

Linear Perspective

She was Joy, exactly what I was looking for. At her house, I pinned her down on her bed and she let me unbutton her shirt. All I knew about sex was what my hands and Joy's cousin John had taught me.

Joy lived down the street for a while, in a flat suburban house in our flat suburb. Later she moved two miles away and lived in a two-story house in a two-story suburb. She had fat cheeks and braces on her teeth. She was as happy as her name, her voice thick with adenoids. She was already putting on weight. The sort of girl I didn't want my friends knowing I had pinned down and tried to deblouse.

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Joy's cousin John's thin voice had a permanent sneer, his walk a forever swagger. Sixth grade, halfway through the year, and he was the new kid in class, come to live a while with Joy and her family. He stood at the classroom door, crying and escorted by the assistant principal. Our teacher, a jut-jawed otherwise young beauty from Kentucky, voice soft and Southern enough to melt the meltable, sat John in the empty desk behind me. He had nothing but a short, stubby pencil, held tight in one hand; the sort of pencil kids make a point of outgrowing after second grade.

He had no paper. I turned and gave him some.

After he taught me how to draw naked girls, I gave him more. I gave him as much paper as he wanted.

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After school that first day, we found we were walking the same way, so we walked together. He told me who he was.

"I've heard about you," I said.

"What does that mean?" he said.

We walked every day to school together. We spent our lunches together, and we walked home together.

Sometimes Joy walked with us. Sometimes John didn't want her to, and she wouldn't. They would fight, John savage and hateful, Joy persistent and hurt, crying, turning away, "If that's the way you like it!"

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John was angry most of the time. He never was angry with me. He taught me how to draw the naked girls; crudities of the girls in our class, identifiable mostly by the names we placed above them on the page.

We were twelve years old. We played on the playground swings at lunch. We played the game where you dive belly-first into the swing, swinging up face-down. John went all the way through one day and landed on his face.

My back was to him when it happened. I turned and saw the cloud of dust, John face-down on the ground. I helped him up. Playground dirt and gravel were embedded in his face, turning into red mud surrounding two staring grey eyes. He was too stunned to cry. He held his arms down and slightly away from himself, his hands opened loosely, fingers splayed. His palms were scraped open, like his face, chunked with dirt and small stones. Blood dripped.

Joy was there, and other kids, too. Joy and I took John by his arms, guided him to the nurse's office. His freckled face healed in a few weeks, but he was scarred for life.

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A summer of swimming, of sun-struck days spent together watching bathing-suited girls poolside, of moonless nights spent alone, thinking intensely about these daytime visions while facing the bathroom sink, then we were thirteen and in junior high, with its multitude of classes and friends and crossing paths. John and Joy moved to the two-story house, upwardly-mobile now to a slightly nicer neighborhood. We saw each other at school, shared a few classes. John and I shared cigarettes snuck at lunch.

“Joy likes you,” he said.

“Shit,” I said.

“Yeah, I know, man,” he said. “Girls.”

But I liked girls. I came over to John and Joy's new house to play with John, and played with Joy instead. We were too old for play, but didn't know what else to call it, an awkward age where it's impossible to be cool enough. For me it didn't matter – I liked girls a lot. I was rathering to be with a girl I didn't much like, a girl like Joy, than to be with my good buddy John.

We three sat in the den, watching television a cool autumn afternoon. Soon, Joy and I were wrestling on the floor.

“Goddammit!” John said, craning at the television. “You two wanna take that

crap outta here?”

“Shush,” Joy said. “Don’t let my mom hear you talking like that.”

“Talk anyway I like,” John muttered. Joy looked at me.

“Let’s go to my room,” she said.

We went. She shut the door behind us. We wrestled. I tickled her, pinning her down on her back on her bed, straddling her with my shins over her arms. She writhed under my weight. I pinned her more firmly, sitting on her belly. Her blouse was white, with white buttons down the front. I unbuttoned one. She looked me in the eye.

I unbuttoned a second white button.

Joy smiled.

I unbuttoned a third white button.

“Joy!” we heard her mom call up the stairs, through the door, faintly, muffled. “You get that boy out of your room!”

“Damn!” Joy whispered. We rolled off her bed. Joy buttoned up. We went downstairs where I could not look her mother in the eye and could not get out of there fast enough, as John delayed me to show me his uncle’s gun collection.

“Check this out, man,” he said. “Seven rifles and three pistols.”

I got home late that afternoon and visited the bathroom sink three times that night. Once more the following morning, before school.

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“Hey, Joy says hi,” John said to me at school. “She says when are you coming over again?”

“Oh, whenever,” I said.

But Joy and her family moved out of town, the day before whenever. John moved too, but not with his cousin and her family. He moved back across town to try living with his own family again. I’d see him around from time to time, at football games or the mall. We’d talk. He was getting tougher. As soon as he turned sixteen, he dropped out and split.

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The stories came first like an unintelligible sound from far off—girls raped in the neighborhood? No one sure how many—one? More than one. Two? Three? Almost certainly, maybe even more than that. People knew people who knew, or knew their friends.

Months later the noise was one night a scream, one day a shout, a sound as

clear and unmistakable as the newspaper headline announcing the rape of a girl we had all gone to high school with, the murder of her boyfriend who had been with her that night, the two young lovers parked in their car on the edge of town. John was tracked down and charged with the crimes.

There's no denying the small thrill, the special feeling one can have when an old friend takes a gun in hand to rape and kill. You can tell your other friends, "Oh, yeah, I knew John, we were good buddies, we hung out together, he taught me how to draw. I almost kissed his cousin once."

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I followed the trial in the papers, staying away until the end, when I went to see John one more time. It had been a few years. Outside the courtroom on a wooden bench in the courthouse hall sat the girl, a dark-haired wisp, with her mother, more substantial. I had sunglasses on and kept them on. My hair was much longer than it had been in school. Nobody needed to know I was anybody.

I walked into the courtroom and sat near the back. I was the only spectator. Not even Joy was there. I didn't realize I had been expecting to see her until I didn't.

The bailiff came in with John and his attorneys. John was in a suit, three-pieced. He looked stunned. He didn't look my way. There was no jury; John had elected trial by judge.

The judge called the barren court to order.

"The defense rests its case," one of John's attorneys said. Ten days later, the judge sentenced John to life in prison without chance of parole.

As for my drawing, it never improved.