

Origins

*W*hitney and me coming into existence in Einstein Hospital, both vaginal births, only three months and six days apart. Me in September of '85, her in December. The apartments we were brought home to in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx were less than three blocks apart, although to baby feet, it would have seemed like a thousand miles. If we could walk.



Whitney and me in water shoes, defeating the Bronx humidity under the sprinklers in Wilkinson Park. Our mothers watching from a distance, wearing a familiar style of sunglasses, waiting for a foot to collect glass. The only thing shared between Whitney and me was the re-circulated water that might have run between our toes or splashed off both of our lips, tasting each other's sweat before we even knew what to look for. We'd both grow up reliving moments like these in Super 8 footage, which was always projected onto a sheet or a wall. No sound, just the projector running. I'd like to go back and look for Whitney, but those films are gone now, I'd bet.



Whitney and me rising through the ranks of elementary school. She went to Catholic school—Our Lady of Assumption—and I went to public school. If only her mother had believed in the safety of P.S. 8, or my mother a bit less. We might have been dance festival partners. We might have competed in candy sale rankings. We might have been there for each other during the days when it was cool to steal car antennas and bring them to use in fights in the schoolyard, and play on the basketball team and believe the games meant something. Funny how at the point, our worlds were contained mostly inside of the Bronx, yet we played no part in the other's definition.



Whitney and me finding the dark spaces in the gymnasiums of our junior highs during school dances. She was still in Our Lady of Assumption. I had moved on to I.S. 12. During the Valentine's Day dance, all the science teachers wore cupid wings and rollerblades and delivered candygrams—a piece of candy attached to a card and a balloon—to us desperate, angst-fueled students. The hallways smelled of \$1 hot dogs and pheromones. During one of those dances, a girl hung herself in the bathroom, but I didn't know her. In all my time at I.S. 12, I don't think the bathroom door signs ever completely spelled out "Male" and "Female." While Whitney and I certainly could have used each other during those dances, our loneliness and anger were the origins of a hunger that would surely come into play later on.



Whitney and me both making the decision to attend Cardinal Spellman High School—my mother had lost faith in the public school system, or maybe me—obviously unaware of the repercussions. And then there was Whitney, walking down a green hallway before homeroom—although I didn't know her name yet—which means it must have been the second floor, since the walls of our high school were color-specific depending on the floor. The first

floor was tan and the third floor was blue. She had short blond hair, some roots showing. Blue eyes like Vermont in the morning. Knee-highs. Red leather Mary-Janes. Patches on her book bag of lame bands. It didn't matter though, because they were bands and I played guitar because we all did in high school. As she walked by, I thought: *I could take her to some practices. I'll strut and she'll dig it and we'll fight and we'll walk out of the studio together and give black eyes to strangers.*



I think of something my father used to say: *What is the opposite of a photographic memory?*



Whitney and me in the basement of my parents' house the night before she left for college. We'd spent the three months since graduation down there, putting hands over our gasps while we fucked on a folding chair and playing video games on my parents' ancient television, the one from their first apartment, where it had doubled as a dining room table, and for the most part, the dining room. That August night was no different than the rest, even with my plans to tell Whitney that I'd found religion and didn't believe in premarital sex anymore—anything to dull the pain of her leaving. The grandeur of higher education had eluded me up until that point and I was unsure of what my next step in life would be, although I knew it wouldn't be more than a tiptoe. My father had disappeared again, and I was planning on applying for a job I'd found in the copy center of the MasterCard World Headquarters in Westchester. Whitney had driven over in her grandmother's Plymouth Reliant. Thunderstorm warnings had been scrolling along the bottom of the TV screen all night. Still new to driving, still putting A&D ointment on her first tattoo, Whitney, who was wearing an aged green t-shirt before green

t-shirts were being artificially aged, needed to get home before the storm hit.



Whitney and me standing in the backyard, the air smelling the way it always smells before a thunderstorm. A stale wind. Air sirens. She said that she had to go. Fat drops of water started landing on our heads. Thunder. We marched down the sidewalk together and she got the key in the Reliant's lock on the third try and we both felt like we were living in a movie and we didn't stop to wonder what people compared their lives to before there were movies. Her shirt was soaked through and I said, "I'll talk to you soon," and I wish she had done more than say nothing. The origins of our lack of fight-or-flight response mechanism were still unknown. I closed the car door once she was in and walked away, and when I looked back, her head was resting on the steering wheel. She was crying.



Whitney telling me to come around back because she was in her parents' garage—her art studio. It had been five months since she left for college and I was nauseous but it might have been from the smell of turpentine in the air. The gate was locked and she heard me rattle the handle and she said, "Oh, hey, sorry, just give me one second" and I thought: *What's one more second when it's been five months?*



Whitney emerging from the garage, framed by the fluorescent bar of light hanging from the rafters, wearing a clear smock, like a butcher, and splattered boots. Her blond hair was pulled back by clips and the dark roots were pushing out. She'd cut the fingers off of her

gloves, and under the smock, she had on a work vest on top of a hooded sweatshirt.



Whitney opening the gate and I could just make out the scent from under her arms—sweat and citrus and yeast. She said, “I’m working on a new piece. Van Gogh is my inspiration. I found this two-drawer nightstand at Salvation Army. I stripped and sanded it. I was going to re-stain it, but I figured it wasn’t worth the effort. I had *Starry Night* in mind, but as you can see, I’ve taken off from there. How are you?” I said, “This won’t work.” Her brushstrokes had left chunky stalactites of paint all over the top of the dresser. “As a nightstand, I mean. The top isn’t level. A glass of water would fall.” She said, “Form, function—it’s all bullshit. Is a nightstand a nightstand forever?”



Whitney smiling when I told her that she forgot my birthday. She said, “I thought it would be better—easier—for you—if I didn’t call. I didn’t *forget*, though.” It was January, and my birthday was in September. She had time to get her story straight. The space heater in the corner of the garage was giving off the stink of melting plastic and Whitney said, “For what it’s worth, you didn’t call me on mine either.”



Whitney saying that she wasn’t sure if she was going back to college. My finger was bleeding because I was toying with the teeth on a handsaw that hung on the wall. She said that she was back now and wanted to know what my plans were and I just licked my lips and said something about having some irons in the fire, an expression that I had neither a reason nor the life experience to use. Screw-