

MARY MULLEN

It's a Long Way to Empty

Wade told me to stand against the tree and “stay very, very fucking still.”

“When did your mom order those anyway?” I asked. I knew a fifteen-year-old couldn’t buy an eight-inch blade. They were still shiny, just out of the box I guessed. I was hoping he had some practice.

I stood straight up, with my back pressed against the ridged bark, and my heels pressed against the roots of the tree, like I was getting measured in gym class. Early September, jeans and t-shirt weather, when every afternoon was spent out in somebody’s yard or down at the river. I felt like a little girl pinned up against that tree, even though I had reached my full height, even though my breasts filled out my orange Datsun t-shirt enough to make most guys, and a few girls, take a second long look at the slogan printed in cursive across my chest.

A small crowd formed behind Wade. No one new, just the regulars, fifteen of our closest friends and enemies. Allison was standing next to Fisher, who she wanted to date but hadn’t. Jason was standing next to Aaron who he hated for dating Laura. Laura was leaning into Sasha, because she really needed someone to go to lunch with and Sasha had just dyed her hair black and it looked really good. All of them stamping out and then lightening up another, because for once, in our quiet town where nothing ever happened, it looked like there was going to be a show.

Wade smiled because he loved the fact that I would let him throw knives at me. It meant I trusted him, or that I was apathetic about my fate. He could appreciate either. I was nervous because I thought he might kill me, but also because I was on display—the foolish girl, or the crazy girl, or the risky girl, or the tough girl—I wasn’t sure which. I was worried it was the wrong one. Wade pulled back his arm and pretended to throw a few times, smiling and laughing, waiting for me to flinch. But I didn’t, because I knew he wasn’t ready.

I kept still and wondered what they all thought of me up against that tree,

wondered why I had said yes, would keep saying yes for so many years until I figured out the eyes of everyone watching wouldn't give me any answers, while they all looked on, silently now, because Wade had quieted them. He said that he needed to concentrate.

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