

Penetration



Jack has been at it for thirty-six minutes. Sulie knows, because it's been windy all night, and the power snapped off and reset the clock radio to twelve, and the red numbers are flashing in the reflection of his horn-rimmed glasses whenever he lifts his head to breathe. (He's made it down there, and still, he's wearing his glasses.) Sulie likes Jack, especially in near-dark, because his tongue tastes like oranges, and his chest is smooth, and she can avoid looking at his scrunched up face. And Jack is older, eighteen to her fifteen, and he's been patient—homing in over six weeks from both directions (her lips, her neck, her breasts, her navel or her toes, her calves, her knees, her thighs), finally up on his haunches like a dog, poised.

Sulie remembers when she was still waiting for such a moment her entire life, or so it seemed, back when she was only eleven and Candace Mack asked her what she'd do if she found out she had only twenty-four hours to live. Sulie had no idea, but she'd read in her mother's *Cosmopolitan* a similar question on a quiz, and answer "d" had been "I would continue to live my life as usual." Analysis on page 225 had revealed this to be the choice of a truly strong individual, and Sulie considered this for awhile until Candace shouted, "Sex, fuck yeah! I mean, don't you want to, like, know?"

Now Jack is poking down there, trying to find his way with a double layer of spermicidally lubricated condoms. Sulie breathes hard, trying to relax. Jack doesn't say it—relax, or relax, baby, or baby, just relax—and for this alone Sulie could love him, maybe—but then her hair is pinned beneath his elbows, and when he shakes the mattress, it hurts her scalp.

Sulie likes the ocean. Sulie likes hip-hops. Sulie likes math. Sulie likes playing guitar and making mixtapes.

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At the moment of penetration, this is what Sulie always sees: her mother's blue jeans, still damp on Sunday mornings, hung to dry everywhere in their double-wide. It is winter. Sulie is twelve. Her mother is at church. The shades are drawn, but Sulie is accustomed to the dark, torsoless forms. One pair suspends from the ceiling fan. Another slumps on a doorknob. Another is draped over the arm of a couch. One pair dangles by a belt loop from the end of a curtain rod, twice-patched at the knees, ripped at the thighs. A pair with brass-studded pockets spreads across the Formica-topped table, stiff legs held at a V.

V is for virgin. V is for vagina. V is for vacant. Sulie likes the ocean. Sulie likes ?ip-?ops. Sulie likes math.

Sulie's mother is screaming, *Get off her, get off her.*

Sulie's uncle says, *I'll kill you both, you whores.*

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At sixteen there is John Henry who reeks of cat and Stefan what's-his-name with his small bony ass, and at seventeen there is Moses (yes, Moses) who rouses himself with a sponge and the Man Who is Much Older who will only mount her from behind and Asher Woo who stops kissing to ask why the backs of her arms feel like chicken skin when the rest of her is so silky soft. At eighteen she stops counting. At twenty-two she marries Jack. He is killed in Iraq the following year.

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Later, much later, there is Sinjin Seymour Silverstein, the boy with the old man's name. He is thirteen, gangly, wipes his salty forehead with his sleeve. Sulie is thirty-one. He mows her lawn, trims her hedges. One day she invites him in for a glass of water, and as he gulps, she can see his prepubescent Adam's apple, bobbing. "You sure have a nice place, Ms. Sulie," he says, admiring her sleek stereo speakers and Viking appliances and sailboat ?gurines. Sinjin Seymour Silverstein is sweet, sweet as a cupcake, and as he rinses his glass in the sink, Sulie presses her breasts against him, weaving her slim hips and shoulders in a slow ?gure-eight motion.

Jack. Why Jack? He once tended to her so carefully, wiping *down there* with a ?stful of tissues and then two moist towelettes procured from the Church's Chicken where he worked.

Sinjin Seymour doesn't last long. A minute, maybe. Then she strokes his forehead, traces his still-soft jawline down to his chin. When he is dressed and gone, Sulie digs out her mother's old hairdryer, takes aim at the sheet. *I would continue to live my life as usual.*

She watches the stains shrink and fade.