

Dear Job,

This morning after they gave me breakfast, this woman I used to know was strapped to a table and had a needle shoved into her arm. The man on the news said Tara Hackett died by means of lethal injection at 7:19am. I started thinking about some doctor, some man standing over her, smacking her forearm, digging for a vein and searching for the last bit of colour her body had to give. I figure they gave her the needle in her right arm, with her being right-handed. Could be wrong though, I never been executed. Can't imagine what it's like when they belt you down and start digging for a vein, digging for the only colour you got left.

Suppose I should be happy with her being dead and all. Everything was supposed to die with her but it hasn't, and it won't. Tara Hackett dying on the same day as your girl's birthday reminds me that everything's the same. That I'm still the same. Today isn't the best day to tell you certain things but I don't mean you no harm. Not sure what 25 looks like on you but I'm sure you're awful handsome. Probably real tall too. Bet your little girl is beautiful, so beautiful it hurts to look at her. It's my niece's birthday today and a woman who said she loved me is dead.

Tara Hackett got the needle because she killed a bunch of people, but she didn't kill them all at once. She did the first four real quick then waited a while before the last one. Police say all her misfortune, the path the Devil chose for her, started when she killed her three little boys. She killed her three sons with three separate pillowcases after dragging a cheese grater over their little baby stomachs and faces. She said she brought the cheese grater in from the kitchen, and that the reason she

did it was to make sure the babies didn't look like their daddy no more. She couldn't bear to look at them no longer—always stumbling around like little screaming, sober versions of him. She said by the time she couldn't recognise her sons' faces anymore, they weren't even crying—probably didn't even need the pillowcases but then she figured it was the decent thing to do. Tara Hackett did all this before unloading six rounds into the soft, booze-bloated flesh of their daddy. He had Satan in him, Tara Hackett had told me one time. She went on saying Satan made the babies' daddy the way he was, that Satan owned him—so the first time she got swollen he owned her and she had to marry him, give him his children, give him what belongs to him. Tara Hackett said God hates women and that's why they're all diseased and disfigured and killed all the time. But now Tara Hackett is dead and I don't like that kind of talk anymore.

Tara Hackett told me she killed the babies because they made her feel real sad and if they stuck around crying much longer she would have to swallow the barrel herself. She said that she didn't see no difference between killing somebody and letting them live. Kindest thing I ever done for anyone was kill them, Tara Hackett had said more than once. She told me she killed the boys' daddy because she was sad and was real scared that if he stuck around much longer he would make her have more babies. Which meant him poking at her more, more babies sucking on her. More babies stealing from her body. More babies taking whatever they could from her. More babies crying and more babies to kill. Then, after she told me all that, she told me she loved me, again.

Courts and doctors said it wasn't all her fault because sometimes when a woman has a baby, she can't cope right. She don't feel like she should. I think it's funny, men doctors and judges telling a woman how she should feel, how she should be after turning her insides out. Courts gave Tara Hackett life without the possibility of parole for killing three

little boys and a man. But Tara Hackett didn't get the needle for that.

On my plate this morning, like every morning, was a scoop of grits and a dry biscuit and a glass of orange juice. The pulp in the juice and the weight of the grits sat on my tongue real heavy, like how I think grated baby skin would feel. They have this taste and this feeling I can't get rid of no matter how much I swallow. And all the swallowing and Tara Hackett being dead now got me thinking I should tell you things, everything that happened so you'll make sure things like that don't happen to your little girl. I'm sure you and me remember different. But truth is you was just a kid and I remember things the way they was, the way I need them to be. Suppose we don't really got a story you and me, but instead two stories that bleed together. And maybe when I'm telling you things I'll be able to stop thinking about digging for veins and what it felt like for three little boys to have those little blades drug clean across their pure skin. I'll tell you things so maybe it'll make my head quiet for a bit.

All the things that happened happened in summer. Maybe that's because folks sin in the summer months more than any other season. Sinning is easier done in the sticky months with less clothes and when the sun stays out, spitting its hot breath into the dry ground until almost midnight. The sun's never weak, not never.

Nothing much happened before Caro. Who I turned out to be started the day I first saw Caro and her sweaty face in the woods. The day Caro showed up is the day all this started—which is funny because I known Collier forever but the day Caro showed up was the first summer we started. The first summer we realized there was nothing to do but be bored. Slinking from house to house like lizards hiding under rocks to escape the stink of heat. Or like truck stop whores who bounce from one backseat to another. Our bodies moved because we made them, they did what we wanted. It was the

first summer we got lazy enough to start acting like the women who made us, and the first summer we started being bad. Collier's mama Donna said a Jezebel is born damned and she'll never be saved. Everything that ever happened to us happened in summer. Always.

Caro shows up the same June our Mother shatters the Willie and Waylon record on the kitchen floor because it's nothing but a cracker's gospel garbage. The June Caro shows up she's seven and I'm seven and Collier's nine. It's the June I love listening to Leave Home on the back porch after our daddy goes to bed, sitting on our Mother's lap. I'm seven and it's the first summer She accidentally burns me with Her cigarette. I wince when She blows on the raw pink flesh then kisses my neck. She apologizes through tears with a mouth that's poison slick and it's the first time I know me and Her don't have the same skin anymore. That we don't like the same types of touch and pain. I'm seven and no matter how hard I press my own flesh into Hers, we don't have the same body no more.

Seven, Seven and Nine

In the small pocket of trees hidden from Collier's mama's perch in the kitchen, Collier and Harper stride to the furthest corner of Donna's acres. Collier leads Harper by the hand to the very back of the woods then pulls the joint from behind her ear.

'My Mama don't like when we touch Her things,' Harper says.

'She got a million of em. She won't miss just one.' The dope cigarette is pinched between Collier's teeth while her small hands fumble with Tommy's confederate flag lighter. 'Sides, She sleep all day.' She flicks until her thumb is red and worn. Quick sparks ignite in flashing breaths before hiding again and the lighter cools.

'Hey,' this real skinny girl calls to them. She's standing on the broken roots of a tree trunk split during an early-morning

thunderstorm, and holding a half-eaten Popsicle that's melting onto her fingers. Rotting bark curls off the tree limbs like flesh scraped clean off somebody's bones. She is Harper's reflection, long hair with dark eyes and gangly limbs, colt-like, untamed. 'That's not how ya do it.'

'Bet you don't know how neither,' Collier shouts.

The girl walks to them, tonguing the last bite of her Popsicle before tossing the cherry-stained stick onto the ground. She shoves her open palm towards Collier. 'Give it here.'

'I know how to do it—seen Luce do it a million times.'

'Yeah, my Mama done it a million times,' Harper says.

'But ya didn't learn. Give it here, cmon. I'll show you right.'

'I don't give my stuff to strangers.'

'My name's Caro. Now give it here.'

'Kinda name is that?'

The girl rolls her eyes, places a hand on each hip and spits thick red saliva on the dying tree.

'Named for my daddy's mama, Carolyn Naylor. But my mama Tillie says she's just some dirty cracker, just like my daddy is—he aint dead but we pretend he is—so my mama call me Caro instead.'

'That's better than Carolyn. I like Caro.' Harper plucks the joint from Collier's lips and offers it to the girl with a Popsicle stained mouth and a sweaty face. 'I'm Harper. That there's Ann-Collier, cept don't nobody call her Ann-Collier. Just Collier.'

'My mama do sometimes.'

'Yeah, but Donna aint her real mama cause Collier didn't come outta her. Collier don't know who she came out of but we think her real mama prolly dead or somethin.'

'She better be,' Collier mumbles.

'Well I hope she dead too then.' Caro gently bites the joint and presses her lips together. A small flame ignites on her first try as she slowly lowers her head, letting the tip catch. The paper burns black and the body's knotted tail glows as she inhales,

her mouth making small caves beneath her cheekbones. Smoke leaks from the right corner of her mouth in a thick ribbon, its hips swaying as it rises towards the treetops then disappears. Red embers flare as she caps the lighter and inhales still. She shuts her eyes and pulls the joint from her lips, sputtering.

‘You got a boyfriend taught you that?’ Harper searches the treetops and sunlight for Caro’s smoke but it’s gone.

‘Nah.’ She chokes as Collier gently slaps her back. ‘My daddy Dennis smoke more dope than Satan do—that’s what my mama Tillie says—’

Since that day we all been drunk on each other. We shared everything too. Clothes, razors and safety pins, beds, boys, pills and secrets. But when I left the first time we all stopped sharing everything because we couldn’t no more.

After the first time I left, Caro called every week and visited when she could. Phone calls slowed when she started working, and then came even less when she left for school. Caro got herself into this college that was pretty far away. But on your sixth birthday, Tillie brought you and Caro to see me. Your eyes were real glassy and dark. You looked more like Her than our daddy and you wore this dirty Mickey Mouse t-shirt that looked like it had been worn every day for a month without a wash because it probably hadn’t been. Caro gave me a gift to give to you and we pretended like I’d bought it myself even though we all knew it was a lie. You tore up the paper and smiled something wonderful when you put the baseball glove on your hand. You said thanks and kissed me gentle on the mouth. Then you sat on the floor, tying up the glove’s laces and letting your hands feel the leather.

Collier called the first Thursday of every month for six months then nothing for a year after—not a letter or a card or a call or a visit. Nothing. Then she shows up on my seventeenth birthday. They told me I had a guest so I waited in the visiting room by myself for twenty minutes just sitting

there. Then, without saying why she didn't come, they took me back. I slept for fourteen hours straight. Tara Hackett didn't say nothing or touch me, she just let me sleep. I slept for fourteen hours with no dreams, no nightmares, no nothing. Caro called the next week and told me they wouldn't let Collier in because she had been real drunk and caused a scene and that they found a knife with a red handle in her back pocket. Caro told me after all that happened, Collier didn't leave her mama's house and cried for days and days and days. I was glad she did.

Caro is the smartest person I've ever known and Collier was the second most beautiful person I've ever known. There was always something that's been real tempting about Collier and the way she was. 'Can't blame her wild nature,' Donna used to say to everyone, but mostly Bart and the other cops. But Collier didn't have a wild nature, she just liked tempting other people and being tempted herself. Temptation is a funny thing. It crawls at your skin, making you itch for something you know is real bad for you. 'Get rid of it,' they say. 'Don't touch things that'll burn you—don't put something in your mouth if it's poison.' They say it because they never been in the garden, never tasted the apple themselves. They never spoke to the serpent like I have, and they never met Collier.

Nineteen, Nineteen and Twenty-One

Beyond the thick lot of oak trees sits a dirty blue pickup. The bass of *Hey Ladies* bumps from its busted speakers and the truck's exhaust breathes grey filth into the heat. Collier's mama's trees are so big, no matter how hard you try, your fingers don't touch when you hug them. Their bright green leaves wilt in the humid stink. Hanging limp on their fractured branches, they seem to sweat just as much as people do. Collier's mama's earth sinks into itself with its empty creek beds of jagged rocks, sticks and broken roots attached to nothing—a barren womb