

MY SISTER INDIA IS PREGNANT. When I announced this to my parents, my father muttered behind the newspaper, “She’s eighteen, for Christ’s sake . . .” My mother spilled sugar all over the counter, her hands trembling the sack against the chipped rim of her grandmother’s hand-me-down stoneware canister. “I don’t want to hear you speak those words again, young lady.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

That’s when I knew it was true.

India picked me up after school last Friday. She never does that. She’s usually too busy with her boyfriend Greg or working at the office of Dr. Hornsbee, DDS to bother with me. India says we all have to be nice to Dr. Hornsbee, even though he’s a lecherous prick of a dentist who won’t invest in one of those heavy lead aprons for the dental assistants (to keep them from growing warts and cancers from the x-ray machine). With India always bumping her belly into the gleaming silver instrument tray, he could have “let her go” by now, but he hasn’t. She also ordered me to be nice to Dr. Hornsbee’s son, Mark. He’s in grade eight, like me. So I started smiling at him, told him he had cool sneakers. The next day he asked me to the Harvest Dance. I said yes. His palms got all sweaty when he held my hand. His fingernails were way too long. He’s a creepy-clawed, sweaty-handed boy and I ditched him by the third slow dance. India was really pissed when I told her what happened. What does she expect? I’m only thirteen, for Christ’s sake.

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SHE SPED HER LITTLE DODGE COLT out to Oak Lawn Cemetery and then slowly twisted her way through the new section where our Grampy was buried last year, back to the old-neglected plots all humped up with time (like Grandma Esther’s back), past leaning tombstones, their faded cracked faces remembering nothing. She parked the car next to *Jeminiah Willett, 1865-1901, We Remember Thee O Lord*. Just behind all the Willetts is a long path lined with sweet-smelling hemlocks. We were going to visit Jesus.

India sat cross-legged at Jesus’ feet and pulled a three-pound bag of m&m’s out of her backpack. I sat next to her, each of us taking turns reaching into the bag, rustling out handfuls of candy, staring up at Christ’s welcoming arms. The beautiful, post-resurrection Jesus.

India tilted back her head, her long dark braid hanging down her back, her nose crinkled with freckles, and said, "This spot always makes me feel safe."

I let the candy drop from my fist and into my open mouth; ping-ponging little clicks against my teeth.

India studied the clouds skimming over the treetops. "Mom says you figured it out."

Teeth crackling through candy coating, I answered. "I guess."

"You wanna feel my belly?"

She had always been a little pudgy around the edges, her body holding roundness in her face, upper arms, thighs, and ankles, long after puberty had settled on her height. Mother was always getting after her for "putting on a few extra pounds." *Watch your figure, or no one else will.* India pulled up the front of her white dental assistant's uniform and placed my hand on her taut, bulging stomach. It was bigger than I had expected.

"It's huge!"

"Yeah, and it's starting to kick too. Keep your hand steady, I'll see if I can get the little bugger to dance for you." She pushed on the opposite side of her belly and began to sing. "*Wake up Maggie, I think I got somethin' to say to you . . .*"

The baby wiggled against my hand. I whispered to India, not wanting to frighten it into stillness, "What does it feel like, inside?"

She smiled, stroking the sides of her stomach. "Like a giant butterfly."

We lay on the grass, the autumn sun on our faces. My hands moved between tracing the narrow fault lines of India's red stretch marks and grabbing more candy from the bag. I should've asked her about the green ones. I've heard kids say that the green ones make you horny. Maybe that's what led to India's downfall.

I should start a scientific study. Perhaps one day I'll find a direct link between teen pregnancy and green m&ms. For the time being, I'll avoid the green ones, but experiment by feeding them to unsuspecting boys. Jesus didn't look too pleased with that idea, his head bent in solemn prayer, his whiteness gleaming against blue sky and the cedars of Lebanon, Indiana. He is magnificent. His long, soft hair, and his holy robes of glory falling off his perfect muscular shoulders . . . seven feet of tallness watched over me while I dreamt about his everlasting love (and of sex).

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I'VE BEEN SEEING HIM, JESUS, EVERYWHERE . . . in the fading glow of the TV after it's turned off, in the dark of the bathroom mirror during a three a.m. pee, in the shadows on my bedroom wall. Christ on a bike, I think I'm in love.

What's the harm in it? He'd be the perfect boyfriend. Thousands of nuns for thousands of years can't be wrong, calling themselves the brides of Christ, pledging their lives to His service. It's gotta be better than the spot India's in, just starting grade twelve, pregnant and planning to marry Greg "hot-wheels" Moore by Christmas. At the bridal/baby shower Mother whispers over baked beans on a weeping paper plate, "I hope he loves her."

India's best friend Lisa laughs, crumbs of yellow cake sticking to the corners of her mouth, "Even if he doesn't, he's got a nice truck . . . and that's really something, isn't it?"

"Yes." We collectively nod, sipping ginger ale-sherbet punch. *That's really something.*

India must believe Greg loves her, otherwise she wouldn't have "done it" with him, right? Otherwise she wouldn't have gotten a prescription for the pill ten seconds after he asked her on their first date. Her tiny, rattling frisbee of hope is hidden in the bottom of the dresser drawer, folded neatly inside the sleeve of a faded striped sweater. She must have always believed he loved her, from the moment their eyes met across the gas pump at the Get-N-Go. "That's \$13.50 for gas and the m&m's are on me," he said. India believes in love at first sight. (And I believe that the Virgin Mary was actually a virgin.)

What I *do* believe is that Christ would make the perfect lover. I believe that the same revelatory magic that brought about the Immaculate Conception also made the Son of God pure and sterile. Can you imagine? Guilt-free sex. I'm sure no STDs, and definitely no children. After all, you can't have a bunch of demi-gods running around the planet, can you?

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FOR MY BIRTHDAY, MOTHER GAVE ME THE BOOK, *Becoming a Woman*, and a heavy, silver-plated hand mirror that had belonged to Grandma Esther. She told me to read the book and then hold the mirror between my legs and have a good long look. I was supposed to check back with her if I had any questions. *Va-gin-a . . . La-bia . . . Vul-va*. Which part is the same as a cunt? Why do boys like to say "twat"? Why do boys try to guess when you're on the rag, why do they try to steal your purse, why do they get so excited about "whacking-off" and about who can do it the fastest, and would it be blasphemous if I stayed in my room and masturbated until the second coming?

Screw Mom, screw India, screw Mark Hornsbee, screw the mirror and *Becoming a Woman*. I've been getting Cort Larsen to help me with my scientific study/spiritual quest. He's Mormon but willing to eat the green m&m's. I like to finger them gently into his mouth while we walk along his Saturday morning paper route. And while I don't think he'll ever look like beautiful post-resurrection Christ, there is kindness in his smiling pimpled cheeks, and willingness in his eyes. Plus, I know he's the kind of guy who would hand me right over to Him whenever He does decide to show up. Who knows how long it will take Christ to arrive? Who knows the hour of His coming? It could be today. It could be fifty years.

There's an elevator in the Farmer's Bank Building that no one uses on Saturdays after noon. There's the non-fiction section of the Carnegie Library. A kiss or two. Christ won't mind. Love isn't jealous. After all, Cort is on *His* team, a real-live holy boy. We sweat and moan, salt-sweet lips mingling between volumes of *Today's Animal Husbandry* and *National Geographic*. All was fine until Ms. Wesley, the head librarian, saw us—the perverted spinster—and ratted us out to our mothers.

Until then, no one had minded our young, innocent relationship. Our parents, our teachers, and even the merchants of downtown Lebanon who buy the Saturday edition of the *Lebanon Reporter* had found the pairing to be sweet, pure-hearted, uplifting. Mr. Floyd, the middle school band director, would grin at us over his music stand as I plunked out random chords and Cort took his trombone solos during stage band practice. No one, not even smiling Mr. Floyd, understood what was happening: how the strains of Cort playing *Round Midnight* sent my pubescent brain groping for dark, needy encounters of the flesh. Between songs, Cort would collect the curling sheets of piano music that had flown to the floor, leaning in over the keyboard, his voice hum-humming in the back of his throat, his neck pulsing to the possibility of our next physical contact. No one minded, no one suspected, until Ms. Wesley started making phone calls, alerting our parents and God knows who else about our tongue-tied lip locks. Cort's hands squeezing my tits, my hands down his pants and the telltale trail of green candy bits littering her precious reference section.

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MAYBE IF THE MAN BELIEVES IN GOD, if he's "a good Christian boy," if he comes from a "church-going family," then you won't get pregnant before you're married. India says sex is inevitable. Everyone does it. Obviously the pill didn't work for my sister, so there has to be something else, a divine reasoning behind who gets knocked up and who doesn't.

Cort's brother, Jacob, is going to be a missionary. After Christmas, the Mormon prophet will send Jacob to some far away place to ride bicycles and hand out tracts printed with the words of Joe Smith and God Himself. These upstanding young men peddle in pairs through Venezuela, Belgium, Italy, Chile. Jacob will not be allowed to date or even think about girls for two years. Cort passed me a note today before band practice. He has been suspended from the Saturday paper route and his mother has forbidden him to see me, to even talk to me. She thinks I'm an evil, bad hussy of a girl. If she only knew how much I love the Lord.

I guess I'll go back to waiting for Christ . . . or maybe I'll try feeding m&m's to Thatcher Ulry. His father preaches hellfire and brimstone at the Rock Church in Pittsboro and I hear they speak in tongues.