

Exploded View

Tasha LeClair

There was Toby, on the street, with this girl. He'd gotten fat, and it shocked me; he was always so lean and hard-angled. He wanted to know about Chrissie. He'd seen her in pictures and talked to her on the phone. "She still into dance?" She's into carousing now, I told him. Luckily she wasn't very good at it.

The girl, who wore a white gauzy skirt that swept the ground, suggested we get drinks.

I could have told them I had a plane to catch. But I wanted to see who this new Toby was. And I wanted him to see me. I was doing alright for myself. I wore a trim red dress but hadn't had a chance to remove the little cow pin I was made to wear to the organic food stores and my dinner dates, hawking Three Daughters Grass-fed Beef. My face had thinned and tightened. I wore lipstick, which Toby used to hate on me. The girl was pretty in a fresh-faced, youthful way, but the undersides of her arms sagged prematurely, and she tended to blink hard, as if she had something in her eye, and gawk around in the manner of very small children.

Toby had made some good investments or something; he evaded my questions. He'd given up cabinetry, but he made rocking horses in his basement, which he sold to mothers interested in classical things, and to collectors. The girl talked and talked. She had seemed to decide it was her role to talk while Toby and I watched each other from the corners of our eyes. The girl brought up a documentary about children living in a subway in Bucharest. "Budapest," said Toby. Her face clouded over. "*We* call it Budapest," Toby said, and added, "I think."

The girl regained her wide-eyed look and leaned across the table toward me. "It's because they'd outlawed abortions, families were in a state of crushing poverty"—Toby glanced at me with his big red watery eyes, like a jowly old dog, and I ignored him—"there's all these abandoned children. There's this one girl who dresses and looks just like a boy, so she won't get raped, and she says"—the girl looked raptly at her own hands on the table—"I don't believe in love. I believe in God. Because God is bigger."

There was a pause and Toby asked, addressing me, all of a sudden: "So she's *carousing*, you say?"

The girl took a sip of her drink and settled back, half-listening—comfortable and wary—like someone waiting her turn in a long and complicated board game. I must have been given her name. I think of her as an Angela.

I sighed, and said, “She drives around.”

“Where does she go?”

“To school. To town. To her friends’. She visits your dad.”

Toby was silent.

“He likes seeing her.”

He took a drink.

“It’s not like he’s a child molester. Or a drug addict.”

“He might as well be,” said Toby, talking into his drink. “A drug addict.”

I shrugged. “He’s not hurting anyone but himself.”

Toby laughed theatrically. I forgot how emotional he could be. “So you think he’s an okay guy now. *You* do?”

“He has problems. He loves her.”

“How is he?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“Oh, I see,” he said petulantly.

“I mean, if you want to know, ask *him*.”

The three of us sat uncomfortably. The objects of the room closed around us; we were being locked into this place, cell by cell—Toby, the girl, and me, fastened to this table, this moment, unable to turn our heads, or breathe, or leave. If we moved, we’d tear out our hair, pull off our skin. If one of them looked at me, I’d burst into flame.

“Sounds like Chrissie’s doing well?” Toby ventured, finally.

“Yeah.”

“She said she was already sending out her college applications? Maybe I can take on her on a tour of the campuses she’s interested in. I have some vacation time coming up in a few weeks.”

The girl’s face was growing dreamy again, and I prayed she would talk some more about Bucharest.

“I’d love to take her,” Toby said.

“You know,” said the girl, “I think children are so *hard* because we’re taught to treat them like little people. But we think, *people*—those are things with Reason, and kids don’t have Reason. The problem is, we think of ourselves as people, and that’s all wrong. We should be thinking of ourselves as animals. We should be treating children like little animals.”

I went to the bar for another drink. Toby came up behind me, slid his arm

around me. I shrugged it off. When our drinks arrived, he leaned his cheek against my head like he used to. I could feel him chuckling, deep in his chest—a father sound. His breath bore a hole into my skull. Even when we were married, I didn't like being held this way—utterly surrounded by him, his hairs, his breath. “Ugh,” I said. He detached himself from me and gave me a weary, sympathetic look. Then he downed his glass, and left me there.

In the ladies' room, the girl, perhaps-Angela, left her purse on the sink. The clasp was magnetic and opened without a sound. A packet of kleenex, a metal card case, a cell phone decorated with black gems. I thought of her with the shiny phone held up to her ear, the loose pouches under her arms jiggling when she laughed. Carefully, I snaked out her keys.

“Is this your purse?” I called.

“Oh!” she cried from the stall. “Yes!”

I dangled it over the top of the stall and felt her receive it. I caught my reflection in the mirror, my iron red dress like the raw meat of me and my collarbone skeletal and my face made-up, its wan prettiness sailing above this peeled-back, pinned-back skin. “I'm leaving,” I said. “Take care of yourselves.” I was out the door before she could respond. Her keys in my bag.

On the flight I sat behind two girls heading home to Denver. They talked the entire flight about the hair of the fatter girl. She was planning to color it. It was already colored, a faded mauve, with black streaks, teased and sprayed. The other girl's blond hair was piled in a messy bun on top of her head. I leaned my forehead against the back of the fat girl's seat so I could hear them.

“When I brush my bangs,” the fat girl was saying, “you'll be able to see the red underneath. And then when I hold it like this, you'll see the red and blond streaks. This and this will be black. My hair's naturally red, but I like it darker. It's better for my complexion. I'm too pink for red hair. And when I pull it all back, you'll see all the streaks. But when it's down like this, it'll just be black. I'll part it like this. It has more volume that way.” And on and on. I opened a book and looked at the page while their words washed over me. Customers responded to my grays, my slight under-bite. I had my hair in a chin-length bob, which was nothing special.

When Toby wasn't bringing in money like he used to, I thought I'd be good at cutting hair. I didn't have a license, but in the end I found a place where I wasn't the only one, and where I felt a sense of comfort moving among the textures and colors that filled that little shop to brimming. Chrissie was a toddler. She climbed on the black vinyl chairs in the waiting room and stood among the potted palms, with the fronds pressed around her face.

We had built on Jack's field, bought from him for more than it was worth. Jack is Toby's father, and together they built our house with the help of sullen young men whose dogs peered out from the cabs of their trucks. I avoided the site. I didn't want to see our home being pieced together. When it would come time to live in it, I didn't want to know where its materials were from, or how they'd been assembled, or by whom. I already recognized the fragility of its existence.

In the old days, when mostly Indians lived here, Black Elk Basin was peppered with identical pre-fab homes. There were big houses for big families, medium ones for medium families, and couples and people who lived alone were given small houses. Each style of house, though painted differently, looked exactly the same, as though three houses were placed in front of changing screens. I remember finding out how driving scenes were filmed when I was about nine—the fan blowing the actors' hair, the jostling of the car, the screen of hazy and endlessly repeating sagebrush. Even as a child, I was always on the lookout for lies, and these houses looked like they were fashioned from realistic materials and lit in such a way as to make us believe they were the real thing.

While Toby and his dad worked, I walked the fields beyond the bones of the house. The fields were crisscrossed with dirtbike paths that spilled over small, sudden rises; they dove into the dry canal bank and popped up the other side. The kids who'd once visited the field were long gone, but I came across evidence of their violent existence—shards of plastic, bits of metal, red and yellow reflector lights, and other debris. Crumpled cans, shotgun shells. I walked all day, up and down the paths and on the sandy bottom of the canal, and when I wasn't walking I sat under one of the cottonwoods lining the fence, my back turned on the house. Our field leaps into another field quite unlike it—one with towering, lively wheatgrass—and another beyond that one, also different from the one that precedes it, and on and on nearly all the way to the bluish mountains hunch-backing beneath a hazy summer sky.

As I walked, I'd imagine the field, our field, unlocking like a puzzle box. Each blade of grass and spider and faded candy wrapper detaching from its allocated place—the tiny piece of the universe it inhabited in that moment—and drifting into space. The exploded view, it's called—such as illustrations in which the components of a heart are displayed individually, but within relation to each other, so you see what they look like together and apart.

There was a message from Toby when I got home. Crystal had listened to it. "Did you steal that woman's keys?" She stood there cupping a mug in both hands like an old lady.

I sank onto the couch with my drink, still in my dress. “Dad said they belonged to some people they were dog-sitting for. They had to break into their house to feed the dog.”

I laughed helplessly. “Oh god. Why didn’t they just take the dog to their house? I mean, originally.”

Crystal sat next to me on the couch. “Are they living together?”

I kicked off my shoes.

Crystal looked at me for a moment. Her expression was neither interested nor uninterested. She just looked. And looked. Like a cow.

Sometimes she left the house in the middle of the night. When I heard the door close, I would go to my window and see her striding into the dark of the field, her hands stuffed in the pockets of her coat and her face watching the sky. During the day, she kept her head down. Nothing about the world exposed in daylight seemed to fascinate her. Nothing I did could surprise her, either.

I lifted my arm. “Here, my child.”

Crystal scooped over and let me put my arm around her. She smelled faintly of pot, and I could tell she’d used my shampoo again—the expensive kind I bought from salons. “I don’t like you examining me,” I said. “I feel like you’re picking me apart. How would you like it if I sat here staring at *you*?” I dug around for the remote.

“I have it,” said Crystal. She turned on the TV.

When I woke up a few hours later, still on the couch, Crystal was gone. She’d left a note. She’d gone to pick up Toby’s dad somewhere again. I’ve tried explaining that she’s only enabling him, that a night in the drunk-tank wouldn’t hurt him. But if she didn’t pick him up, I guess I’d have to. And I wasn’t up to it.

I searched my purse, rifling through a glossy packet on the many advantages of Three Daughters, and found an old lipstick wedged between the pages. No keys. I went upstairs, to Crystal’s room. They were on her bed.

Crystal’s room hadn’t changed since she was thirteen. She doesn’t spend much time there anymore, preferring to be driving around somewhere. I opened her closet. Her jeans were in a pile on the floor; her shirts dangled from their hangers. The only thing she seemed to take any pride in was her car. She even cut her own hair—just twisted it and cut in straight across with a pair of her old school scissors.

I thought of something and went to her dresser. The clothes were predictably mashed in the drawers. I inspected a t-shirt her friend had decorated with Sharpies when they were nine. I dug through her underwear drawer. Then I sat on her bed, suddenly exhausted, wondering what I might have done had I found

weed, or something else. Weed wasn't so bad. But pills, maybe. Or who knows. I realized I didn't have the keys in my hand anymore. I searched her bed, then the floor. I must have left them in her dresser. I drug myself to my feet again.

There was the weed, in a baggie, on top of a pile of sweaters in the bottom drawer, which I'd neglected the first time around. She hadn't tried to hide it. I knelt there, and as I shifted, my dress split at the thigh. It wasn't a bad tear, but I could never wear the dress again. My hand moved instinctively to cover the tear, startling me as much as if it'd been someone else's. The sight of my hand—its veins, its freckles—drained the rest of my strength. I shut the dresser and crossed the hall to my room, to my bed.

I awoke once and thought about the keys, lost somewhere in Crystal's room. She would find them, eventually—know I had gone through her things. I thought about calling the old man's place to see if he was home. Maybe he'd been home all along. I stared at the ceiling, at those gleaming logs. I considered, by what masterful force, what act of God, would these carcasses be sent flying back to their respective forests and plunged into the mute, stump-rotted ground. And then I must have fallen back asleep.



In August, Toby accelerated work on the house. We slept in cots in his dad's spare room. Something about the cots made him want to ask me things; he became childlike, reaching for my hand across the gap between our beds. He would tease me. "Tell me stories from your childhood. Tell me of your people's plights. Folktales, whatever." My mother had immigrated from Russia and married my father, and Indian who died of lung cancer when I was five. Toby's interests lay exclusively with my Russian heritage, which was just as well, as I knew nothing of either. "There were wolves," I would say. "And forests. Like here. It was cold." I didn't sleep well in my cot, but I didn't dare go on a walk, knowing Toby would be frightened to wake up and find me gone.

It grew hotter. Deer flies rose from the distant marsh and left welts on my skin. I borrowed Toby's long-sleeved shirts and put the collars up. The more persistent flies bit through the shirts. I walked the field absorbed in the movement of the long yellow grasses in the wind or the prairie dogs sprinting across the trails, chasing one another. There were two red-tailed hawks all summer, circling the field. They'd built a huge, messy nest on top of a telephone pole along the highway, and while I sometimes saw one of them sitting in it, I never saw the chicks.

One day, when I returned to Jack's place to refill Toby's water jugs, I found

Jack in our room, standing over our cots. He'd begun looking old. He had driven his truck into a ditch that year. After losing his driver's license, he'd been forced to sober up, and he seemed nervous and clammy and complained of aches in his joints and sleeplessness. He didn't seem surprised to see me when he finally looked up from the cots. He asked if we were sleeping alright. "I was going to throw them away before you moved in here," he said, "but maybe I better just keep them." We studied the cots together. Other bodies had made grooves in them long before they became beds for Toby and me. At night, it felt like we were sleeping in the pits of other people's lives. But in the daylight, with our blankets flung back, the depressions were as soft and impermanent as circles of crushed grass where deer had slept. Finally, Jack cast his large pale eyes to the empty water jugs in my hands. "I'll let you get to it," he said, as if to dismiss me.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

His face had settled into a flat expanse of weariness. "Not today," he said.

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In my late teens, before Toby, I lived in a low-income housing division on the outskirts of Billings, Montana, with a man named Jake. We shared a parchment-colored duplex that squatted at the edge of a field. The field, like the one in Black Elk Basin, was crisscrossed with dirtbike paths. It was a wide, rolling patch of dirt, a wooden sign at its boundary proclaiming it a public park. Across the field, the true suburbs began—three-story houses with tiny yards and full-grown trees.

A network of paved walking paths rambled through our neighborhood, narrowing into tunnels between tall fences against which unseen dogs threw themselves and opening suddenly into little clearings, like meadows, where a tree might shade a patch of grass and a little bench, or weeds pushed up through the cracked earth of a vacant lot. My favorite path wound around a rise crowned by a row of nearly identical pastel houses. A green park bench stood opposite one of the pastel houses, across the sidewalk. It was a yellow house, with tiny lace-curtained windows and a white door. The bench faced the house. I had a strange sense that if I sat in the bench, studying the yellow house, and its little white door opened while I sat there, whatever was inside that house, or whoever lived there, would welcome me. It would be an invitation to further mysteries—a world made of the flat white light of a city the moment it's bombed, when it's lit up and destroyed in the same moment.

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I was still in bed when Crystal came home. I heard her stop outside my bedroom.

I opened my eyes. She was about to turn when she saw me awake.

I lifted the sheet.

“You ripped your dress,” she said, and crept closer, slight and cautious as a little deer. I moved over so she could crawl under the sheet beside me.

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Something thudded against the window. I'd been half-asleep, drifting in and out of dreams in which faces of people I'd known issued out of darkness, their bodies blurred or nonexistent. The faces gave orders and I did what they said. Crystal stirred beside me. It was early evening. We might have heard the thud a second ago, hours ago. The impressions of logs all around us reminded me of a furrowed field, ridges and ditches. This was a workable land. “What was that?” Crystal asked. I looked into her face. She'd developed creases on either side of her nose that seemed unique to her—neither Toby nor I had them. A new animal.

It was twilight outside. We crossed the driveway, picking through the gravel in our bare feet. Something lay in the grass beneath the window. Then it moved. Without a word, Crystal ran inside. I watched her climbing the stairs through the window, her strange blunt hair bouncing. Then she disappeared into the insides of the house—every piece of which I'd disassembled myself, and flung into the air, and turned over, and replaced.

The bird lay face-down, its wings spread, one eye watching me. I knelt beside it. It gave a gurgled whistle when I touched its wing. It closed its eye. Its back rose rapidly, up and down. I caught a movement in the field, beyond the square of dirt where Toby's woodworking shed used to be, some two hundred yards away. Perhaps it had been the tip of a fox's tail slipping into a ditch. The bird's eye cracked open—a black slit. Crickets began to chirp far off, under the cottonwoods. Darkness was falling over us, every second, faster and faster. I tried to call up the name of this particular kind of bird. Wings like a bat's. I could hear Crystal upstairs, rummaging through my closet or hers, searching for a shoebox. I began pulling up grass to serve as bedding, piling it next to the bird's body. It watched me, its beak open. A car passed on the highway. Then another.

At my styling station in the salon, between appointments, I'd held Chrissie in my arms and watched the reflection of the room in the mirror. In those moments I took pleasure in everything I saw. The walls were painted purple and mauve. The tiles of the floor were black and white, and there were mirrors

on the ceiling. Bottles of hair product bristled from one wall, the owner's collection of ceramic cherubs from the other. Always a faint roar of blow dryers, aromatic clouds that burned the eyes. The shrill "How are *yous*." I worked there nine years. At night, I drove us home. After a few years, it was as if Toby had never been there. Maybe I'd been carrying Crystal through a field and found it, this house, and gone inside, and lived among its objects.

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