

PRECIOUS THINGS

Her collection begins with a vibrating pleasure ring, and Susan keeps it secret. She takes out a P.O. Box the next town over, where the risk of running into someone she knows is low. She isn't sure they'll let someone under eighteen have one, so she shows them her sister's license. They hand her paperwork, and she almost enters her own information before she remembers she's supposed to be Sadie. The clerk hands her a key, and a week later, she returns. Resting in the box is a parcel wrapped in brown paper. The name of the company from which she purchased it is printed in the upper left-hand corner, but the package is anonymous, nondescript. It might contain anything really . . .

Two girls stroll along a grassy verge at the edge of a highway, far enough that local law enforcement won't chase them off, but close enough that the blasts of truckers' horns rattle their ears as they pass. Alex suggests this route whenever they walk to the mall because she likes the attention, no matter how much she denies it.

Susan and Alex have been friends since seventh grade, and the horns have always been there. The truckers see her friend's blonde hair and pull the cord. Once they reached high school, she and Alex started making lewd gestures, laughing, but today, they walk in silence. Susan watches the cars speed by, their hulking metal bodies. She waits for the slide, the screech. She wonders what it's like: windshields caving in, glass shattering, metal twisting, plunging into her body, but she hasn't shared these thoughts — not with her parents nor Alex nor the counselor her parents force her to see Wednesday afternoons. She imagines her senses fading, vision blacking out as the blood stops pumping to her brain. Are

there pieces where it happened, remnants, broken reflectors? She finds herself gazing at the ground, and Alex must notice.

"Hey," she says. "I bet you won't go in there . . ."

They're coming up to the intersection. The mall is to their left. To their right stands a gas station, an undeveloped stretch of trees and grass where Sadie had her accident, and a little further down, *Adult World*. The store was in the news for months leading up to its opening – protests, concerned citizens signing petitions to block permits, but their efforts failed. Susan has seen the place, and she's interested, but she can't show this.

"I'll go if you do," she says.

Aside from the yellow sign – black silhouettes of a man and woman, presumably nude, holding up a globe – there isn't much to suggest what's inside: racks of dirty magazines, movies. As they approach, Susan sees a placard on the door – *Patrons Must Be 21 to Enter*. But the worst they can do is chase them out. For an instant, she wonders what her parents would say, but she knows she can blame it on grief. Susan isn't concerned about using grief as a motive. She'll do whatever she wants if it makes her feel better.

The girls slide behind a rack of DVDs before the cashier can spot them. Aside from two middle-aged men, the store is empty, and Alex begins pulling movies from the shelves.

"*Let's Stain the Sheets,*" she reads. "*Star Whores.*"

Susan roams about, searching. At the end of an aisle, a neon glow catches her eye. There's a wall behind the counter, stocked with toys. They have vibrators of various sizes, blowup dolls folded into boxes with pictures of women in nurses' uniforms on them. They have beads and lubes, and the objects attract her – the gaudy colors, strange distortions of human anatomical design. She leans over and reaches out to touch them, but as she does, someone yells, "Hey! What do you think you're doing in here!" and Alex grabs her and they run from the store, laughing.

For the moment, Susan feels all right.

For the moment, she's not thinking of her dead sister.

Over the next two months, Susan's collection grows. Since she can't buy from the store, she orders off the Internet. Her parents had given Sadie a credit card for graduation—"in case of emergencies"—but they've forgotten about it. In those first days after the accident, when belongings were returned to the families, Susan swiped it from her sister's wallet, and since she's home all day while her parents work, she takes the bills from the mailbox and pays them without her parents' knowing. She hides her collection in a chest beneath her bed. She locks it with a built-in lock whose flimsiness begs breaking, but her parents never enter her room. The display is lovingly arranged. She owns an array of rings, each with special features—clit flickers, dual clit flickers, constricting super-soft c rings. She has an uninflated blowup doll, a wrap-around Rosie, anal beads, beads connected to c rings, c rings connected to cock rings. She even has a prostate stimulator designed to bring about what one reviewer called, "the gratest orgazm in f@#king history," a double entendre she assumes was unintended. She avoids vibrators and dildos for fear if she gets caught her mother will think she uses them to masturbate. Somehow, it seems less shameful to let her parents think she's having sex, though she doesn't have a boyfriend.

Mostly, she sees her collection as a rebellion. No black clothes and mohawk for her, not like Alex, who'd met some delinquent at a party in May and taken to wearing a leather jacket and pink streak in her hair. Her own rebellion is secretive, subversive, the speakeasy password, the French Resistance, though maybe not the French Resistance. They were heroic. Susan's just an outsider. But at least, her rebellion isn't trite.

Susan's sister was cliché, her death so typical Susan almost hates her for it—alcohol, graduation party, car crash. "It's okay to be screwed up," her mother tells her. But it doesn't seem okay. Her parents, for all their concern, are coping too well. They've joined support groups, seen therapists. They have sessions as a family, and in these sessions, it feels like her parents and counselor are

teaming up on her. They urge her to share, but the more they insist, the less she's inclined.

"I miss my little girl," her mother says.

"I feel empty," her father says. "Lost . . ."

They cry, but their tears are restrained. They're both on meds to level them out. They've suggested she do the same, but she doesn't want to handle her grief. She wants to rip at her clothes and howl at the sky. She wants to burn Sadie's possessions. She wants her mother weeping at the kitchen table in a bathrobe, her father to come home from work wrecked. These are clichés she could live with. Most of all, she wants to fall apart, but she isn't interested in drugs and won't drink after what happened to Sadie. What's worse, she hasn't cried since the accident, not even at the funeral. She's worried her emotions are fading, that she's becoming cold. She'd like to talk to someone about it, just not her counselor. His insights are dim-witted, his apparent breakthroughs so textbook even a teen with a limited knowledge of Freud can predict what he's going to say.

That afternoon, she bikes to his office. She's started making up dreams with obvious symbolism for him to interpret.

"So I'm riding my bike in the street. All of a sudden, I'm on a hill. My brakes don't work, so I can't slow down. There's traffic. I'm weaving in and out, dodging cars. I'm not sure how it ends . . ."

He sits at a desk, with her on a swivel chair across from him. She plays with the strap on her bag, inside of which she's stowed a new toy.

"Could it be," he says, "that control is the issue? Could it be that you feel you have no control over what happens in your life?"

Susan bites her bottom lip and nods. Part of her wishes she could tell him the truth. She wants to ask why her parents are acting like Sadie's just moved to another town. She wants to tell him she's scared that Alex is drifting away, how they used to spend every day together, but don't anymore. She wants to tell him how, whenever she sees her friend, all Alex talks about is sex to make her jealous, but it doesn't work and Susan wishes she'd

shut up. She wants to say this but worries he'll think she's crazy, and she can't deal with that — being crazy. Still, it's how she feels, with her parents coping. She wants to fess up, but she's too far into the act and he might be insulted if she does.

"Wow," she says. "I've never thought of it like that."

By summer's end, Susan wonders if she wants to get caught. Between her counselor's psychobabble and Alex's tales of debauchery, she could have hidden motives. Maybe the toys aren't a rebellion. Maybe they're a cry for help. Perhaps she keeps them hidden in her room with hopes of provoking her parents. Yet, whenever she leaves, she surrounds the box with stacks of books, thick tomes arranged to conceal it from view. If she wanted to be discovered, she'd forget to lock it, leave it out. Alex, on the other hand, tells Susan everything.

"We haven't had sex yet," she says, though Susan wonders what's stopping them.

Susan and Alex sit in her bedroom, the music turned up. Alex worries that her mother eavesdrops. She wants to tell Susan all the things she and her boyfriend have done since last week. It seems like Alex is tempting fate. Last week, she told Susan she'd given the delinquent a blowjob in the broom closet at Macy's. It sounds like Alex is just doing this so that she can tell others. What's worse is Alex punctuates each statement with a silence in which Susan suspects it's her job to ask questions. Instead, she scans Alex's yearbook, looking for pictures of Sadie.

"You need a guy," Alex says.

"I don't."

Susan flips the yearbook closed, slips it back on the shelf.

"There's this guy. He's Jim's friend. We can hang out. In a group. See if you like him . . ."

Susan reaches into her pocket to touch the ring she now carries everywhere. It's her favorite: red lacquered, wireless vibrations, a single flicker on top. She likes the smooth surface, the cool polished metal.

"Tracey McGuinness is having a party Saturday. I can bring him along . . ."

Susan knows what Alex is doing. Once the schoolyear begins, they'll see even less of each other, with Susan in the AP track and Alex not. If their boyfriends are friends, it'll give them an excuse to hang out. It's tempting, the idea of having a boyfriend. Susan likes the normalcy in it, thinks how nice it would be to feel like a regular girl.

"I can't," she says. "Maybe another time, but right now, I can't."

Some days, Susan wishes she were made of this stuff, plastics and polymers, an artificial substance engineered to bend but not break. She hasn't stepped into these halls—the narrow corridors lined with orange lockers and green and white tiles—since her sister died, and the smell of chalk dust and stale textbooks serve to augment her absence. Alex has first period free, so Susan shows up alone, slipping into the crowd, heading through the front doors. She says hello to a few acquaintances, but other than that, the only word she speaks is, "Here," seven succinct times to acknowledge her presence during attendance.

Her last class of the day is Driver's Ed. It isn't a class she'd planned to take when she made her schedule last spring, but her issues with control have come up in the sessions with her parents, and her counselor suggested she get her license. Now she's here, her bag banging against the back of her seat, the driver's manual open on her desk. She sees her presence as penance for lying to her counselor, her games gone awry.

"I think it's best she learn to drive," he'd said. "It will help her overcome her fears."

She'd been avoiding cars all summer, going by foot or bicycle whenever she could.

"Most of you see the car as freedom," the instructor tells them. "This class is one way of getting there. But freedom comes with responsibility. You'll be wielding two tons of metal, moving

at high velocities. Even twenty miles an hour is enough to kill a pedestrian.”

The teacher’s words are slow, deliberate, his voice gruff. This wing of the school doesn’t have air conditioning, so Susan’s hot, lethargic, her shirt heavy with perspiration. She watches the other students. Their eyelids droop. The sun drifts through slats in the blinds, illuminating the dust motes.

“Now we’ll watch some clips,” the teacher says, dimming the lights.

Susan’s pulse quickens. She’s expecting scare tactics, images of roadside wrecks. But the first clip comes on, explaining the rudiments of safety, diagrams, actors illustrating proper technique, ten and two. When the movie shows crashes, they’re simulations, using dummies. Perhaps her teacher knows about Sadie and chose the clips with care. Still, she feels dizzy. A sudden chill cuts the heat. On screen, a car rams a brick wall, the hood crumples, the windshield is blown out. The dummies thrash, go through. And Susan pictures herself as one of them, hollowed-out, empty. She has trouble catching her breath. She looks at her skin, transforming in the lucent afternoon light. There aren’t any organs in there, no blood or lymph, sentience or sensation. She leans back and reaches into her pocket and rubs the ring’s outline with a finger, tracing the metal prongs. It feels good, yet her pockets are tight, and as she draws her hand out, she flicks it on, vibrations filling the silence between one scene and the next.

Susan needs to feel normal again, to reassert some sense of normalcy. In August, she stops collecting. She pays off the card and closes the account, but she keeps the box under her bed and takes it out whenever she needs it. She’s surprised she hasn’t been exposed already. She keeps expecting her parents to call her into the dining room to talk, but when they do, it’s not about the toys.

“We’re having another child,” her father informs her.

“You’re forty-six,” Susan says, looking at her mom.

"It's considered high-risk, but it's not unheard of."

Susan doesn't care. If they need it, why not? Susan needs other things. She wonders what advice Sadie would give her. Susan and Sadie hadn't moved in the same circles. But Sadie had never ignored her. Susan could have used her help right now, with Alex being how she was, an incompetent shrink, her parents replacing the child they lost. She's embarrassed she turned her ring on in class, though no one noticed, and if they had, they hadn't known what it was.

"So what?" she hears Sadie say, her voice clear in a way her face no longer is. "You turned on your cock ring in Driver's Ed. There's life after this."

Her sister's mind was always on the future. Sadie was popular, but she wanted more from life. College, then career. Career, then family. Sadie had picked her college in ninth grade—NYU.

"I want to do the big city, live it up."

And she'd worked to get the grades and got in. Only she never went.

"You have to get out more," Sadie would say, tossing her hair, her relaxed manner making her trite diagnosis seem profound. And maybe it's true. Maybe Susan's kept to herself too long, nursing her pain. Maybe she needs to get out. She calls Alex.

"Hey," she says, "you know that party? Could we go? Just me and you?"

The night of the party, Susan's thinking of Sadie, of how she died. It's not the same party, not the same night, but she's nervous. She almost regrets her decision to call Alex but for one thing: she gets to spend the evening with her friend, no delinquent. Susan and Alex have arranged to meet there. Neither has her license, which offers Susan some relief, since neither has to drive home, and Susan searches her closet for something to wear.

When Susan arrives, she feels better. Alex is already there, and she and Susan carve out a seat on the sofa where they catch up on the week, discuss classes, teachers.

"I have Thompson for Chemistry," Susan says. "I like him. He's funny."

"I think he's hot," Alex says.

"He's got to be sixty years old!"

"Well, he's hot in that charming old man kind of way. I'd like to rub his bald head."

They're laughing, and all the while, Susan tries not to think of Sadie, of how the night she died she'd probably done these things—lingered in choosing her clothes, met up with friends, talked, laughed. She'd probably had a good time. People stand around, listening to music, chatting, with red plastic cups in their hands. But Alex refrains and Susan loves her for this. They used to drink, she and Alex, at the parties they'd gone to before. But now they don't.

After a while, they get up, move about, mingle. They stop before a set of sliding glass doors that lead out back to a pool. Susan's watching the glistening blue waters, the way the waves lap at the concrete lip, when someone slaps the glass. She jumps back and finds herself face-to-face with the delinquent and one of his friends. The boys open the door, and Susan reaches for her pocket.

"Did you know they were coming?" she asks.

"No, I swear," Alex says. "Jim mentioned they might stop by, but I didn't invite him."

Jim grabs Alex by the waist as Susan leaves. It doesn't matter if Alex planned this or not. She's back to being dull Susan, sad Susan, Susan who can't cope.

She pulls her cardigan close about her shoulders and spots a bike in the yard. She doesn't know whose it is, but she only plans to borrow it. She's never been to the spot where Sadie died, the exact spot, but as her feet touch the pedals, she knows that's where she's headed.

It's six blocks to the exit ramp, and she rides along the shoulder. As she enters the freeway, cars honk and pass. She keeps a steady pace, gravel crunching beneath her tires. It's dark, near

midnight, but the moon is lighting her way.

The crash happened four months ago, a few hundred yards down the road from *Adult World*. The region is grassy, peppered by oak and pine, and that's what did it. Sadie's boyfriend had lost control of the wheel, they were moving at high speed, they'd veered off the road. Had it been a plain field, they might have been okay, but they'd hit a tree.

Susan drops the bike. There's a divot the size of a tire, it might be a track. She picks up a stick and starts whipping the overgrown grass, looking for traces of taillights, pieces of the wreck, but the world has moved on, even if she can't. Had Sadie been scared? Did she know what was happening? The car had caught fire. The service was closed-casket. Had it scorched the tree?

She stops beside a sycamore and places her hand on the trunk, looking for blackened bark. At its base is a red piece of plastic. She bends and picks it up, tracing its rigid edge. *This is it*, she thinks, *all that's left*. She wants to cry but can't. She's suddenly weak. She lies down and looks up at the sky. She takes out her ring and sets it atop her chest to hum. Her heart is dead, dried and withered, but in the dark of night, as she touches her breast, she pretends that it still knows how to beat.