Twenty-two
by Skijler Hutson

When the guy from the grocery store came to my porch, I was smoking a third cigarette and reckoning the sidewalk and a kid running down the street, her braids bouncing like a wave. I know when he started speaking to me, I would have to lie and tell him I'd already smoked a little weed too so I could explain the pauses in my speech. But that was okay because I had worked outside all day and felt taught in the right places and even let the sun lick me a little. Usually, I was paranoid about sunblock and aging, but glory was all I had in mind that day. God, he was so hot and had these two tattoos, one on each forearm, and not yet 21… Later that would embarrass me.

Do you want a beer? I walked to the back of the house where the kitchen was and grabbed him something out the minifridge. Before returning to the front, I paused in the hallway and pressed the cold aluminum to my temples. The wooden door was open and there he was through the screen with his back toward me. The whole energy of that house that summer was opening on to me, and of course there was a dude waiting for me on the slouching, rotting porch. Not just some dude I met in a chatroom and asked to come over, but a guy I slowly got to know, who waved me over to his line and didn't scan the expensive stuff. In a year, I'd come back, and it would all be painted over and lifted up so a dropped marble wouldn't roll.

Thing was I was actually smoking a lot that summer. But it was fine because I had made a little routine of it, and anyway it was North Carolina: heavy and humid, a screen porch and something Blake left you to suck on. I mean, you could literally see the Lucky Strike smokestack from my bedroom window. And then the neighbor also had an old fashioned *ceci n'est pas* type of dick that he kept brandishing off while he mowed the lawn. Sometimes I'd go up to my room and masturbate to him and sweat it all out and Blake would knock on my door. *Jacking off to the neighbor! Leave me alone.* God, it was so hot that summer and I was so angry, so I kept on smoking and feeling young about it.

His name was Noah, the guy from the grocery store. Noah didn't know it all, but he saw me dressed in a skirt once, and I think he thought it was about fashion. Apparently, he ran a vintage resale account on Instagram – on the porch, he scrolled through it to show me. Okay, so it was definitely about fashion. But it wasn't like *he* wore skirts.

I thought the vintage resale account was cute because I guess we were all doing that at some point or just telling each other about "estate sales." Like people died and then you got all this stuff. We vaporized it onto the internet and let people know that it was hot again. *Where did people even find this stuff?* Estate sales, dude. I guess the business was in making it convenient. He showed me this one jacket that kind of looked like a carpet. I could tell he thought he was really doing something there. And I guess he was. He decided it was possible to wear carpets and I decided I could wear skirts.

He talked all southern and called me *cousin*, which I didn't even know was southern. I could get down with *cousin,* except then it was all incestual. It was a weird thing to whisper to myself walking down the street daydreaming – *cousin*. Or shorter, *cuz*. I feel like he called me that just to make sure I knew he wasn't into me like that, which is to say he wasn't into *dudes* like that. But I still just swayed there on the porch and let him punch me on the shoulder, *cuz…* It was about the sun and the big mulberry tree cracking the sidewalk, the texture of its bark latticed just like a Victorian boddice.

His whole life could be found between Durham and the Virginia border. In high school all his friends would come down here to the fake ID spot that all the freshmen liked. When he moved to Durham it was the only type of city he could imagine. We had actually

first met a few years ago when I lived in the dorms. He was working janitorial and he would smile at me and I thought he was cute. Then he started working construction but didn't speak Spanish so felt lonely and dumb. By then I had moved off campus and he switched to bagging groceries and then I didn't have a dining plan anymore so I started going to his store.

He told me this story once that seemed really formative to him, and it involved getting punched out by some trashy country white dude. It all sounded very juvenile, drunken, about jealousy and girls. He kept turning to me and asking if he was funny the way he told the story. I assured him. He remarked how easy it was to talk to me and I wondered to myself if it was because I was a woman. He clearly didn't talk to women. At least, not openly.

I'd usually jerk off in the sunlight around 1:00, fall asleep for a couple hours, and then smoke a bowl and head to work feeling light. Pre-shift, we'd try out a few drinks, or Amanda and I would sneak out to her car. She was always drunk but always so kind, and we all understood – or rather, there was *an understanding*. My understanding was that her dad had died and I snuck Jack Daniels into the cokes we sipped on the floor. By opening, I was usually buzzed enough to get through the night. Not that it was hard, just more enjoyable that way. In the winter I really felt the theater of it all, but that summer I think I was good just getting on and making people happy. I'd really play it up for them and even talk fake southern and be hospitable. They'd compliment my hair and I'd tell them where the fish was from and then I'd go sit on the bathroom floor and watch porn on Twitter just to stimulate. Or message someone.

At the time there was this forty-eight-year-old who kept driving by, his distance from me updating by the miles, then feet. *You want daddy dick to open you up?* I thought that was really funny, "daddy dick." *Yes yes yes. I want daddy dick to come destroy me.*

So later I got home and told Blake someone was coming over and he's older.
--No, like Blake, he's older.
--I get it, I have gay friends.
--Okay, but can you just stay in your room?
--Yes yes yes.

We smoked until we were very high (he had brought it back from a recent business trip) and his cock was so big that I literally came in one thrust and it. Tore. Me. Apart. I was embarrassed, but then he grabbed my head and made me lick his armpits which I did and then his nipples and we lay down and I asked him if he had kids and he said why would I ask that.

I met him at the river one afternoon, Noah from the grocery store. The Eno River runs across the northern circumference of Durham, it's also the name of one of the first peoples and it's like embroidery because its perfect and inlaid. Here you could be really hot and sweaty in a jean shorts type of way. There were hammocks and innertubes. I'd stop at the gas station and grab canned iced tea and gummies and drive over with one hand on the wheel, Lucinda Williams and John Prine playing.

I parked by the old mill, then followed a gravel path. The gravel gave onto a bridge and then a cut wood, a stream, meadow, along the river and then an opening where he had already set up his hammock. He waved me over, and I bow-legged across the rocks and into him, I mean, he grabbed my shoulder when I stumbled. And, *hi*.
--hi, how are you
--good, hot out
--yeah, I already took a dip, but I'd go back in
--okay let me just set my stuff down

He was wearing all this gold and it looked 90s, chain linked like it could pinch me. His watch in particular dangled a gap where I could slide my finger through. There would be

his veins, forking, stretching. This could all be very convincing, I thought. I had only brought basketball shorts to swim in, the same ones I had come in.

I can't identify the trees in North Carolina too well, otherwise I'd give more, but it seemed like there were willows along the river. Out west, at a cliff's height you never hope to see visible water, but if there's an arroyo full of willows, that's something – a long leafy line in the sand. So yeah, probably they were willows, some sort of Piedmont race. And they encroached and shifted on top of us, bending over the water. The silt and sand were all glittery with minerals underneath. And all muddy.

The river slowed where we were and formed a sort of lagoon. We kind of just bathed there and wriggled around like two Norwegian girls, giggling. When we got back on the rocks there was a large Mexican family playing music and someone who must have been an uncle offered us Coronas. Noah also had his vape, so we were hitting that too and lying down, occasionally sipping on the beer. He was telling me about his mother and siblings. One of the children from the Mexican family kept running up to us completely naked. He grabbed her finger and kind of twirled her around and she'd do a little scream and scurry away. Then he talked more about his own sister at that age, when he had to take care of her more.

The little naked girl came up to my feet, gapped-mouth and confused, just rolling about in the dirt and shallows. I wiggled my toes at her, but she just stared at me the way very young children do, so I tried my best to ignore her until her mother noticed. I decided to lay my body completely down on the earth. Until then, I had been propping myself up with one arm, so it felt good to turn my shoulder in its socket and bend my wrist back and forth, feeling the tendons relax. I created a sort of ditch to support the back of my head in the hardened mud. Then I lay flat, palms outstretched at my side.

Yeah, when she was her age, obviously I was not old enough to be caring for her, but I really acted like her parent. I always kept her in the corner of my eye or checked what she was sticking in her mouth. I don't even remember my mother saying "watch out for your sister" or something like that, I just kind of took to it. I don't know… There was this time I caught her with my grandfather's cigar cutter. You ever see one? They look like toys but are the perfect size for a finger… Now she's in middle school and is doing just fine, not even dramatic like she should be.

One night that summer: People had really turned out, if you know what I mean. I was drunk and dancing, smoking in the back with some girls, talking loudly about New York and the future. There was some drag number about to go on, and I was ready, as it were, to be a bit feral. Then Noah called me, asking me if anything was happening. I screamed into the phone the club's name (the only one I could have been at in Durham), he screamed back reminding me he was only twenty, I screamed instructions to go to the back, then he asked if it was fine to bring his girl.

They pull up in the back parking lot twenty-five minutes later, and the moment I see her I can tell she's not having any of it. I ask her name, whispers a reply, shaking a bent hand. Gelled down brunette hair, coffin nails, jumpsuit, clear braces. Ugly. Ugly bitch.

He and I grab each other by the shoulders. I am in heels so I'm stumbling a bit, but we're joking around, and I even give him a little diva kiss on the cheek. She's there being a total bitch about it all, frowning, hands in her armpits, giving me a smile she obviously doesn't want to spare. I go up to her and introduce myself some more, she's nervous, and I ask why. *Because you're cool, and the people here are cool. And I don't even know how you two met.* Bitch, I say to myself. Ugly bitch.

It bothered me how easily she could see it and how ugly she was for it. How much I liked him and how much I was better than her. I've never been much of one for rules with

these sorts of things, but in her eyes whatever I was doing was definitely not cool. What I *was* doing of course was just swaying my hips.

Anyway, he ended up leaving early because of her and her insecurities. I ended up doing a couple lines in the bathroom. Blake picked me up and it was all the same it ever has been, except outside some girl complimented my outfit up and down with a finger wagging, knowing.

That day at the river with him I snuck off into the woods and jerked off against a tree. I had made an excuse about having to leave early, just so I could get it all out and him against me would not be a thing anymore. And there was a sigh of the trees and a cataract against my vision.

After that I felt a heavy cloud so I bended my sex against the flesh and squatted down and started pissing a puddle down into the detritus. Then I was thinking about the naked little girl. And I was copying her nature. I put my hands all the way up and started laughing, enjoying the air against my skin. Feeling all it was I thought I needed to. The space of time that was that summer, that country, my sorrow, and above all my anger. Turning across into one revelation upon another. Tired like my muscles aching. Tired of knowing myself.

Then it was the hand of my mother that came and scooped me up. Right where it all shouldn't have been. Against my skin, the wind coarse, guiding, a faint memory filled with sand. And her voice upon the water, *get your butt back over here*. The image of the girl, scurrying away.