

I used to think my troubles got legs the summer Jude Vanderjohn disappeared, but now I see how they started much earlier.

Before that summer, the things that happened to me were air and water and just as see-thru. They were real but I didn't care for them much. I did not care for the real. It didn't seem so special to me, whatever communion I could take with the dust spangles, or the snakes that spun in an oiled way along the rotting tractor tires stacked up by the shed, or the stony light that fell in those hills and made the vines and mosses this vivid nightmare green. None of it had a purpose to me. Everything I saw seemed to have been emptied out and left there humming. I watched the cars. I read catalogs, which I collected and which my family called Cindy's magazines. My life was an empty place. From where I stood, it seared on with a blank and merciless light. All dust and no song. Rainbows in oil puddles. Bug bites hatched with a curved X from my fingernails. Donald Duck orange juice in the can. Red mottles on my brother Clinton's puffy hands, otherwise so white they were actually yellow, like hard cheese. The mole on my belly button. You get to know things this way, by looking at yourself. You know the world by the shape of what comes back when you yell.

I had only ever been myself, and found it lacking. Even when the sun was shining, when the world was up, when I was born. And some days, I was really, really born. Most of my day I spent carving little pits in time

where I could hide out in a texture of light or an idea. And then, that summer, I made a space between myself and all that. I guess how I could say it is, I began to see the other world, and it was not real and yet I could pull it across the real at will, like a thin cotton curtain. When I stood just far enough outside of it, my life, suddenly the blaring light resolved itself into a huge movie screen blooming out of the dark, a woman's jaw jutting into the abandoning tilt of a kiss. The beginning of romance came from that distance. Black and white, the sparkling velvet dark and always someone else is there in the mind, in the cavern above my head. But a stranger. But it doesn't matter, really. The point is that at that moment in my life, I would kill or die, die or kill, to be anyone else.

I wasn't trying to become Jude. Not exactly. But I wanted to disappear, and she had left a space. When I stepped into that space, I vanished from my senses. It changed me into someone who didn't have my actual mind. The same way it changed Jude, when Virgil called her Marilou as they walked the halls of our high school arm in arm, shining like magazine people you'd never see. She became that other girl, and it lit her up, and that is what I wanted.

Now, I know how that sounds: teenage, teenage. I was, and it brought me to wickedness. Except in wickedness, I loved the world, too, in a way so fierce I assumed no one could imagine. And I love it still. It was, quite simply, how I survived.

I

Jude Vanderjohn was last seen in the parking lot across from Burchinal's General Store in Gans, just over the West Virginia border, where she had been camping in Coopers Rock State Forest with four other girls from the newly graduated West Greene High School senior class. The quickest way back went through Morgantown, but they had gone instead through Fayette County. When asked why they took the long way, Kayla apparently said that they wanted a prettier drive, they weren't anxious to come back so soon. Then, when Detective Torboli asked again, she admitted they had wanted to smoke a blunt in the car, and Jude had a strict personal law against blunt smoking on interstates. Which did turn out to be true, but it wasn't the real reason either.

Eventually Crystal admitted that they had been followed, and took the other route because they were trying to lose the boys who had been hanging around their campsite. The boys had seemed vaguely related. They all had a similar smudge of mustache and they spoke in a brisk mystery language. At first, Shawn, B.D., and Caleb had loitered in a helpful way, starting the fire and sharing from their thirty racks, showing off places around the margins of Cheat Lake where the fish were so gullible you'd think they wanted to die in your hands.

The second night of the trip, the boys took them on a hike through some path that wound around the massive blocks of limestone stories below the lookout pavilion. They took secret avenues through the rock

where slim light fell through, silvery and ancient. At the Ravens Rock Overlook, they had produced homemade blackberry wine in a three-liter Pepsi bottle. They were romance minded, of course. The girls didn't rebuff them too hard at first. It is sometimes nice to see a little attention. A little of that light lands on you, say, on a dizzy vista, and sweet wine is sweet, or so I'm told.

Thrill seekers prefer Ravens Rock Overlook because it is unfenced. The view isn't troubled by those coin-op lookie-loos. It feels likely, if you place a foot wrong, that you will spin off into the sky and never again trouble with gravity. So the boys dared to touch the girls in the dark, on the small of the back, the casual first declaration. It was romance. Apparently Kayla even held hands with Shawn, the tall one with the buff of his arms showing through his cut-up T-shirt. They talked about the souls of animals and the things the stars looked like, and they talked about their idiot worried parents and how they would all be just fine.

Shawn walked Kayla closer to the edge. He said he wanted to show her a place where you could see the river down below like a moving silver chain. Close to the drop, he kicked her in the back of the knee, sly, to make her stumble and grab on to him dearly. Kayla pantomimed this by pinwheeling her arms in dismay when she told me the story. Shawn had probably intended for her to swoon into his arms, but she instead shrieked and tore back up from the edge, and running blind in the dark she turned her ankle in a gopher hole. The boys carried her back to camp and bound her ankle with duct tape and even went to the Eagle Lodge Café to bring her ice, a Coke, a stack of cordwood to apologize.

But things had turned. Suddenly Kayla's absent boyfriend asserted himself a bit more firmly in her memory. She started to talk about him a lot. Maybe she was trying to remind herself as much as anything, but she did allude to Lyle's WPIAL wrestling trophies and bow-hunting expertise something on the heavy side. The musk wore down to a lean little smell. But the boys kept working their angle, saying how cold a night for

May. Saying, man, what a lonely thing, to sleep alone on a night so cold. When the girls didn't respond they laid it down for a while and kept up the friendliness, but Jude had already heard the sour note. She said she didn't like their manners and they could go bang their dicks together if they were so fucking cold. The smallest of the boys, B.D., feint-stepped to her with his hand rared back, like he would slap her in the face, and they noticed then that he had a knife. It was nothing special, with a black plastic handle like for a kitchen, but he let it wave around meanly all the same. Jude brought out a canister of pepper spray—none of the others knew she even carried such a thing—and scorched B.D. right at the bridge of his nose.

Tia and Crystal and Kayla wanted to leave immediately, but it had already been dark for some time and they had left the cars outside the park limits to avoid the vehicle fee. Jude and Amber doubted the boys would come back, and with Kayla on one foot it would take forever to hike out in the dark. But the boys did pass through a few times in the night to thrash around in the underbrush and scare them, muttering under their breath in a simmering way: *bitches, bitches, bitches*. Crystal was sure someone had peed on her tent in the middle of the night.

In the morning, they broke camp as soon as the light started to change and hiked back out of the park. Jude's car was scratched up with key marks that bit down to the metal. They had not told the boys where they'd left their cars, but Jude realized one must have followed her when she had made the trek to get bug spray from the trunk. Still, she didn't seem scared, they said. Pissed off, though, like anyone would be.

Once they were loaded up and driving off, a shitty Chevy Corsica pulled out of the brush by the highway entrance and kicked up hard behind them on the turns, swinging out into the oncoming lane and passing them on blind curves, then slowing down to nothing so the girls would have to go around. Amber, who was driving the other vehicle, claimed the Corsica nipped her rear bumper a few times, and though they brought it in to gather evidence, nothing could be discerned from

the condition of her car. Jude, who was driving in front, pulled off toward Uniontown. She said she knew a back way. The boys didn't follow.

Jude's car was still in front. She didn't know her way so well as she thought—they were about to enter a toll road, and she swerved off at the last exit before the turnpike. Her vehicle was knocking and slugging to accelerate, and as they went through Gans, it slowed up and seemed to shake on the turns. On one hairpin she hit a pothole and limped it into the parking lot across from Burchinal's, where a hand-lettered sign advertised a pepperoni roll sale for the students of Ferd Swaney Elementary and the American flag hung rigid like it does everywhere. An old boy in greased coveralls and no undershirt was smoking in a watchful way on his porch, right up by the road, as they peeped the dark windows. Closed, Sunday morning, for church. He came out from behind a dismembered Honda Rebel to look at Jude's car. From what they described, he said it sounded like someone had put sugar in her gas tank and the fuel filter would have to be dumped. He offered his services, or she could use the phone inside to call AAA. Jude chose to call, even though it would take a few hours. She waved him off and called on her cell. She must have had it with friendly men by that point.

The other girls were getting anxious. They had a mutual friend who was getting married in Nineveh that afternoon, and while they didn't want to abandon Jude, it happened that Kayla, Crystal, Amber, and Tia were all in the wedding party, and Jude was not. Morgan, the bride, expected them at eleven to have their hair duded up with mini rhinestones and all that. More to the point, Morgan was a real grudge keeper and had already dis- and reinvited Amber multiple times, so they were relieved when Jude told them to go on. The old boy said Jude could wait inside the store. It just so happened to belong to his uncle. He fished a key out from the mailbox and let them into the unlit place already decided. He gave them Cokes to calm them down, and said he hoped they would all pass through again someday on happier errands.

It was not even clear whether he or his wife had been the last person

to see Jude. His name was Denny Cogar and he advised that the tow truck arrived around two, many hours after it was supposed to come. He also advised that he had watched Jude hitch herself up into the cab and laugh with the driver about something. But Cheryl Cogar recalled that Jude had spent a long time on her cell phone, pacing along the crick behind the store, talking to someone, fighting, kind of, and hours before the tow truck arrived, she had gotten into a low little hat-shaped sedan that had skidded up from nowhere.

“And they was playing loud music about riding for the devil,” Cheryl said. “Gangster music, I think it was.”

“You saw Jude get into this car?”

“I heard it.”

“What kind of car was it?” Detective Torboli asked.

“Red,” she said.

“Nothing else?”

“It was red.”

The interview pressed on along this line for hours. The detective named all types of cars in a soft, chanting voice.

II

The summer Jude disappeared, my brothers and I had turned basically feral since our mother had gone off for a number of months and we were living free, according to our own ideas and customs. Our mother disappearing was nothing new, but she usually came back within a few weeks. This time, we had not exactly been counting the days, but we had run out of food maybe a month past and been improvising ever since. I was fourteen and ruled by a dark planet. My brothers were grown, or seemed so to me at the time. In winter, they ate Steak-umms in front of the TV and made up theories about the New World Order while Clinton got lazy angry drunk around twilight. But in summer, Virgil lined up mowing jobs all over, and they were suddenly honest workmen, and you couldn't tell them a single thing.

Our well was low from a dry spring, so we bathed in the pond. We called it Heaven Lake because we had grand imaginations and no sense, but it was really just a retainer pond. The family that owned it was called the Dukes and they had built a house, too, which looked like a blank face. They had made the pond, just scratched it right in and pulled the silver into it somehow with backhoes and a spillway of cinder blocks. They peopled it with catfish and bluegill. It was fenced in at the road with an eighteen-foot chain-link gate. The family kept it locked all the time except when they wanted to swim or fish, although they only came up a few times each year and the place was essentially ours.

We usually walked along our ridge and dropped down to it through the brambles and little saplings that gave way under our hands. It was harder to get over the fence. Once I'd gotten stuck at the top with a leg on either side, petrified of swinging the other leg over and losing my balance. Virgil got me down by shaking the fence with his fists. I didn't so much as smile at him for two weeks.

Clinton slid down the steep parts on his feet, going in long pulls, and caught himself on hemlocks to slow up. Virgil walked down steady with his feet slanted sideways, sometimes testing the branches and footholds before he dropped his weight down on them. Virgil wasn't scared of much, but he hated walking down steep places, especially if they were rocky and shifting. It always surprised me to see him look so careful. When he focused, it painted something hard and solemn over his eyes.

The pond looked alive to me, even the shape of the hills around it. I lit it up by looking at it. I had made its very image. I felt, all at the same moment, that it was valiant for beauty and also so plain that it embarrassed me to belong to it. On the steep tractor paths and under the hawthorns, fine dappled mushrooms winked like they had invented themselves, sporelike, and had materialized from the floaters in your eyes.

The good thing about washing up at the pond was we could also catch fish in it. I didn't ask anymore why we were going to do something. This made it easier, because then I just did the things that happened and each moment was like turning a page in a book and it felt easy to me. The shade was icy. Something in the air was touching on the cold water and carrying it in big bold rushes under the trees.

I couldn't remember how long she was gone, except there had still been snow when our mother left. I knew because I remembered the cold air shoving itself in while she stood in the doorway and gave Virgil a bank envelope. It was supposed to last us. There was a job, she said, and the money could last us a long time, but she had to be away to do it. She told Virgil how to go pay the light bill at the customer service counter at the grocery store in town. Her car was already running with the fumes

sinking down and snaking and spreading. It had seemed like midnight but it was just after dinner.

Virgil carried the fishing poles. Clinton wasn't allowed to carry anything since he more or less let himself fall down the hill, just stopping before the last drop. He once had smashed the tackle box when his foot hit a mud skid that sent him tumbling down to a broad shelf held up by tree roots. All the lures and hooks went dazzle in the undergrass, shining so much I could hear them almost. I had to carry the tackle box since then.

Near the bottom, Clinton dropped out of sight. There was a wall of shale there. You could either pick around the side and come down to level slowly, or race off and fall the last six feet. Virgil and I wound around to the side. He put me in front and laid his huge hand on my skull.

"First thing, I want you to get in the water and wash up, OK?"

Virgil had put a bottle of shampoo in his back pocket before we left the house. I knew my hair was gummy under his hand. It stuck under my nose and on my cheeks with its oil. I couldn't smush the oil off with the back of my hand anymore because it was getting too thick.

Lately I felt funny about him touching me. I felt funny about all men. At school, I had punched Justin Deeba in the stomach when he said he liked me as we stood in the lunch line. I couldn't think what else to do. He dropped the confetti plastic tray. The gray green beans and their juice and blubs of salt pork got all down his shirt and down the front of his pants. My face had gotten so I thought it was melting, but I was crying. And I loved how it felt. I spent the rest of the day hiding in the woods behind school, trying to look into the white sky hard enough for it to shimmer.

Also, I had noticed that men smelled. They smelled like pepper and skunk and oil. Some reeked of it. It frightened me that lately this smell came off my brothers, too.

When we got to the water, Clinton was already in, ducking his head under and coming up with his mouth wide and his hair flat and bright across his shoulders. He walked out and took off his clothes and laid

them out to bleach in the sun. He pulled on a bottle of pink muscat wine and spat some at Virgil.

“Fucking stop it,” Virgil said.

“Fucking make me,” Clinton said. He fell back again into the water, slapping home on it. Virgil got tense whenever anybody was drinking or getting stoned. He had never drunk a bit of alcohol. He tried not to make it a big deal, but once I saw him sip on Clinton’s coffee cup by mistake and spit wine right on the floor, and go wash out his mouth over and over.

I had to do something about the snakes before I could get in the water. I found a few big rocks and carried them to the dock. I threw them down hard so they would send a tail of white water gutting up from the surface, one after another so the snakes would get scared off. This I had always done, since I was little. It was kind of a joke that I still did it, but not the kind of joke that made anyone laugh. Then I walked back around to the marshy edge where the water was shallow and warm and fine like dog hair and started getting in barefooted with my feet sucking down. I didn’t like to jump in just yet. I liked the feel of the water coming up my legs and dimpling where my hairs stuck in it. I did it slow so I could get used to the cold.

Once Virgil was on the flat land, he jumped in from the dock to make himself look brave again. He and Clinton bashed each other’s heads against the water and kicked. He put some of the shampoo over his shirt and ran his hands to suds it up, then dove down. But he got out again almost right away and laid his wet clothes where Clinton had, then put out the tackle box and started thinking through it.

The fishing spot was on the other side of the pond where it cut deep into the sycamore banks above it. I could just still see them casting out over there. Their reflections sent out flying tentacles that kissed up at the place where their hooks landed. Virgil was using my Snoopy rod, even though it was sized for a girl, since it brought him the best luck. He always asked me for permission to use it, even though he had given it to me for my eighth birthday.

Alone in the water I bladed my hand through it until my fingers got grainy. I hugged my legs and arms in to feel the sink. Around one end, benches ringed the dock. The boards were broad and flat so I could lie myself out full length on them and get my front half dry from the sun, all the sticky water shrinking while it dried up. It left a dust all over me. Something was wrong with my skin. When it got wet, I could rub on it to make gray strings, and then sweep them away. In my ankle hollows, the skin was hard and brown and I could peel it off with a fingernail. What was underneath was dusty and white.

Once I felt good and hot, like the muscles were about to fall off my bones, I would jump back in from the dock and feel the water shock me to pieces. I was getting a body. One day my mother had stopped me at the door and informed me in a blistering whisper that she could see my *nipples* through my T-shirt. She had given me one of her old bras, teal satin, but you could see down into it that I didn't have enough chest to fill it up.

A shadow passed over my eyes and turned the gloom inside my head from red to green. A boy was standing over me. He was tall and his elbows buckled out to the sides since he had his hands on his hips in a disapproving way.

"Hey. Hey. You better get away from here." I sat up and squinted at him. There were two more boys behind him, and a girl with her hands hitched down into her shorts pockets. Back up at the house, I had missed the white Range Rover. A dark cord flashed across my eyes. Something in my head was ringing, and they came closer. My underwear was drying out and it stuck to my skin when I shifted around.

"Can't you see the sign? Can't you read?" It was posted NO TRESPASSING all around the fence, but I shrugged.

"Course she can't read," the girl said. Her T-shirt sleeves were cuffed up almost perfectly to look like wings.

"I can read," I said. I hated how my voice sounded feathery.

"Then what's she doing here?" the other boy asked. I wished him to say it louder so Virgil would hear and come tell them off. I cut my eyes to

the left, where the fishing was, and saw Virgil and Clinton naked except for wet underwear, leaning their heads together over something. The boys were standing on either side of me now, although I did not believe they had the guts to put a hand on me. The boys had white T-shirts that were so bright in the sun they looked blue. The taller one, he was closer and his jaw hung down. He was looking down my bra.

I wanted to scare him. So I took his hand and put it to the front of my underwear. He had to stoop down. But he did it willingly. His palms were cold, and I realized he was already afraid, of me or in that moment, some way. The waistband of my underwear was still wet, but the rest of me was all cooked from the sun. He hardly moved, but a clear drop of snot fell from his nose onto my knee. I pushed his hand down farther to my privates. It was so quiet I thought I heard his fingernail catch on the cotton. I don't know how long we stayed like that.

"Ew, freak!" the girl said. Except she said it long, like: fur-reek. That's how I could tell she wasn't from here. "Whatever, come on." The tall one was still looking at me. He wiped his hand on his shorts like I had messed it. She kicked the shorter boy in the ankle, and that broke the spell. When I stood up they took off hard, running backward for a second before they turned. They crashed the laurels at the lake rim and threw all the birds in there upward. Clinton looked up at the sound. I don't know what he saw. Nothing that worried him, plainly. I got the shampoo from where we had dropped our things and poured a flood of it in my hand, hot like my own guts, and walked back into the water to wash.

It was the kind of gas station where they kept a black rubber hose out front for you to drive over and clang a bell. Virgil and Clinton were about to mow a big field for some gas company that needed a clear plot for a foreman's trailer, and they were excited about the money. We were still drying off from the pond. My hair floated up white blond. The radio was coming in clear that day, Bad Company and Van Halen, although the clouds were metal blue at their edges and it would rain. I felt good. I usually had a window of optimism after I bathed, which wore off by the time I was dry again. But for just then, I was washed. I was hungry in a clean right way I hadn't found in some time.

Inside the gas station was a store that had basically one of everything. All the food was pushed to the edge of the shelf with nothing else behind it, so it looked more like someone's private soup museum than a grocery. People said it was a front for a secret poker game, or possibly the McConaughys moved pain clinic pills or whatnot. In any case, it had the soft, sour smell of a room no one uses. Each can had a price sticker on the top and was dim from dust, although you could see brighter swipes from where people had picked the thing up, the cocktail weenies or whatever, and considered buying it, and then put it back. I went around writing things in the dust. I wrote *BABIES* on everything. *BABIES BABIES BABIES*.

The girl behind the counter had a deep face, like her eyes were all the

way back in there, and she had a line down her chin where she had been glued back together, and her name was Melda McConaughy, which I knew because she and Virgil had been the same year in school. They had actually gone to prom together, although just, Virgil said, as friends. Even though they had only graduated three years before, Melda already looked a little like a mom or an aunt I wouldn't notice. She wore a big sweatshirt with her fingers dangling out of the cuffs, and she had a pink tissue balled up in one fist. When she saw Virgil, she stopped rolling quarters and busted down crying.

"Oh my god," she said. "You heard." *What was this?* I wondered. I loved it when anybody was in grief. Grief was something interesting. It had a heat, and I had none of my own. It seemed to me I hadn't felt anything with a point to it, and yet I cried often. One time I cried at the store over a stuffed chimpanzee shoved in with the magazines. It had probably fallen out of someone's cart. I thought about all the empty hours it would spend, and its lostness. I wasn't stone. Sometimes my sorrow lay over all I saw, like neon light.

"What's the matter?" Virgil asked her. "Is it your mom? Is she OK?"

She waved away the thought. Her mouth was open and she sucked in air while her shoulders racked.

"It's Jude," she said. "She's been missing for weeks, but nobody knew."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know, I just heard."

"Why you crying about it if you don't know how true it is?" Clinton asked.

"Well, last week they found that other girl in the woods behind the CoGo's. It's terrible!"

Clinton shrugged like maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. "She could've just run away."

"She's dead," Melda said. "I can just feel it. Sometimes I just know things. I knew it as soon as I saw you."

"Whoa," Virgil said.

“You were the one she really loved. You know that? Because it’s true. I’m sure she died loving you.”

Melda spoke in a fashion borrowed from soap operas, and I thrilled in it. I felt almost a secondary kind of fame from it. I maybe was not that much of anything, but my brother, he was a dead girl’s true love. Virgil and Jude had dated for almost two years, which was long for high school. I had always been a little obsessed about her. Sometimes, when I was bored, I would go through my catalogs and pick out a gift for Jude on every page, what I imagined she’d like, anyway, and I had from that the illusion that I knew her well. It says a lot about my interest in Jude that I took her disappearance as some juicy twist instead of danger coming to a real person. I guess I thought of her as a character above anything else. She seemed fearless, even as different from everybody else as she was. I, on the other hand, said strange wrong things almost constantly and burned with the shame of it. So I made her a hero, and sowed meaning in everything she did, but I couldn’t accomplish this without making her flat, without real features or pain.

Virgil went behind the counter and he held Melda. Like a little girl she tucked her head into his shoulder. She was still holding the paper sleeves for the quarters, and they rustled as she clasped her hands around his neck. And that was the only sound happening in there. Clouds moved over the sun. The light in the room shrank away.

“You know if anybody’s checked on Bernadette?” Virgil said.

“Who’s that?” Melda asked.

“That’s her mom. Shit. She’ll be in pieces.”

“Well, I don’t know. You go up and ask at Pecjak’s. Everybody’s talking about it. I heard they set up a TV on the hoagie counter.” Just like that, Virgil was already out the door without good-bye. Right away the truck started up. Christ, Clinton said to the hurry.

Sissy Pecjak’s gas station had a row of tables inside, so it was something, very slightly, of a restaurant, and you could also buy motor oil, tires, kiddie pools, feather dusters made of real dyed chicken feathers,

and everything like that. There was a coffee smell as soon as we got in the door, and it was too hot because so many people were standing around sweating and the smell of wet tobacco and salt and oil and hay came up to punch on my brain. I had never seen so many people there before. It was all men, except for Sissy herself, and she was reaching up to find a pack of cigarettes in the dispenser while her own lit one shook down a cap of ash onto her blouse. The sound of everybody talking went like: *wash, wash, wash*. All the newspaper racks were empty. Virgil asked if anybody'd spare a paper and some bald-headed man with little round glasses and white muttonchops told him he could go find one on the floor of the john. I stood in the back. The refrigerator case leaked hot air on the backs of my legs. Clinton dropped his hands down on my shoulders like they were keeping me from floating away. It was plain that everybody was very excited. On the TV, they showed a picture of Jude from senior skip day. She was sitting on a garbage can in front of the Sheetz with a backward baseball cap and an extra-large Mountain Dew and very stylish round sunglasses. If you didn't know her, you might think she was tough, but she played violin and read poems on the morning announcements. Still, all the men standing around were muttering about she must have gotten herself into some bad business, dealing drugs like her kind usually did. But what they really meant was: She was black. Well, mixed, but in Greene County that meant basically the same thing, and she was the only black person in school. Her father, Alistair Vanderjohn, was a college professor and a black man, all at once. Whenever he came to visit, you could feel the effort people made to not stare, just like you could feel us all move our eyes around Jude.

The people standing around were saying the Vanderjohn girl had been gone two weeks at the slightest, and she'd run away because her momma was a hoarder and a bestiality practicer, and someone had seen Jude in the Greene Plaza shopping center, which was where people waited in their cars to buy dope from other people in cars. And someone else said oh my god she was just there to buy those chocolate bars from