

Best of Fiction |

Piper Rowley

She

We don't talk about her like that. Past tense, or otherwise.

Unless we've been drinking.

She gets drunk off two glasses of wine.

I hold her hair, rub her back while she buries her face in my chest.

My lips around her penis, she moans in ecstasy, and then breaks into tears. She pushes my head away,

and weeps into her hands.

I don't know what to feel. I don't know what I am.

I know what you are. Her cries quiet.

She grew up with pickup trucks and football.

Her grandpa's name.

He had been a sweet man, gentle, with clear blue eyes,

until the day she told him his name didn't match who she was inside,

and he broke the skin on her face with the knuckles of his closed fist.

His old blue eyes bright and cracked,

I'm not your home anymore.

I grew up with a single mom and magazines,

How to Get Your Best Figure Yet,

Please Him in Bed,

that's what people say.

I hold her tight in bed.

Sometimes she steals my boxers, rolls the waist-

band up to fit,
does her hair in the mirror.
I can see the angry sadness in her eyes.
I go up behind her, kiss her neck to make her
shiver, make her smile,
if she feels safe
I slide my hands into her pants,
hear her breath catch
feel her get hard.
We stumble back to the bed and make love.
Some mornings it takes us hours to get ready.
I want her to feel beautiful.

Going out, we feel the stares.
Head turning, lingering, hard-edged glaring eyes.
They look at us like we are an obscene puzzle.
Their eyes are hateful daggers piercing our flesh,
fish-hooks pulling at our skin.
I put my arm around her broad shoulders,
you look lovely again today.
We take our food to go.

Her head is resting on my shoulder, her hair is
vanilla scented.
The TV illuminates our faces,
a movie we've seen a dozen times already.
I hear her sniffing, feel a soft tremor quivering
down her spine.
I turn her eyes towards me,
why are you crying?
She inhales, shaking, her voice is wet,
it's okay if you leave me for a real girl,
want a real girl.
I hold her while she shudders, becoming violent-

ly breathless.
My hands frame her rounded face,
her tear-stained eyes break my heart,
I am enveloped in her vanilla scent.
You are a real girl.

For her birthday I get her a silver bracelet.
She has no jewelry of her own.
I pick something modest, elegant,
beautiful like you,
I say when she opens the box.
They were the first tears of happiness I had seen
in a long, long time.
My mother made her a cake sprinkled with
crushed almonds.
Her family,
like they are every other day of the year,
were silent.
Later that night in the darkness of our bedroom,
with her cold bare feet pressed against my warm
ribcage
I can hear her soft smile through the dark.
This was the best birthday I have ever had.
You said that last year.
She wraps her arm around my chest,
every birthday I spend with you is the best.
She kisses me on the lips and falls asleep.

She sits on the edge of the tub,
her long damp hair falling over her shoulder.
I watch this ritual the way some people pray.
We share razors,
men's are better than women's, she says.
I watch the way she pulls the blades across the

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curve of her legs,
she is a painter with a brush.
Her face is still, calm, peaceful.
She glances up,
why do you always watch me?
I smile, go to her, on folded knees I kiss her soft
smooth legs, her calves, her thighs,
because I can never look away.

You are an abomination, one woman says.
A sin against God, humanity and nature, an older man screams.
Hey sweetheart, let me suck on it, you fucking fag, a drunk guy shouts.
Some weeks she refuses to leave the house.

She makes the bed in the morning. Her side is neat and crisp without a single wrinkle.
She leaves my side carefully undone, because she knows I don't like climbing into a made bed at night,
she laughs, you say it is like getting in a coffin, a stranger's bed, so I make my side, I leave yours.
She buys me the deodorant I like, and my favorite soda when I've had a long day at work.
She is learning to cook.
She home-cooks a big spaghetti dinner, the only thing she knows how to make, when we are celebrating.
I've come to love the texture of the slightly overcooked noodles.

She's not a screamer.
Not a talker.

When she is upset, if she is angry, she disappears inside of herself. She is gone.
Pensive, silent, absent.
I get so frustrated.
I learned from my mother,
to complain, to say,
I don't like it, it makes me feel
you hurt me.
She does not speak.
I think she learned from a young age, how to fold herself away.
An inverted origami piece.
She exiles herself into isolation,
to the island of our couch.
She avoids my eyes.
I've found her in the shower,
after hours of sitting there,
her hair is dry, her skin is dry, she is sitting in the corner, staring at the floor.
My voice gets rough with desperate emotion,
what is it, just tell me.
Just talk.
But I know how she is. I know this is how she deals with life.
So I climb into the shower with her,
and I wait.

Her eyes are squeezed tightly shut,
the pain on her face hurts me.
They were so mean...even when I tried...
Her sentences are fragmented by hiccups.
They're still so mean.
All I can say is,
I know baby.

She

I can't kiss away her bruises,
I can't erase the faces she sees.

The first time was slow. She was scared.
I was sure.
Are you sure, are you sure, she had asked.
It had been months.
Months of timid, shaky kisses, her lips nervously
knocking into mine.
It was months before my hand traveled to her
breasts and cupped them,
stroked them while she moaned inside my mouth,
then wrapped her fingers around my wrists,
are you sure?
Only if you are.
She hesitated, so I took my hand away,
kissed her cheek, my fingers in her hair.
When you're ready.
Five months later it was Christmas Eve,
and she stayed over.
My hands were pulling down her underwear,
wait, wait,
are you sure, you know, you know I'm not, I
don't, I have,
I stopped.
Put my hand on her cheek,
I am sure.
We looked at each other for a long time,
blinking Christmas tree lights reflecting in her
eyes,
and then she nodded, ever so slightly.
That night, we unwrapped each other like pres-
ents under the tree,
our fingertips shaking and roaming,

skating across flesh, touching, petting, stroking.
Our voices, is this okay, does this feel good,
became frantic pants,
the Christmas tree lights blinking against the dull
sheen of sweat on our bare skin.
We fell asleep naked, her head in the crook of
my arm,
my leg over hers.

She is inside, putting groceries away.
Mother and I are pulling the last few bags out of
the car.
She takes care of you, you know, my mother says.
I know, I say.
Did you know, right away, that she...her voice
trails off.
I nod.
It must be so hard, she says softly to herself.
It doesn't make a difference, she says.
She really is something special.
She is, I say.