

Parade

FLORY SLEPT IN and her family left without her. They were already standing with all the other families in her aunt's front yard, sipping second coffees and cooking in the sun. Marching bands formed lines in the high school parking lot. Crepe paper hung limp on patriotic floats. Folks with houses along the route dragged spare chairs from garages to the strip of grass by the curb, served iced tea on folding tables, and remarked that it sure was a scorcher. Infants and old ladies overheated. Vendors readied carts of noisy toys. Flory stood up naked in her bedroom and thought about her body.

She curled her toes and scuffed her feet on the carpet and twisted in the stagnant air. Fourteen last month and newly figured, she raised her arms and flung back her head and felt in charge. No longer gangly. She flopped back on the bed and snuggled down in the hot blankets and put her hand on herself and thought her favorite thought: The older boy in the leather jacket caught her peering into the boys' locker room and dragged her into the janitor's closet and pressed her against the wall and lifted up her skirt and put his thing inside her and kept going even after she protested. And then he kissed her on the mouth and said you're *my* girl now. And then they went to prom.

Satisfied, not satisfied, Flory dressed in cut-off denim and clean white cotton. The suburb buzzed. Children shrieked in the street with special-day delight. Flory was late. All the aunts and uncles and cousins were already assembled. She had to catch her friend Alicia as she passed along the route, or she'd be left behind. No phone yet, not allowed. Alicia wouldn't know where to find her. She tied on tennis shoes and painted her lips a thistle pink and sprayed a scent of sugared flowers on her neck. She let the screen door slam when she walked out. Her key was in her other shorts, but why lock doors? Flory walked fast, half skipping. Her next-door neighbor called out Hi, Flory! from the porch where she was wrangling her toddler son, and her son called out, Hi, Flory! and Flory called, Hello!

One left turn from her quiet side street onto a wider street where

her aunt's large house and large yard faced onto the route. In the fall her aunt put out gourds of many colors and in the winter her aunt put out a nativity scene with a glowing baby Jesus and in the spring her aunt planted hundreds of colorful plants. Summer was flags. As Flory approached, stepping around babies in shaded carriers and balloons already starting to deflate, one giant flag announced the house. It flapped in the hot breeze on a long metal pole mounted in the roof, flanked by flag-colored bunting under the eaves. Hundreds of smaller flags bloomed in the flower beds, and the rented tent that shaded the pitchers of lemonade and the platters of breakfast pastries was red and white and blue.

Arriving on the lawn, she was caught in a whirl of relations. Flory! Hi, Flory! You've gotten so tall now! Your hair is so long now! Your teeth are so straight! She was hugged and kissed by seven uncles and as many aunts and made to hold four different babies in turn, to feel the soggy weight of them in her arms and experience the awful frailty of their unfinished skulls against her shoulder. All around her, relatives played out the nauseating drama of child rearing. An older cousin pressed a cup of grape juice to her tiny daughter's mouth. Use your lips. Your lips! Not your teeth! The girl grinned a mean grin and dug her teeth into the cup and let red liquid dribble down her chin and chest. Flory was repulsed. The blind contrariness of children. Had she been so antagonistic? In a queue for chilled champagne she found her parents, sun-struck and blotchy and thirsting for something stronger than coffee.

Her mother had her little sister Kinsey by the collar, holding the girl still and smearing sunscreen on anything exposed. Kinsey was ten and her body belonged to their mother. Their mother chose Kinsey's clothing and combed Kinsey's hair and applied various lotions and remedies and protectants to Kinsey's milky skin. In the past months Flory had struggled to break free of this same mothering, absenting herself at hair-combing time and declaring that she would no longer eat meat and that she had always hated lavender-scented lotion. This struggle had peaked in their first real fight when her mother asked her where the rest of her skirt had gone and Flory said that it was probably off somewhere with her mother's missing sense of style. Not the insult that bothered her mother, but the unpleasant surprise of her child's autonomy. Her mother left the room and ignored her completely for three days. They were now at a testy detente. Since giving up author-

ity over Flory's physical being, her mother had lost interest in the rest of her as well. Flory found that her comings and goings were no longer remarked upon. Arriving home late for dinner one evening the week before, she had found the table cleared and her family asleep, no plate of food set aside in the fridge or warming in the oven. She ate cereal alone in the dark kitchen and plotted to lose her virginity.

She had options, she supposed. Her breasts had come in before the other girls in her grade, and boys were making inquiries. That one over there, they asked her friend Alicia. Does she party? Flory had not yet partied. On some evenings her father, vaguely warm and unconcerned, mixed her cups of gin and grapefruit juice. To acclimate your palate, daughter mine! It tasted thrillingly of trouble. The key to this whole thing, she thought, was drinking. Drinking without her parents. Drinking with boys. And with Alicia.

Back when her mother had expressed opinions about Flory's life, she had expressed concerns about her friendship with Alicia. She looks like the kind of girl, she said, who'll let a boy do anything to her. Cruelly put, but probably correct. Alicia was Flory's only friend who had done things, and it was all because of camp. Alicia went away to camp for all of August every summer, and described it as a magic world where boys kissed you next to campfires and launched raids on your cabin to catch you in your underwear and tried to snatch your top off in the lake. Last September, when Alicia showed up on the first day of eighth grade, it was obvious that she was entirely changed. Behind the gym at lunch time, she told Flory all about it. How she had been ready for ages, but all the boys were too scared to do the deed. How they would feel her up and let her touch it, and then chicken out before the big event. How they were all such babies she thought it was hopeless until the last night of camp, when a counselor, a boy in his first year of college, had shared his flask of bourbon on the dock and told her she was pretty and then did it to her right there in the open on the creaky wooden boards. Flory's jealousy and admiration had grown in equal measure over the course of the school year, as Alicia recounted her nights in the back seats of older boys' cars and shared every little detail of the hidden things that happened in the dark. Alicia could show her the way.

Her mother finished coating Kinsey and was putting the sunscreen back in her bag when she stopped and held it out at arm's length, silently, to Flory. Flory refused. Her father clapped a hand on her shoulder,

always a chum. Well, hello, lazybones! Did you get some breakfast? Flory nodded and looked with disinterest at the trays of sugared doughnuts and egg soufflés. All around her the sweaty aging bodies of her relatives swelled with food and drink. She felt the taut boundaries of her own body, buffered by hot air on all sides, no larger or smaller than it should be, and poured herself a glass of ice water.

Kinsey tugged on her arm. Are you gonna come with us to see the parachutes? Her father cut in. Of course she's coming! We go every year! Flory had forgotten. Every year, after the route was reopened to traffic, after all the people ate their burgers and swam in their pools and drank all the beer in their coolers, sky divers jumped from a plane high over the town and landed in the middle of the football field. There were always three men and three parachutes, one red, one white, and one blue. After they were safely on the ground, it would be time to pack up blankets and Cokes and snacks in wicker baskets and walk to the beach for the fireworks. That was the order of the day. Of course I'm coming, Flory said. She moved with her family to the front of the yard and clustered with the others, craning their necks to see the start of the parade.

Flory remembered the terror of parades in early childhood, the unrelenting loudness and alarm. Even now she clapped her hands over her ears and cowered. Everyone stood still and fought the urge to run away and breathed relief when the fire trucks gave way to old-fashioned cars and bicycles with enormous front wheels. Proud members of clubs and troupes and societies wore uniforms of unseasonable wool and dark polyester and suffered for their associations. Local politicians tossed buttons to the crowd. Candy fell in little showers on the curb and children darted to retrieve the already melting pieces. The long train stopped and started at the pleasure of the bands that paused to bang out brassy tunes on every block.

Alongside the floats a stream of people lawn-hopped, stopping at familiar houses for small talk and refreshment. Some were teenagers, too old to sit and watch with the children, too young to drink champagne with the adults. The boys traipsed along squirting each other with water guns and blowing noise makers in each other's ears, bursting with their newfound sense of irony, of being above their old innocent pleasure in celebrations. The girls used the route as a runway, the whole town a captive audience to the strut of their tanned legs and the daring of their tiny summer clothes. Flory wanted to be carried

away by this stream of teenage revelers but had no point of entry. This urge to join turned to a panic. The panic of wasting an important day, a day of slick hot weather and suspension of rules, when the adults were distracted and things, big things, might happen. This wasting, this missing, this sickened her and she felt shame and hate and spite and all the new feelings that had controlled her in frantic, fickle waves since the spring. She looked around for a way into the action.

Two houses down, stopped beside a cart selling flavored ices, two boys looked at Flory and did not look away. The taller boy inclined his head and whispered something to the other. They both nodded. They both smiled. They were two or three grades ahead, high school boys, she'd seen them hanging around the convenience store downtown, smoking cigarettes and grabbing high school girls by the hips and pulling them close and kissing. But there were no high school girls with them now. The only girl with them now was Alicia.

Flory! Alicia ran over and dragged Flory off her aunt's lawn and into the flow of people in the street. Flory, she whispered, they've got a bottle of something and they want us to come with them. Then she made a noise like Eeeeeee! and pranced to catch up with the boys. Flory started to follow. Looking back, she saw her sister Kinsey tucked under her mother's arm, staring straight ahead, pacified by a yellow popsicle. She was struck by the tininess of her sister and the way she seemed to be reabsorbed into the woman who made her, a little appendage anchored at her side. Her father called out, Where you going, Flory? Her mother saw Flory moving toward Alicia and started to say something that stifled in her throat. Flory waited for her mother to come and stop her. Her mother settled back on the lawn and dropped her eyes and sucked her mouth into a hard point. Flory walked away untethered.

Reaching the group, she saw the shorter boy's arm around Alicia's waist and turned her attention to the taller boy. You're Flory, yeah? I'm Marcel. Flory said hello and fell in step beside him. She heard in his voice that he was from somewhere else. She noted the sweat on his skin and the solid weighty lank of his arms. She squirmed at the knowledge of the boys and the bottle and that they had invited her, had noticed her. The parade stretched out before them in its grand expanse. They wound along the route past veterans in fancy dress and flinched when rifles fired. Bagpipes droned morbid sounds from somewhere far away in Flory's ancestry and troupes of dancers

twirled batons and shimmered in the light. Children threw little white explosives at their feet. *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!* Debris piled up on the pavement. Soon the town would be a low tide of broken whistles and trampled cotton candy. *Pop!*

We're going to my house, yeah? Marcel smiled at her sideways. Parents went away. He gave off a sweetness she did not expect. Unlike the rough unfeeling boys in her daydreams. She adjusted. He was dark and strong jawed. She could see now. All she had to do was drink from his bottle and stay calm and go through with it and then she would be like Alicia, a girl other girls looked at with envy, a girl who got phone calls, a girl who came to school wearing purple bruises on her neck and walking carefully. She prepared herself.

His house was a prefab mansion on the nicest block, one of the new ones that went up overnight on a barren lot, waiting for the landscaping to grow in. This one was doubly odd for the barn out back, an old shaggy barn that chafed against the newness of the house. Inside, he led them through rooms painted eggshell and mauve and cornflower and into a gleaming white kitchen. He pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer and rummaged in the fridge for juice and tonic and limes. His parents were always traveling, he explained, away more than they were here, but since he was seventeen they let him stay alone. They were from France. In France kids had more freedom, the parents were not so nosy, and sex, everyone had sex and no one cared, he claimed and grinned with foreign wisdom. Not like here, where you're supposed to wait. To save yourself. Promise rings. None of that stuff. Like you, Flory, he said, a girl your age in France, a pretty girl like you, already would've had five lovers! Alicia laughed. Who says Flory hasn't had five lovers? Alicia stuck her hip out and gave him her best provocative mug. Marcel smiled. You can't fool me, he said. I know girls. She's a good girl. Not like you! He poured two pint glasses half full of vodka and added cranberry juice and ice and a wedge of lime and a dash of tonic. For you, he said. Flory and Alicia sipped. Flory tasted mostly sugar, with an undertone of sickness. Marcel played rap music from speakers hidden in the walls.

Alicia asked for the bathroom and dragged Flory along, sloshing their drinks onto the white tiles. You're lucky, Alicia said. He'll be a good first one. Flory drank cold water from the faucet and stuck her face in the stream. How do I know what to do? Flory asked. Alicia dried Flory's face with a towel. You don't have to know. Just don't cry.

They hate that. Flory considered. Was she the type to cry? They found the boys back in the kitchen, lining up shots on the counter and racing to get them down. Alicia started pulling the other boy into the living room by his belt loops. Show Flory how you do it in France, she said, and disappeared through the door.

Alone now in the kitchen, Marcel cornered her against the counter. You having fun? She nodded. He kissed her in a way she found both gentle and barbaric. His hands worked down inside her shorts and inside her underwear and she shuddered when he grabbed hold of her. He backed off. You're scared, he said. Don't be scared. He put his hand back, grabbed her harder. You're a virgin, yeah? Flory nodded. Her legs clenched together. It's no big deal! he said, and smiled wide and easy, and pressed her legs apart. Wait, she said. I forgot. I have to go watch the parachutes. Marcel took his hand away again. His breathing had quickened, and now he calmed it and pulled her into a clumsy hug and let her feel the pulse of him against her. Hey, he said, that's fine. We have all day. I'll take you to the parachutes. We have all day. He pulled away and smiled at her like someone who accomplished things.

When they opened the door to the living room, the other boy was just rolling off Alicia. Flory saw his pink and shrinking thing retreat out of her, saw the connection break. Was this what people looked like after it was over? Alicia did not look happy or sad or anything but tired and a little drunk. The boy looked sweaty and grim. Marcel threw their clothes at them playfully and said, Up, up, lover birds! We're taking Flory to watch the parachutes! Who wants a shot for the road? He poured four shots of quickly warming vodka, and then he poured four more. Flory fought back the urge to vomit and smiled—prettily, she hoped. Marcel caught her in a big sloppy kiss and they all ran out the door and down the street to the high school, silly drunk and feeling in control.

Already the town had gathered, sluggish with the bloat of boozy lunches, scratching at sunburns and flopping on the grass, halfway deceased. She was too late now to find her family and watch it with them as she always had before. The sky was a vicious blue. Remaining members of the high school band, those not laid low by heatstroke, played a lazy rhythm on the bleachers. Flory's head fuzzed and refocused and she let herself be dragged along by Marcel, tripping on the green and level turf. A cheer went up as the plane drew near. It circled tightly overhead three times, and then three dots appeared and plum-

meted. Three human dots approached the crowd, as they always did. Three chutes deployed and billowed as expected. Red chute, white chute, blue. On the ground was perfect stillness. Perfect wonder. Then blue veered sharply left and crashed full-bodied into white. The collision spun the men and chutes into a spiral. The sails of cloth collapsed. Blue and white picked up speed and pulled away from red, red still buoyed up and tranquil in the air. Two smaller chutes deployed and slowed the free fall. Not enough but some. A gasp from the crowd as the two men finally thudded into ground. Flory groaned a strangled No. Alicia clutched at her boy's arm and said, No way! Marcel said, Wow. There was some screaming and some dialing of numbers. People ran to help.

Alicia did not want to look but Flory wanted to look. She wanted to know. She stumbled forward, pulling Marcel with her, stopping when they were close enough to see the lower halves of bodies crumpled into earth. The heads were turned away, the arms frozen stiff in a desperate embrace or else a struggle to break free. The men were unconscious, but it seemed they were not dead. Policemen and regular men began to push the crowd back from the scene. Sirens rang far and then nearer. Dazed people loped off, leaden, unsure. Marcel turned Flory away toward the road. Under a tree at the outskirts, huddled together in a little nest of limbs, Flory recognized her family. Had they wondered where she was? Her father hunched in an awkward squat, sheltering wife and daughter with his bulk. Her mother formed a bowl with her body, and in this tender bowl she held Flory's sobbing sister. Kinsey curled, fetal, burrowing her head into her mother's chest. Flory could approach them. She could say, I tried to find you. She could say, Isn't it terrible? She could crouch down small and crawl into their form. She let Marcel lead her past them to the road. She walked away unnoticed.

They joined the haggard exit from the field. Everywhere people questioned whether the men would live and reassured each other that they would. Marcel led the way back to his house. Alicia and her boy sat on the couch with beers in silence. Flory found herself back in the kitchen, back against the counter, but she said, Not here. He took her to the barn behind his house and guided her up to the loft. I sleep out here in summer. It's quiet. No one can hear me, I can't hear anyone, you know? Flory sat on his unmade mattress. Feathers from his pillows fluttered out. She heard bees up in the rafters. This time when he

pressed himself down on top of her and trapped her with his weight, it didn't feel like a decision. He slid her clothes off her body in easy motions. Her legs opened and she did not protest and the pain was shocking, yes, a pain so strangely in her center, where she had never hurt before. She didn't cry. He kissed her nicely on her mouth. He treated her roughly for a frantic moment. He was done before she had gotten fully used to him.

Outside the town was rustling. Voices carried. Tiny sirens sounded farther off. Would there be fireworks? Could there be fireworks now, and would anyone go to see them, carrying baskets of snacks, toting babies and blankets, ready to *oooh* and *aaah* at bright lights after what had happened at the field? Flory became aware of wetness. A long red line trailed down from inside her and onto the white sheets. Marcel said, Oh. He looked at her blood like it had nothing to do with him. Like he had never injured anyone at all. She freed herself from under him and stood, let her blood snake down her leg and onto the floorboards. Bees buzzed in the rafters. In some other house, a child bellowed for its mother.