

You might assume Trevor Bennington lost his innocence the moment he stood over the skinned cat and laughed—but innocence doesn't go out like a blown light, it's a slow unraveling.

He cleaned the blade of his hunting knife on his sesame street pajamas and looked at me.

"So what do we do with it?" he asked. "Feels wrong to just leave it here." A cold breeze dropped a few dead leaves, landing on the cat's face, hiding its lifeless eyes.

"Cover it. Make a blanket," I said.

"This was your idea, you know. If my dad finds out I took his hunting knife he'll skin *me*."

"I said he was annoying. Didn't expect you to turn him into a marbles bag."

Trevor held up the tabby pouch cinched off with twine. He shook its contents and chuckled. "This'll hold a hundred marbles, maybe more. Fine use for the waste." He slid the cleaned knife into the band of his pants and shoved the pouch in his pocket. "Come over for dinner, I'll distract my dad while you sneak his knife back into the garage."

You might see innocence as a sliding scale. The weight moves back and forth, stopping on a meaningless number. That day found Trevor and me teetering at the far edge, but I know I slept like a baby without the damn cat moaning at my window.

Summer came to an end. We drifted in and out of each other's lives during the next school year. He was the king of marbles on the playground, and every time I watched from afar, my eyes were always glued to his damn pouch. He'd catch my blank expression and give me a knowing wink. I'd smile back. What else could you do?

Just before spring break, Trevor stopped by my locker and handed me a present.

"What the hell do you mean, *going away*?"

Trevor shrugged and pushed the box into my hands. “Dad got a new job.” He forced the box into my hands. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s weird.”

“You’re weird.”

Trevor took off toward the gym to win more marbles from some poor kid.

I didn’t open the box until a week after school let out for the summer. It’d been sitting at the bottom of my closet until I worked up the courage to unwrap his gift. I stood in front of my bedroom mirror and stared at the pale bones strung from the twine around my neck. They’d been cleaned until they almost shined in the dark. Thirteen pairs of rib bones, each meticulously spaced and curving upward, highlighting my throat.

It went back into the closet.

You don’t forget a kid like Trevor. And four years later he caught me by surprise when he pulled up in front of my high school, in a windowless van with *Free Candy* sprawled across the side in white spray paint. So many stares. Two years spent trying to get people to stop calling me strange down the drain.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He nodded for me to climb inside.

“What the hell?”

“I haven’t seen you in forever, and that’s how you greet me? I’m hurt.”

I hopped in the van. “Just go.”

“I got you a present,” he said, a few minutes later. Then he glanced at my neck. “But it’s not like you wear the one I got you before. Maybe you don’t deserve another one.”

“It’s at the dry cleaner’s.”

“It’s good to see you again.”

“You too, Trevor.” I think I meant it.

The town dissolved into a country road and we turned onto a dirt path that led into a sparse woods. He parked the van at the edge of an old trail and killed the engine. “Ready?”

“For what?”

“Your present, dumbass. Do I need to blindfold you?”

“Why?”

Not knowing where his hands had been, I opted to keep my eyes shut of my own accord. I stumbled over roots and felt thin branches tug at my clothes until Trevor brought us to a halt.

It’s hard to forget the excitement in his voice when he told me to open my eyes. At the base of a large oak, with his hands and feet bound in rope, mouth gagged with an old rag, laid a familiar classmate.

“He’s the one, right?” Trevor asked. He picked up a large, broken limb and poked the kid in the chest. He cried out against the rag.

I stirred from a daze. “He’s the one.”

Trevor held a deep emptiness in his smile. “Teach him a lesson.” Trevor pulled out a familiar hunting knife.

“I don’t think—”

“He wants this discipline.”

The knife wasn’t going to disappear. Had Trevor been stalking me? Just standing there and watching the kid writhe against the restraints made me an accomplice. How far would we go this time? But there he lay, crying. I knew that feeling. I’d been there.

I took the knife from Trevor's hand. The kid peed his pants. My hand stopped shaking and I slammed the knife into the tree trunk. "Look at me wrong again, and I'll carve you into pieces and feed you to stray dogs." I waited for him to acknowledge me before I walked back toward the van, feeling Trevor's glare.

He threw up his hands. "That's it? A warning?"

"He's not worth it." I could handle myself from now on.

"This wasn't an easy gift to acquire. And you're going to return it? I'm hurt. I'm real hurt." We walked away silently, leaving the bound kid to figure out how to untie himself and get home. Hopefully the embarrassment would keep his lips sealed.

"You've changed," he said. "I shouldn't have brought you out here."

"Don't say that." It felt good, leaving the kid out there alone. I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

"Are we friends?" Trevor asked, climbing back into the van.

It took a long moment to answer. With Trevor, word choice mattered. "Been a long time since we've seen each other. Don't worry about it."

"Who said I was worried?"

Trevor dropped me off a block from my house, saluted me, and sped off in the *Free Candy* van. It backfired at the end of the street, sending a plume of black smoke into the sky.

And then he was gone.

Often times I find myself still awake at dawn, thinking of Trevor Bennington's antics, wondering how much he shaped my own actions. Years later, and sometimes it brings a smile, other times nausea. The sickness in my gut this morning came from bruised knuckles and a

pitiful realization that those puppy dog eyes cowering on the bedroom floor had overworn their welcome. She could keep the t-shirt. It was ripped now, anyway. My phone vibrated. The text cordially invited me to Trevor's wedding.

You might expect a Trevor Bennington wedding to be some dark affair on Halloween with a bride dressed in black and some strange incantations exchanged in the place of vows. Instead, you'd find a typical fanfare of colorful spring flowers, sad bridesmaids in sadder dresses, a beautiful bride, and a Trevor smile never seen before. It resembled real happiness.

I stood at the back. Two aisles were packed with family and friends who all looked normal. Everyday people with nice clothes and clean haircuts. The normalcy was unexpected and disillusioning. But what had I expected to see, or more importantly, what did I hope to find in its place?

The reception gave me a chance to meet the bride. More overflowing normal. She gave me a hug and told me how Trevor told her all about me, how we'd grown up as best friends, and how he was so glad we kept in touch over the years. She was overjoyed I made it to the wedding. I was already over it.

"The prodigal son returns." Trevor flashed me his new smile, but I caught the hint of insanity at the edges. Then it was gone. He extended his hand. "How are you?"

"Nothing prodigal about me, unfortunately." I took his hand in my own, feeling his ring against my skin. He went to pull back but I held it up and stared at the smooth white band.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Trevor's wife asked.

Pale white, perfectly smooth. I let go. The band seemed to shine in the dim reception light.

“Ivory. That’s what you said, right, Trevor?”

“Yup.”

“Where’d you get it?” I asked. His eyes burned for a second before dissipating.

Trevor’s wife touched me on the shoulder and laughed. “It’s a secret.”

“Oh?”

Trevor held a ridiculous smile, but the edges held firm.

She continued, “I told him a married couple keep no secrets, but he said he got the ring before we were married so it doesn’t count. Does that sound fair to you?”

“It sounds like three’s a crowd. If you’ll excuse me, there are a few old classmates I should catch up with. It was lovely to meet you, Mrs. Bennington.” I shook Trevor’s hand again, felt the clean bone against my skin, heard the sound of marbles banging together in a tabby pouch.

“Don’t be a stranger.”

Outside, underneath a bright sun and a choir of birds, I vomited up cheap cake and strawberry punch.

We kept in touch through text for a couple years. Simple pleasantries, a quick hello—how’s life? It’s wonderful, Trevor. I’d love come for dinner, really, but I’m not living in town. It’d be a long drive. Too long. I’m a moving target. This went on for another year before he told me I had to come back home. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

What changed?

He opened the front door to his father’s old home and invited me inside. Quaint one-story ranch, immaculate on the inside. Nothing like how I remember. Bright daylight poured in

through a bay window in the living room and fell over a playpen. A baby lay on its back in the center, cooing and kicking at a mobile of kitties circling above. Trevor bent down and pulled the baby out, setting it on his hip.

“Come, meet my son.”

I held out my finger and the boy grabbed hold. Spit bubbles formed at the edge of his giggling lips. “Nice to meet you, too,” I said. He smelled like talcum powder in his little onesie with some silly saying about his dad being his superhero. I tried to pull my finger away but the baby held on tight.

“He’s stronger than you think,” Trevor said. He tickled his son, getting him to relax his grip, and set him back in the playpen. “Let’s go have a beer in the garage.”

“Sure, it’s been a long time.”

“Kitten, can you watch the baby? Going out for a drink.”

We sat down on overturned buckets in a dimly-lit garage. A wooden table was covered in old tools and dirty rags. The spot where we had practiced marbles in the corner still had an oil stain. I remember cutting open my hand on a box of rusted junk from when I hid that stupid knife. How long ago was that?

And now Trevor had a wife and baby.

“What changed?” I asked.

Trevor popped the cap off his beer and took a long drink. He let out an exaggerated sigh. “Beer isn’t too bad, huh? Got it on discount last week. Coupon clipping, man, it can become an obsession if you’re not careful.”

I tried to find the old Trevor somewhere in his ridiculous new father facade. A hint of something at the edge, but gone in a flash. The only things left behind were heavy bags under his eyes from sleepless nights. Typical kid shit. “What am I doing here?”

“You’re an old friend,” he said. Another drink. “Probably my best friend. Shouldn’t we try and share our major life events with one another?”

“Didn’t picture you as the marrying, having babies, and settling down type.”

“One child.” He laughed. “We grew up. That’s what changed. We left our baggage behind, where it can’t weigh us down.”

“I always thought our experiences as kids shaped us into the things we eventually become. Don’t we carry around those bags forever?”

“Drown them in a river.”

I glanced at Trevor’s wedding band. “Is that what you did?”

Trevor sat down his beer. “I have a gift for you. Actually, I’d sent this to you several years ago but the damn thing never made it. Then you moved all around and I never had a good address, so...” He reached under the table and shoved several pieces of junk out of the way. He withdrew a box and handed it to me.

It was nearly identical to the one he’d given me years ago at school. Some boxes were best left unopened. I handed it back to him. “I appreciate it, but it’s probably best if I just go.”

“I guess not much *has* changed, huh?” For a brief moment, his face showed the same expression as the boy over the skinned cat—the stoic indifference. But it passed and Trevor took the gift, slid it back under the table. “Are you going to hang around town for a while, reminisce around old stomping grounds?”



A bound kid's face from a distant past came to mind. Everything came back in sharp clarity and I needed to go. "There's nothing left for me here anymore."

"That's too bad. It was real good to see you. Don't be a stranger."

"Goodbye, Trevor."

Can a man regain something he lost years ago, take the unraveled string and roll it back tight? Trevor stopped texting me a few weeks after we shared a beer I never drank. Before I'd given it any thought, several more years had passed since I'd spoken to him.

Then my phone started ringing during another bruised knuckles session. I contemplated whether or not to answer, but the mess on the floor couldn't do more than wheeze. She wasn't going anywhere, and the phone wouldn't stop ringing.

"What is it?"

Sobbing on the other end. Not Trevor. Another crying woman.

"Why?" she finally asked. "He left *you* a note. Not me—*you*."

I needed to put ice on my hand. Otherwise people ask questions. There wasn't time to be arguing with an old—what had I really considered him?—friend's wife.

"Trevor had been acting differently ever since the cat went missing. He took our son out every night for a week, put flyers on every telephone pole in the neighborhood. Then he'd just came home and sit in his chair. He didn't speak. Nothing."

I sat the overturned chair upright and went outside.

"And then yesterday I found him out in the garage. Do you know what that's like?" She breathed into the phone. I felt it against my neck. "You have a girlfriend? A wife?" I glanced back at the apartment and looked away. "Can you imagine finding her like that?"

After all this time, Trevor was just—gone? For some reason I assumed he would live forever, a monster who kept coming back at inopportune times. All those years, everything we'd done together—everything I tried to forget. None of it seemed important now.

She brought me out of my daze with more sobbing, and eventually, she said, “Tell me why he left a note on top of a box addressed to you. Nothing for anyone else. I opened the box, which is my *goddamn right*, and it's full of pictures of you and him as kids, all smiles and carefree.” She paused. I didn't answer. “What's the hunting knife for?”