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## AT THIRTEEN, IT WAS

At thirteen, it was rolling up our uniform skirts in the ladies' locker room, passing around old copies of European history tests in the cafeteria, and hanging out at the Junction for pizza on half-day Wednesdays. It was walking to the A&P, and counting the number of honks our skinny legs and tanned arms could collect from the anonymous Hondas and Fords speeding down Laurel Avenue. Seven was average, thirteen a record high. My friends and I would call them pervs and psychos, but we put ourselves on display nonetheless, risking scraped knees from overgrown branches and coughing fits from car exhaust fumes. At thirteen, we settled for someone to notice us.

After school, we would gather in the living room watching countless music videos: Janet Jackson's *Again*, Mariah Carey's *Dream Lover*, and S.W.V.'s *Weak*. Those songs didn't just express ordinary love, the kind my parents or teachers must have experienced, but a tormented, soul-shattering, life-defining, can't-eat-can't-sleep-can't-breathe kind of love. John Sencio's top twenty video countdowns gave me a vision of the adult world—people who lived by and through their emotions. They sang about lives led by the beating in their chests, that flutter deep inside I had yet to experience. The closest I came were the obnoxious beeps that sent jolts through the core of my body.

So we walked, our bodies finally bored with lying around the living room floor, flipping through the Delia's clothing catalogue. My sister and our two friends passed the identical, two-storey colonial houses of our neighbourhood and took a right onto Laurel Avenue, single file. I stayed in the back, watching the girls in front of me stomp along the dirt path and duck under low branches, their bright tank tops and jean shorts already covered in a fine film of dust. We called to each other over the din of speeding cars with comments about the rings of sweat on Mr. Attridge's collared-shirts or the thermos of vodka Doug Terry was rumoured to bring to homeroom every morning. We only had change in our pockets, enough for a fifty-cent soda and maybe some lip gloss if our friend was on duty at the drugstore; she usually charged us a quarter for the makeup we placed on her conveyor belt. After half a mile, the road widened, and we were on display. The men who beeped at us probably drove too fast to notice our age, Danielle's freckles or Sonya's chubby cheeks, or the identical brown eyes of Brooke and me, our dark, tangled hair pulled back in loose ponytails.

I felt gangly and unattractive everywhere except for that strip of sidewalk. I was anyone on that portion of Laurel Avenue, one of the tormented souls on Janet Jackson's music videos, walking away from or approaching a new lover, watched and sought by scores of men. I knew that those honks were demeaning and primitive, a gesture made by vulgar men, but

I still delighted in the noise, its deliberateness and anonymity. In the fall, our excursions would end—too cold, too busy with basketball or cheerleading practice. Yet on dark October nights I still wondered about the men who had honked and shouted at us. I imagined them as immature boys without girlfriends, middle-aged losers, or old degenerates. We had made fun of these men as we plodded along; better options awaited us, those who would be drawn in by our particular charms, whatever those turned out to be. As I stretched out to sleep on those autumn nights, my calves sore from running up and down the basketball court, I dreamed of those jolts of excitement in my chest and the adult world of all-consuming love awaiting me.

As a twenty-something living in Jamaica Plain, Boston, and then Morgantown, West Virginia, I would receive more honks and calls from men in their cars. My body inevitably jerked from the sound, registering it deep within my chest, then, as a sign of potential danger. I would look straight ahead and walk faster toward the Boston T, or the Blue Moose Café. I remembered that thirteen-year-old girl who equated those primal calls for attention with the kind of desperate love I was certain awaited me, and wondered what she could have been thinking, how that could have been thrilling to her. I recalled all the drama and tears I longed for back then, as I told myself stories about romance in the adult world. I wanted to tell that girl to keep trusting that adult love would be thrillingly torturous for her, and sometimes wished that I too could believe in the anticipation of that first crude brush with male attention once more.

