

Counting

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Counting is important. Not that you're able to count because an idiot can count. But it's how you count that's important. Cheryl does it the right way, the proper way. The way they do it in the military, according to her father, with "one thousand" in between each number.

Punishment pushups and mopping floors slowly so as to remove every speck of dirt, imagined or otherwise, gives her lots of practice. She's so good at it she doesn't always use the "thousand." Just waits the right amount of time before moving on.

In the shade of a big maple tree, she holds out till seven then pulls the cigarette off her arm and hands it back to Meredith. The group reacts with their usual "oh my god" and "are you okay," but Cheryl doesn't pay much attention. The routine has become boring. For a minute, though, she's proud of hitting seven. It's her best yet.

"You're a weird chick, Cheryl," Doug says. He hunches his shoulders and frowns, like he's got more to say. He wags his head, instead, then takes off on his bike. Bob, dressed in his usual black, trails behind him. Meredith and Julie stick up for Cheryl, informing Doug he's just jealous, suggesting that he fuck off.

They wander over to rusted, weathered equipment clumped together in an open, grassy area. Cheryl and Meredith sit in rubber, U-shaped swings and trace the deep, well-worn ruts centered underneath with their feet. Julie sits off to the side in a bed of clover, a red bandana in her hair. "Your arm okay?" she says.

"Yep," Cheryl says. The worst of it's over; now it's just numb.

"Why do you do that?"

Cheryl shrugs. Why not? Because she can. Because they can't.

Any of these and none of these.

Julie futzes with clover blossoms while Meredith swings slowly back and forth, balancing her pack of Marlboro reds on her knee. Cheryl plants her feet wide apart and rocks from side to side. The motion is too much for her ribs, though, and she lets the swing sag to a stop. Usually she's better at sensing when her father's fist curls into a sledgehammer and arcs through the air. Usually he connects with her arm or shoulder. But this morning it was an uppercut, and she didn't see it coming. She counted to five before she could breathe again. A lady with four babbling toddlers appears, breaking the silence, and they get up, as though on cue. "Look what I made," Julie says, holding up a circle of green and white. "Cool, huh."

"Cool," Cheryl and Meredith say in unison. They sound like sheep.

Cheryl hooks her thumbs in the pockets of her jean shorts and begins walking toward the road. Julie and Meredith follow her lead and the three of them shuffle through crab grass and thick, clumpy dandelions. The constant smack-smack-smack of Cheryl's flip-flops annoys her, so she kicks them off, shoving one into each of her back pockets. She enjoys the soft, ticklish grass beneath her bare feet and wonders, briefly, about staining the carpets at home if the grass turns her feet green. At the edge of the road, she uses her toes to pluck a dandelion flower from its stem then asks, "Who's hungry?"

Cheryl's house is closed up tight, like a mausoleum. Her father keeps it this way, says the neighbors don't need to know their business. She

knows what he means is he wants to be able to hand down punishment without any outside interference. It's been this way for as long as she can remember. Her mother left when Cheryl was four. Just packed a bag one day and left. Her father tells the story at least once a year about how her mother stood in the doorway, flowered suitcase in hand, and announced she'd never wanted kids. After offering a small salute, she'd simply walked away. Even though Cheryl doesn't have any hard proof, she tells herself her father's got it wrong, that it was his demanding preciseness that drove her mother off.

In the kitchen, Cheryl grabs Diet Cokes while Julie pulls the makings for sandwiches from the fridge. Meredith sits at the table waiting to be served, like a queen bee. "Open the blinds behind you," Cheryl tells her. Bright light splashes onto the table, the walls, and Cheryl breathes it in. "How about opening the window, too?" she says, smiling. Meredith makes a face but complies.

Cheryl and Julie each eat a sandwich while Meredith polishes off two of them, along with two double-handfuls of Cheetos. Cheryl counts the Cheetos as Meredith eats them: 47. Meredith's ability to eat like a horse and still be skinny is one of the things about her that pisses Cheryl off. The other is Meredith's gift at acing geometry quizzes while stoned. The best Cheryl can manage is a D. She consoles herself with the knowledge that she can hold her smoke for a nine-count while Meredith coughs and sputters at six.

Julie pushes away from the table, pulling everyone's paper plates with her. She tosses the plates and used napkins into the trashcan under the sink then returns the pickles and sandwich stuff to the fridge. Cheryl used to feel bad about Julie always cleaning up after

them, but Julie likes to do it, says it's no bother. Early on, when they first started hanging out together, Cheryl would jump in and help, but Julie always shushed her away. Now Cheryl lets Julie do her thing and everybody's happy.

They move to the family room, and Cheryl opens the curtains. The room fills with warm sunshine. They sprawl on the floor and Meredith grabs the remote and starts flipping through channels. Her idea of flipping is to stay on one channel three or four minutes, long enough for Cheryl to get interested, then to go on to the next channel. It makes Cheryl crazy. "Knock it off," Cheryl says after the fifth flip, and Meredith settles for an old *Friends* episode.

"That Phoebe is crazy cool," Julie says during a commercial.

"You know she's just acting, right?" Meredith says, rolling her eyes.

Julie flips her the bird. Meredith laughs like she's just told the world's funniest joke. She and Julie do this back and forth thing, needling each other, all the time. Cheryl stays out of it. Sometimes it's funny to watch, but mostly she thinks it's stupid.

Meredith snorts one last time then pushes her long, black hair away from her face. She fishes her cigarettes from her back pocket, taps one out, and sets it on the coffee table.

"Put it away," Cheryl says.

Meredith bats her eyes at Cheryl and says, "I'll smoke it out back. Your father'll never know." She flicks her lighter on, off, on, off.

"No."

Meredith keeps on with her lighter—on, off, on, off, on, off—but abruptly stops when Cheryl makes a grab for it. Meredith gives her a hard look, but when Cheryl refuses to give in, she sticks her bottom lip out and puts her cigarettes away.

The credits are rolling after a second episode when Cheryl hears the garage door go up. "My dad's home," she says and jumps up. Confusion flashes across her friend's faces. It lasts only a second, though, and they scramble up. Julie stands at attention; Meredith turns the TV off while Cheryl yanks the curtains closed. She reminds Meredith to place the remote exactly as she found it—on the left outermost edge of the coffee table—then sprints to the kitchen. She takes a quick swipe at the table surface, pushes the chairs in, and, just as the door slams, twists the blinds shut. There's a beat of silence before her father appears.

He stands with his legs apart and hands clasped behind his back. His shoulders fill the doorway. "Tell me what the rules are," he says.

Cheryl fingers the hours-old cigarette scab and forces herself to stand still. "One friend over at a time."

"Then why do you have two?" He unbuckles his belt, and she thinks he's going to whip her right here, in front of her friends. "I suggest you ask them both to leave." He turns and takes the stairs two at a time. Cheryl counts out four deep breaths and feels the adrenaline begin to subside. She finds her friends where she left them. They look like statues and she wonders if that's how she looks to them, scared.

When Cheryl returns to the kitchen, her father's waiting, toothbrush in hand. "The bathroom floors need cleaning," he says. As Cheryl reaches for the toothbrush, his other hand snakes around, grabs her ponytail, and pulls her to him. His nose is against her cheek. "I want them clean," he says. "So clean you can eat off them."

"Yes, sir."

She waits until she rounds the corner before massaging her scalp. She hates her hair. It's shoulder-length and frizzy, and makes an easy target. It's her mother's hair. Not that she remembers her mother's hair, but the two pictures she'd found buried in the never-used-table-cloths drawer showed her mother with the same kinky hair. Sometimes Cheryl thinks about cutting it all off, crew cut short. She imagines the look on her father's face, thinks how wonderful that moment would be and wishes she had the guts to do it.

The bathroom in the hall is small with a black and white tiled floor. Cheryl scrubs, rinses, scrubs, and counts. She's at 205 when her father appears behind her.

"I want those grout lines sparkling," he says, and kicks her foot for emphasis.

"Yes, sir."

When he leaves, Cheryl sits back on her heels and sweeps her arm across her forehead. The back and forth scrubbing motion aggravates her still-sore ribs. But she knows not to take any shortcuts. Once, when she mopped the kitchen floor with plain water instead of taking the time to measure out the proper amount of bleach, her father made her sleep on the Linoleum floor for a week. He said some up close time with the germey floor would help her see that his way was the right way.

She gets back to work but shortens her range of motion to make it easier on her ribs. She keeps her mind blank, focusing only on the counting. She finishes at 840.

The master bathroom is bigger but the matte white tile is, too, and she's learned tiles are easier to clean than grout lines. She hasn't

figured out a way to make it easier on her knees, though, and retrieves a hand towel from the vanity and uses it as a cushion. The work is tedious, but counting helps her find her rhythm. She finishes at 1278.

Heading downstairs to report in, Cheryl rounds the corner of the family room and stops short. Her father is hunched in his recliner, cradling a picture of her mother. She recognizes it as the one that used to sit on his bedside table, the one he said he'd thrown away because she wasn't a part of their lives any longer. She watches as he rubs his thumb slowly over the glass, watches as he slips the frame into the side pouch of his recliner, behind the latest issue of TV Guide. She quickly retreats into the hallway, pauses, then goes back upstairs.

In the shed behind her house, Cheryl places the cigarette next to the weeping scab from earlier. As she counts, she thinks about her sore ribs, her raw knees, the tender flesh of her cheek from the latest reprimand. She makes it to eight before pulling the cigarette off. She drops it onto the floor, steps on it then grabs her inflamed arm at the wrist and squeezes as hard as she can. The squeezing helps with the pain. When the numbness comes, she sinks to the floor and smiles: she's just broken her earlier record.

She checks her watch: only two hours till curfew. She pushes herself up and leaves the shed to meet her friends in the woods. They're not serious woods; they don't go on for miles. Just a dense area of trees and brush that separate their neighborhood from the prep school kids' subdivision. Their place is deep in the middle, in a small clearing Doug or Bob or someone made. Sitting on dead logs and pieces of cardboard, they form a semi-circle.

"Who brought what?" Doug says. His tone is pushy and it sets Cheryl on edge.

Bob pulls a small, nearly empty bottle of Tequila from the front of his pants. "This is all I could get. My mom was hanging around."

"I got this," Cheryl says, unzipping her sweatshirt and producing a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels.

Julie opens her hippie purse and exposes a box of Zingers and five Ding Dongs. "For later," she says.

"You got weed?" Meredith says, looking at Doug.

"Yeah. What'd you bring?"

Meredith bends over, sticks her hand down the front of her V-neck shirt and whips out a small foil package. From her back pocket, she pulls out a pipe, and holds them both up for display. "Only the best hashish in the city," she says, smiling.

They pass the bottles and pipe around, though Cheryl waves the pipe on. She's not in the mood. Doug takes a hit and his cheeks puff out. Cheryl watches him, watches the shadows skate across his face. She imagines him ten years from now, imagines him yelling at his wife and kids, demanding their absolute obedience.

An hour later the sun is closing in on the western horizon and it's getting hard to see; the surrounding trees block most of the light. The weed's gone, along with the Ding Dongs and most of the Zingers.

"You nursing that bottle?" Doug says, looking at Cheryl.

"I can drink your ass under the table any day," she says.

"Is that right?" Cheryl can see the smirk on his face even in the darkness.

Doug turns to Bob. "Toss me that bottle," he says, pointing to the empty tequila bottle at Bob's feet. He then reaches over, grabs the Jack from Cheryl's hand, and holds it up.

"How about we see who can finish first? Without puking." He divides the booze then continues. "What do you say Cheryl? Chicken?"

"Give me my half," she says. He keeps the tequila bottle and hands the original back to Cheryl. From where she's sitting, it looks like hers has more, but she doesn't say anything.

"Are we supposed to down it without stopping?"

"I won't have to stop, but if you need to, go right ahead."

Playing announcer, Bob tells them to get ready. When he shouts "GO", Cheryl lets the amber liquid flow slowly down her throat. Go too fast and she'll puke. She starts counting, figuring this'll be a ten. She sees Doug take a break out of the corner of her eye, but she keeps going. Her eyes tear up. She hears Julie and Meredith chanting "go, Cheryl, go." At eight her throat wants to close up so she slows down a little. She finishes it at number eleven. Wiping her eyes with her sleeve, she refuses to let the booze come back up. Sounds of night creatures punctuate the stillness. She looks over at Doug and smiles.

"You sure you don't have a dick?" Doug says. "No girl I know can drink like that."

"That's because you're an asshole." Cheryl wants to tell him she knows his kind, knows the misery he will cause, but the trees are beginning to multiply around her. She grabs Meredith and Julie and pulls them with her. Her finger rips through Julie's clover bracelet and it falls to the ground, but she doesn't let her stop to get it. She needs

to get home. She counts as she walks: counts her steps; counts the trees—then the houses—they pass; counts the reasons why she should stand up to her dad.

At Knollwood Street, Cheryl leaves Julie and Meredith and walks the last block alone. She lets the cool breeze calm her, give her courage. She counts her steps up the driveway, knowing it'll take 17. At the front door she pauses, pops a mint into her mouth, and goes inside. The front of the house is dark, but the canned laughter blaring from the TV in the family room tells her that her father is still up.

Using her hand on the wall as a guide, Cheryl inches her way into the living room. She squares her shoulders, takes a big breath, then rushes over to the big picture window and yanks the curtains open. Turning quickly, she does the same with the small side window then run-walks into the dining room and raises all the blinds. She pushes all the air from her lungs, counts to five, and pulls a chair away from the table. She sits down and readies herself. ◻