

Circles

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The screen door bounced once, twice, then closed. Elise leapt off the porch, hips square, wrists firm, legs outstretched like a longjumper, cotton skirt kicking open like a green parasol. She lit out for the oak tree at the lawn's edge, legs gridded with welts, blood drops, one shoe unbuckled--hell, ten was too old to be wearing buckled shoes anyway. The skirt hem tapped the back of her calves with each running step. A dark, ragged braid thumped her back like a heartbeat. Reaching the tree, she climbed it without finesse, skinned her moist palms on two knotholes, lost the loose shoe, knocked a swelling knee against a broken branch, pinched her lips over clenched teeth, eyes pinned on the topmost branch. She straddled the perch, leaning forward on her right forearm, acorns biting her skin. She reached under her skirt, hooked a finger under the shiny left cheek of her snug panties, tugged them down a notch. Her feet dangled above absolute air.

The sun was setting, the sky a canvas washed in orange yolk, like the smeared one Elise had eaten on her potato-bread toast at supper. The clouds were stationary, moored in creamed slips.

She gnawed the inside of her cheek. Sweat cooled on her body as the sky's colors melted from violet to a burnt-orange slice on the horizon. She marveled at how the sun never lost its path, even on days when the sky wore a crust of stern gray clouds. Her mother had administered the whipping, the third in as many weeks.

Last week, Elise had been caught red-handed as could be in Joren's corduroy pants; the week prior, his baseball knickers and brand-new cleats. Joren had made the Beavers' eighth-grade team that week. Joren never minded her borrowing his clothes. Once, he found her in the small downstairs room where Daddy had built Joren's elevated train network. Elise was running the Lionels, outfitted in Joren's overalls which sagged from the waist and pooled at her ankles. She was shirtless, one shoulder strap unbuckled. Joren had grabbed the roomy seat of the pants, yanking it back and forth: "Geez lady, there's enough room in there for both of

us!” He’d pulled her braid, told her she’d better change before their parents returned from the neighborhood watch meeting.

But tonight, after dinner, when her parents should have settled down with their coffee and television, Elise had concealed herself in the dim cellar’s laundry room and tried on Joren’s football jersey and helmet. She had a football tucked into her armpit when her mother yanked the door open. Afterwards, she’d changed into the green dress and run out to the tree.

The following week, Elise attended one of Joren’s dusty baseball games, flanked by her parents. Was this the way convicts felt when first arrested, sandwiched between burly officers in the rear seats of cruisers, access cut to the door handle, window crank? She didn’t see any other of the team’s little brothers or sisters hedged in this way. In fact, most of them were not sitting with their parents, but with one another.

Winston Smithers, the shortstop and Joren’s best friend, stepped from the dugout sporting his buzz cut. Throughout the game, Elise longed to have her hair shorn like Winston’s. She often missed the action of entire games because of her daydreaming. Her pining tended to crest during the church’s six annual Young Ladies teas.

After the game, Joren and Daddy left with the team and coaches on a trip to Swensen’s. Mother had other plans, however, and drove Elise to Graciella’s Boutique. She searched for a short teal velvet dress, meant for Elise to wear to her next Young Ladies Tea. Elise tried to show some interest, nodding and smiling when her mother removed one dress after another from the rack. But she could not get her mind off of the looming season of Teas. The occasions were, with their prim etiquette and polished bearing, ghastly enough. But Elise had developed an increasing dread of the requisite salon trip, her anxiety reaching the point where, every year, by the time the fourth tea rolled around, she would hide from her mother in a closet or in the backyard shrubs, shaky, ill, sweating, breath rasping. She kept her ponytail ribbons tangled in a drawer, beneath her *Black Phantom* comics stash, but her mother produced fresh pairs of butterfly barrettes for every tea. Elise could not abide the impending transformation: hair coiled into cascading ringlets, a pleated skirt over an itchy slip. Sometimes a hat to match. Delivered from the salon to the church no longer herself, but a glazed cruller, dusted in vanilla and jasmine.

“Elise, dear? You’re so far away. I’m asking you which of these dresses you like best: the one with the belt or without the belt?” Her mother held a velvet dress in each hand, smiling broadly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Elise mumbled. “Whichever one you like best.”

“But I’m not the one who’ll be wearing it.” Mother laid the dresses over one arm and tucked a sprig of hair behind Elise’s ear. “We’re almost done here, sweetie. Do you want to try them both on and see how they look? Then we’ll stop at the diner for a burger and ice cream.”

“No, I don’t need to try it on. The one without the belt.”

A saleswoman who’d been hovering near the fitting rooms now stepped forward, took a small case from a rotating display and showed Elise an earring and necklace set, three blue crescent moons.

“My ears aren’t pierced,” Elise said, drawing her shoulders up.

The svelte woman bent to squeeze Elise’s earlobe. “That’s okay, honey, we can do them right here. See Lorraine back there? She just got hers done for junior cotillion.” The saleswoman gestured towards a small booth near the back of the store. A redheaded girl, perhaps a year older, sat grinning on a tall wooden chair, admiring herself in a handheld mirror. Perched and pierced and preening. A tall woman with a French manicure, probably the mother, leaned over Lorraine to look into the mirror, too.

“Yeah, I see Lorraine,” Elise muttered, letting acid leak into her tone. “Cotillions are a bore.” She’d never been to one, but if the coifed pixie in the back frequented them, odds were good that they were dull gatherings. Elise heard her mother’s sharp breath intake, but did not meet what she knew was a stony gaze.

“If you do it today your mom gets a discount.” The shopper beamed at Mother, who did not smile.

Elise looked down, took one step back, tipped her left sneaker on its heel and dragged it, leaving darkened furrows in the beige carpet. “Naw.”

Her mother grabbed her shoulder and rattled it. “Excuse me?”

Elise pressed against the resistant grip. “No, ma’am. No thank you, ma’am.”

The saleswoman cocked her head to one side, pursed her glossed lips. “What a shame. They’d go beautifully with--”

“We’ll just take the dress,” Elise’s mother said.

Elise's stomach flipped the way it did on the Typhoon Coaster at Six Flags. Mother bent to her ear as she headed to the checkout counter. "Tuck your shirt in! Go wait outside the store."

Elise went out into the mall with clenched fists, slamming herself on to a bench so that it slid back several inches. She would really look spectacular if she had Winston's haircut and Joren's jersey.

The following day brought the first tea. Elise stood on the periphery of the covey of girls. She chewed a berry tart and studied her instructor. Lady Wilmington (Miss Wilmington in Sunday school, but a Lady at the Teas) always called on her to read the longest scriptural passages because she could read them the fastest without tripping over the King James English. She let Elise take her hat off during Sunday school while the other girls kept theirs on. While sipping a cup of apricot tea held in a white-gloved hand, Elise mentioned to Lady Wilmington that she would prefer to be called Elton instead of Elise. She wanted a haircut, one without curls. She wanted Lady Wilmington to tell her mother it was okay for girls to have different clothes and new names, that there was nothing to fret about, that God wouldn't mind. He would still know she was a girl.

Rita and Darlene huddled nearby. They overheard the discussion and set off towards their cohorts. Group by group, the room's decorous voices fell silent, though the soft orchestra of uncentered teacups wobbling on saucers continued. Lady Wilmington raised a smooth hand to bracket her glasses, moving them down her nose and then pushing them back to their original perch. Elise could see the color pour across Lady Wilmington's cinnamon complexion like a fluid sunburn. "Elton," she said in a strange voice, the name sounding like a verdict on her tongue. "Elton. Indeed." A low purr of giggles rose about the room, and Elise felt her own face heat.

Lady Wilmington snapped into her role. "Pardon! Let us put our tea up. Do we remember the proper manner in which to reassemble a tea tray? I expect each group to have a perfectly arranged tray when I return." She moved to Elise, clamped her hand around her right arm, ushered her from the room, up the nursery stairs and into an empty classroom with toddler-sized plastic chairs. "Wait here for your mother," Lady Wilmington said, her words hot, metallic, like the curler the salon used on Elise's ringlets.

That afternoon was the first time her mother whipped her for something other than wearing Joren's clothes.

Joren was home. Elise heard him call out to her father, heard a car door slam. Winston's father had dropped Joren off after practice. He usually did on Fridays, and Daddy returned the favor most Wednesdays. Elise was back in the oak, and she wrapped an arm around the branch beside her, leaning out to catch a glimpse of Mr. Smithers' blue pickup truck as it pulled away from the curb. She caught a faint whiff of exhaust. A puddle of shadow swallowed her shoe at the foot of the tree.

The sound of Joren's cleats on the wooden porch brought an image to Elise's mind, that of Mother rocking in the chair and watching Elise in the yard. Her mother favored yardsticks for drawing precise chalk squares on the sidewalk before their brown shingled house. Elise would play at playing hopscotch, Mother on the porch sewing ribbons for Elise's Sunday bonnets, rocking, watching. Beneath the carping gaze, Elise tried to play with neighbor girls who happened by, but she was distracted by the guffaws, snickers, rocking, hiccoughs, snorts and spits of the knot of corner boys, barefoot, dirty, boisterous, daring, their movements broad, flip, coarse.

Since it was Friday, Mother would soon call her in for games night. Tonight, it might be okay. Joren would want cards, backgammon, maybe Othello. Some games nights Joren slept over at a Beaver's house, and her parents would invite a church family with a daughter to the house. Of course the girl would want to play dolls or make-up, discuss which sixth-grader she had a crush on, her latest Scout lima bean project and cookie orders. She wouldn't want to go outside in the dark. She wouldn't want to run the Lionels. She could never spit. She'd wear old jeans but still wouldn't want to get them dirty. She'd bring a Tiffany Taylor doll, maybe a Barbie. She was never backgammon material.

On Saturday afternoon, Elise skipped rope in Buchanan Park in a yellow polka-dot dress, barbered crewcut lawn, tended heather carpeting her rhymeless jumps. She saw classmates, Rita and Darlene, Cara and Michelle, Bobbie and Paulette, others. They teemed like a fragrant ant mass on a sugar cube. How many games could they play that required circles, linked hands, coy turns, skips and singsongs? How many?

Her mother was engaged in deep chat with Cara's aunt (cupcake sale, best pumpkin pie recipe, trick-or-treat car pools) when Elise slipped from the field to a narrow track between hedges. The track wended to the stream where she and Joren had caught tadpoles in the summer. During the summer's last humid Saturday, she'd tailed Joren to the stream, knowing that Joren was intent on catching tadpoles for showoff on the first day of junior high. That day her mother had given her a blue basket for collecting flowers, but Elise had hung the basket on a branch and tiptoed through the wood, following Joren. He'd heard her steps, turning on her with a slow, lopsided grin, tufts of spiked hair drooping like chocolate meringue peaks.

They reached the stream together. Joren handed her the smooth fishbowl, warm from his hands, long-handled net within. He'd knotted his orange beach towel around her georgette skirt so she could kneel beside him to catch tadpoles. Elise had forsaken the net for the increased speed and accuracy of her palms, soon flushed, numbed in the cold current. Within two minutes, she'd caught three.

"You got pretty sharp technique, lady." Joren's voice cracked upwards.

"Yeah. I do." Her eyes watched the flashing lithe bodies.

"Hands're gonna get cold that way, though."

"No they ain't. Here come a snake."

A garter snake had passed in front of her toweled lap, shockingly close to the bank, and when it crossed Joren he'd picked it up behind its neck in a fluid swoop.

"Hey. You snagged that the way a mother cat snags her kits."

"Yeah. I got good hands, too." And he'd winked at her.

Elise's throat tightened. If she could be Joren's brother, an all-the-way boy, side by side with him, with the Beavers, the football. If she could right the equation instead of trying to balance it, if only she could inhabit a skin that followed her grain. Her yearning dammed at the back of her tongue.

Cara's high-pitched whining snapped Elise back to her skipping rope, which hung limp in her fist. She slid her gaze over to her mother and Cara's aunt; they were still plotting car pool routes, their heads close together over a creased map. Elise turned and picked her way to the tadpole stream. She found brown freckled toads along the muddy bank, hordes of them. She hurried after a swift-hopping posse of three. In seconds, the trio disappeared under a thicket of bushes. Elise squatted, craning her neck and back like a comma to peer into the dark, rank roots.

But she couldn't observe the toads' progress without getting down on all fours. She waited a beat--maybe they'd emerge?-then rose as her calves cramped. She returned along the bank, stepping into her arrival shoe prints. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that one of her prints was blurred in the middle, the outline tapering to toes pointed in opposite directions, not unlike the *Newsday* photo Daddy had shown her one evening, Siamese twins joined at the head. She heard a single, spongy step behind her. She whirled to see her mother standing rigid, arms so still at her sides they might have been prostheses (on another evening, Daddy's *New York Post* photo of a former construction worker with a prosthetic leg). Her mother's shoulders slumped, her eyes boring into Elise's, mouth pulled straight, felt hat askew, crumpled, her white dress streaked with leaf stains. She breathed hard, as though the journey from the field's cupcake and carpool discussion had been a taxing ordeal, and she withdrew a monogrammed handkerchief. She dabbed her brow.

Elise's eyes widened as she noticed that her mother's shoes were still white, save for the heels, which sank in a mound of brindled loam. She brushed away three yellowed pine needles spanning the part in her hair. They fell to the ground, miniature plantains. Her knees felt like softened butter as her mother spoke.

"If the deacon could see you. If your grandmother could see you. Did you know your grandma was a debutante? A homecoming queen? Her name was Martina Ellen Lochburn. Martina. She carried *her* name with pride." Mother's voice rose on the last declaration. "Your aunt Paula was an active Delta Sigma Theta sister. Only the finest ladies make it into Delta Sig! Lena Horne and Barbara Jordan were Delta Sigs!"

"Why aren't you one?" Elise's voice was pointed but hushed.

"If I wasn't so busy with Women's Fellowship, Stephen Ministry, ballroom, I'd be right in--Lord God, look at your dress. It'll have to go to the cleaners!" She took another step forward. Elise held her ground.

"What *is* it with you?" Elise heard tears in her mother's voice. "Do you know the neighbors are talking? That they're saying you need to see a doctor?" Her voice caught and she raised both hands, dabbing beneath each brimming eye with manicured fingertips. Her face wizened.

"I've just been, before school started," Elise offered, her voice even. "Remember? I got my booster." Absently, she rubbed the injection site on her shoulder, her fingers slipping over the small inoculation nub beneath her dress.

Her mother spoke in a vicious tone. “Not that kind of doctor, Elise!” She smoothed her hands over the grass stains, drew a quavered breath. Her body shuddered. “I just cannot believe you are my daughter. But then, you don’t want to *be* my daughter, do you?”

“Elise! Time to come in now.” Her father’s voice sounded the way his morning coffee smelled: potent, unsugared. Then, a hint of teasing: “Backgammon! Joren’s here.”

It was Sunday evening and Elise was in her tree. Yesterday, right after leaving Buchanan Park, Mother had booked an appointment with a mysterious doctor whom Elise would visit Monday morning. She would not have to wear a dress or file her nails or wear shiny black shoes. She would not get a shot or even have her temperature taken. It sounded confusing, intriguing even, but Elise’s instinct made her sure of one thing. This doctor was not a magician. He would not be able to reshape her.

Her father resorted to a bribe. “Come on, sweetie, Mom’s cutting the cobbler. Let’s not make her angry, okay?”

Elise knew her father worried about her, too, but he was not given to her mother’s tantrums. On occasion, at the breakfast table, in front of the TV, at bedtime, he’d stare at her with puzzlement, suspicion, but then flashed a broad smile at her whenever she caught his gaze.

Elise swung down from a branch on the backs of her knees, hanging upside down, scraping her shins, her dress and slip shrouding her face, curls and arms stretching towards earth. She somersaulted out of the tree, breaking the long fall with her hands and a short combat roll. Then she loped towards the house.