

the wolves  
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part one

Lacy heard her sister moving in the top bunk. Heard her turn over, shift. Their bedroom door was ajar and Michael went by in the hallway. Lacy heard his shoes reach the place where the hallway carpet met the stairs that went down the back of the house into the kitchen. One of his shoes squeaked on the wooden stairs. One of the rubber soles had probably gotten some water in it. Lacy's sister was laying silent when the alarm went off again. Lacy turned her head away from the wall and looked at the edge of the top bunk. It was light outside. They didn't have curtains. Lacy heard her sister groan. A foot came over the edge of the bed, and when its thigh was also visible the other foot came over more tentatively, dangling while the first one found the edge of Lacy's bed. Her sister stood on the floor, sleepy-eyed. One arm went out to the alarm and hit snooze. Lacy looked at her sister, who was standing very still. Her hand rested on the alarm, for balance, it looked like. The girl's eyes drooped below half-shut, her head dropped, and the motion startled her awake. Lacy slid her foot from under the covers and kicked her sister in the butt.

"Lacy!" Her sister stumbled. Then she slapped Lacy in the head.

"Hey!" Lacy yelled, "I'm trying to sleep here!"

"Then why don't you turn off the alarm?"

"You're the one who sets it. I never set it. I hate the sound of the thing."

"Then get your ass out of bed and turn it off once in a while." Lacy's sister climbed back up to the top bunk, careful to stay out of Lacy's striking range. Lacy pulled the covers over her head. It wasn't cold in the room, but it was too bright. Lacy wasn't ready yet. She pulled her knees up to her chest and spread the big toe on each foot away from the other ones. She ran a finger through the space between her toes, the big ones first, then all the way down, pinching the skin lightly with her fingertips. "This little piggy" started in her head. Maddeningly, she knew she couldn't stop it. Better not to think about it too much, else it get even more stuck. Lacy uncovered her head. She rolled over in the bed. There was too much light in the room. It was way too early to be awake. In a minute she was going to have to get up and go downstairs and walk through the kitchen where her mother would yell at her for not eating breakfast and for not taking a shower and tell her that she needed to comb her hair and "God!" that she stank and that they didn't buy her deodorant just because they liked spending money. Then it was nine months

of Jessica Harrison and Sarah Michelle Motherfucking Cartwright, armies of eastside rednecks, westside thugs, brick-thick teachers, and, of course, the stupidest man alive, someone who truly deserved and continually (though unknowingly) defended the title Lacy used internally as his moniker ("The One Man Clusterfuck")... someone who happened to be the principal of her school, Mr. Craig D. Williams.

The alarm came on again. Lacy's mother yelled "Girls!"

"Fuck," Lacy muttered, and got out of bed.

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Rachael was eating Cheerios from a plastic bowl and looking down at the newspaper, spread flat on the kitchen table. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. She was reading the editorials. Lacy came down the stairs behind her, dressed in slightly bell-bottomed jeans and a tight long-sleeved shirt with horizontal blue stripes that chased across her breasts. Over that, the front open, a black trenchcoat. Rachael was at the end of her cereal and had just taken a spoonful of tan milk from the bowl and put it in her mouth when Lacy slapped her sister on the side of her head where her hair lay flat from the ponytail. Half the mouthful of milk dribbled down Rachael's neck onto her shirt. She swallowed the other half and turned violently to Lacy. "What is your problem?"

Lacy ignored her, going to the kitchen counter. She took a green apple and stashed it deep in one of the pockets in her trenchcoat. Rachael dried her face with a paper towel. She looked at her shirt. It was darkened down the front in a thin dribble.

"Look at this! Look what you did to my shirt."

Lacy was looking out the window over the sink, staring at the mist made by the sprinkler. Sun hit the spray at a low angle and gave their yard the uncertain quality of a dream.

"Are you even listening?!"

Lacy's mother entered the kitchen.

"Look what she did to my shirt. She punched me while I was eating."

"Lacy!" her mother snapped.

Lacy saw the tiny drops of water arching over the yard, sunlight glistening on individual globules, light traveling from a giant ball of exploding gasses through the massive distance of space, through the Earth's atmosphere, into the yard, into the water from the sprinkler, and through the kitchen window into her eyes. One glint on one drop of water, it's electric sparkle. Another glint, from another drop, into her eye.

"Lacy!" her mother yelled. "What did you do to your sister?"

Lacy turned from the window, very slowly. Rachael frantically blotted her shirt. Her mother stood with her hands on her hips, menacing, questions in her eyes. The sounds they made were muted to Lacy, their volume turned down.

"Did you do this to your sister?"

"She punched me in the back of the head while I was reading!"

"Did you punch her, Lacy?"

"Why is it the first thing you think to do when you come into a room, and I'm in it, you punch me in the head? I'm eating breakfast, not in your way, not saying anything to you, you punch me in the head. I almost choked."

Rachael looked to her mother for sympathy. It made Lacy feel sick.

"Don't blame me if you haven't learned how to eat properly."

"Did you hit her?"

"It's hard to eat when people are punching you in the head."

"I didn't say it was going to be easy."

"Lacy! Apologize."

"For what?"

Lacy's mother came toward her. Lacy sidestepped and went for the door that led to the living room. Lacy's mother stayed at the kitchen counter, her head bowed to the sink and shaking. As Lacy went by, Rachael grabbed the sleeve of her trenchcoat. Lacy shook her arm.

"Get...off."

But Rachael's grip was firm.

"Let me ask you something--"

"Let go of me."

Their mother looked up from the sink. She saw the water from the sprinkler. Rachael swung around to face her sister.

"Why is it, that the first word out of your mouth, right after you just wake up, is 'fuck'?"

"Because." Lacy wrenched her sleeve free. "That's my favorite word."

She left the kitchen.

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Michael was sitting on the couch in the living room wearing his school uniform, blue pants and a white shirt. His bookbag was on his lap, and he sat hunched forward, elbows resting on the bag, his thumbs moving quickly over a game controller. Lacy didn't look at her brother, or at the television, but she knew by the music that he was playing Dr. Mario. Lacy hefted her bag onto

one shoulder and left the house. She went down the porch steps toward the side of the house. She hesitated at the edge of the gravel driveway, noting, as she always did when she came to the edge of the driveway, the number of vehicles her family owned: five. That number seemed high to Lacy given that there were only three drivers in the family. There were two Chevy trucks parked in the gravel driveway. Those were the new ones. A rusted one was parked on the side of the road in front of the house. Another, even more rusted, completely inoperable pickup truck, permanently occupied the garage. Lacy had concluded that her parents were obsessed with Chevrolet pickup trucks. The sixth vehicle, a baby blue Mustang, had been her dad's car before her parents met. That was the car that Lacy's dad had taught her to drive on, and, since her dad never drove it anymore, and since Lacy hated the thought of driving a pickup truck anywhere (but especially to school) that was the only car she ever drove. Lacy threw her bookbag into the back seat and slammed the door. When she started the engine the car filled with the voices of the Beatles. Lacy never turned the radio off and she never changed it from the oldies station. She also never wore her seatbelt, but, as she started the engine, it was her ritual to check her face in the rear view mirror. She raised herself against the seat, leaning toward the center of the car to get a better view. She saw the blue striped shirt framed with the folds of her trenchcoat. Her pale skin was framed by the round neck of the blue shirt. Other than two tiny moles, her skin was perfect. She never let it tan in the summer; she didn't own a swimsuit, and, generally, avoided direct sunlight. Lacy examined her reflection. A thin carpet of blond hair, like ducking fuzz, covered her scalp. Two spiraling earlocks curled like ribbons from in front of each of her ears. Her lips, stained with makeup the color of dried blood, formed a slight, pouty frown. Her eyes, circled in blue, flashed like the devil's. Lacy settled into position before the wheel and had her hand on the gearshift when she saw the screen door spurt open and then bag shut as Rachael turned to grab something she'd dropped. Lacy yelled:

"Hurry up!"

Rachael's body slammed against the screen door, thinking it was still open from her previous attempt, but the door had latched shut and it jarringly stopped her movement. Rachael opened it again and stumbled out of the house with her bookbag over both shoulders, carrying the newspaper and a toasted bagel. Their mother leaned looked on from inside the house as Rachael opened door of the Mustang, and before getting into the car, folded the newspaper, placed it on the floor, and set her bookbag on top of it. Lacy was still looking at herself in the mirror.

Rachael buckled her seatbelt and then closed the door. The girls' mother held her hand up in a wave. Rachael waved back. Lacy threw the Mustang in reverse, and backed into the road. She didn't look back as she drove away. She looked forward at the fading dashed line that seperated the lanes, which, other than her car, were empty as far as she could see in both directions.

Rachael gripped the underside of the seat as her sister bore the sole of her boot into the gas pedal. The pedal was stiff, but when you really put your leg into it, the car responded. Lacy

liked that about the Mustang. She sped up until the wind blowing in through the side windows whipped her earlocks about her face and gusts of air echoed about the seats and dash. Lacy's dad had re-upholstered the seats himself with creamy white leather. Lacy kept the seats free of clutter. Unless it was raining or there was an all-out blizzard, she drove with the windows down, regardless of the temperature. When she drove Rachael places, Rachael would invariably lose homework or other papers to gusts of air that rushed in through one window and rushed out just as quickly through another, taking with it anything lightweight and not pinned to the seat under Rachael's legs or gripped tightly between her fingers. When this happened Rachael hit the seat with clamped fists and looked indignantly at her sister.

"Lace! That was my magazine report!"

Lacy would shake her head scoldingly. "You know I drive with the windows down..."

"We have to go back and get it."

Lacy would just shake her head at the situation.

"Lacy!"

"No."

Rachael had lost magazine reports, algebra, love notes, gossip notes, folding fortune tellers, hair ties, plastic jewelery, orthodontic rubber bands, scarves, socks, and, one time, a sandal to the wind bursts of ther Mustang. When she lost her sandal Rachael's usual look of indignance was replaced by a look more of horror and shock. Lacy met her gaze.

"I told you not to be gettin dressed in the car."

Rachael's jaw dropped. "Lace... I can't walk around with one sandal!"

"Better toss the other one out, too, then."

"I didn't toss it out. The wind took it!"

"The wind wouldn't be able to take it so easy if you'd keep your dirty feet off my dashboard."

"They're not dirty. Lacy, look. My feet aren't dirty." Then Rachael had snuck her bare foot, the one that had lost its sandal, up to her face, smelling it as inconspicuously as possible while Lacy pretended not to notice. As Lacy remembered the time with the sandal, she glanced at Rachael and smiled. Rachael returned her glance suspiciously.

"What?" Rachael held the bagel away from her mouth.

Lacy looked back at the road. As she sped away from home the woods on both sides of the road thinned. On the left she began to see a few houses set far back from the road with long gravel driveways that connected them to the road. These were new houses, no more than ten years old. They were all single-story, with attached garages, owned by grandparents and great grandparents who, when they were young, had been farmers. Now their only activities were mowing acres of lawn on riding mowers made by Honda that cost almost as much as a car made by Honda, and they also watched television, doubtless, and they were always selling something by the side of the road, unattended, like firewood, bundled in five dollar increments with a sign to advertise and

a Tupperware container for people to leave their money. Lacy's house was older, and her parents were younger, than these. Also, Lacy's parents had never been farmers. As the woods thinned and gave way to these houses on the left side of the road, the woods thinned on the right side too, but there it gave way not to houses, but to the Narrows Memorial Gardens, a massive cemetery which, in local parlance, was just known as The Narrows. The oldest plots lay at the front of the cemetery, along Route 61. As more people died, whoever owned the cemetery thinned out more and more of the woods farther and farther from the road. If you parked in the grass outside the front gate of The Narrows and walked straight into the cemetery, you would pass graves from the late 1700s, mainly small tablet-styled markers, you would pass graves from the 1800s, some with elaborate statues and large obelisks, and, going farther back, you would come to smaller and less expensive graves, the polished, colored marble of the 1900s. Beyond the newest graves, the woods beyond The Narrows quickly became impassable, a tangle of old growth, vines, rotting fallen trunks, decaying leaves. Lacy had walked that way many times. She remembered fragments of those times as she drove along Dog Leg Road, the road her house was on, with The Narrows on her right. The woods thinned as she drove toward the intersection of Dog Leg and Route 61. The smell of freshly cut grass from the houses on the left was not her favorite smell, but it was worth putting up with to keep the windows down. The cemetery made itself more and more apparent as Lacy drove. First she saw only thick woods to her right, then a few plots deep in the woods, the sunlight glinting off their polished marble, then the frequent pastel blotch of artificial flowers, ceramic statuary, pinwheels, flags left by mourners. Lacy eased her boot off the gas pedal. A dog laying in the yard to her left perked its head up at her car, its gaze following the blue streak along the line of road. Lacy shifted her body, unsticking her thin, white legs from the leather seat. The Mustang rumbled steadily beneath her. Rachael thought she saw her sister looking at her own legs against the leather seat. Black combat boots and a leather miniskirt? Rachael herself had chosen an orange blouse and a pair of stretchy jeans with an elastic waist. She looked at her sister's lipstick. It wasn't regular lipstick, just designed to add color. It only stuck to certain parts of her lips, wearing away in chunks with the texture of her lips. To Rachael, it looked exactly like the pictures of erosion they looked at in science class, mainly dark, dark red with pink rivulets of her actual lip color showing through. Rachael watched her sister's boot press against the pedal. Lacy wouldn't just press the gas pedal, though, she insisted on coaxing it, rocking it in and out, the result of which made Rachael dizzy.

"Come in, Rachael. Earth to Rachael."

Rachael snapped back to Lacy's eyes.

"Am I losing you, there, cadet? There something on the floor I should know about?"

Rachael shook her head. Lacy reached for the volume on the radio. She turned it up. The Beatles wailed "don't want to leave her now...you know I believe in how..." Rachael pressed her back to the seat and took a bite of her bagel. She kept her eyes facing straight ahead. Lacy sang

along with the radio. She slowed the Mustang as they approached the stopsign at the intersection of Dog Leg and Route 61. She came to a complete stop even though, with an expansive lawn on the left and The Narrows' parking lot on the right, she could see pretty far in both directions. Going the other way on Dog Leg, you couldn't see at all. Corn grew up eight feet high all along that side of 61. There was no one coming. Lacy turned right onto highway 61 and drove east, with The Narrows on her right. When she drove this way, Lacy always wondered why Dog Leg Road was called Dog Leg Road. She'd been from one end to the other many times and it happened to be completely straight.

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Lacy pulled into the student parking lot of Colonel White High School for the Arts a couple minutes before eight. School didn't start until eight thirty, but as she cruised the length of the lot, spaces were scarce. She passed a row of battered 1980s luxury cars, their brown paint cracking, their ceiling upholstery falling down, with chrome hubcaps and the distinctive thump of the west side. She saw Germane Holmes situated halfway in, halfway out of, one such vehicle, twisting the butt of a Black and Tan into the pavement. He saw Lacy. He didn't smile. He squinted indesipherably. Lacy eased along between the rows of parked cars. She passed a rusted pickup truck. That was Braun. Lacy had known Braun since the second grade. She had watched him grow from a Batman lunchbox-toting, sweater-wearing, clean-brown-hair-parted-on-the-side, squeaky-voiced momma's boy to his current state...fried, showerless, voice so deep you couldn't understand anything he said, burnout, practically dropout, failed musician, pseudo-philosopher... Lacy used to like Braun. Braun still liked Lacy, but he had a girlfriend. Lacy passed a sports car, a Talon, that belonged to one of the art teachers, who, coincidentally, was named Mrs. Tallan. Mrs. Tallan hated Lacy. Lacy hater Mrs. Tallan back.

"Here we go, motherfucker..." Lacy said. Rachael looked up from picking her nails.

They were passing a Japanese car the same shape and color as a jellybean that belonged to David St. Meyers. David and Sarah Cartwright were standing beside it. Sarah's violin case was strapped over her shoulder, in addition to the bookbag. David had a notebook out and was showing her something in it. She leaned tastefully close to him while he talked. It was obvious to Lacy that she liked him. The tragedy, she thought, was that Sarah would never do anything about it. She'd be a virgin at 40, Lacy mused as Sarah caught sight of the baby blue Mustang from the corner of her eye, pretending not to have noticed.

Lacy muttered: "Fucking bitch."

Lines formed on Rachael's forehead. "Why do you hate them so much?"

Lacy laughed without looking over. "Ask me again at the end of the year." Rachael was a freshman. Give her time...she'd see. Lacy pulled the Mustang to the end of the row and circled around to the next. Rachael looked out the window at all the kids and cars they passed, at kids listening to their stereos and kids fixing their hair in rear view mirrors before they got out of their cars, at kids leaning against the brick exterior walls of the school smoking cigarettes, passing a basketball, kids dressed in ROTC uniforms performing mock military drills of some sort. She looked down at the tips of her fingers and used one thumbnail to shave a sliver of nail off the other. She put the emancipated sliver in her mouth and bisected it with her front teeth. Lacy pulled the car around the end of the next row and left the student parking lot completely, going out the same place she had come in. As they passed the engraved stone that said "Colonel White School for the Arts", leaving it behind, Rachael felt her heart leap with excitement and fear. Would Lacy kidnap her and drive across the country, forbidding either of them to call home, taking her hostage, force her to dye her hair, change her name, wear church dresses, lipstick, sunglasses, cover her body with tatoos, sleep in cheap motels like in Lolita...? Rachael hoped for this, but it wasn't in the cards that morning. Lacy drove along Niagra, the street in front of the school. She drove two blocks, turned around in someone's driveway, and came back to the school, ultimately parking the car on Niagra in front of the school. Fuck the student parking lot. You could park there if you wanted, but you could park here, too. Cops were always lounging around in front of the school, parked right where Lacy parked, watching the students at lunchtime, talking with the security guards, filling out reports, listening to their dispatch radios, doing god knows what. Lacy took the key out of the ignition. She went for the door, but stopped. Her sister was looking at her. Lacy opened the door and stood up, then leaned down and looked at the girl in the passenger seat.

"Well?" she barked, "what's the hold up?"

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"Don't think I'm gonna let you walk around with me all day," Lacy said to Rachael, who was walking beside and a little behind her sister. Rachael turned her head sideways from the ground, eyeing Lacy.

"I know."

When they go to the steps leading into the recessed courtyard in front of the school, Rachael hesitated. Lacy yelled to Rachael without turning around, "Meet me!"

Rachael glared at the back of Lacy's head, then started down the steps and only making it halfway before looking frantically at her own hands--empty--and yelling, "Lace!"

Lacy kept walking.

"I forgot my newspaper!"

"You'll manage!" came Lacy's nasal voice, muted for Rachael by virtue of the fact that she was shouting in the opposite direction of her listener. Lacy was glad Rachael had left the newspaper; child spent too much time reading nonfiction. Lacy had loaned her Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* the first week of summer, but Rachael never made it past the first chapter. She had wriggled around on the porch swing, alternating between looking at the second hand on her watch and choking down two or three word fragments of the text.

"Are you even trying?" Lacy had asked, watching her through the screen door.

"It's hard..."

"Don't they teach reading anymore?" Lacy had scoffed, withdrawing farther into the house. She always caught Rachael reading the newspaper or watching the news. If you took her to a library she went straight for the periodicals. When Lacy was ready to go she found Rachael by looking for the nearest microfilm viewer. After dinner the girls' parents would tell Rachael to change the channel from CNN to NBC so they could watch *The Simpsons*. Rachael grumbled her complaints, then Rachael and her parents switched places, Rachael moving from the living room to the dining room to do her homework, her parents moving from the dining room to the living room. Michael sat with his homework spread across the floor before the couch. Their mother sat on the couch. Their dad never actually watched *The Simpsons*. He paced around the living room until the first commercial and then went out to the garage. Next to the broken-down truck he had an electrical workshop. He was always making things there. Remote controls, radios, microphones, lasers... Lacy didn't watch TV. The electrical workshop was a solitary thing for her dad. Sitting at the dinner table with Rachael was an invitation for bickering. Lacy stayed upstairs reading science fiction and classic literature. Sometimes she talked on the phone. Sometimes she doodled on the wall by her bed with a pink pen.

Lacy counted out her next ten steps through the courtyard. At the end of the count, she glanced back to see if Rachael was still freaking out about her newspaper. Lacy saw that her sister was making it tentatively down the steps. She looked lost, but still seemed to possess basic motor skills. Lacy scanned the benches, the brick walls, the ad-hoc gatherings for someone she recognized. The freshmen were getting taller and taller every year, and the classes were getting bigger, too. Every year Lacy felt shorter by comparison. She didn't see anyone. fzw

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"Benjamin," Lacy scolded.

"Yes?"

"Sometimes I don't know whether you have absolutely no self control..." She paused. "...or entirely too much."

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The door was open. That morning was the first time Lacy's mother had opened it in two years. They had moved most of Rachael's things to the room that used to be the sewing room. By now that was just Rachael's bedroom. The girls' mother was kneeling on the floor in a dusty shaft of sunlight. She was kneeling where the bed used to be. She was facing the wall, tracing, with her fingers, a series of doodles which had been applied in pink pen.

Some had captions, and she had written some paragraphs. Her eyes wandered over the ones closest to her. There was a picture of Ben. She had drawn him with devil horns coming out of his head. Appropriate. He was carrying a book in one hand and a pencil in the other. She had given him exaggerated Converse high-tops (the shoes were larger than his head) and had even written, in tiny lettering, barely legible, "Chuck Taylor" "Converse" "All Stars". Nearby was a picture of Merlin, black trenchcoat-clad, spiraling braids falling before his face. He was poised like a sorcerer, his hands shaping the space between into a shadowburst, dustspeckle, or whatever he was always talking about. Merlin's eyes had been drawn badly, gone over several times in attempted corrections. The result was that this representation suggested he was either delirious or blind. Between the two boys, Lacy had drawn a picture of herself. She was dressed in a kilt, was wearing combat boots, and was completely naked from the waist up. She had drawn her breasts a bit smaller, proportionally, than they actually were. A snake coiled around her waist, her chest, her arms, its tongue flicking Ben's ear. There was a pink butterfly clip in Lacy's hair. Around all of their heads she had written quotes from real life, things they had said that she liked to remember, and also general notes about them. "I don't love, my friend" was written near Merlin, and also the word "Talisman". Next to Ben it said, "Gatsby" and something, badly remembered, about wearing a high hat and bouncing for your lover if that's what moves her, until she screams, "high-hatted, bouncing lover, I must have you!" Next to Ben, it also said "DORK". Lacy's own likeness had no quotes, but she had given herself a title. Above her head, in two arching lines of very neatly written block capitals, it said "THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS IN THE WORLD".

splotches of which were filled with her

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