**Lipstick Heart**

Sarah Thomas

When I was twelve, going on thirteen, I didn’t have many friends and so I used to spend the summer holidays drifting on the wake of my older sister’s current. Glimpsing her from afar, loitering in the doorway of her bedroom like a spectre until she yelled at me to get out, even though my toes hadn’t crossed over the dividing line of her privacy. In the warm, restless buzz of endless nights, I would listen to her telephone conversations with my ear against the chipboard wall that separated our lives. Unable to make out words, just undulations in the pitch of her voice, waves and crests, rising and falling, swimming in the darkness that surrounded me. After a while, I began to understand that her low, breathy voice was reserved for confessions revealed to one of her girlfriends and the sudden squeal of laughter that often erupted only ever happened when she was on the phone to Jesse. Jesse wore black shades and a leather jacket and whispered secret things into Heather’s ear that made her smile. He always spoke with the bounce of a cigarette between his lips and he often patted my head and called me kiddo which, of course, I didn’t like.

That summer, I found something far better than just hovering on the peripheral edges of Heather’s existence. I discovered opportunities to peel back the fleshy membrane she had drawn around herself. Heather was always going somewhere. A head full of half made plans and spontaneous ideas, eyes still littered with the crumbs of the previous day’s mascara, flashing through the kitchen, slurping the dregs of someone else’s orange juice, gripping a piece of toast between her teeth. A slam of the front door, jumping into the passenger seat of Jesse’s battered old Ford, a rumbling, cagey animal. She flitted through her days like a desperate, impatient moth, allowing me to slip into her life, trespassing across the border into her room.

Heather never bothered to open her curtains, so it was always dusk, the fuzzy edges of pale sunlight shimmering around the window like a weak halo. I crept into the warm, still, silence, gazing around as though I was inspecting artefacts in the halls of an ancient museum. The crumbled remains of a burnt-out incense stick, scattered on her desk. The air still thick with its exotic promises, as peculiar and distant to me as my own sister. I flipped through the cassette tapes, caked in dust, stashed in a wicker basket under her chair. In the top drawer amongst her underwear, there was a half empty box of Tampax, a strip of condoms, the latest issue of Cosmopolitan magazine, all dogeared and creased, yet still proclaiming to reveal the secrets of the female orgasm. Nothing hidden in those drawers were of any use to me. I felt dried up and useless before I’d even got old. A lack of female camaraderie could do that to a girl, even one on the edge of adolescence.

There was a leather notebook tied with string on Heather’s bed, its pages fat, stuffed full, force fed with words until it looked as though it would explode at the lightest of touches. I reached my fingers towards it but changed my mind at the last moment; that was a step too far, even for me. Instead, I focused my attention towards the vanity case on the dresser. All of the items in there had been showered with the cakey mist of old foundation. I shuffled through the bric-a-brac, dabbing out of date concealer on a spot I’d picked earlier. It still throbbed angrily beneath the peachy glow of new life. I drew a heart on the misty sheen of Heather’s mirror with the blunt end of a melted lipstick, leaving a trace of me there, like the calling card of an elusive serial killer.

Then I retreated back to the plain confines of my room, lying on my bed reading an illustrated copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, waiting for Heather to return, wondering how long it would take for her to notice the lipstick heart.

Instead a policeman knocked on our door whilst I sat at the top of the stairs and Mum collapsed at the bottom of them, her prehistoric shriek splitting the house in two. It was a guttural, uncontrollable sound that shook the night. I was mesmerized by the flashing lights that rippled over the policeman’s face and burned around him in a blue haze, lighting up the summer evening that was continuing on outside beyond our doorstep.

There’s been an accident, he said.

Neither Heather nor Jesse had been wearing seatbelts.

The summer then became a parade of mourning relatives dressed all in black, and white lilies in the corners of every room in the house. I used to sit on the swing in the back yard even when it was raining, watching my mother soundlessly weeping at the kitchen table surrounded by my aunts. A peculiar shrine in the dewy glow of lamplights. Neighbours brought us casseroles and stews and lasagnes wrapped in checked tea towels but mum never felt like eating and I hungrily picked at them while she fell asleep on the sofa in the middle of the afternoon, halfway down her second bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

I didn’t go into Heather’s room again but I often stood at the shadowy threshold, expecting to hear her voice yelling at me to leave her alone. A painful muscle memory. When autumn came, Mum closed the door on Heather’s room for the final time, sealing it towards an eternity of preservation. The silent hauntings of a model village. Her notebook on the bed, the decaying incense, the cosmetics left to rot. And my lipstick heart, wilting on the mirror.