

## Sutro Baths

I thought that my heart would stop.

A year after he had gone missing, he called. I was nineteen by then, selling window treatments at a now-defunct department store. I had a nice boyfriend, a nice job for a girl of my age, and I was doing nicely at the local JC. But when I heard Hendley's voice at the other end of the line, I didn't really care about any of that. I didn't even ask where he'd been. I would have dropped everything in one hot second for a second chance with him.

There was going to be a party, he'd said. The rambling house on H Street Hendley had shared with other college boys was still inhabited by his friends. They were inviting all his acquaintances and opening the bar to welcome him home. He would take the train in from the city and would meet me there. Frye, who was now renting his old room, could pick me up so I wouldn't have to call a cab.

What I remember about that night is this:

I bought a new sweater in the ladies' department. I touched up my lipstick and spritzed a sample of a perfume I could not afford at the cosmetics counter. It was later in the season, so it was dark when Frye pulled up behind the employee doors. I think his car was dark red, I think his hair was brown. I can't seem to recall what he looked like or what he said to me.

The house was full and cheerfully noisy when we arrived. Things were arranged the same, more or less. Hendley's oversized Kandinsky print was missing from above the fireplace. It was a bit more disheveled overall and, of course, there were more girls about. They were effortlessly chic in mix-matched patterns and premium cigarettes. Waxing on about indie bands, drinking top-shelf tequila. I settled on the sofa and waited for Hendley to come.

I wondered if he would explain. I wanted an answer that was in my favor or, if not, I just wanted a kiss. A year before, he had left for a bachelor party and ended up in Prague instead. I liked to think he was just overcome with affection for me and had to get away. I was

nineteen—I was able to feel more than I was able to think.

Frye talked and talked while keeping my glass full. I waited and waited. And drank. The ochre and burnt orange sofa scratched my bottom. The waiting was intolerable, but I felt on the precipice of happiness. Hopeful. And the last time I was happy was a year before.

*We left the park on the west side. It was late. Hendley guided me down the rough path. I abandoned my shoes and the rocks were painfully cold. The sand exhilarated my bare feet. From the light of the Cliff House above us, I could make out curious architecture rising up from the beach. Remnants of concrete foundation were both out of and under the sand in curious geometry. Pipes appeared at odd angles. It was a relic of a long-forgotten society.*

*Hendley bundled me in his sweater and found a dry spot to sit on one of the bunkers. As we watched the waves churn under the moon, he told me about Sutro Baths. This place was a swimming complex at the turn of the century. It held ten thousand people. The seawater was pumped in and warmed for their watersports. In 1907, there was a terrible fire... This was all that is left.*

*He showed me a secret tunnel in a cave on the hillside. There were two openings: on the left, a jagged window to tumbling water about eight feet below and, at the end, a clearing to the rocky beach. The sand was coarse between my toes. I still remember his scent—a mix of salt, shaving soap, juniper, and pine.*

Hendley wasn't there. Around two in the morning, I'd imbibed too much to be trusted to get home, even by cab. Frye invited me to stay over and sleep it off. He led me upstairs to Hendley's old room. Funny, though, H and I had never used it for its intended purpose. At eighteen, I thought he was Catholic, he thought I was a virgin. Neither one of us wanted to corrupt the other.

But it wasn't H's bedroom anymore. And I didn't even kick off my shoes. I just wanted to lie down and black out. For a moment, I was able to close my eyes and relish to cold sheets on the side of my face. Frye climbed on top of me. He reached under my skirt and pulled my panties down. He tried to enter me, over and over. I was too drunk to resist much; he was to

drunk to succeed. Eventually, he gave up and rolled to one side of the bed to sleep. I curled on the opposite edge. I left in the morning before Frye woke. Fortunately, Hendley had not come.

I cleaned myself up after that. I was good to my nice boyfriend, good at my nice job. I just wanted to stop thinking if another life would have made me happier. It wasn't my choice anyway.

A few years later, I was ending a day in the city with a cocktail in the Cliff House lounge and I saw him. Hendley was leaving from dinner. He saw me, too. He took the wingchair next to mine. We exchanged pleasantries for awhile. And then, we talked about the night of the party.

It seems that his train was delayed. He arrived at the H Street house in the morning, about an hour after I'd left. Frye told him that I'd spent the night. With him. He said it was terrific. Hendley had taken his suitcase, turned around, and left.

I told H what actually happened, at least what I could remember. He ran his hands through my hair. He put his face very close to mine. I could feel his breath, but he didn't kiss me. I think it was too late for that.

From the Cliff House windows, I could see the concrete remnants of Sutro Baths below. A couple entered the tunnel holding hands.