

Dear Hero Worshipper

Jenny Crakes

The neighbors didn't understand my friend, who rode a motorbike for the first time when she was eight years old and crashed into bushes after trying to stop by using the gas and brakes at once. She was just enough older to always do things first while I would watch and then decide whether to follow.

"Pick someone else," she said once, but I adored her.

She loved to play with fire and singed her fingers playing with melting candle wax from the lights on the table. We balanced along railway tracks, tracing them in the thick dark under stars. In winter we set up camp one night out in the snow, to watch the moon shine down like a palace of shadows and mirrors. She led me into stories whose doors were just beyond my reach, stories that were not quite safe but glimmered like that moon.

One day we walked down to a bend in the wide river and played with the rapids, giggling as the water snatched at our bodies and we made our escape. I got tired and sat down on the bank, while she swam off once more, where the surface frothed in small white ripples. Past where we usually ducked out of the current, she floated to a standstill, struggling against the water that curled and snagged her slowly forward. Her eyes met mine and for one second they flashed with fear.

I jumped up, but she choked out "Stay put" and so I did, poised knee-deep on the slippery rocks.

She untangled herself and swam to shore, laughing in breathless bursts, steadying herself on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Were you scared?"

"Course not." My throat constricted and my voice came out sounding fierce.

We came up from the river chilled, still damp beneath our clothes. We sat in the house with hot chocolate, but I couldn't get warm. At home I drew a bath in the claw-foot tub, curled up numb in the spoonful of steam.

She had a boyfriend first, and I was the one left to sit banging my heels against the school wall, wondering if she would still want to come home to hang out. They were linked for five years. They moved in together. He ate pizza at my family's table, drove a snowmobile for us while we bounced, laughing, behind it on a sled.

After their breakup, we giggled in the kitchen baking cookies while she told the family that things just weren't working out, then skipped right into a description of how the mall cops trailed her and a friend home from the park after they set off a bathroom security alarm. She casually took the wheel when the two of us headed off for the island, only to find that after a flood, the bridge had been closed. The park lady with a British accent told us to take the causeway. We didn't understand what that meant so we crawled under the bridge and attempted to wade across 'til we noticed the gravel sandbar, remnants of a road.

We walked the shiny, wooded trails and admired the surging river, its waters high in the assertion that it was still most powerful. We explored the magical little chapel house and swung our legs picnicking on pop, strawberries and whipped cream. The sun soaked into our bodies as we walked, side-by-side on the path, and it was so peaceful when she turned to me in a low voice and said he wouldn't take his medication, that he hit her, but she'd thought it would stop until the night he grabbed her by the neck. Choked her, flung her across the room, told her to get into bed. I froze, so cold, the clean cut of shock.

Her eyes were calm, serious. So you know, it just didn't work out. Don't tell anyone. I didn't know what to say so we kept on walking as though nothing had happened. I was breathless with guilt and I wanted to snatch her up, to save her. People always say they don't understand how women stay with men like that, why they don't just get away. I barely brushed her hand and thought of her delicate glamour, her sparkling taking of risks, and I understood, oh, I understood.

After that she went away, someplace she wouldn't see his old truck around town any longer.

"You'll leave one day, too," she said, but it didn't come out like a warning.

