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Hooky

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HOOKY

Nicole Burchette

One day in the tree house kitchen the neighbor boy asked to me to play hooky with him. I paused, forgetting my imaginary eggs over the cardboard oven, the sticks and ripped paper shreds arranged like a fire beneath the pan, and followed him. I thought it meant something bad, or at least taboo. We left the tree house and went around the back of the bushy pines that lined the property. In a bed of brown pine needles I laid down, my palms to the earth. I felt the pairing of each individual needle, two by two, like cherry stems. He looked at me and asked if I knew how to play. I shook my head and said, "No." My eyes fixed on the base of the tree, away from him. Moving closer, he curled his index finger and pressed the edge of his nail under my chin. He told me to close my eyes, then gently ran his crooked finger over each of them. He ran the hook of his finger across my closed eyelids again, then down to my chin, across my forehead and over my lips. He traced the fall of my shoulder and caught the curve of his finger under my collar bone. He pressed in the space below the bone and paused. Lifting my shirt, he twisted and curled his finger in my belly button. He told me to be to still, that this was very serious; that it wouldn't hurt. I felt his curious fingers scratch down the wool of my skirt to the ridge of my socks and back up again. On the return up my knobby knees he swiftly turned his hand over and reached beneath warmth of my skirt. My buttocks pressed flat against the cool hard ground, his hooked fingertip slid under the elastic of my underwear. Fishing around, he found the middle of me. Eyes open, mouth wide, I writhed like a fish on a hook, out of water, out of air. The breath was gone from me. The earth was pulling me forever downward. We didn't know we were acting out real life. We were just pretending. We were innocent, trying to unveil adulthood. He grew up allergic to shellfish and gay. I found comfort in crooked things, corkscrews and coat hangers and the crooked smiles of crooked men who play hooky too often.