

SILENT NIGHT

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When Carol disappeared, she was fifty years old. The police department flier described her the way I remembered her: five feet six, blond, thin, a smoker of cigarettes. In this way it was as if high school Carol was missing, the girl with the best clothes and the eyes and the beautiful, drunken laugh. Her disappearance brought back our town with its main street and its winding suburban lanes clotted with fallen maple leaves. It brought back Paul Ruskin and his truck, and my receptionist job in the manufacturing company across the street from the gas station where he worked, the Grote & Weigel hot dog factory next door, the Hole-in-the-Wall Theater and its production of *Hair*.

Some suggested Carol was careless. These were fellow high school classmates who straightened out and went to college, married well and had three children. Carol waitressed at a tavern and went into the beauty industry, suffered addictions and, sometimes, driving into trees, and arrests with drugs and paraphernalia in the car in towns like New Britain and Derby, places my father called the armpit of Connecticut. He meant our town was nothing like these.

Once, looking through a book of picture riddles with my grandson, we came to the final page, titled “Silent Night.” It was a snowy nighttime scene, a town with a church and a railroad crossing and a farm with a fence and small, safe houses with snow-covered roofs tucked along the road, their windows a pale yellow glow. Beyond the town were the edges of woods, crests of hills. The photographer claimed to have constructed the four by eight foot set out of wood and chicken wire. He used baking soda for snow. But in the photograph the town looked real—the moon lighting everything bluish, the night so dark the objects we sought were barely perceptible: *a glove, a horse, a gate, a silver coin, the shadow of a skate.*

“This is just like the town I grew up in,” I said, and then immediately wanted to pull the words back.

Carol’s house was two down from mine. We were friends from childhood up through high school, though she was a year behind me. I graduated and got a full-time job filing and answering phones and filling in pink “While You Were Out” slips. Carol cheered at Homecoming and made culottes in Home Ec. That first year of work, I went to my company Christmas party at the Sheraton ballroom downtown. I wore a peach satin halter dress, one that I imagined Carol would have worn herself. I had the money, finally, to buy the clothes I always wanted—still living at home, paying a small car loan. The only coat I owned was a parka, and I didn’t think it matched the dress, so when Paul Ruskin picked me up in his truck I rushed down the front walk of my mother’s house with nothing on but the dress and a pair of black velvet heels. I never brought a purse with me on dates. The house was always left open, and I knew I didn’t have to pay.

I think of this now in light of Carol’s disappearance—how we’d grown up with the desire to be unencumbered. No one carried a purse to the keg party by the reservoir. You had some bills in the pocket of your jeans and that was for cigarettes if you were low. The boy paid for the alcohol he plied you with, and condoms, and the motel, if he lived at home, too, and wanted to have sex somewhere other than his car. It was considered romantic to get a room—something couples did on the night of prom. Even if the room was at the Grantmoor on the Berlin Turnpike.

In the three months since her last sighting, a snowstorm in December, Carol’s cell phone had not been paid, her number given to someone else. Her bank account and credit cards had gone unused. Carol didn’t own a car. On the website broadcasting her disappearance, nothing is listed for “Clothing and Accessories,” which is a terrible injustice. Carol was always fashionably dressed, and it saddened me that whatever outfit she had pulled together on that day would always go unnoticed. I imagined her stepping out into the snow the way we often did—with nothing but ourselves and the pull of the unknown. *What will happen now?* we had thought. We didn’t worry about bodily harm. These were local boys who knew how to drive the town’s winding roads. They gripped the wheel of the car or truck, their sleeves rolled up and their forearms ropy with muscle. All through high school, Paul Ruskin was Carol’s boyfriend, and his family lived in Kenwood in a brick colonial, and she was safe, safe, safe.

The night of my company's Christmas party I climbed into Paul's truck and he grinned at me, the grin slightly off. He and Carol had recently broken up. He'd been working at the Mobil station for two years, serving suburban women who pulled in and said, "Fill it up, please." He washed their windshields, hustling around their station wagons with the squeegee, but you could tell he wasn't suited for the job, that his family expected him to go to college, and in many ways, Carol's leaving him was just another disappointment for his parents, who had spent many nights with her, watching television in the den. I knew I wouldn't be filling her position. I wasn't the type at the time, and I sensed that Paul knew it, and understood that maybe this night with me would be his last. Still, I saw he would make the best of things. He leaned over and rubbed his hands up and down my exposed arms.

"Jesus," he said. "You know it's like twenty degrees out?"

I settled into the truck's seat and Paul angled the heating vents toward me.

"Ice Queen," he said, putting the truck into gear. A compliment, or not, I couldn't tell.

The night was dark and clear, the sky like it had been pricked with a fork, the sparks of light showing through. We drove through town—the Congregational Church strung with lights, the roads black and shining, the houses looking like everyone inside sat in front of their televisions with hot cocoa and bowls of popcorn. At my house my mother perched on the edge of her bed watching her little black and white television, drinking sherry. My sisters were out somewhere with their friends in the night, loose and as immune to the cold as I was. Back then, people said things like "the wrong side of the tracks," and that was where we'd moved with my mother when she divorced my father, when the house we'd grown up in was sold and only the living room's love seats fit in the rental—a gray house with slipping clapboards. The winding lane and the maples and the iron lamp post of our old house no longer protected us, and we were suddenly, like a store with its lights flipped on, open for business. "Here we are!" we said.

Paul Ruskin was one of a string of boys who took me out the year we moved, all after my first boyfriend decided to tell his friends about the things we did together. I saw now that he'd been hurt and rejected when I broke up with him. I was probably cruel, though I cannot remember what I said. I only know I wanted to be away from him, that I wanted to be with someone else. Later, he moved on with his life and married a local girl and had chil-

dren and discovered cancer in his lungs and died. It struck me now how much he may have truly cared for me—taking me to the motels for sex, trying to make it nice in various ways. But no matter how nice I didn't care for him, and there was nothing to be done about that.

Paul drove I-95 downtown to the Sheraton, into the depths of the parking garage, a place as dank and forlorn as any I'd ever seen. We took the elevator, and inside, in its mirrored walls, I saw how pale my shoulders were, how my nipples poked against my dress. Paul wore a suit. He kept tugging on his tie.

"We don't have to stay long," I said, though a plan for after the party had not been shared.

The elevator opened into the lobby and we followed the little placards to the ballroom. My dress moved along my legs, and Paul put his hand on the small of my back, and I thought we were an attractive couple—he was one of the most handsome boys I knew, and that was the reason I'd asked him. He looked like the kind of boy the person I pretended to be would date, and this would impress the people I worked with—the office women with their manicured hands and designer bags and dishes of watermelon candies; the men who invited me into their offices and told me to close the door, then leaned back, their chairs squeaking.

"So, you have a boyfriend? What does he do?"

I was happy to have the break from the dull clerical work, and it seemed as if these men were bored, too—distracted and irritated with their wives and children, tearing open packages of Snowballs and Mars bars and downing cans of Coke. I can honestly say I never knew what sort of work they did at the company or looked with any interest at the piles of papers on their desks. I never saw them working at anything.

Along with pumping gas, Paul Ruskin had become friendly with the owner of the Hole in the Wall theater, and he played Romeo in a version in which Romeo and Juliet remove their clothes in their tower, a construct of wood and artificial stone. Paul had invited me to the show's final performance the week before. It was our first date. The lights were dimmed in the theater, but everyone knew beforehand that there would be a nude scene—this was probably why they were there. I sat in the audience and watched him step out of his pants, embarrassed for him. After, I met the theater owner at the cast party, and he took a handful of my hair in his hand and asked me to be in his version of "Hair."

“You have to do it,” he said. “Convince her Paul.”

I knew that this play, too, had a nude scene and that the theater owner wasn’t just complimenting my hair. He ran his fingers through the long strands and when I tried to step away he gripped my hair in his fist. In his other hand he held a plastic cup of wine and a cigarette. He was an English professor at a nearby university and had started the theater in the early 70s. He made me nervous, the way he stared at me, and held my hair, though I behaved as if he didn’t. I thought he was probably dead now, as were most of the people I knew back then. I smiled at him and sipped from my own plastic cup of wine. He wore a velvet jacket, as threadbare as the red carpet in the theater lobby. Outside, the wind blew white paper napkins in the street. I watched them flutter past the front window, waiting for him to release me.

At the Christmas party, Paul steered me with a gentle hand on my bare back to the bar. The room warmed with humming voices—too early for the sharp laughter and raucous singing that I’d imagined. The office men, there with their wives, stood in clusters amidst swags of greens, around table tops balancing festive centerpieces. The room smelled of pine—there was a large glittering Fraser fir in the corner. Cigarette smoke wafted up from the groups, forming clouds above their heads.

“What if,” I said into Paul’s ear, “it started to snow over the little groups of people.”

He sipped from his Seagram’s & Coke, his pinky held out. “Let’s find our table.”

Paul had been to these sorts of things before. He located our seats and pulled out my chair. Bob Ossowski’s wife was the only occupant, and she held her slim hand out to me. I wanted to tell her that her husband spent his work days eating Snowballs and taking naps on the couch in the back of the shop, but I decided that the secrets of the office should be safe with me, that if I told her something she didn’t know she might begin to imagine other things I was hiding.

Bob’s wife’s name was Cassandra. Paul offered to refresh her drink, and she admitted she was a lightweight. Her watered-down Tom Collins sweated onto its green napkin. She made conversation the way older adults often did by asking questions, and discovered that she’d graduated from Oberlin the same year as Paul’s father.

“Oh Christ, I’m old,” she said, and I saw suddenly that she was—the skin

around her eyes sagged beneath her make up. Her hands were thick with veins, her head topped with coarse, wiry hairs that stuck up from her page boy haircut. I felt a rush of terror that this was my fate.

"You're not," I said, placing my hand onto hers on the table cloth.

"Look at you," she said. "Look at the two of you."

Paul put on his clever grin—the one he used as acknowledgement when someone said how good looking he was. He leaned over and gave me a wet kiss on the cheek, grabbed my empty glass and slipped from the table.

We knew how to get drunk quickly and efficiently, something the dol-drums of our small town fostered. There was no pretending to pace things. There were never any regrets for what we did when we were drunk. I knew Carol and I had that in common. Wherever she was that night, she was doing what I was doing, and maybe more—maybe not the cocaine yet, but she was smoking pot and drinking, and she was a happy, funny, entertaining drunken girl. She may have been at a party of her own, or at the movies, or hanging out with friends in their cars, the cars lined up in the bowling alley parking lot. And maybe she would drink too much and argue with her date and take off into the night, her high heeled boots striking the pavement in that ringing way, a pint of blackberry brandy in her coat pocket. We did that, too, often enough—struck out on our own into the darkness, the air burning our lungs, some boy trailing after us in the car. "Get in the car, please," and then finally slamming on the brakes and chasing us down. We were a danger to ourselves, we needed to be corralled and brought back.

Paul delivered my drink and he slipped me a pill—some sort of pain pill he'd told me earlier in the truck he'd swiped from his mother.

"Did you take one?" I'd asked him, the guardrails cold and snow-topped, slipping past.

"Do these lights look blurry to you, too?" he said, gripping the steering wheel, leaning forward to squint at the highway.

We laughed. I was never afraid with any of the boys I dated. Nothing bad had ever happened to anyone I knew yet. Bob Ossowski returned to the table with Matt Carpenter from purchasing, and Matt pulled up a chair alongside me. He smelled of bourbon and his eyes lit on me the way they often did at work.

"So, this is the guy, eh?" he said. "The lucky guy."

I folded my hands in my lap, a gesture that calmed me. "Paul," I said, "this is Matt."

"His father graduated college the same year as me," Cassandra said, and I saw she wasn't as pathetic as I'd thought, and her sobriety lent her a certain ruthlessness. Matt was drunk. He'd been drunk the other day at work, too, when we'd all been given silver gift boxes of Canadian Club and he had cracked his open and we'd swallowed it straight from paper cups.

"Still drinking the Canadian Club?" I said.

"Thought I'd keep the roll going," he said. "The ball rolling. Whatever."

He seemed unsure, flustered. I felt that my bringing Paul to the party had changed his opinion of me—not the new little receptionist but a woman with a man, his arm thrown over her shoulder. Matt gripped his glass and shook the ice, and the sound reminded me of an afternoon playing Yahtzee with an old friend in middle school, her beagle asleep by the fire, the snow falling beyond the sliding glass doors onto the railings of her back deck. The contrast was disorienting. I didn't know which scene I fit.

"Nice to meet you," Paul said, reaching a hand out.

Beneath all the chatter was music—that Bing Crosby holiday fare, the kind even your parents called classic. It lent a strange sort of feeling to the event, as if we'd been caught in a version of a party that had played out in the room for years. At some point servers delivered food and maybe I ate chicken cutlet and mashed potatoes, and maybe Paul kept lighting my cigarettes and holding my hand, and maybe Matt Carpenter brushed his fingers down my back. I didn't leave any impression of myself behind that night. If you'd asked Cassandra, she might have remembered me in my peach halter dress, my hair long to my waist. "She was a little girl trying to act like a grown up," she might have said. "She was with that boy, the one who ate lit cigarettes."

Paul became the center of attention. Everyone gathered around and watched as he did his party trick. I stood to the side, humiliated, the magician's assistant handing him lit Marlboros. Matt came up and slipped his hand along my waist and leaned into my hair and sighed, the sort of sound you make when you have taken a bite of something delicious. I didn't wear a bra. He could have untied the bow at the back of my neck and the dress would have dropped to my waist, exposing my breasts. I suppose if I had suggested this someone might have remembered me, and I would later learn that this was the way you made an impression—offering yourself up, fearless and bold and without shame.

“What are you doing with this clown?” Matt said. “Don’t let him kiss you with that mouth.”

The night was ruined.

Paul and I left the Christmas party. It was our second date, and he hadn’t suggested getting a room. The cost of the Sheraton would have been too much for his salary, anyway. I didn’t remember much about the drive home. It was still early, and I awoke in his truck parked in his driveway, the large brick house looming over us. We could see the lights on in the den where his parents still watched television, and I thought he was contemplating bringing me inside, settling me on the couch in the place where he always sat with Carol.

“Why are we here?” I said, alarmed. I was drunk enough to feel the need to bolt, to walk fiercely into the night with the cold on my skin and in my lungs. Perhaps sensing this, Paul put the truck into gear and backed out of the driveway and began a circuit around town, looking for people out. This is what we did when the night was over, but not quite. You’d find someone circling the town the way we were, prolonging the inevitable return to our parents’ houses. Maybe someone knew of a party, or a bar where everyone else congregated. We were at in-betweens—too old to hang out at the usual high school places, too young to have our own families and homes. Those of us who’d married young invited other couples over for dinner—awkward evenings that seemed a parody of our parents’ lives. There’d be lobster casserole and the Doobie Brothers playing on the stereo. There’d be a joint smoked and chit chat that was pointless, really. You already knew who you would sleep with, and the drama and intrigue had been stripped of the night.

Paul parked his truck in front of my mother’s rented house. The lights were out and it was nearly one a.m. The night had involved a series of choices and chances and I had missed each one. He pulled me into his arms and I was pliant and curious. We’d kissed the first night we went out to the theater, but nothing else had happened beyond that, and tonight I knew his hands would slide beneath my dress, which they did. I was drunk and drowsy from the pill and I let him do what he wanted, falling into a sort of stupor. He pressed my head down to the front of his pants, and I pulled back for a moment, but finally relented and did what he wanted, and he moaned and said, “Carol, oh, Carol.”

His voice held a note of longing and sorrow, and later it was clear to me

that he wasn't confusing the two of us, but in that moment, I'd imagined he was.

"I'm not Carol," I said, secretly gratified that I might be mistaken for her. He was ashamed for revealing too much.

The trick to the past is that its details can be manipulated to serve our purposes. And sometimes, I got out of the truck and slammed the door and went inside my mother's house and went to bed. Others, I let myself remember the way he held me by the throat, the feeling of his fingers on my neck. The things he called me that were far worse than another girl's name. The way he drove the truck, with one hand, holding me down with the other. The passive way I let him do that, settling into the truck seat, my head pressed against the passenger door handle.

Paul parked his truck behind the Hole in the Wall theater and we had sex. He told me to say I liked it and I did. He didn't call me Carol again. The only thing I feared was his dragging me into the theater, that the owner would be there waiting for me in his velvet jacket—the threat of the stranger so much more than this boy I felt I knew.

A year later, I saw Carol at a New Year's party in town—a party in someone's parents' house—my husband's though I didn't know it then. The house was a raised ranch, and people milled up and down the carpeted stairs from the subterranean rec room to the living room and kitchen. The place was too warm and filled with smoke and music. Carol saw me and grabbed my arm in surprise.

"Come outside with me," she said, and the two of us slipped out the steamed-up storm door. It was bitterly cold, the snow sheened with a layer of ice, the houses along the road festooned with colored lights. Carol's nails were an opalescent pink. She wore a white angora sweater, long and belted, as was the style at the time. From a pocket she pulled a pack of Newport cigarettes and offered me one, and we walked along the slate path to the street and the mailbox. I wore only a blouse, and Carol slipped an arm from her sweater and told me to put my arm through so that we shared it—two bodies enclosed within the wool like conjoined twins.

She asked me what I'd been doing, and I told her nothing much, which was true. I'd left the receptionist job and gotten work at a department store selling handbags.

"What about you?" I said.

She told me that last year she'd gotten pregnant and thought Paul would

marry her, and he had refused. She'd fallen into a depression and took pills and nearly died.

"I lost the baby," she said.

I wondered if they were his mother's pills, if one night while watching television she'd slipped away and stolen them, tucked them into her purse. All of this had happened, I realized, during the short time I'd been dating Paul.

"I'm sorry," I said, though I wanted to say she was lucky.

"I'm not," she said. "He cheated on me and I'm glad I found out."

Overhead the sky was deeply layered with stars—some small and distant, some brighter. We smoked, and she asked me, "If you could go anywhere in the world right this minute, where would that be?"

I held the cigarette to my lips. I wanted to give a right answer when really, there wasn't one. I tried to say the place that Carol would say, "Miami Beach."

We'd walked the length of the road to Folly Farm's wooden fence, half-buried in snow.

Carol said she would go back in time. "I want to be little in my bed again, listening to my parents and their friends and their party downstairs. I want to hear the ice tapping my window during a snowstorm, and the radiators clanking heat through the house."

Beyond the farm's fence the field was empty and white and lit by the moon. The barn was dark. "The horses are safe in their beds," I said.

Carol pressed her cheek to mine. "I want to see them," she said. The two of us slipped over the fence. We were drunk, stumbling across the snowy field in the one sweater. The party was a muffled sound in the distance—a blare of brightly lit windows. This was before motion activated security lights, a time when our presence was signaled only by our footsteps in the snow. We circled the barn, but the door was locked. We placed our faces against the wood, and I could feel the warmth of the horse's bodies, their breath. I could smell the hay they disturbed as they stepped and rubbed against their stalls, sensing us.

"Listen," Carol said. "I can hear them."

And then I imagined the safety of my room, the contents of my bureau drawers, the smell of the blanket on my bed.

Back on the road, someone approached, a figure who appeared out of the darkness and stepped up to the fence, whose features, lit by the flare of a lighter, became Paul Ruskin's.

“Carol,” he called, his voice gentle, and coaxing. “What are you doing?”

I had avoided Paul for a year, and I didn’t want to see him, but though I resisted, Carol pulled me back with her toward the road.

“*Not* hiding from you,” she said.

The two of us fell over the fence, tangled up in the sweater in the snow.

“Come back inside,” he said. He wore a knit cap, a bomber jacket. When he spoke, his breath huffed, white and disarmingly tender in the space between us. He turned to me.

“What are you telling her?” he said.

“We’ve got our time machine in that horse barn,” Carol said. “We’re going to disappear and live our lives over again. You’re going to see me one day and think you know me, but I will be someone else—not Carol,” she said.

Paul closed his eyes. He swayed a little there in the road, just as drunk as we were.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Freeze to death.”

He turned away from her and she made a sharp, animal-like sound. “I’m leaving,” she said. Her voice echoed in the empty the street. “I mean it.”

Paul walked off, and Carol told me how he would always love her and that hating him was her revenge. I admired her confidence in his feelings for her, and I confessed to her that she was right.

“When I went out with him, he called me your name.”

I’d expected her to laugh about it, but her eyes filled with tears.

“It was you?” she said. “You fucked my boyfriend?”

It surprised me, to see her cry. She yanked her sweater away, and I felt the cold surround me. I protested, but she wouldn’t listen. Even if I’d told the truth about what happened, I saw she wouldn’t care.

Somehow, I urged her back to the house, to the party. I found the friends I had arrived with, but they weren’t ready to leave, so I found the boy giving the party, the one who would become my husband, and he and I climbed into his car. We drove into a snowbank that night, and the police came, and I was taken home in a cruiser to my mother, who answered the door in her floral printed robe. “Aren’t you a little old for this sort of behavior?” she said, barring my way inside.

Back in high school, we were like cars stalled out on a small back road—waiting for some kind of life to start, as if we needed only to remain still for it to find us. Eventually, you got a job at Travelers or Connecticut General or Aetna, or you married and had children and bought a little house in a sub-

urb and were grateful. Changing diapers and letting out the dog you were happy you had security and a car in the driveway to take to the store for milk.

Carol never wanted anything like that. She took up with an older man who kept her in an apartment downtown, not far from the Sheraton where I had my Christmas party. She didn't have to work. She only had to be beautiful when she was with him—at business dinners and on trips to Napa. I'm not sure what else happened to her then. I was married and had two children I pushed in a double stroller around town—a replica of that scene created for the picture riddle book—sneaking my covert cigarettes. I passed Folly Farm on my walks, the baby throwing out his pacifier into the road, the horses coming to the fence for windfall apples. The smell of manure and hay and mud, the swarm of flies followed me along the fence. I was not myself then. I had become someone else at some indistinct point in my past, assumed a disguise and then grown so used to it I had forgotten the other person—the one in the peach satin halter dress who imagined the man from work undoing the bow at her neck.

Though Carol's parents continued to live in town, and Carol returned to live with them intermittently throughout the years, I rarely saw her. I didn't know anyone who knew her, so for me her disappearance shouldn't have made much difference. Still, when the fliers went up in the pharmacy and the Shop Rite and the bike shop, when they flapped on telephone poles on Park Road, I felt, as did all her old high school friends, a terrible loss. The local police station began to receive sightings of Carol in New Britain, in Bridgeport. She was spotted in Vermont, in Lakeland, Florida.

But I knew she was none of those places. She'd been last seen leaving her parents' house, walking down Gun Hill Road. Her mother, suffering from Alzheimer's, couldn't say the exact time. Her father had been in the basement watching the game on television and had fallen asleep. The night she disappeared, the barn at Folly Farm caught fire. The fire department response was swift, but the freezing temperatures hampered the fire fighters' efforts, and twenty horses were lost to smoke inhalation. She had nothing to do with the fire—a spark in the wiring caused it to smolder and then rage—but everyone would associate the barn fire and her disappearance the way that people always associate tragedies. "They come in threes."

For me, the third loss was the death of my first husband, whom I'd long divorced. He drove his car off the road leaving the old Gun Club and hit a

tree. If my sisters and I had stayed married to our local boys we would all three be widows now. Or we would have been in the car with them when the accident happened. Our bodies might have been found in shallow graves in the woods or asphyxiated in our station wagons in our garages. And even if there had been a chance to go back and start over, who's to say what we would have done differently? Who's to say how things might have turned out.