

Something to Prove

In sixth grade study hall, Nikki turned around, attention piqued. Bryan, Bruce, and Steven sat behind her, talking about the junkies living in the dilapidated steel factory on the outskirts of town. Then they noticed her and gave her *the look*, the conspiratorial glares of boys repulsed by girls, especially those like Nikki. She hated *the look*; their sharp eyes reminded her that she was boyish: she kept her hair short, her tank tops and plaid shirts ruffled, her denim shorts tight around her waist. Last week the boys called her a dyke. Not to her face, rarely to her face. But she knew the boys hated her for being different. She had friends—best friends since elementary school—but as she returned their glances with a smile, she started to feel less than them, like the effeminate boys they jostle in the hallway between classes. She wanted to fit in, to please. Her friends went to different schools in the area, so she spent most of the school day alone. Hoping to quell *the look*, she now smiled at Bryan and his friends, but they kept staring at her.

“We’re trying to have a private conversation,” Bryan said. He was the leader of the group, the one she disliked, yet feared, the most. She lowered her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just curious, that’s all.”

“About what?” Bryan demanded.

“The factory.” She lifted her eyes. “Have any of you actually seen the junkies in person?”

Bryan looked at his friends. The three of them gave slight nods.

“Of course we have,” Bruce said. “Have *you*?”

“Well, no,” she said, “but I could go if I wanted to.”

Steven looked amazed. “You’ve never been to the factory?”

“Why would I go to a stupid factory?”

“Of course you’d think it’s stupid,” Steven said. “You’re just a girl.”

“Just a girl?” She wanted to slap him, but pinched her arms instead, easing her anger with the pain. She sounded bold but plaintive. “I could go to the factory if I wanted to.”

“Yeah, right,” Bryan mumbled.

“I could,” she said. “I can do anything you guys can do.”

Bruce and Steven turned to Bryan as though he were their master, waiting orders. Bryan’s eyes remained trained on Nikki. He didn’t have to do much to make her feel pathetic. She turned to the floor and he laughed. Almost at the same time Bruce and Steven laughed along. Nikki turned back around in her seat without saying another word. When study hall ended, she could still hear their laughter inside her mind.

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When the school bell ringed, announcing the beginning of summer vacation, Nikki hurried down the hallway to the main entrance without saying goodbye to anyone. She kept her eyes on the ground, thinking of Bryan, thinking of the factory. She had a plan, crudely made, crudely simple, but she knew what she had to do. Once outside the school, she ran down the street to the bus stop in the mall parking

lot. She didn't have to wait long for the bus to arrive; she rode it to the outskirts of town. No one questioned her as she got off alone and began to trudge into the nearby woods, a dark stretch of elms, crabgrass, and ferns. On the other side lay a gravel road that cut across the countryside. She strode down the gravel road and, minutes later, saw the factory the boys were talking about. Her heart pounded with joy and fear. She never expected going to the factory for any reason, but she had to prove to herself that she wasn't just a girl. She could be anyone, anything, she damn wanted to be.

She crawled through an opening in the factory's barbwire fence. Gravel crunched under her sneakers. She shuffled across the lot, stepping over glass shards and glancing at the cigarette butts, tattered blankets, and discarded water jugs lying about in piles. From the factory came an odor. Body odor and piss. Keeping her breath steady, not wanting to vomit, she crept through the side entrance. A concrete wall stood at the beginning of a long hallway, profuse with light, dust, fallen crossbeams, and tin garbage cans.

As she covered her nose with the bottom of her shirt, she peeked around the corner. A couple of shoeless women in pink nylons and black blouses were walking down the hallway. Nikki watched as they stopped at a cart full of bulging garbage bags next to a shattered window. They wrapped their arms around the man leaning against the windowpane. The man wore nothing but army boots and a gray baseball cap. Sweat coated his face. His eyes were closed, his left hand scratching his exposed crotch, his other hand holding a beer. Nikki, who had never seen a naked

man in person before, looked on in awe. She lowered her shirt to grab her camera cellphone and crawled to the other side of the wall and suddenly inhaled a waft of dust. She pinched her nose, the phone tottering in her free hand. Before she could do anything, the phone fumbled and struck the floor. She felt as if she had just awoken a large, rabid dog.

Along with the women, the man stepped back from the window. “Who’s there?” he shouted, and rushed to the cart. Nikki inspected her phone—it wasn’t cracked—and looked down the hallway. The man brandished a pistol.

She started to run back the way she came. The man fired into the air twice. She yelped, ran faster. “This is our place, you little brat!” he declared, and fired another shot. For a moment she thought a bullet would ricochet off the steel rafter and hit her in the head, but she panted in relief as she jumped out of the side entrance of the factory and crawled back through the opening in the fence. She had never risked her life like that. When she reached the gravel road, she grinned with pride. Her heart was rapping. She trudged back into town, eager to tell her friends Sophia and Mia what she’d done.

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“Are you stupid?” said Sophia later that evening.

Nikki, Sophia, and Mia sat on Nikki’s bed, passing along a blunt. Drapes decaled in the Green Bay Packer logo hung above the windows, while posters of the latest indie band, DeathScream, were pinned on the walls. Novels Nikki couldn’t understand but wanted to reread over the summer—*Mrs. Dalloway* and *To Kill a*

Mockingbird, in particular—lay at the foot of the bed. Sophia scratched her own pixie cut with confusion, looking at Nikki with reproach. Dressed in a pair of navy blue overalls, Mia passed the blunt to Nikki, who took a drag and avoided looking at Sophia. Mia laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Sophia said.

“Oh, lighten up,” Mia said. “She’s fine, isn’t she?”

Sophia leaned closer to Nikki. “Tell me you were just acting stupid.”

“I wasn’t acting stupid,” Nikki said. “I thought you’d be proud of me. It’s about time someone stood up to Bryan.”

“By going to the factory, alone?” Sophia said. “Do you have a brain tumor or something? Why would you risk your life going to the factory?”

Nikki shrugged.

“Tell us,” Sophia said, setting down the blunt.

Nikki was silent for a long time. “Do you remember the parking lot story?”

Nikki remembered the story well. Once, Bryan and his friends had convinced a substitute teacher she was boy. She’d wanted to cry; Sophia and Mia remembered the incident well. Instead of crying, Nikki had come up to Bruce in the school parking lot after lunch and punched him in the gut. Mia’s brother, Steven, rushed to Bruce’s side, but Nikki shoved them both against a parked car. Steven fell on top of Bruce and together they moaned in pain. She towered over them and, tears streaming down her cheeks, told them to never make fun of her again. But Bryan came out from nowhere and elbowed her to the ground. She yelped in surprise more

than pain and covered her eyes to hide her sorrow. When she got home, she went to her bedroom and looked at a recent picture of herself on her phone. She looked at her freckles, the boyish nose, and the plaid shirt she was wearing in the picture. She felt like such a girl.

“I remember,” Sophia answered. “I’ll never forget.”

“He should’ve been expelled,” Mia said. She picked up the blunt. “Don’t let him make you feel like shit. You have nothing to prove.”

Nikki thought of the condescending look Bryan gave her at school today. She couldn’t stop thinking of his face, the bravado in his eyes.

“Guys want to make women prove themselves,” Mia went on. “They’re assholes like that.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Nikki started, then heard a noise outside the house.

Sophia turned to the open window. “Who’s calling?”

The three of them walked over to the window.

Bryan, Bruce, and Steven stood below. Steven looked at his sister. “I’ve been trying to text you for the last hour!” he called. “Mom wants us.”

“Hold on,” Mia said. “I’ll be down.”

Nikki looked at Bryan. He looked back at her. Even though she stood above him, she felt as though he were a foot in front of her, giving her *the look*. He turned to leave.

“Wait!” she called. Her friends and the boys froze. This was her chance to show: she told the boys about the factory and the naked man. Sophia tugged on her

arm. Mia reminded her that she didn't owe anyone—not even these jerks—anything. Nikki ignored them, eyes affixed on Bryan, who watched her without blinking. “That’s a load of bull,” he said.

“Where’s your proof?” Steven said. “Take pictures? Or did you ask the guy for his number?”

Sophia stuck her head out the window. “She could’ve died!”

“Don’t be hysterical,” Bruce said. “She was only shot at.”

“*Only* shot at?” Mia said.

They waited for Bryan to speak. He crossed his arms. “Do you have anything from the factory? The pistol?”

“Do you think she asked the guy if she could borrow it?” Sophia said.

Bryan and Nikki weren't paying attention to Sophia. Their eyes were locked on each other. He grinned and she twitched. “You’re just a dumb liar,” he said.

“Come on, guys.” Bruce and Steven trailed after him.

“Wait!” Nikki said.

Sophia and Mia pulled her back.

“What are you doing?” Sophia said. “*We* believe you. So what if he doesn't?”

“I know what I’m doing,” Nikki said, and returned to the window. Bryan stood directly below. “If I take a picture of the naked guy in the factory, will you believe me?”

“If it’s a real picture,” he said.

“It’ll be real,” Nikki said. “I’ll send you one before the end of summer.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No. I want the picture by tomorrow evening. Or it doesn’t count.”

He smirked at his friends.

“Are you crazy?” Nikki said.

“You create the challenge and I create the rules. That’s how it works.”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

Bryan walked away. Bruce and Steven followed. On the curb, Steven gestured for Mia to come. Mia turned to Nikki. “That’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever done. You won’t gain Bryan’s respect for risking your life.”

“She’s right,” Sophia said. “Besides, you don’t need his respect.”

“I don’t care,” Nikki said, coming up with another plan. “I’m going tomorrow. Coming along?”

Sophia and Mia looked at each other.

“Do we have a choice?” Sophia said to Nikki.

“Everyone’s got a choice,” Nikki said. “Well? Are you going to help a friend out? I’ve never asked for anything.” Sophia and Mia looked at each other again.

“We’ll take a picture of the guy and leave,” she reassured.

At last, Sophia said, “I’ll come along—but only to make sure you’ll be safe.”

“Me too,” Mia said. “Ten minutes. Tops.”

“Shouldn’t take that long,” Nikki said.

“You sure you want this?” Sophia asked. “This is happening so fast.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

Sophia and Mia exchanged looks.

“Honest,” Nikki said. “It’s going to be fine. Ten minutes. That’s it.”

Sophia and Mia nodded with apprehension and soon left together.

#

It was the hottest day of the year. Black hornets flew long the gravel road to the factory. In a nearby field an osprey stood on the head of a scarecrow and glanced at the cloudless sky. A tractor rumbled less than a quarter mile away, a din of passing cicadas masked the dulling rumble. From outside the factory was silent.

Nikki and her friends entered the building. Two hours ago they’d agreed to the plan via text messages: Nikki brought the weapons just in case—old baseball bats she’d found discarded in an alleyway—then she’d take the naked man’s picture with her phone, then the three of them would run to the exit. If anything happened, they would leave the factory and never return. As Nikki mapped out the exit in her mind, the three of them stepped into the hallway. They each held a baseball bat, firmly.

They sidled forward and circumvented the garbage cans and crossbeams; they crossed the luminous window and noticed the two bullet holes in the ceiling. Rust and mold clung to the edges of the walls, the corners of the hallway shadowy and piled in metallic scraps. White and blue bird feces painted the rafters. Made of

straw and milkweed, birds' nests sat in the crevices near the ceiling. They shivered at the sight of a bat hanging over the man's bed.

They stepped in front of the man. Nikki still clutched the baseball bat and phone. Naked, the man slept on a pile of mattresses and cardboard boxes, his head resting on a roll of paper towels. Mia leaned closer to Nikki. "I'll take the picture and send it to my brother. He'll show it to Bryan." Before Nikki could remind her of the plan, Mia seized the phone and took a picture. "I'll send the picture when we get outside. C'mon."

"Right behind you," Sophia said, the bat shaking in her hands. She and Mia turned to leave, but Nikki whispered for them to stop. "We got what you wanted," Sophia said. "C'mon."

"Not yet," Nikki said. "I need to get something."

"Like what?" Mia said. "I already took the damn picture."

Nikki was improvising. With her bat Nikki pointed to the pistol on the man's chest. "If Bryan wants proof, I'll get the asshole proof."

As the man snored, his hands rested on the pistol. Nikki reached forward and peeled his fingers from the weapon. She plucked it and stepped back. Mia shook her head in disappointment. Sophia looked around frantically. "Let's leave," Sophia said, "and never come back."

They turned around. The two women from yesterday were marching toward them. Nikki and her friends fumbled back, the women's high heels clacking. One of the women told them to stay put, and Nikki cringed as the woman's shrill voice

reverberated throughout the hallway. The man woke up and crawled to his feet. Sophia swung the bat, but the man caught it and yanked it from her hands. Mia threw Nikki's phone into a pants pocket. The women glowered at Nikki and her friends, flashing rotting teeth. The girls huddled together.

"Hand it over," the man said, hand outstretched.

Sophia began to cry. Mia stood frozen.

Nikki looked at the pistol. Smelling of cleaning oil and gunpowder, it was warm in her hand. She raised the pistol and the bat.

The man glared at her.

"What are you waiting for?" Mia stuttered.

Nikki took another step back. She thought once more of Bryan's face, *the look* like a grimacing smirk behind her eyes like a nightmare.

"Hand it over," the man said.

"What are you waiting for?" Mia repeated to Nikki. "Do as he says."

In Nikki's mind *the look* grew. She wanted to throw down the gun, but the gun was additional proof. She squeezed the grip, hard. The gun's muzzle was like a large mouth; it quivered in her trembling hand. She considered pointing it forward, to scare the man and the women clinging to him like tattered shawls. But instead she raised the bat and whispered to Mia and Sophia, "Prepare to run."

"Run?" they whispered back.

The man stepped forward. "I won't hurt you," he said. "But I'm getting impatient. Hand. It. Over!"

He lunged forward. Nikki swung the back, and it hit the back left shoulder. As he fumbled back, the women caught him. Nikki pushed her friends into a doorway to their right. "Run!" she screamed. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

Nikki and her friends sprinted down a hallway. It led deeper into the factory. The building was getting darker the farther they ran. Nikki glanced behind her: the women and the man were chasing after them. Nikki dashed around a bend and down another hallway; panting and sweating; the sounds of stomping feet reverberating throughout the building like a dozen hearts thumping in her ears. She looked back again: Mia and Sophia weren't there, but she could their footfalls going in a different direction in a different hallway. She rounded another corner. The factory was like a maze, dark and dank and reeking. She heard the sounds of mumbling voices farther ahead. She remembered the junkies Bryan and the other boys were talking about at school. The mumbling voices. The junkies. Dead ahead. She stopped in mid-sprint, almost crashing into a wall, and she thought about turning back, away from the voices, away from the enveloping dark. She turned around: the naked man had rounded a corner and was coming at her. Without second-guessing herself, she opened a random door and sprinted past a group of homeless women sleeping in cardboard tents, teenagers smoking blunts next to overstuffed carts, and two men kissing with needles in their arms. They all gawked at her as though she were an apparition. She tried not to look at them as she contemplated flinging every door open. There must've been fire escape somewhere,

she thought, so she ran without stopping. At last she burst open a door at the end of yet another hallway. And stumbled through the narrow doorway.

She had found a large room, pieces of torn down conveyor belts and mangled chains and piping lying about. A wall of cracked and moldy windows let in some sunshine. At least three dozen people stood or sat about. Many slept, smoked, drank, chatted. Out from a dark corner a half-dressed man and woman stumbled and watched Nikki cross the room, her eyes downcast, hoping that they would ignore her. A bulky man in sweatpants and a tight undershirt rose from a crate and followed her. Several people rose. Their voices remained soft, yet threatening; the people were like snakes following their prey through a pit of garbage cans, rusty machinery, puddles of urine. The door on the other side of the room was open. It exposed a fire escape.

Suddenly, a younger man with a face caked with dirt stumbled forward and grabbed Nikki's arm. She shuddered. Spun around. Swung the bat. She couldn't think clearly.

Recoiling off his chest, the bat flew toward a sleeping woman.

The man fell back. A bulky man caught him.

The door she came through burst open and the naked man stomped in and screamed for Nikki to stop. The others in the room rushed upon her in a ring of swaying, stinking bodies. She pointed the pistol at a nearby junkie. "Let me through!" she demanded, and imagined Bryan standing in the crowd. He was frightened, at her mercy. She told everyone around her to back off. They formed a

path to the fire escape: several gaunt men wearing nothing but boxers eyed her; women in gray sundresses retreated to the back of the group with crying infants at their breasts; dressed in leather pants and a ruffled tee, a boy helped an elderly woman away from the crowd. The boy and the woman reminded Nikki of Sophia and Mia. She lowered the pistol.

“Throw it here,” the naked man said. “I only want what’s mine.” Other people urged her to hand over the pistol. Her heart rapped, body becoming ponderous under their glares. She thought about throwing the pistol into the farthest corner of the room. The bums and junkies, like a family, waited for her to act. Still she couldn’t think straight. “Please hand it over,” the naked man said. He sounded amiable, almost like a friend. “You’re safe. You’ve got nothing to prove.”

Bryan’s face and voice crossed her mind. The man wrapped himself with a blanket and stepped forward with a reassuring smile. In Nikki’s head everything went blank. Gasps from the crowd. A sharp ringing in her ears. She looked forward in disbelief, her fingers trembling. She has fired the bullet into the naked man’s stomach. She jolted back and the crowd screamed. The naked man flailed back into a puddle of urine. Several men and women dropped to his side and held him as he writhed. Nikki watched from the doorway with horror, not understanding what she had just done. Several people ran forward. She shot into the air several times, warning shots. When they scrambled back, she backed out of the room and then descended the fire escape. She didn’t look back.

Nikki saw Sophia and Mia standing outside the fence that surrounded the factory. They called out her name, their faces crinkled with tears. Nikki sprinted across the lot and crawled to their side. Then the women from the first hallway jumped out of the side entrance and ordered the girls to stop. But the three of them raced down the road leading away from the factory, and then they dove into thicket of tallgrass and tried to keep silent as the women rushed through the grass in a frantic search to find them. Sophia covered her mouth to prevent herself from crying aloud. Mia held her. Nikki watched the women return to the factory emptyhanded.

The girls stepped back onto the road, but Mia shoved Nikki onto the ground and pinned her down with her knees. Sophia tried to push Mia away, but Mia nudged her back. Nikki squirmed under the weight of Mia's bony knees. "What's your deal?" Mia exclaimed. "You could've gotten us killed. And for what? For a stupid gun?"

"Leave Nikki alone," Sophia said. "Yeah, she shouldn't have stolen the gun, but that guy almost killed her. Didn't you hear the gunshots?"

Mia stared at Nikki. Then came a pause, long and gravid. "How did he get the gun from you?" It was an accusation. Nikki got to her feet and averted her eyes. "What happened after we separated? Tell me." She glanced at the pistol in Nikki's hands. Nikki remained silent. "Tell us!"

"Let's talk about this later," Sophia begged. "I want to go home."

Mia didn't move. The silence between her and Nikki was impregnable. Nikki opened her mouth, but closed it. Mia said, "You shot him. Didn't you?"

Nikki looked away. Mia shook her head with disgust, rose to her feet, and started to walk down the road. Sophia trailed behind. Nikki climbed to her feet and struggled to keep up with them. "You don't understand," Nikki said.

"Is he hurt?" Mia said without turning around.

"I think in the chest. I think."

Mia stopped and turned around, almost bumping into Sophia. Mia's face was scarlet with rage. "We should never have come. Fuck. We should never have come."

"I didn't mean it," Nikki said in a low voice.

"Shut up," Mia said. "You had nothing to prove coming here in the first place."

"But—"

"Shut up," Mia snapped. "We know Bryan's a prick, but what are you?"

"I'm still your friend."

Mia went on ahead in silence. Sophia flashed Nikki a smile, but joined Mia a second later. Nikki trailed behind, still holding onto the pistol.

#

When the bus dropped them off, Sophia and Mia started to walk back to Sophia's place. Nikki tried to follow, but Sophia told her now wasn't the best time. Nodding in acknowledgment, Nikki said she'd call them later. Sophia and Mia

didn't say anything back. They might not be Nikki's friend anymore; Nikki tried not to think about it on her way to Bryan's place.

The sun beat on and a balmy breeze, smelling of dandelions, passed through the neighborhood; kids played basketball on the street; a block over, an ice cream truck sang its luring tune. Soon Nikki reached Bryan's home. Bryan's bedroom window was open.

"Are you up there, you stupid prick!" she called.

Moments later Bryan poked his head out the window and gave Nikki *the look*. It didn't faze her; she knew it wouldn't affect her the same way again.

"What the hell do you want?" he said.

"Here. Take it."

She threw the pistol through the window. He held up the pistol in astonishment. "Jesus. Is this real?" he said. "Is this that guy's gun, the guy from the factory?"

"It's yours now."

The look was gone. His face crinkled with alarm. "What the hell am I supposed to do with it?"

"Don't care. Yours now. Told you I could go to the factory if I wanted to."

She stood there, numb and motionless. She thought about calling Sophia and Mia, but remembered Mia still had her phone. She started to walk back the way she came. Bryan called out her name, pleading her to get rid of the gun, but she kept on walking. Soon his face, *the look*, melted away in her mind, but an image of the

naked guy resurfaced, bloody and dying or perhaps by now dead, his eyes fixed on her as he tremored in the laps and arms of his friends. His pained expression was *the new look*. And she knew it.

Minutes later, she reached home. Her palms smelled of gunpowder and her shirt smelled like a puddle of stale piss.