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In a rusty Detroit iron he took Delia to his house, his basement with the russet futon. She looked through his cabinet of records, turning each one with her knuckle. Her fingers were still tacky, still had the bright smell of orange juice. She had been sitting on the front lawn of school, peeling her orange, trying to scour off the soft pulp with her thumbnail. She got up to throw away the skin and when she came back he was sitting next to her jumper on the grass, breaking the orange into segments. Blonde hair and a suede vest. Then and every time after a shock to her, the long hair spreading over the masculine back like a river delta.

The pulp is where all the vitamins are, he said. Reward for those willing to stomach a little roughage.

Delia had been a little stunned to see him there, so close, when her mother had told her to keep her distance from people of his type. The things to look out for: long, unwashed hair, loose clothes, loose morals. So when he held a piece of the orange out to her, her alarmed response was to open her mouth like a child. Without exaggeration or suggestion he put it on her tongue, and she chewed it, trying not to make a face at the texture of the pulp he hadn't removed.

He said, I'm Sam. She held out her palm, fingers splaying so wide it hurt, ready for more.

More was the basement, with the records her father wouldn't like, music he said was too stirring, by which he meant black. Sam reclined on the couch. Delia touching his hair out of curiosity, fingers passing through it like smoke. This observation Sam made, and then pulled out a joint and offered it to her. She declined but watched him smoke the whole thing.

Your eyes are all red, she said.

He said he should check to see if hers had turned color as well.

The formation of an immediate new sign between them. She asked him to check her eyes again when she wanted him to kiss her.

Delia’s parents had already been concerned about Sam, with Delia saying things like, he has this cool friend who calls himself Stovepipe, because he's black, and he's always smoking. Her increased appetite. Her passionate discussion of the war industry at the dinner table—why else would Johnson still have us in Vietnam? And then Sam showed up at the front door to
take Delia out, his wet eyes drowning in the sleepy features of his face, and in that moment they called the school board in order to transfer her to a private girls' facility.

They expected a fight, this being Delia’s junior year in her school, but Delia didn’t mind. She sat in class, not speaking to anyone, instead imagining a telephone line connecting her to Sam and sending thoughts his way while considering her own uncombed hair. She liked the way it tangled. She liked thinking about Sam’s resin-stained fingers getting caught in it, pulling her neck back, how she would dig her fingers into his scalp in recompense.

Her senior year, she skipped class for Sam’s birthday, so she could help bake the cake and cut the brownies and stand on the futon to crack the basement window. They passed a lighter around and when it came back to Sam she brought out the cake but he told her to put it down for a minute. He took out a piece of paper.

Turn down the lights, he said. She did.

He read from the card: Sam Michael Warnick. Birth date, September fourteenth nineteen fifty-one. Reno, Nevada. Eyes, blue. Hair, blonde. Height six one. Other obvious physical characteristics, none. Was duly registered on this day. This your selective service system registration certificate.

The basement was quiet with smoke.

This is to certify that you are in accordance with the selective service law, he said. Happy birthday to me.

Delia scanned the faces of his friends, expecting some horror or sadness. Small smiles instead.

The lighter, please?

He mimed pointing a gun at Delia, bent his thumb. *Fire*, he mouthed.

She clicked on the lighter and he held the draft card over it. She watched it burn from the bottom up, erasing his birthday, his eyes, his long blonde hair, his name last of all.

It made sense to her to quit school right away. They swept up the ashes of the draft card and dumped them out the window, but she could still see it burning, smell it worse than the skunk.

They got a one-bedroom apartment in the city. There was a couch for a friend to sleep on. The living room floor. The rug in the laundry room. Their apartment for two being used for nine or more. They had the floor space, after all.

Delia got a part-time job as a typist for a professor who didn’t really need the help, but needed a legitimate excuse for the money going out, which was really going towards the odd bag of leaves. She took the documents up to his campus and while she was there she asked around about upcoming protests, sit-ins, demonstrations. She and Sam painted signs together on the floor when there wasn’t anybody sleeping there.
He put red paint on his eyelids. You'd better check my eyes, he said.

When she wasn't typing or painting or protesting, Delia tried to convince Sam to try to get a deferment. He could apply to the professor’s college. He could fake an injury. If drafted, he could go to the physical examination in some of her lace underwear so they’d think he was a fairy and turn him away.

He shook his head. I’m not pretending anything, he said.

She lit herself a joint to gain courage. They also offer deferments to heads of families, sometimes, she said. She waited for a reaction, and hurried on when there was none. We could try for a baby. We could get married.

He held out his hand for her joint and took a puff. The smoke sunk out of his nose, slow.

I’m not going to let them push us into any major steps too quickly, he said. This is too good.

She smiled and nodded, and didn’t say check my eyes again even though she knew he wanted her to. She tried to keep her face in place, to not think about why, during this quickened life they’d built together, anything could be too fast.

December was there with little flurries coming down that looked like cigarette ashes.

And December first was the day of the draft lotto, every day given a number. 1: January first. 2: January second. Et cetera et cetera.

And the very first number they drew from that cylindrical cage that could easily double as a bingo roller, except it was filled with blue pellets that almost looked like rubber bullets, was 258.

The first boys to report for the draft, those born on September fourteenth.

Dear Delia, read the note he left.

I love you. I had to go, you know why. I can’t tell you where, baby, you’re an open book, my open book. They’ll ask you and now you won’t even be lying when you say you don’t know.

Sam.

Not knowing where he was made sense at first to Delia. When the police came by to ask whether Sam still lived on the premise? No? If not, where might he have gone to? They believed her when she said she didn’t know.

When she was at the rallies, shouting around her like thunderheads, without a hand to hold, came off too loud. When she saw the riot police with their shields and turned to run, she had a worry that Sam’s running was over. Maybe he’d been caught. Maybe without her knowing he’d been shipped off. She thought of this in the empty bed. When she walked into the kitchen and saw friends lying on the floor in various states of disarray, something that used to reassure her, she now saw the pictures from the newsreels. Bodies spread over the ground in Khe Sanh.
The professor stopped giving her work. His wife had figured him out and threatened to leave him. She got a job as a waitress instead. Every time she saw young teenagers sitting at one of her tables, not having to worry yet about their age, she’d go into the back and smack her tray against the wall several times.

After a few weeks, she called up Stovepipe because she had a hunch he knew where Sam was staying. She told him she really needed to hear Sam’s voice. And he called her back, from wherever he was. She held the receiver to her ear, tight, to hear him drag out a Hey blossom, I wish you would come here and check my eyes.

He asked her to describe the snow out the window. She spoke quietly so as not to disturb anyone sleeping in the living room. She asked him where he was. He told her he couldn’t say, that he thought they were bugging the wires. Just pretend he was vacationing on the warm sunny beaches of Nam. She told him not to make jokes about that.

She lost her job at the restaurant, because she smelled like skunk. She hadn’t even had any lately, couldn’t afford it. Sam’s friends could though, were hazing up the apartment.

She asked Stovepipe to have Sam call her again. Where are you, she said first thing, when he said hello.

Hawaii, he said. Told you I’m on the beach. Surfing on turtle shells, sleeping in palm trees, building sand-snowmen, thinking of you.

Why don’t you come home? They’ve already come to check for you here, they haven’t come back at all.

Too risky, he said. Baby, I’ve got to go.

In the second before he hung up, she could hear a high voice in the background, a female? Laughing.

Rent notices piled up on her table like the snowflakes outside. She gave them to her friends to roll joints with.

She visited her parents to ask for help.

They’d given her up for a lost sheep already, but still didn’t like to dwell on it, so instead of attacking her they attacked Sam. Told her they were ashamed of his cowardice, that they wouldn’t give her a dime until he did right by his country.

She thought of lying, of telling them that she’d ask him to reconsider when he came back into town, then realized suddenly that she didn’t actually know when that would be.

If you don’t know where he is, that’s your fault for living with that type of man, her mother said. I told you they practice loose behavior.
When she walked out, her mother spat out: Not only has he abandoned his country, he’s abandoned you.

Delia went home to beg a smoke and turned on the tv. Footage from Nam. Men cutting through the jungle, men with shaved heads and smudged faces. She thought she saw Sam’s blonde hair for a second. She turned the tv off and finished the joint.

On Sam’s side of the bed she took a good look at the black and white print of every person who needed money from her. For the first time she considered life after being thrown out of her apartment. She didn’t have enough to get a new place. She couldn’t stay with her parents, who she called upon again only to have them reiterate that they wouldn’t let her back into the house for anything, and wouldn’t loan her anything as long as Sam was draft-dodging.

She felt very afraid after the joint, more than usual.

She imagined of Sam freezing to death in the forest running from the police. Sam getting hit by a bus as he hitchhiked to the border of Mexico. Sam in South America contracting a rare disease, getting shot by a drug cartel. Sam with that female voice whispering in his ear, with two strange arms around him.

And finally, she got Stovepipe to give her Sam’s number, and she called him, and she shouted into the receiver when he told her he was meditating with the yogis in India.

She told him she couldn’t take him joking about where he was anymore, that she had to know where he was, that she had to see him. He bewilderedly told her that he didn’t know why she was so upset, but he agreed to meet her at the Super 8 in the next town at 5:30 on Saturday.

She’d already called them beforehand, but she told them 11pm, to leave time for the reunion.

To leave time for will you please check my eyes again.

The police said they might consider a financial recompense if it was truly Sam she was turning in, but even if they went back on their word, her parents had promised they would welcome her back while she waited for Sam to come back from the war, duty served.

The unknown horrors Sam faced now gone, she thought of the real ones. The guerrillas. The grenades, the landmines. Children carrying guns. The tiny towns shot up and disintegrated.

The little bullets, she had been told, that you couldn’t really hear. That shot past you in the dark whizzing like flies, that your ears couldn’t trace until your eyes watched a man go down.

One image in particular: the compound barbershop, the shears going to Sam’s head, shaving off his lovely hair that shone in the sun the first time she’d seen him. Bright like the smell of orange juice. She couldn’t shake it off. She went to the front desk of the hotel and asked to borrow some scissors.

This the last good thing she would do for him, gently lifting his head and easing her knee under it, stroking his head.
Picked up one of his locks and closed the blades, the blonde hairs falling to the bedspread one by one.

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