

# Virgin

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You first hear the word when you're young, maybe eight or nine. Knees scraped, mouth sticky from a fudge pop that made your teeth ring, jean shorts clinging to sweaty legs. Your best friend Betty is a year older than you. Her fingers are sticky and her cheeks are just as fat as yours, but she is wiser. She knows a new word: *Virgin*.

She defines it with crude hand motions and you clamp your hands over your ears, squealing in disgust. You both fake gag. You both fake vomit. You both burst into screeching laughter after your cries of *GROSS!* make the neighbor holler through his thin walls. It's funny enough that you fall back against your lumpy mattress and forget about hand-me-downs and the invisible "stamps" your parents use to buy food.

Later, when you're a bit older, you'll find yourself at the grocery store with Betty. She giggles in front of one of the shelves and you rush across the linoleum, the soles of your shoes slapping with each step. *Virgin*, she mouths, pointing to the olive oil. She encourages you to touch it, her tan skin scattered with scratches and peeling sunburns. *Virgin*, you repeat. Your finger touches the cool glass of the bottle. *Being virgin means pure*, she half-whispers. Your hand feels dirty when you pull it back. Oily.

You read about virgins in a mythology book at the library. Artemis stands strong with a bow and arrow, her posture as proud as you are, handing your brother Jamie the paintbrush he asks for. He teaches you how to fill in the holes in the walls left by raging door-knobs. You tell him about virgin goddesses and he tells you about his God and chastity—but his God doesn't seem to make him as happy as he says. He leaves for college that autumn, his eyes filled with sadness.

You're thirteen and sitting on the curb of your driveway, mindlessly picking at old scabs, when Betty appears from nowhere. Her dollar store mascara trails down her cheeks, her lips are bitten. You shoot upright, attention locked on the way her caked makeup parts like

the Red Sea as tears fall. *What happened? What's wrong? Betty!* you half shout, partially in fear, partially in annoyance as she starts to blubber.

*I made a mistake*, she sobs, collapsing on the concrete. Her skirt shifts, revealing bruised, scraped knees. Serum wells in droplets of clear-yellow. You lower yourself beside her, pulling her quaking hands from her face. *What happened?* you repeat. Your eyes lock on the trail of blood leading down her thigh. You understand, then.

Instantly.

*Virgin means pure*, you recite. You don't mean to, but the words slip out. The balmy summer air seems to grow heavier as Betty takes a deep, deep breath. *I'm not*, she whispers. Her blue eyes flicker open, veins bursting red, and for a moment you're entranced by the contrast of color, by the beauty of her. *It's okay*, you murmur back, reaching an arm around her. You expect her skin to be dirty, you're remembering the olive oil bottle, but she is the same Betty she's always been. *It's okay. It's okay.* You press your lips to her cheek as you've done a thousand times and feel her flinch away. It's too late now to tell her that you love her.

You write about this experience to Jamie the night your parents echo down the halls. Your tears hit the letter and make the paper moist and pasty. You write about the last book you read, about virgin sacrifices and Iphigenia. You write about how virgins were killed to end wars and save crops, and how gods rarely answered. You write about how you realized that Artemis doesn't save girls like in the myths – she didn't save Betty. You ask if Jamie's God protects those who pray to him, but when Jamie's reply comes, he ignores the question. Instead, his letters slow down and then taper completely, until one letter appears with "return to sender" on the front.

A virgin beer is what your mom hands you after the funeral three long months later, the apple juice sparkling in a plastic cup. You raise it with the rest of the people toasting, your eyes on the closed casket. Jamie is gone. The priest says that despair is a sin, but Jamie's soul may find mercy in God anyway because he kept his body pure. He was a man of God, after all—unstained, even with

weakness in his mind. The drink tastes sour despite the saccharine carbonation coating your tongue and throat.

Betty stands beside you, but she no longer remembers how to cry. You cling to each other and lower your cups to the edge of the casket, leaving them there, abandoned.

Oily. Untouched.