

The End of the Tunnel

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In the beginning I had not meant to live in the crawlspace under the porch. That wasn't the kind of project I usually devoted myself to, as I am usually successful and disdainful and quite irreparably busy, for a high schooler, and well dressed, boots and shawls, drapery in shades of brown, Bohemia in miniature. Like last Friday, for example: silver moon earrings dangling coquettishly beneath a slouchy beret, rings, fringe, a presentation on fifteenth-century Portuguese explorers smashed, the other tenth-graders drooling in awe. I take pride in myself.

But today, Monday, I had dressed dully and warmly in Adidas zip pants and a soccer hoodie, and tennis shoes with warm socks. I knew I would be going to the porch directly after school (skipping various meetings, obligatory end-of-day locker visits, and coaches' summonings). I needed to think. I faced a dilemma. The fate of a man was, quite literally, in my hands.

I had beelined to the porch with the desperation of someone promised a hot bath, and my relief upon arrival was palpable. Cloistered away under the porch, in a world of eerie cave-like miniatures, among the wiffleballs and desiccated rabbit poo, the quiet ringing in my ears, I unpacked my bookbag, including my waterbottle and the extra blanket I had humped around with me all day. The fact that I had bothered to show up at school at all, knowing I would be running away afterward, says a lot about my personality.

The cracks in the floorboards of the porch let in dramatic slants of light. I had, at least, arrived. I sat thinking until the sky went milky, towards evening.

I had meant to 'run away' for only a few hours, that's all, perhaps a nap's-worth of afternoon; just enough to stimulate a flutter in the repose of my mother or Nana. That meant my time was nearly up.

But, if I stayed under the porch, I wouldn't have to deal with what I had seen. With my dilemma.

The mere thought of continued existence under the porch was, to the unprepared mind, laughable. No - one would have the willpower to sleep outside, in the cold dark.

But if I stayed... I wouldn't have to do anything about what I had seen. Which, in fact, was the correct course of action. Because I didn't know what to do.

So I prepared my mind.

First I let go of the idea that I was hungry. I sipped from my water bottle. Nana or one of my brothers would bring me dinner. Doubtless they already knew I was under here. I had pulled this trick more than once as a child.

Then I had to let go of the idea of track.

I should have been preparing my body for club track tryouts, so that I could bounce on my feet like the deer do, and make Dolly Brady sorry she was ever rude to me with her eyes. Last-year I was runner-up in the middle distances.

Laughing, shiny-teeth D. B. was a first-place runner. You bet she was. She was the kind of long-legged blonde who gets everything easily and is genuinely hurt when people resent her. I have known D. B. for a long time, because in addition to competing in track, we also play club soccer together and we have been on the same team for years, with the same coaches. She's also my best friend and has never let me win a race. I love her for it: I win almost everywhere else.

It hurt to think of Ol' D. B. out there in the wild, while I was stuck under the porch. I wanted to train.

But I let go of that idea. I was not to be training for track tryouts. I was not even going to be attending high school. I had something to deal with first.

The crawlspace was an eight-by-ten-by-three pocket just waiting for my creative touch. My entrance was a hole in the lattice tucked behind porch steps. The crawlspace living room featured all natural light, from the cracks in between the porch floorboards, and a suitable ventilation system from the diamond holes in the lattice. Luckily I am a small person. Once I hollowed out a place to sleep, I could sit up.

It was easy to sleep most of the day and come out at night, when my family was asleep. Sometimes Nana left gifts, like cookies or books or scratchy bedding. When I needed a change of clothes I took Mom's pajamas down from the laundry line, which was practically public goods anyway. It was then - because Nana kept sneaking them to me- that I started to read Agatha Christie out of desperation and fell in love. I will probably never stop reading her, even though at this point I wish I could.

After the novelty of my new bedroom wore off, my brothers didn't visit me often. Both were too big to fit comfortably, even Reese, who is younger than me by only ten months and the better of the two, best if he's alone. Plus they are the kind of people who need something to do immediately, or they just wander away. Careless, physical, fighting brothers. Reese assured me that he was telling everyone in school that I had run away. Well don't, I said. I didn't want the cops coming round and assigning my mother a truancy notice. They kept the secret, though, without me having to kill them, and that was already more than I had ever expected of them.

They all knew I was under the porch - Reese, Jacob, Nana, Mom. They just didn't know how to get me out.

Little did I know the small-town beat cops had already come by the house and given my mom a truancy notice. My mom had given them some yarn about me being slow and her teaching me at home during her precious leisure time. Luckily my Mom and Nana were clever enough to play hot potato with the cops, telling them I was at grandma's if they came to my house and vice versa. So they both abetted me, although with Mom especially it was like holding a hot wire to her palm-lines.

I imagined Mom reading to me through the lattice work, her voice making the sun go down.

In reality she did talk to me while she was out working the garden, or Sundays or Saturdays. This was the end of my first week under the porch. I was still thinking; or rather, I had spent a lot of time thinking about ways to think about what I needed to think about.

I woke up when she came out to the yard even though I always have been a deep sleeper and she made no noise. She came out with a two-foot shears and trimmed the crabapple tree. She wrenched out the carpet roses, which always come up in the wrong spot. It was a late spring morning, the weekend, and everything was moist and nothing was sweaty, but water fell even from the fingertips of the pine needles and from the zenith of the wing of the grasshopper, because it had rained deeply last night and the Earth had drunk her fill.

I longed to see my Mom's eyes but she had on her reflective bug-eye sunglasses, like always.

She never asked me why I was under there, even as my exile under the porch went on and on and on. She just told me it was stupid. She'd stand atop the porch and tell the potted basil, Just stop it now. But she was talking to me. Her voice rocking like a boat about to capsize. I knew if I were looking at her she would be looking for a hug. She always needs reassurance when I transgress.

Then she'd retire, scraping open the screen door and squirreling herself away to TV luncheons, always half a second before I decided to come out, even though I was dirty and guilty for it.

I thought about her at night, lying inside while I laid outside. She was surrounded by an impenetrable fog, which could only be matched and understood by grumpy fogs of similar density; I wish I could lie and say that she had a secret room, where she retired to to be herself; but that is my secret fear, that she had no room, that she had no self.

I wanted to tell her why I had run away. But the shame would kill her. I kept this fear close to my chest, which is the body of my parents given unto itself.

It was around this time that I got the idea to dig my way out from under the porch.

I quickly lost track of how many days had passed. All I could say is that I slept without a hat now. I could have scratched reminders into the southern porch post, which got the most light, but this was hardly enjoyable work. The sun went up or it went down, which it did as quickly as a pinky dips in water, in a continuous duel with the iridescent moon.

Instead, time passed when somebody came by to tell me how much time had passed. My mom perfected the art of discussing me within earshot. She was worried what her sister might think. Her sister did not approve of my retreat from life. Her sister believed in a firm command of children. Her sister, in fact, had excellent children. (Those would be my excellent cousins.) Her sister had recommended my mother to a psychologist.

I gave you girls everything, my Nana would say, Everything, and you still find something to be such bitches about.

These one-sided discussions about me left my mom furious and Nana amused, which is a kind of sad which goes out of its way to forget itself.

The weekend before I began sleeping under the porch, I had attended our U16 club soccer banquet. Everyone was there: me, Selene, Ally, Ty, Corrine, Deana, D.B... in short, girls I had known for years. There were boys there too, from the comparative U16 boy's division, but honestly they aren't important. The girl's team, my team, was almost professional; the boys were barely mediocre. Soccer isn't as big of a draw for boys as it is for girls. Or maybe they're just bad.

Most of the players were represented by at least one parent, and our coaches were there. Also men that I had known for years. Coach Tre, Coach Sal, and Coach Darrell.

D.B.'s mom wasn't there, but her Craig brother was.

Craig is a piece of shit, if I do say so myself.

We ate shrimp hors d'oeuvres.

We drank white wine.

We ate pasta: each diner had a choice between white sauce and red. The sauces tasted identical.

The parents were loud and loose and when our time was up at the rented venue hall Ally's mom rallied a group to go out afterward, because we had, after all, won the State championship in soccer, and we all had a lot to celebrate, the parents especially, as they had done all the driving and fundraising and cheering on and bandaging. Us girls just played.

The parents went out. We went too: me, Selene, Ally, and D.B; a ragtag collection of parents including my mother; D.B's brother; and Coach Sal and Coach Darrell.

It was Saturday night. We were drinking wine that was ordered for us in a real bar.

How it ended up, I'm not sure. Craig (the POS brother) was supposed to be making sure we got home safe.

I was meant to be sleeping at D.B.'s house. I had done this for about half the Saturdays of my short life. My mom called an Uber for D.B. and me and called a separate one for herself.

Hers arrived first.

Craig, the arrogant and luckless bachelor, was staying out.

I got in the Uber. So did D.B. So did Coach Darrell.

Coach Darrell was not part of the plan. He was, however, insistent, drunk, and stumbling.

When we got home, Coach Darrel took D.B. down to her basement and fucked her. I saw them; I heard them. I didn't intervene. I, feeling helpless and stupider than I had ever felt, passed out on the upstairs couch by the flatscreen.

D.B. says she doesn't remember anything "after we got to the bar."

Coach Darrell has been our coach since we were U14.

These are the facts of the case.

My first night sleeping under the porch, I hardly slept at all. The first night I laid awake and every half hour got up to check for the sun.

Now I liked it. I had become comfortable in my prison. School was a nightmare, something I only remembered when I wanted to punish myself.

And I kept digging. I put the dirt all around the edges of the crawlspace under the porch. Now that I had a sizeable hole I got scared of the immensity of my project. This was truly weird behavior.

I remembered Nana's wobbly voice as she talked with my mom. She never disagreed with her daughter. She usually just shut down and stared off into space. Started naming the flowers. I remembered something so far beyond words I had never thought to remember it before. Grandma and I used to build fairies out of peony petals and straw bundles. She told me if I built a nice house for them they would like to stay with me. She said, build a nice house and all the little creatures will love you.

When my brothers came in from playing outside my mom would chastise them for being late. My grandma would feed them, secretly, like she was bribing them to always come back.

Girls are different than boys, Coach Darrel had said. When you're facing a girl, a defender, you need to get inside her head.

God, I hated him. I wished I could scrub myself clean of him.

You've got such a great rack, D. B., Coach Darrel had said. That much I had heard.

But I still didn't know what to do.

Every night I dug almost vertical in the earth. I let my nails grow out without chewing them so I might have more purchase when I dug. I piled the rocks I found around the entrance to the tunnel. I needed to eat a lot more, too. Luckily I have never been a picky eater. I would rather have a stomach ache

from bad food than go hungry. I suppose that's the way I am. I raided the trash bins every night, though Nana usually found a way to get it to me without it even having to go in the bin. I walked around the neighborhood for entire evenings, keeping my legs stretched, thinking, thinking.

The tunnel started off as a hole. Once it was taller than I am, and I had to hoist myself up with my forearms to get out, I started to dig outward, under the yard. I was aiming for the sewage ditch opposite. I thought about Darrell as I dug. He walked with the swagger of someone who found a lot of success early in life. He was short and dressed well. He had always been demanding, intense, moody: sometimes he would pick out a girl's mistake and stop play and broadcast it in front of everyone, and demand that girl replay whatever it was she did wrong, while the rest of us did planks, until she fixed it. But he never yelled.

And D. B. was his favorite. She was good, you see. She was really good. She was going to play college. She was going to go D1, maybe.

I kept digging. I was moving myself into the unknown. Soon I would reach the sewage ditch. Then I would be able to stand. Maybe I could follow it and find a pond to swim in. That would be heaven, floating, cut off from all events, myself an event unto myself. Discontinuous.

I heard a sound behind me and turned around.

I almost thrust my hand into my grandmother's face. It always seems like the next red-haired person you see will be your last. I had to bite my knuckle to keep from screaming.

What are you doing here?

I heard you digging.

That was impossible but I didn't argue. Above my head, perhaps, marking the passage of my tunnel, were cracks in the grass where the roof was thin.

If you go beyond this point, your mother will not accept you back. She would rather keep the peace than accuse someone. There will be publicity. Your mother will blame you for speaking out.

Nana paused, looked at me critically, like one looks at amateur artwork, deeply but without awe. She does not want girls to be known as victims, she said slowly, her voice high and old.

But D. B is a victim, I said.

I turned around and kept digging. I dug through the yard dirt that was rich and wet and black. I didn't even return to the porch, I fell asleep in the tunnel.

We revolved around a point of indiscernibility, Nana and I. If she had appeared, if she hadn't, it didn't matter.

The next morning she woke me by dropping a plastic bag full of blueberry pancakes in the west end of the tunnel.

I was dirty and tired. But I was done hiding.

Ok, I said.

My mom would not want to know that D. B. was raped. Too bad. She was, also, the person I needed to tell. She was my practice before I could confront Darrell. I stood in my tunnel. The tunnel, which ended anticlimactically where I had quit digging, never reached the surface.

I ate three chewy pancakes and climbed out of the tunnel. The sunlight tore at me. In one hand I held the plastic bag, heavy with pancakes. They were still warm.

Thank you, I said. It was the first time in weeks we had stood face to face.

Long time no see, Nana said. How short she was, how she smelled like a good closet when we hugged. A short woman has watched over me all my life and cried but never turned away from what she

saw, and never judged, neither. We hugged, which was heroic of her. People look best in the dawn light, but light can do nothing for smell. I felt hideous.

Don't go in there just yet, she said. You need to be gentle with your mom.

I think Nana was referring to my smell, but I felt calm.

I thanked her again for the pancakes, kissed her. Her skin was as blank as the dreamless, and cold. I will probably always have to get on my tiptoes to kiss her cheek. Nana is always somewhere far away, some say she is lost among the flowers of evil, so say those unhappy people for whom joy is not productive.

I went in the house. Mom? I said. Mom?

I don't think my mom has ever once been surprised, no matter what I do. She took my reappearance in the house in stride. At dawn, she was not wearing pajamas: she wore maroon scrubs and Tuesday makeup and her brown hair was done up in a bun in the back: she was hurrying to the clinic, already late but, having shined her beauty, she was ready, wide-eyed, impatient, yes, but not surprised.

It is such a chore having a gorgeous mother.

I told her.

Darrell raped D.B.

Well, she said, through the layers of fog that protect her, Well, what do you mean by 'raped.'

I'm not going to say any more, you just have to believe me.

Why would he do that?

Believe me, I've been asking myself the same question.

We parried and fought. Quickly my mom called in to the clinic, earning a two-hour delay, hopefully sufficient time to destroy me. She sent Reese and Jacob away to school, those rats. Then she turned herself back to me. To her, I had been hiding out from my responsibilities for weeks. What seemed to me like willpower was, to her, an audacious impudence.

But I begged her to see that what I said was true. We got to her secret room. So it really did exist. Coffee was served there: my mother does not often look the widow, though that is who she is, and I understand why she hides away the sad part of herself in a little room.

I'm sorry, she said at last, how she would ever be able to trust a coach again, or any other man with her daughter, that was my question to bring but not mine to answer, Do you still want to go to that school, Yes, Are you sure, Yes, I do, at least until the school year ends and I can transfer if I want to, which I'm not sure I do, Even though - well, the whole club team goes to your high school, and if you decide to tell about this they'll all know, it might be the end of your club team, That's a pity because it was the best team I ever played for, but all good things end, Yes, but do they have to end now, think about it, you'll graduate in another year and then you can tell all about it after you leave, you could preserve your last year together. Because things will end anyway, regardless.

Exactly, so I have to end them the right way, I've thought about it, my decision is final. I'm going to tell Coach Darrell - I shivered - Today - that I know what he did and that he was rather stupid about it, actually, and then I'm going to tell the Club higher-ups and they'll take it from there.

But you'll be slandered at school, my mom said, and I laughed because she was such a scaredy-cat, she should spend some time sleeping on the cold ground.

You sound like you don't want me to tell the truth, I said, It's not that, she backtracked, I just want you to be prepared for how hard it's gonna be.

What's mine is mine, I said, It's my school. It's my cross-country team come fall.

Well, if you're sure, you need to tell D.B. what you're going to do first.

Ok.

Oh, my sweet baby darling, said my mother, nothing that's easy is ever easy for you, Luckily, I said,
Why is that lucky, I just have a feeling that it is.

Careful that your words don't get twisted around, said my mom, I know what I mean, I said.

Also I was grounded for impertinence re: running away to live under the porch and I was not
allowed to accept rides home from anybody, ever. I rode the bus home like a plebian.

I had lost nearly a third of my sophomore spring. The house finches were building upon the eaves.
D.B. had won a blue ribbon in track, and acquired a college boyfriend, neither of which were good for her,
although they were both shiny.

I did what I had to do. I told. In the end, it took very little time and everyone knew.

Coach Darrel went to jail for a few measly months. But he went back to Oregon when he got out,
or so he said, according to Facebook. He became a window salesman: and who knows if he ever got better.
I felt better, at least.

At last I had earned back the right to keep sleeping at D.B.'s house. We both slept in her bed. Life
resumed around me, as the circle swallows the dancer.