has to know it or he won't know me. So I tell him. I maybe cry a little bit. He makes eye contact with me for the entire duration of the story, occasionally nodding his head and putting a consoling hand on my hand. When I'm finished he is silent for a while. Then he says something like.... Well, I haven't figured out that part of the story yet. But the most important thing is that once I tell the truth, it no longer plagues my thoughts. Like someone sucking the venom out of a snake bite, I'm healed.

Of course, I realize that this will probably never happen. This story has to come out in pieces for now. That's just the way it is.

It's like that feeling you have when you want something so bad that you think about it all the time. Every minute, every hour of the day, your mind is focused on that one thing. It goes beyond songs on the radio or lovers embracing on television. The act of brushing your teeth in the morning or taking out the trash brings the thing back into your mind and it stays there. Even though you don't have what you want, in that moment the memory is almost as good. It colors your days, heats up your face, makes you smile to yourself like a fool. "What are you smiling about?" Your mom asks. Nothing. Always nothing.

This is a story about getting what you want. You get it and it's in your hand and holy shit it's fucking great. It looks, feels, tastes, and smells beyond anything you've ever imagined. This is it, I've finally got it! You say. And in that moment it's wonderful. What comes next is up in the air.

I'm fourteen years and eight months old the day I first kiss a twenty-four-years-and-two months-old man who also happens to be my music teacher.

Something you should know about me is that I hate sad things. When I feel sad things I put them somewhere I don't have to look at them. I think it's partly because I hate when people confide in me about their problems. I feel as though I can't give them what they need from me as a friend. I try to ask all the right questions and give advice, but it all sounds wrong to me. My friends know this about me and keep away unless it's a last resort. Truthfully speaking, I think it's best to keep these things out of sight.

I'd come home on school nights with swollen lips and tousled hair and she never said a thing, only eyed me as I wordlessly entered my bedroom and shut the door. The next day she would ask about how my friend's house was. "Fine. We did homework and then watched *Teen Mom*. Nothing crazy. Can you pick me up from school at five? I have a late orchestra rehearsal."

I don't know if she knew what I was up to. Certainly she was suspicious of the idea that I was with a friend for all those hours. I didn't have any close friends back then. I had have-to friends in high school: our only time together was during free periods and bus rides home. After school, most of my free time until that winter was spent alone in my room, devouring books from the library and listening to music. I preferred time alone more than time spent with people.

Maybe she was just so overjoyed by the thought of me having a close friend that she couldn't see the truth. Or maybe she knew that I was lying, but about something more normal, like smoking cigarettes or having a junior boyfriend. The sort of things teenagers lie about in after-school specials and real life. The kind of lies that are easily forgiven with no gray area for what is right and what is wrong. The teenager accepts her mistake with some grumbling as the parent sighs in relief that it isn't a pregnancy or hard drugs.

My mother taught me to never take shit from anyone.

I'm ten years old and sitting at the vanity in my parents' master bathroom. The mirror across from me is warped and drips condensation from my shower. I wipe a space clean to see my face clearly. I'm waiting for my mom to finish whatever she's doing so she can brush my wet hair. It's a little ritual we have that started when I was old enough to have hair longer than a few inches. She brushed the snarls out of my hair carefully, something I never quite got the hang of. When I brushed my hair it sounded like a shovel scraping ice off asphalt. I'd do it in a rush, ripping out follicles in the process and littering the carpet with strands of the stuff. My mom took her time, starting at the bottom of the hair and then working her way up, effortlessly getting out all the knots. While she did this, I would tell her about everything going on in my preteen life.

On this day in particular, I am telling my mother about how a girl in my class, Kimberly, punched another girl, Theresa, because Theresa had stolen her prized Beanie Baby and hid it in a bush during recess. At this point, my mom stops brushing my hair. She looks me in the eye through the reflection of the mirror and says in a serious tone, "What would you have done if Kimberly hit you?" I am caught off guard and say, "I don't know." Still serious, my mother answers her own question. Picking up the brush, she says, "You hit her back harder."

I don't know what first attracted me to my guitar teacher. Well, no. That's not entirely true. He was funny and kind, qualities that I didn't see in myself back then but desperately wanted to. We shared a love for music. We both agreed that the Misfits with Glen Danzig was a waste, Lou Reed was underrated, and Morrissey, despite have a reputation for being an asexual asshole, was a wonder. He told me that he admired my desire to learn so many instruments. I was a violinist and a cellist up to that point, and I often complained that the two extra strings on the guitar were going to be my downfall. He taught me patiently—my fingers got callouses. He wrote music and made me listen to it before anyone else. I was flattered by his attention, and my own admiration towards him grew into a full-out crush within a few months. I thought about him constantly and wondered if he thought about me, too.

I can picture the line in my head, thick and white, and the day that we crossed it. Sitting side by side, our legs almost touching, he watched me play the opening notes for Radiohead's "Fake Plastic Trees." I was aware that his eyes were not on my fingers, but on my face. I knew he wasn't paying attention to the chords, or if my form was correct. My awareness made me mess up a chord, and I immediately looked up at him. He looked away quickly. "That was good," he said. "Really good." And right then, I knew I had him.

It didn't last the winter.

I am in the shower when my mom knocks on the door and tells me she needs to talk to me about something. Immediately. She says it in the tone of voice that used to scare me as a kid. It's the voice that made me beg for forgiveness for whatever I'd done, even if I wasn't sure what that was. Now that I'm older, the trigger word "immediately" doesn't scare me as much. "Immediately" to teenage me means whenever I've finished doing what I'm in the middle of.

In this case, it's conditioning my hair. When I'm done, I turn off the water and wrap myself in a towel. I open the bathroom door and she's not standing right outside like I thought. I walk to her bedroom and find her

sitting in near darkness with only the flickering blue light from the muted TV flashing across her face. She says nothing.

She is holding my cell phone.

The moment I see it, my heart doubles its pace. I know what has happened.

She's read my text messages from him. She knows everything.

The lie starts to come out of my mouth but she cuts me off before it can escape. She asks me how long this has been going on for. I say nothing. She asks again, this time with the don't-lie-to-me tone in her voice. I am mute. In this moment I am simultaneously humiliated, enraged, guilty and, most of all, terrified. I don't want him to get into any trouble. I don't want him to be angry with me. I don't want him to think that I did this on purpose.

My mother is still waiting for the truth.

I lie and say that nothing has been going on—that she doesn't know what she's talking about. I tell her that she shouldn't have been going through my text messages in the first place and that I will never be able to trust her again. As I continue to lie, my voice becomes louder and my throat constricts. By the time I finally stop yelling, I'm a crying mess.

The pain I feel in my chest is like running into a brick wall without stopping. I feel like my rib cage is collapsing in on itself as my lungs struggle for air.

My mother doesn't try to argue with me. She accepts my lies and puts them somewhere else to deal with another time. For now she just lets me stand before her, a crying child.

I don't know why my mother decided to snoop through my text messages that day. Maybe she heard my phone buzz while I was in the shower and couldn't help but take a look. All parents snoop, whether they'd like to admit it or not. It used to be diaries, cracked open silently during the night; now a concerned parent just has to swipe a screen to see what their child is really up to. I don't remember the exact details of the texts themselves, but I imagine that the content, combined with the name of the sender at the top, was enough to tell her all she needed to know.

Eventually, half-truths did come out. Call me selfish, but I think the whole truth belongs to me and me only. It doesn't belong to the therapist who I silently sat with for weekly forty-five minute sessions. It doesn't belong to the detective who condescendingly asked me if I knew what certain sex terms meant. It doesn't belong to my have-to friends, who didn't know how to act around me now that I was "that girl." I wasn't going to let anyone bully me into talking about my business. They pushed me and I pushed right back with more force.

I don't think the truth belongs to my mother either, despite her deserving it. She knows this. It made her crazy for a while. Then angry. Now, she's over it. Though sometimes we'll be together, driving in the car or eating at the dining room table, and I'll catch her looking at me with the saddest look on her face. She blames herself.

My mother's guilt haunts me. She thinks this was her fault. No, no, no, no. I want to shake her and yell it in her face. She wants so badly to take my problems and make them her own. It's like when I was little and had to go to the doctor to get a shot. She'd hold my hand as I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to cry. The pain was never excruciating, but the anticipation of the needle always made me anxious. Give me all the hurt, she would say. You won't feel a thing. I nearly dislocated her fingers.

The guilt, in addition to the whole truth, is mine. I've claimed its rights.