

The Hills of Laura

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It is true that I hated Hucker Norton. But I did not mean to crush his thumb.

He wasn't one of us, really. Even his name told you he was from some other place. We were Petey and Tommy and Davy and Matty, and he was Hucker. And it was not lost on me that he rhymed with *fucker*.

He was the first one to start saying, "your mother," to every question a ten-year-old boy could ask. When a passing car beeped its horn and I asked, "Who was that?" Hucker told me it was my mother and she was beeping at him. When we played cards and I asked the dealer what was wild, Hucker told me that it was my mother who was wild. And by the time he'd been around for a month he had learned all our mothers' names, and he called us by them. He called me *Mary*.

I used to wonder if girls did that. I wondered if girls would say, "Your daddy," or "Your daddy's wild." I wondered if girls called each other by their fathers' names, like Eddie and Bruce. But we were boys, and that was the thing about us, we allowed for such sins. We didn't hang around with Hucker Norton because he was friendly or because he'd always been there. We hung around with him because he was a boy.

It is also true that my tenth summer—the summer of 1972—began with a punch in the belly from Hucker Norton. Still, I could not have crushed his thumb for hate.

It was September and I stood on the foundation wall of the first

house under construction on the site of the old Wallace Playlot. Holes had been clawed like local scars in the yellow dirt garden that had grown boys into men until that summer.

I held the cinder block in my trembling fingers, and below me—where the first basement floor of the playlot would be—was Hucker Norton. I remember looking at my hands. I could see the white of every bone of them.

Behind my hands, Hucker was crouched and exploring when I felt the grit of the gray brick slip away from me. I had no time to warn him.

Matty Vaccarello called it, “A *spectacular act of negligence*.” He was eleven years old, but he was my best friend, and he was there when it happened and I swear to God that’s how he talked. He got to the exact truth of things. If you saw something and you told him what it was you saw, he listened closely, and he asked you questions about what you saw, and who was there, and what they did, and all of a sudden you’d be telling him how you *felt*. He would kind of trick you into it, and when you were done, he would put his own words to the thing that happened, and he would look you in the eye after he said it better than you could, and he’d wait for you to say something like, “Yes! That’s it! That’s exactly what I felt!” That’s what Matty wanted you to say.

And so he took the slop and mess of our words and made them into truths that could not be denied. And what came of them were stories. And if he wasn’t even there when the thing actually happened, we wondered if he was, he made it seem so real.

But Matty Vacc was definitely there when I crushed Hucker Norton’s thumb. He was looking down from the top of the hill next

to us. He saw it all, and after he asked me a hundred questions, what he called it was, “A spectacular act of negligence.”

And yet my first thought after the shock of Hucker’s scream, was that we were even, Hucker and me. He had punched me in the stomach to start the summer, and I had crushed his thumb to end it.

On the day of the punch, it was me and Hucker and Matty, too. It was three months earlier, and we were in front of Dressel’s Bakery where I lived on the third floor. Hucker was standing where a punk named Gus Valenti had etched the words, *Fuck you, Mary Nelson, 1970* into once wet cement. I stood guard over the cement that day—an eight-year-old sentinel—had watched Gus carve the words with my own Popsicle stick.

I am not certain why Hucker punched me; it might have been something like a dare. Matty said something to me later—after Hucker left—something about how I “*tapped into the violent psyche of Hucker Norton.*” I could have done that with a dare. Hucker was in the middle of a story about how he punched some kid by his cousin’s house; he was always talking about how he punched somebody, and I must’ve rolled my eyes. Maybe I rolled my eyes, or said, “*Yeah, right, Hucker.*”

And what came next is not at all clear, it happened so fast. He might have said, “You wanna make a bet I did, Mary? You want me to prove it?” And, not thinking, maybe I said something that sounded to him like, “*Yeah, Hucker, why don’t you prove it.*”

And before I had a chance to think about what I said, before I had a chance to drag back my stupid dare, or whatever it was, out of the air, Hucker moved into his wind-up. I thought he was bluffing. I

thought he was going to wind-up and then just make me flinch—he was always trying to make somebody flinch. But when he reached all the way back there, and then turned toward me again, he had a look on his face that made me think there was a pretty good chance he wasn't going to stop his punch. It didn't seem anymore like he was lying. He had a stance, Hucker did. He had a stance and a wind-up, and he had a swing path, and it seemed as though they'd all been used before. And in one inexplicable second he completed his swing with a hard-fisted shock to my belly, and I thought everything would change. I was a punched boy. I wondered if I was even a boy anymore.

I clutched at my stomach and my body folded forward. But I did not fall. Nor did I stumble backward. My mouth opened wide to let in air, but I couldn't breathe yet. I wanted to lift my head and look up at Hucker, I'm not sure why—perhaps I thought he might hit me again—but I couldn't. I could only see the message Gus Valenti had left for Mary Nelson. I could only see Hucker's feet stepping away.

I am sure that my body made gasping sounds—sounds of struggling to breathe, sounds of wanting and wanting *not* to cry, and I am sure that if Hucker had stayed even for a second he might have heard them. He might have known then, the sound of a boy believing, but he didn't stay. Before I could breathe or cry or even lift my head, he turned away from Matty and me. He jaywalked across the street and past the construction zone of the Wallace Playlot, thinking, perhaps, that he'd taught me a lesson—that he hadn't wanted to punch me, but I'd left him with no choice. I'd asked him for proof, and he'd given me what I'd asked for.

Proof was everything then. It was the only thing to keep a boy

from falling for a lie, which was the worst kind of falling. I wanted to be so savvy and smart that I could smell a lie a mile away. That's what I wanted. But back then everything smelled like a lie. What I could have used help with was the truth. That's what I couldn't smell. I guess I just wanted proof.

But I wonder now if it might have been something else, too. I wonder if maybe I just didn't *want* to believe; maybe I didn't want to believe the world was a place that could give a ten-year-old boy a reason to punch. And maybe I didn't want to believe boys did the things they said they did, because believing them meant admitting that nothing ever happened to me—that I was standing still while an unbelievable world was going on. Not believing was all I had.

With Matty Vacc, though, there wasn't the wondering—he insisted so much on the truth of things. But three years after the punch from Hucker, when Matty told me what happened with Laura Fantano, I had some thinking to do. That's when Matty Vacc told me that while he was making out with Laura Fantano in his basement, he touched her breasts. That's what he called them. He called them *breasts*.

“So I'm sitting in my dad's office on his swivel chair,” Matty said. “And Laura's on my lap, and we're kissing,” he said. “And after a while she stops kissing me and looks right in my eyes. She reached behind her back and slipped her hands under her T-shirt to unhook the clasp of her bra.”

He went back and forth from the present to the past, as if he wasn't happy with the question of tense.

“Her shoulder pointed toward me like this,” and Matty reached

back like he was unclasping his bra. “And then she looks right in my eyes, Petey. Then she slips her right arm back inside her T-shirt sleeve, and then she slips it right back through, and then she tucks her right hand under her shirt and then I think she did something with her left arm, she tucked it back through that sleeve or something—I don’t know what the hell she did—and anyway, out comes her bra through her sleeve like magic. And when she did that,” he told me, “I felt like I knew what her breasts were gonna look like, and how they would even *feel*, just from the bounce. It was like I had a *sense* of them.”

Matty made all these dreamy and sexy faces, like he was Laura Fantano herself.

“Then she lifted her T-shirt above her breasts,” Matty said, “and Petey, it stayed there, like it was sitting on a little shelf, it *stayed* there, and she closed her eyes and she brought her hands toward mine. She traced her fingers over mine and lifted my hands, and then she brought my hands to her breasts, and it was like a dream.

“I couldn’t believe I was there. It was like she was all grown up, the way she took my hands in hers and whispered them across her skin.” That’s what Matty said, that she *whispered* his fingers across her skin.

“And there they were, Petey. Laura’s breasts. In these very hands. They were perfect little...” He paused. “Little hills of breast,” he said softly.

He closed his eyes. He was searching for something to compare them to; something other than themselves. He needed to put her breasts into words that would make sense to me. And with his eyes still closed he held out his hands with his palms facing me, as if he

couldn't find the thing in his head to compare to breasts but maybe he could find it with his hands.

"Little hills, Petey. The hills of Laura." And he looked at me like maybe that was enough.

He opened his eyes then. He looked at the back of his hands as they held the memory of Laura in front of him.

"My hands cupped them perfectly," he said. "The tips of my fingers and thumbs touched her chest, and my hands were filled with breast, Petey."

Matty kept looking at me to see if I had that look in my eyes like I understood, but I guess I didn't. It was like he could see that he hadn't gotten at the truth of them, yet.

"I could see pieces of her through my fingers," he said. And then his face lit up, and he smiled. "And you know what they felt like, Petey? You know what it felt like to have these hands filled with the breasts of Laura? It felt like holding my hand out the car window to feel the wind on the highway."

And then Matty laughed. He laughed and he put his right hand out as if he were in the passenger side of his father's car. He laughed as though he had found the exact truth of Laura's breasts. He laughed as if he was certain that this latest thing he said was the thing I most needed to know in order to understand the feeling of breasts in my own hands. He opened his eyes and looked at me again.

"Know what I'm talking about, Petey? On the highway? When the air shapes your hands like this? Well if you close your eyes and think of a girl, it's like she's right there.

"You gotta try it," he said. "When you're in the car with your dad

you oughta give it a shot.”

I felt my fingers twitch.

“I’ll never forget it, Petey,” he said. “It was like holding the wind in my hands.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to live in *that* world, the one in which a girl’s breasts could be touched by a boy. But I hadn’t actually *seen* him touch them, and it would be several hundreds of days before I had a girl with breasts of her own.

But my father had a car. And there was always the wind.

My father delivered bread and doughnuts and wedding cakes for Dressel’s Bakery, and on the next Saturday morning I asked him if I could come along. We filled the back seat of the Catalina with doughnuts and bags of bread and pulled out of the parking lot behind the bakery. We made two stops on Taylor Street and headed toward Harrison, where we merged onto the Eisenhower for the next delivery.

I’d been thinking about Laura’s breasts since the minute I woke up, but we covered almost a mile of highway before I got up the nerve to touch them. I kept looking at my dad.

At Western Avenue I put my hand on the armrest of the door, and inched my fingers toward the window. I edged them along the window slot. I set my wrist there and let my fingers play with the wind. I reached past the window slot and let the wind run across the tips of my fingers, like a kind of flirting. I reached out a couple of inches more and felt the wind advance toward my wrist. I reached out again, and the second I felt my hand cup the full wind of the highway

I got scared and whipped my hand back into the car and looked at my father.

He hadn't noticed a thing. He'd just turned the radio on and was fiddling with the tuner. He must have felt me looking at him, though, because he looked back at me and winked. I glanced straight ahead. I wasn't sure how long we were going to be on the Eisenhower, though, so I just slipped my hand out the window like it wasn't a big deal or anything. Like it didn't mean anything. Like I was just putting my hand out the window.

And then my hand held the wind. Or the wind filled my hand. I think it was September, because there was nothing like September in Chicago. And the wind was cool in my hand, but I felt the heat of the sun, too. I closed my eyes. I worked against the wind. I held my fingers solidly against the wind, and then let the wind work against my fingers. I let the wind be the wind, I gave my fingers to it. I closed my eyes and tried to listen to Matty like he was telling me right then about Laura's breasts.

I wanted to look at my hand, I wanted to see the shape of it, but I didn't. I was afraid that if I looked it would be like waking up from a dream of a bag of money, and you wake up and it's gone, so I didn't look. But it felt like the wind was shaping it into something that really was like breasts. And as my hand danced with the wind, the face of Laura came into my head. I couldn't help it. I tried to think of another girl, because Laura was Matty's girl. I tried to think of Bridget Pentecoff who had just moved in down the street. She was beautiful and her hair was like six white crayons and one yellow one, melted together but not completely. I pressed my eyelids together and tried to

think of Bridget Pentecoff, but it didn't work; Laura kept coming back. So I stopped thinking about Bridget. And when I heard my father's voice I turned my head toward him and opened my eyes. I was still careful not to look at my hand.

My father had just tuned into a radio station at the start of a Tony Bennett song, and he smiled, like the day couldn't get any better. He sang along with Tony Bennett and I just looked ahead at the highway and smiled, because Tony Bennett was the perfect thing to be on the radio just then, because I only saw my father cry twice in my life, and I don't know why he was crying one of those times, but the other time was when Tony Bennett was on the television and he was singing a song, and I don't remember what song it was, but my father started singing the song with Tony on the television, and all of a sudden he had to stop singing because he was crying. But on the radio in the car, it was *Fly Me to the Moon*, that Tony Bennett was singing and my father was singing right along with him and he wasn't crying. He was smiling and holding his pocket comb in his hand like it was a microphone and he was singing,

*Fly Me to the Moon,
Let me play among the stars,
Let me see what spring is like,
on Jupiter and Mars...*

And he didn't sound bad, my father, and I smiled because I think I could've smoked a cigarette in the car and my father would have just let me sit there and smoke. I could've blown smoke rings in his face and he probably would have just laughed and poked his fingers

through the smoke rings, and he probably would have just kept right on singing. So I just closed my eyes and shoved my left hand out the window, too. I put it out there like it was nothing, and the wind from the highway swirled the smell of warm bread in circles through the car and I think I could even see the smells swirling, and I felt the sun on my face and my neck and I was thirteen and my dad was singing *Fly Me to the Moon* and my hands cupped the September wind and I almost laughed out loud. I almost laughed out loud.

And then I opened my eyes. I opened them, because it felt so real I was pretty sure that nothing would disappear, nothing would go away, just for the opening of my eyes.

And I looked at my hands in the shape of Laura Fantano, and behind them the trees on the side of the highway, they were a blur, we were going so fast. □