



# LOOKING AT SASHA

by Lillian Fishman

**WE** had just come from the Harvard Tasty Burger; we were on Myles Standish Road. A Ne-Yo song had just finished playing on the car stereo. Yes, she had said, I like this, I like how it builds, as I had known she would. It was too late to idle in her parents' driveway, and the feeling came down on us like we were pretending to be teenagers again, subject to house rules and obscure disappointments. Everything on Myles Standish was a scene underwater, five years of tides warping the shape of the road and the house as I remembered it. She told me she had loved me all these years and not known it. She was sheepish and confused, and though she'd always

shied from touch I put my hand on the inside of her shoulder, where her warm neck began to slope.

After a while I said:

Why now?

And then:

Don't worry.

In the weeks since then an image has come back to me: on the golf course, in springtime, perhaps when we were sixteen. I had borrowed plaid shorts from her; I owned nothing that would lend itself to a golf course. She wore her hair up, sunglasses, white shirt, wide-shouldered and straight-backed, full of that ease that Mrs. Taylor would later tell me she had always suspected was the ease of a dyke. Small pearl studs, no make-up, boat shoes. In the moment in which she was about to swing she was silhouetted, larger than the sun, and I felt unable either to continue looking or to look away. There was no guilt in it, guilt had not occurred to me and love was so unsuited to a girl in pearl studs and boat shoes on a golf course that it could not be called love. How to give it a name? Once, on a long road trip, while burrowed in the backseat, I had felt that all of the liquid and flesh of my body was being spun in an urgent, inexorable whirlpool that found its

center at the base of my hips. In this incarnation of my body, no mistake could be made, I was all purposeful flesh tied together by the vortex. Petty needs breathed toward me from far away, like sirens two avenues off. This was what looking at Sasha was like.



What was love suited to? In Chemistry Sasha would throw paper balls at me with Bing Crosby and Sinatra lyrics penned carefully in blue ink inside. Her handwriting was small and curved. She was only interested in old things; in her bedroom she had hung pictures of Jimmy Stewart and Errol Flynn on the walls. The first spring we were friends, in afternoons at Driver's Ed, we would hide out in the corner bathroom in the History wing and sit in adjacent stalls. When I had English Lit for last block I would linger with Mrs. Taylor after class while she packed up her papers. Sometimes she would ask me about Sasha. You two are very different, she said once, but I'm not surprised. And later, after I had come out, she said: Really? Never with Sasha? When the last bus had left the parking lot on warm afternoons in May, Sasha and I would lie outside in new t-shirts on

the concrete and let the sunlight lick our arms. We were terrified of our bodies then; our naked arms were like auguries.



I now consider it bad form to center my life around someone. It is a sort of embarrassment to think of Sasha when I think of my days as a teenager; like sisters or married people we were with each other constantly. This is another thing I remember very clearly, sitting in Sasha's parents' house when we were seventeen, Sasha standing at the stove stirring a stick of butter into a pot of rice. Sasha made the simplest foods, white rice and chicken, pilaf and brownies, no dishes without small mountains of salt heaped atop them. At home she wore corduroys and t-shirts she had gotten for free at fundraisers and community service events. She had parents from somewhere in Eastern Europe. Her family was the type that covered their refrigerator door in photos, the table was large enough only for four, her mother always left small bowls of M&Ms out in the theme of the season – red and green at Christmas, and pink at Valentine's. Her mother didn't like me, or didn't like that Sasha had a boyfriend but liked me better than him.

My dailiness with Sasha: it was this bodily feeling of the whirlpool, the sense that my body knew itself to belong to her, and beside it the whisper of fear. The fear is why it is so strange to think of Sasha in my car after Tasty Burger, the smell of French fries and salt, the house she no longer lives in, and my voice, *why now?* After prom night we had a party in my mother's barn. Back then we lived on a farm on the west side of town; the horses were sleeping on the bottom floor, and we nestled into the attic. She had found out whatever there was about me to find out, it had to do with the look I gave her in that moment on the golf course when she was about to swing, the compact muscles of her back, her bare arms. It wasn't something I felt I could tell Sasha – Sasha who had brought me with her to the country club for golf, Sasha who led food drives and organized the annual antique car show in the center of town in the summertime. I didn't mean to tell her but she knew, and after prom we were so pretty and bright and slick with our own hopes that she could not help but look it in the eye.

Then we were tired and lost in the barn attic. Looking at each other like new animals, raw skin, half-blind eyes. She went outside on the grass by the paddocks. She wore her boyfriend's tuxedo shoes below her pajamas, enormous boats of shoes, walking back and forth on the low wooden walls

my mother had put up around the vegetable garden to keep out the rabbits. It was bluer than it was dark.

In the diary entry I wrote after prom night it's hardly anything like I remember it. *When she pulled the butter out of the fridge I wanted to say "I love you," when she cracked the eggs I wanted to say "I love you," when she flipped the pancakes I wanted to say "I love you," when Evan put his arms around her I wanted to say "I LOVE YOU." I wanted to say, "you look beautiful." I wanted to say, "please."* After breakfast when everyone had gone she threw her phone at me and left the barn while I cried and my lip bled.

• • •

This winter when I think about memory I think of a scene in *Black Mirror* when a man who will sabotage his marriage begins to replay a party at which he witnessed his wife flirting with an acquaintance from across a room. In this episode, we have developed internal cameras embedded behind our ears that allow us to record and replay everything we see. I watched it with the kind of envy I had beforehand only associated with arresting celebrity beauty and a particular paragraph in *Mrs. Dalloway* in

which Peter prepares for a conversation as horses prepare for battle. How desperately I want to remember: did Sasha play piano one morning on the top floor of some friend's house, when all the other girls were still asleep and I was dancing on the white-paneled floor of the piano room? Yes, she was playing piano, yes, I was dancing, she made fun of me, as she always did when I danced, but I don't know what she said, or what she was playing. Most often I only remember the words I wrote down in my mother's kitchen. The farm was built in a valley, and light would not find its way into the kitchen windows until ten or eleven, when the sun rose above the far trees. We lived out by the woods, on the far side of town. To get between my house and Sasha's I drove down a long road into the center of town, then north on Conant and over the commuter tracks to Myles Standish Road. In the center of town there were three churches, a pizza place, a grocery store, a drug store, two holiday-gift boutiques, two banks, and a real-estate office. There was nothing resembling a liquor store; this was an old New England town. On the south side were the schools, another church and two country clubs—Sasha's, and Pine Brook for the Jews. It is helpful to remember all of this, and to make a map of it. How else will I remember with what genuine glow Sasha became a beacon of



something else, something I needed, even on the trim, improbable grass of the golf course?

Sasha and I live in different cities now. Coming back in the winter, when the Christmas lights are up, and our families are unchanged, and we half-recognize each other, I wonder what it feels like for her, this new desire moving in her, how much of it is fresh and how much is nostalgia? What girl was it, in some bar, that changed the movement of her whole life? It seems impossible that she has skipped the hardest part of all: falling in love with girls before you know what it means, watching them in locker rooms, feeling dirt inside you, feeling muddy like March all the time. Muddy in the parking lot of the high school in new t-shirts, our breasts aware, cool and nervous. I miss the urgency, the way I soaked in my own need.



With girls I've always felt a certain confusion about what I want. I want to be inside them and I want them to be inside me, but how do we get there? I don't mean graphically. Between girls there is a consuming confusion, an

urgent need to get to a place where the reality of your separateness is no longer distracting, but there is so much to wade through. This leads to nights when you curse each other for falling asleep and afternoons at the beach when you swim into the water to kiss so as not to feel the ground pulling you away from each other.

I can't imagine this kind of desire in Sasha. She is so conservative, so self-contained. She is never without her pearl earrings. On the town green at the Pumpkin Festival she said to me: Why are you smelling the pumpkin? Isn't that embarrassing?

But how could I not smell the pumpkin? It was our last October before graduation, and the pumpkins were the richest color. My mother would bake the seeds later.

When I tell these stories I feel as though I need to explain why it is that I loved her. She was unfailingly happy; there was no part of her that understood why someone in our world would ever be dissatisfied. There was ignorance in it, perverse disbelief, but there was also pure determined optimism, an unwillingness to abide any laziness or self-pity. We were surrounded by laziness and self-pity, by girls who saw only dark moons, who could never see a sliver of their own luck. I knew I was lucky but I didn't have the heart to be as happy as Sasha every day. She was too

beautiful, and I was too afraid. We were afraid of each other—Sasha afraid that I thought she was frivolous, that I felt disdain for her on the golf course, that I was too interested in the shape of her shoulders, and so we would ask these questions of each other: Aren't you embarrassed? Why would you smell the pumpkin? *So before a battle begins, the horses paw the ground; toss their heads; the light shines on their flanks; their necks curve. So Peter Walsh and Clarissa, sitting side by side on the blue sofa, challenged each other.* It's okay, I said to Sasha, I'm not embarrassed. Do you want to roll down the hill? Yes, she did want to roll down the hill. We were afraid we were too old, but our bodies were fervent and gleaming and we had to do something with them, so we did it anyway.

---

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lillian Fishman is from Massachusetts. Her stories have appeared in Quarto, Necessary Fiction, and Wilderness House, among other publications. She writes a tinyletter at [tinyletter.com/lrf](http://tinyletter.com/lrf).

---

BT #027

© 2017 Lillian Fishman. Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, August 2017. Edited by Alicia Elliott + Amanda Leduc. Cover design by Troy Palmer.

Read more stories and essays at [littlefiction.com](http://littlefiction.com)