

BREAKING
POINTS

Chelsea Stickle

BLACK LAWRENCE PRESS



Black
Lawrence
Press

www.blacklawrence.com

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel
Chapbook Editor: Kit Frick
Book and Cover Design: Zoe Norvell

Copyright ©Chelsea Stickle 2021
ISBN: 978-1-62557-019-2

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher: editors@blacklawrencepress.com

Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.
Printed in the United States.

For all the people who taught me how to walk away.

Table of Contents

What the Detectives Found in Her Abandoned Car	1
Coming of Age	3
We're Not Allowed Outside	6
Through Rose-Colored Glasses	8
The One Who Gets Away	15
How to Make Stock with Thanksgiving Leftovers	17
Though Her Teeth Never Break Skin	20
Household Extractions	22
Heirloom Seed Propagation	25
Quiz: How Mature Are You?	29
Gutter Ball	35
Don't You Worry There's Still Time	38
If You Want It Bad Enough	42
Notes and Acknowledgments	45

What the Detectives Found in Her Abandoned Car

The guts of a dead mosquito on the inside of the windshield. Smashed by the recently rolled *Elle* on the passenger side floor. A can of OFF! rolling around next to it.

A hole in the dashboard where the cigarette lighter should be. An empty pack of Marlboros. Husband says she quit for the baby. Gave birth a month ago. The baby's at his sister's.

The car key hidden in the visor.

A holstered taser in the armrest compartment. A pill bottle—the label neatly peeled off—crammed with quarters. A packet of ladybug tissues. An iPhone charger. A first aid kit. A tartan wool blanket. An empty, unused gasoline container. A flashlight. Reusable grocery bags. An umbrella. Wet wipes: used and unused. Annie's bunny snack wrappers crinkled under the seats. Crumpled Safeway receipts as long as her arm.

A child's drawing of the family in front of their house. Stick figures holding stick hands. A pregnant woman. A child with blue hair. A man towering over them.

Scatterings of loose soil and woodchips on the backseat floor. The husband explains that these aren't clues. She buys indoor plants, kills them, and replaces them regularly. And she never cleans her car. Inside or out. She always waits for the next rainstorm. He repeats his insistence that they interrogate the neighbor who eyed his wife's belly. The boss who sat on her desk and played with his

balls. A detective tells him now is the time for collecting evidence. The car is in front of them. It needs to be examined for leads.

When CSI searches for blood, they find none. In fact, there are no signs of a struggle at all. The husband doesn't understand. A new mother would never. His wife would never.

It's like she stepped out of the car and walked until she reached something. The sea air with her toes enmeshed in wet sand. A cave that echoed so she could finally hear herself. The quiet solitude of the dwarfing Redwood forest with trunks the size of cars. The past smaller than a speck behind her.

Coming of Age

It's weird seeing her cut off at the waist in a glass box. A mannequin in an upright coffin disguised as an arcade game is always going to be strange, even if there is a crystal ball by her hand. It costs one dollar to hear my fortune. I never play.

We're not even supposed to be in here—Christina and I, not alone anyway. My older sister Elise is supposed to be watching us, but all she wants to do is sunbathe on a beach towel until she smells like peanut butter. She tells us we can do whatever we want as long as we stay together. We lick cotton candy off our fingers, or rig a dollar on some line to fish for rednecks on the pier. When we overheat we hide out in the arcade.

The arcade is one of the few places where there are only other kids, usually all boys, sometimes high schoolers. We're not old enough to be noticed by boys yet. Elise saunters in and every eye is on her. Christina and I walk in and nobody cares, which is great. I'd be happy avoiding all that for the rest of my life.

Christina doesn't understand. This summer she started plucking her eyebrows into thin lines and dutifully applying watermelon lip gloss in store windows. She sees our inability to get noticed as failure, so she tries harder.

I'm staring at the fortune teller game as she showily struggles with pinball when a boy about two years older appears. "Not having any luck?"

Christina pouts and sticks her chest out. "None."

“Let me show you,” he says but doesn’t wait for permission. He snakes his arms around her as she blushes and glances at me, looking for outside confirmation that it’s actually happening.

I cross my arms and watch them play a tired game. Everything he says or does is wonderful, and she’s so grateful to learn from such a master. She’s never played this game before, but she’s seen enough movies to know her lines. When he’s imparted all of his wisdom, he steps back. She takes a half-step toward him, so he can see down her spaghetti strap tank top.

“Nice tits,” he says.

Her eyes turn down for the full effect of her falsies as her shoulder spasms into a shrug. “Thanks.”

He leers at me and says, “You’d probably have nice tits, too, if you didn’t hide ’em.”

Christina giggles.

My arms tighten over my sweatshirt. She’s betrayed me for some boy we met three minutes ago because he makes her feel pretty. “We should go,” I say, yanking her toward the exit.

“Wait,” she says to me, and simpers back at him.

He trails us outside. There’s a group of boys in a circle. They shout at the boy, who flips them off. “Hey, I’ve got an idea,” he says. “Let’s go watch the sunset. I know a place.”

Christina rips her hand from mine and scratches my palms with her homemade French manicure. My hand falls limply to my side. She’s talked about moments like this. She pictures her first kiss against the most romantic setting imaginable—a sunset.

She pats the tube of lip gloss in the back pocket of her short shorts but knows she can’t re-apply without him seeing, and he has to know her lips are naturally sticky sweet. “Great!”

He seizes her hand and they start off. I numbly follow.

“Sonya, you can’t come,” Christina chastises.

I stop moving. Stranger danger doesn’t disappear when you start wearing a push-up bra. “We’re not supposed to go anywhere alone.”

He glances at Christina critically for the first time. Her perfect kiss begins to slip away. “She’s just kidding,” Christina says. “I can go wherever I want.”

“Well you’re not alone if you’re with me,” he says.

It’s the smoothest line Christina’s ever heard. She hits the side of her breast against him and gazes up at him like he’s a god.

“Keep an eye on her!” he calls to the group of boys, who perk up and come over.

I’m suddenly aware that there aren’t any other people near us and that no one knows where we are. My blood soars through my veins. “Christina!” I plead.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” she calls back. “You get your pick.”

The Axe body spray masking BO announces the presence of the five boys as they swarm me. Being so outnumbered, I don’t like my odds. I know what happens next. I’ve seen movies, too. I can hear their lewd thoughts and sense their sticky fingers. I don’t wait to learn more.

I run until my lungs ache. I run until I taste iron on my tongue and my thighs are stiff. I swerve into the dunes and onto the populated beach. It’s the safest place I can think of. I don’t glance behind until I splash into the water. The coolness drifts over my flip flops and the sand slurps them up. Bending over, I press my sweaty, scratched palms onto my knees and suck air into my mouth like a dying fish.

The boys are gone but so is Christina.



©Maureen Porto Photography

Chelsea Stickle's flash fiction appears in *matchbook*, *Pithead Chapel*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and others. Her story "Postcard Town" was selected for *Best Microfiction 2021*. Other stories have been nominated for *Best Small Fictions*, *The Best of the Net*, *Best Microfiction*, and the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland with her black rabbit George and a forest of houseplants. *Breaking Points* is her debut chapbook. Read more at chelseastickle.com and on Twitter @Chelsea_Stickle.