

Natalia's big secret

Natalia had a peppered white nose. It rested cozily within a freckled face filled with pimples and that tantalizing smile encouraging you to do something just beyond your reach.

The River was their song. Back then Springsteen knew what it was like to be young, naked, goose fleshed in the cold, the sweat of first love, sex in the back seat, down by the river beneath the fall of a light rain destined to stain your body forever.

She'd wanted the first child. That was first love. Then the others just arrived. They sorted it out. Worked to keep it all moving, keep them from fighting. Five seemed enough so they sought some help and worked out how to put on a condom.

The kids grew up without parents really. Too young to notice at the time. Too old now not to remember the gruel of parents working to keep five mouths from chirping too loud in hunger; it had all become a haze of loneliness and siblings fighting over the TV. Children find it hard to forgive. Parents find it hard to forget. Another perfect childhood. Just what they had all wanted.

How he had loved that face, the sweat trickling into tears. Freckles become stained with age. Hair thinned, muscles slacked, chin dropped but he remembered her body slippery in the rain, tight between his groping hands, their tongues sneaking through wet clothes, defrosted limbs. Bruce sang loud.

He had thought of an email, even an SMS or whatsapp. But he couldn't quite square the technology with the sound of an old cassette player and Springsteen howling out the car door as they squirmed away on the grass beside a dull, dark lake they pretended was a river.

She'd be back in a minute. He'd tell her face to face. Thirty one years was enough. He was leaving. And maybe in the end she wouldn't even be angry. Or surprised. Maybe she too had waited thirty one years for him to say it, or pluck up enough courage to say it herself. Natalia. Goodbye.

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