

## *Sweet Thing*

**I**t was just me and Colby and Colby's fucked-up face, and we'd found us a highway to ride on and a Cadillac just fast enough to travel it.

There was a logical series of events leading us here. I can't recall them now, but we'd decided to drive out to Polunsky Prison for Colby's brother Billy's final hoorah. I am no stranger to death. My father died, wrecked his own Cadillac celebrating my birth, and I was born to take his place. That's how I know this body is only a rental. That's how come I refer to myself in the past tense. My momma told me these things, and I know they're true because my father tells me too. I'm kind of a psychic or medium but not like the ones you see on TV—one-nine-hundred-tell-them-some-lies—I got the real gift, and I use it to talk to him. I only ever seen one picture of my father, and it was buried beneath some Hellmann's mayonnaise packets in the catchall drawer. He's got his arms crossed in front of him, a great big eagle tattooed on his forearm. I'll get the same one someday, and it'll be like time and human skin are boundless or something like that.

I have no friends, only accomplices. Well, okay, there are the ghosts but they're really only good for one thing. And then there's Colby, but Colby says I'm nuts. She says ghosts don't talk, only haunt. But you know what? (and let's keep this between us girls): I think Colby went nuts two years ago, when she was sixteen, and Billy shoved that lit Black Cat firecracker up her nostril. She had the prettiest little button nose but it got all torn to shreds, ending any designs she had on the beauty queen scene.

I think Billy got jealous she was hooking up with Pug Landry in an if-I-can't-have-you-no-one-else-can type of scenario. Didn't see it but the aftermath; but I heard it. The two sounds occurred almost simultaneously—the dull pop muffled by cartilage and Colby's high, beautiful scream like a crystalline chime. When she came stumbling through the screen door, I cupped my hand to her face like I could somehow stop the bleeding through sheer force of will. Problem was, I didn't want to stop the bleeding. It was like putting a hand under the faucet when you're getting your bath to just the right temperature. Her ruby blood shined in the light of the noontime kitchen. Her blue eyes turned bloodshot and rolled around her head like spilled marbles before she passed out. I could have crawled up and lived in the moment forever. I could have kissed her. She really needed me.

She's still pretty I think, and they sent Billy up to Polunsky, death row, for stabbing a motorist outside a Citgo on his getaway from El Paso, wanted for the firecracker incident and other assaults. When I read about it in the

papers, I prayed the dead motorist wouldn't come looking to sap me with some psychic hammer. Owing to my gift, I am very easily haunted.

I know that's a lot to tell a person all at once, but I can trust you, can't I?

Colby'd recently been fired from the Dairy Queen after they caught her putting used tampons into the Strawberry Blizzard machine, and I don't cotton to traditional employment, so neither of us had much else going on at the moment and the road trip seemed like a pretty good plan. She was going through the glove compartment, pulling out insurance and registration slips and letting them out the window. It was a little gratuitous, but if we'd have gotten pulled over, it's not like proof of liability was going to save our asses.

"He's got CDs!" Colby said, flipping discs into the wind. "I fucking hate CDs!"

"You tell 'em, Colby," I said.

I watched her thin wrist flick another CD, which glittered in the sun and then landed somewhere against the barren stretch of pavement. Had to have the Caddy, so I'm glad I clobbered the old coot. My father said, *He shouldn't have done what he did*. I know, Dad! *No man should*.

"No man should," Colby repeated, though we hadn't said anything out loud.

*Hey, Colby*, I said in my head. *Hey, hey, can you hear me?*

My father said, *Be quiet now*.

Colby picked at her teeth with her thumbnail and then spit.

"Why are you staring at me?" she said.

"I just think you're so pretty is all."

Colby did not respond because she doesn't think she's pretty. She thinks the doctors messed up the graft job, and she's not wrong. The skin there is thick and puckered. The tragedy is, she was Ms. Junior El Paso two years running and was the favorite to head to Dallas for the state finals, but Billy derailed that whole show. She liked to sit and smoke Winston's on the front porch talking about all the things she could have had like she was some old lady going over her grand old days.

Colby might also think I'm a lez, which I'm not. I don't think. I let Pug Landry fingerbang me behind the 7-Eleven, but only because he was so sad about Colby's face and I was feeling sorry for him. He cried on my shoulder the whole time, and I can't taste Cherry Ices the same way anymore.

In Abilene, we decided to stop for the night. Have you ever been to Abilene? You know when you get dried up gunk in your eye, and you got to dig it out with your littler finger? What do you do with that gunk? Not eat it. But you got to flick it somewhere. Well, it's like someone flicked it and then decided, hey, this would be a great place for a town, right here where I flicked this gunk.

I said, "Colby, we should meet some men out here. I bet they're real dumb and would put some gas in our ride and maybe even give us a place to stay. And all we'd have to do is be our charming old selves."

Colby was silent in the passenger's seat.

"If this is on account of you not thinking you're pretty," I said, "you are crazy."

The truth was, we were pulling in on fumes and had little money for the rest of the trip. I'd sell two molars if I thought it'd help but, shit, my teeth had seen better days. It was either hustle some suckers or try and flip the car for two Greyhound tickets.

We found a little juke joint called the Broken Animal and, judging by the look of it, not many women came swinging through the doors so I figured they wouldn't ask for our IDs. We lucked out pulling in on the second Friday of the month. There was a tangle of bicycles locked up out front of the bar, so I figured there were enough DUI cases inside who'd take a ride for the price of a fill-up. Inside, a neon sign above a video slot machine blinked "Losers Win Here," and I thought it must be true. The bartender called me Sweet Thing and poured what we asked. In just under five minutes, I was shooting pool with a guy called Cretin with our last ten bucks on the table.

"You sure do shoot good for a girl, Sweet Thing," Cretin said.

"I learned it from your momma," I said and sank my next two.

To be honest, I am terrible at shooting pool but am very good at exposing the weaknesses of others. I saw the way Cretin shot and put myself between him and his target every time. My fathers said, *When I was younger, I was a very good player. When I spent all my time in honkytonks and saloons. This was before I became a father.* I know it, Dad, like I know all your old war stories.

I took Cretin's ten bucks and asked if he wanted to go double or nothing. I could smell the wad in his pocket, the pumice soap on his hands. He took the bet, and soon I was up twenty.

"Cretin's a real weirdo name," I said.

"It ain't my Christian name," he said, his ball clacking away from the pocket.

But he never did tell us any other name. He reminded me of this sow-bellied bitch hound who used to come sniffing around the neighborhood. I wanted to put a little rag around his rat head and cradle him like a baby doll. He'd do anything we said.

He bought us two more beers, and we danced. He was not very good and soon my toes felt like they'd been hammered on. The skin of his arms was streaked with old oil, and he smelled like a campfire. His pores were like loam holes cratering his face, and a pus-filled pimple shined white, and, boy, I wanted to get my pincers around it and see the juicy stuff come oozing out. He made for kissing me after the last song.

He whistled when he saw the Cadillac, and we angled his bike into the trunk. He filled up the tank in exchange for a lift back to his apartment.

“Where’d y’all get a sweet ride like this?”

“Won it in a card game,” I said.

“Beat a man half to death,” Colby said.

“Y’all are too much,” Cretin said. “Where are y’all headed with it?”

“Polunsky” I said. “To see Colby’s dear old brother, Billy.”

“Polunsky! My Daddy’s up at Polunsky! Mind if I hitch a ride? I’d help with gas, and I don’t talk too much.”

“That,” Colby said, “is a thing I do not believe.”

I said, “No,” and didn’t say anything after making the car go silent.

After a while, Cretin said, “But if you’re heading that way anyway.”

“We ain’t.”

“C’mon,” Colby said.

“We ain’t.”

Cretin’s place was in a part of town where folks throw worn out tennis shoes over power lines and lean forgotten hubcaps against streetlights. He said we had to be real quiet because his ex-wife lived in the apartment just down the row and if she heard him sneaking up, there’d be trouble.

“Especially with two pretty girls in tow,” he said muffling his keys so they didn’t jingle.

But it was so boring there. You know when you think something is going to happen, and then it doesn’t, the boredom in between the moments of things happening and not happening. He was so sweaty and strange. He kept fumbling with the bottle opener when he’d crack open another one for us. He didn’t lick his lips but just let them get more and more chapped like he was trying to come off as not-creepy but ended up not coming off as anything at all. In my head I was saying, *C’mon Cretin, take your shirt off or something. Show us your secret tattoos.*

Like I’d willed it (and, believe you me, I did), he stripped off his shirt but was disappointingly pale and hairless. Above his right nipple was a cheaply inked and sloping ying yang. Instead of engaging us in any fashion, he turned the television to a late night station playing old cop shows. With the volume down low so he didn’t wake his ex-wife. I realized he had a ritual and a rhythm to his pathetic life, and the miniature excitement we brought was probably too much for him to handle.

He fell asleep with half a beer on his belly, and I used the power of my mind to connect with Colby. *Hey*, I said, closing my eyelids tight and bearing down like I had to take a shit. *Let’s just rob this dumb hillbilly for anything good he’s got and be done with it.*

“Why are you making that face?” Colby said.

“You never listen to me.”

"We should take him with us," she said. "He's so dumb and sweet."

"Hell no," I said.

"You never want to do anything fun," she said, but I couldn't stay arguing with her.

"Alright," I said. "But he's sitting in the back seat and you're not sitting next to him."

*My father said, I was always so good at getting people to see things my way. It's what made your mother fall in love with me. When the ambulance men came to pick me up, they said I was acting like I wasn't even hurt. I kept telling them I could drive home and be just fine. They were so surprised when I coughed up all that blood and sputtered out.*

Cretin was saying, "And that's when she shot at me but missed because I had this thirty-eight you couldn't hit shit with from ten feet out."

I'd woken up to Cretin's boner in my back. He'd said he was sorry, that he'd crawled back to the bed after falling asleep in the old chair, not remembering he'd put us up for the night. It'd felt tight and compact like a heart and beat the same way too. He'd just tucked it away and rolled over. But then I kissed him on his chapped lips, smelling the beer on his breath, and that's as far as it went.

Now I was alone on the thin mattress smelling of cigarettes and the musk of him—cheap deodorant body spray and semen. Colby was giggling in the kitchen and something was sizzling and by the smell I figured it was Spam. My stomach growled. I was still wearing my jeans but the top button had been snapped open. I walked into the kitchen and slapped my pale belly like I imagined a father would do, though I'd never seen it done, but Cretin and Colby were too busy with each other, laughing low.

"What's cooking?" I said.

Cretin shrugged and smiled at Colby, and I got this feeling. I guess maybe it was like anger and jealousy and maybe something else, something hot and passionate but not sexual. I can't explain it, but I wanted to do something mean. I filled a chipped coffee mug—"Drink. Drive. Die." emblazoned on the side—with water, took a sip, and then dashed the rest into the hot pan. Fat splashed back and Cretin turned his shoulder to the crackle and spit. Colby let loose a little yelp, but then covered her mouth like she knew she'd done something wrong.

"What the hell?" Cretin said.

"I tripped over this stupid chair leg," I said, toeing a chair nowhere near the stovetop.

We ate warm, watery Spam with doughy white bread. Cretin stood, shoveling the yellowy meat into his mouth, while Colby and I sat at the rickety table.

"Where'd you sleep last night?" I said to Colby, and she shrugged.

“You got a real way about you, Sweet Thing,” Cretin said.  
“Well,” I said. “You sure as hell don’t.”

We were readying to leave when a knock came at the door. Cretin told us to wait in the kitchen while he answered it. Colby crossed her arms and didn’t speak to me. My father said, *There will be people who just won’t go with you.* But she will, Dad, okay? *You can’t be afraid to leave things behind.*

“You can’t stop me from feeling good,” Colby said.

“I wouldn’t want that,” I said.

“And I’m feeling good now. For the first time in a long time.”

I wanted to say something kind of mean but sweet like the way you might talk to a stuffed and mounted deer head, but we heard a feminine voice and curiosity got the better of us. We peeked into the living room and saw a woman there in the doorway. She was done up like she was going to work, wearing a bright blue vest and bouncing a small ginger-headed child on her hip. Maybe she was just getting off. She saw us and gestured with her free hand. Cretin didn’t look back, but he knew.

“Really?” the woman said. “Really?”

I closed my eyes and tried to read her. Reading somebody is no easy task. It’s like trying to dial in those old pay-per-view porno stations, occasionally getting enough of a signal to see something good. My reading of the woman glowed warm in the back of my head. The hairs on my arms stood on end. She didn’t seem like the type of person who’d wield a revolver. I opened my eyes and saw she was pretty, and I wondered where a sorry son-of-a-bitch like Cretin got the nerve to leave a good-looking woman like that.

We were in the Cadillac filled up on Cretin’s dime, and nothing mattered now. Colby was mouthing words in the mirror, practicing for her big moment with Billy. I wanted to coach her through this, but sometimes you’ve got to sit back and let people be.

“Look at me,” Colby said. “Look at what you did you son-of-a-bitch.”

Neither Cretin nor I looked, but I knew both our bellies were filled with taut guitar strings, detuned and strummed with a nervous hand. I’d never been so happy to hear Cretin’s voice when he started yammering.

“They made a fool out of my old man,” he said. “They said he’d won a boat and just needed to come down to the senior center to claim it, and they locked him up. They got like fifty guys that way.”

“Dumb don’t fall too far from the apple tree,” I said.

“A few unpaid speeding tickets and an assault charge from something like a year before. Goddamn the man.”

The terrain turned increasingly lush, with the tops of pine trees reaching toward the sky and going out of sight, not looking like any part of Texas I’d

ever seen. The remaining four hours turned out to be a long ride without any of those CDs, and someone had snapped the antenna off the car while we were sleeping, so the only thing that came over the AM was an old man with a thick bayou drawl saying “Shoshanna” over and over. Cretin told us it was the name of the man’s wife who had died, and he came on every day just to say her name until he went hoarse and then clicked out.

“Ain’t that the saddest thing you ever heard?” Cretin said.

Neither of us said anything because, no, it was not the saddest thing we’d ever heard.

On the side of the road, hidden in a patch of tall feathergrass was a bunch of turkey vultures feasting on what looked, at one time, to be an armadillo but squashed to a red pulpy mass. I could see them beating their long, black wings. One of the vultures took to the air, and Colby pointed a thin finger to it, trying to blot it from our path but couldn’t. Cretin said, “Look out,” but we’d already hit it. It bounced off the hood with a dry thump, leaving a shallow divot there. The acrid smoke from the brakes came in through the open windows as I leaned into them.

“Shit,” Colby said, absently holding her scars.

“Shit,” I said in return.

I pulled over and inspected the damage but wasn’t sure what I was looking at or for. A cruiser pulled alongside and a highway patrolman with a fat, orange face leaned across the seat to yell out the passenger’s side window.

“Hey, Sweet Thing,” he said. “You okay?”

“Suicidal buzzards,” I said and laughed nervously, girlishly. For a moment, I’d forgotten the car was stolen, but then it all came rushing back.

He whistled. “That’s a sweet ride for such a young girl like you.” At this, he unstrapped from his safety belt and made for getting out of the cruiser.

“We’re okay,” I said. “Just shook up. Car’s okay too. Got to get back on the road here pretty soon.”

But he was already at the hood, running his hand over the dent like he could read the secret longings of the engine beneath. The trunk popped open, Colby probably, and the tire iron was staring up at me and shining cruelly.

*Do you know what it feels like to hurt a man? my father said. I’d never been much for talking, I preferred to use my hands when I could.*

“I know a couple shops that could pop this sucker out real easy like,” the patrolman said.

*The line between life and death is so blurry. There is true power in defining it.*

“Uh huh,” I said.

“Wouldn’t even cost you that much. Wouldn’t cost a thing at all.”

He was sweating hard underneath his cowboy hat, the cream-colored felt darkening around the band. He wasn’t looking at me, was lovingly caressing the dent. Could he see himself in the hood? Could he have seen

me if I snuck up behind him? I put the iron in my hand. It was heavy, cold from the AC coming through the backseat. I closed the trunk, keeping the iron down at my side and hidden behind the bumper.

The dense sound of the closing trunk snapped him to attention. A call came over his shoulder-mounted radio. He forgot us as he spoke into the walkie. I rolled the iron in my fist.

“Should be fine to drive though,” he said and thumbed the brim of his hat. The patrolman got into his cruiser and departed. I let out a breath and dropped the iron into the dirt.

“I almost shit myself,” Cretin said as I reentered the Cadillac.

“Shut up, Cretin,” I said.

The prison was old and white like the state but didn’t look nearly as dangerous. It was smaller than I expected, kind of like the Alamo. A sign reading, “Aaron B. Polunsky Unit” came looming from around the bend.

“Who do you think that Polunsky guy was?” Cretin said, waving his hand at the sign.

“Probably some old asshole,” Colby said.

“Who never did nothing good for nobody,” I said.

We rode up to the gate guard, and after typing on his old computer, he waved us on through with his big hat. There were so many cars we had to circle for a long while to find a spot. An old woman gestured she was about to leave, and it felt like one of the sorriest signals I’ve ever been party to. Hey, let’s trade tragedies, day crew for the night crew.

Heat came waving away from the pavement, and the parking lot smelled like asphalt and onions. My father said, *I spent some days in the drunk tank, but all the police in our town knew me so well they’d never lock me up for long. I had such a handsome face, perfect jawline, thick head of hair, winning smile, able body, hardly ever lost at cards and could always spot a cheat.*

Most days Colby caked on the makeup, but today she let it all hang out. The people waiting around knew what we were all about. I could feel it coming off them like charged static. You couldn’t see a face like Colby’s in a place like Polunsky and not assume we were present to confront the accused. We filled out some papers and showed our IDs again. The guard behind the counter smirked when he saw mine but said nothing. We went through the metal detector, got the wand, and the guard looked at the bottoms of my feet. This embarrassed me. Cretin went one way, and we went the other. I asked Colby if she wanted me to go with her, and she said she did.

When he came through the door and sat behind the Plexiglas, it was clear Colby didn’t recognize him, but then it came to her, and she started like she was going to cry but didn’t and I was so proud. He was wearing a white jumpsuit, stained in the pits and crotch and showing off his veiny forearms.



Before he'd gone in, Billy had been this pudgy little fudge ball with greasy hair and zits galore. Now he was like some baby aspirin daydream, and I couldn't help but squirm in my seat. Cut like glass, hair in military style, and two little teardrops tattooed just under his left eye.

"Hey, baby sister," Billy said. "Hey, Sweet Thing."

Colby said, "I heard they're gonna send you to Huntsville soon."

"Yeah," he said, and put his hands in his pockets, casual as a drunk in a diner. "Finally going to see the other side. Got any questions for the devil?"

I could see now—it wasn't like he'd been hitting the weight bench. He'd lost the weight, sure, but black circles rimmed his eyes and his cheekbones came sharply through his rubbery skin tinted an almost pale blue. Something essential had been sucked from him. I thought of cornhusks forgotten on the floor of a kitchen in an abandoned house, packets of expired mayonnaise in the catchall drawer.

"I wish they weren't going to kill you," Colby said. "I'd like to do it myself."

"They told me you weren't pretty no more," Billy said. "And I didn't believe it at first, but I do now. Not going to win no more beauty pageants, is you?"

"When you die," she said, "you're going to shit yourself. That's your first order of business as a dead man. And then they're going to wheel you out, dump your body in a hole somewhere and no one is ever going to think about you again."

At this, Colby stood up and left. She had a flair for the dramatic, a holdover from her pageant days. Billy just shrugged and fixed his eyes at something between us, but I could see he was afraid. I liked seeing the fear. I wanted to slurp it all up and spit it back in his face. I watched him for a while, trying to read him, trying to make his head pop like a brain-filled balloon, but I couldn't, and it didn't.

Before I left he said, "If you see him, tell your Daddy I says, 'Hello.' Don't know if you were fixing on sitting with him too, but I don't get to see him much since they took my privileges away."

"My Daddy is dead," I said.

"Thought that too 'cause that's what your momma always said. But naw," he said and traced his forearm with his finger. "He got that big-ass turkey vulture tattoo right here?"

"Shut up, Billy."

"You don't wanna know what he done neither," he said, leaning his face so close I could have touched it. "Apparently he fucked that girl up so bad, they had to use her molars to identify her."

I wanted to reach through the glass and dig into him. I wanted the skin to come off in chunks and take those stupid teardrop tattoos away. I wanted

to roll the fleshy rind of his face from under my fingernails. But I couldn't. So I did the cruelest thing I could think of—I left him to die alone, to be forgotten while I kept on living.

I'm still not sure who won this exchange, if there even was a winner.

Cretin and Colby were sitting on the trunk sharing a cigarette. It was so hot my head swam. Cretin had his arm around her, and I decided to not let it bother me.

"Sorry," Colby said. "I just couldn't take no more."

"It's okay," I said.

"I can't believe I got the same blood as him."

"Maybe you don't," Cretin offered.

"Shut up, Cretin," one of us said.

"You were in there for a while."

"I let Billy tell some lies."

Three months from now, on September 23 at eight a.m., I will wake straight up in my bed and know Billy has taken the needle. Colby won't ask, and I won't tell her. He'll try to talk to me through the veil of the hereafter, but I won't listen.

"Fun's over," Colby said, and, in the light, she looked so young, brushing a stray hair from her lips. When she dies at a tragic age, I will sing a song at her funeral, unaccompanied.

"Yeah," I said. "Fun's over."

*My father said, I am buried in my burnt-out Cadillac on the side of the interstate. Where I am, I can still hear the big rigs rumble and the sirens wail like phantoms for the departed. Where I am, I am handsome, young, and unmarred. Where I am, I am the smell of bodies in youth. I am the thirty-eight that doesn't shoot lovers. I am the radio saying Shoshanna, Shoshanna, Shoshanna until I go hoarse and click out. Where I am, I am a lie to living. I am alive and living.*

"C'mere, Cretin," I said and he hopped off the trunk. I reeled back and socked him hard in the mouth. He didn't fall to the ground so much as considerately lower himself there, rubbing his jaw and saying, "What'd you do that for? What'd you do that for?" I signaled for his cigarette, and he handed it up to me.

"You just have to try and understand, Cretin," I said, taking a drag. "But you never will."

"Okay," he said and lay down on his back because I guess the warm ground probably felt pretty good. I lay down next to him, and it did. Colby came and lay down too, sticking her nose into my shoulder, and the sky above us was the most beautiful thing I'd seen in some time. I'd describe it but really wouldn't do it any justice. But you can imagine.