June Bugs

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Smoke curled up toward the open window. The girl flicked ashes into a mason jar at her feet. She was perched cross legged on the worn velvet cushion of a wicker chair. With her left hand she turned the page of a book which lay open on her knee. A calico cat slipped through the bushes outside the window. It rubbed up against the screen and meowed impatiently. The girl folded over the corner of the page and set the book on the floor. She stood up and let the cat inside. It hopped deftly onto the end table without disturbing a teetering stack of paperbacks.

The cat ran underneath the bed and curled up in the cool darkness. The girl crushed out her cigarette and put the jar in the drawer of the end table. She lifted a pair of jean shorts from a pile of clothes on the floor and yanked them up over her narrow legs. She pulled off the threadbare Viking Cross Country t-shirt she was wearing, and put on a green paisley bikini top. She slid the rolled up bath towel out from under the door with her foot; walked through the den and out to the backyard.

Kneeling on the cement behind the garage, she pulled a lawn chair out from under the porch. She dragged it across the grass, unfolded its rusty metal legs, and lay back in the sun. A semi rumbled down the highway. An arc of water from the sprinkler; traveled back and forth over tomatoes and cucumbers in the garden. The girl stared out at the flat rows of corn that began at the edge of the yard. She leaned her head back against the warm plastic chair and closed her eyes.

“Hey Margaret!” Her brother Sam shouted from the back door. The girl opened her eyes, the sun was setting beyond the corn field. She rolled over on her side and looked back at Sam. “Yeah?” she said.

“Can you take me into town?”

She hoisted herself to her feet and strolled up to the porch. “Okay, just lemme put a shirt on.”

Sam threw his skateboard into the backseat of the brown station wagon. “Can I drive?” He asked.
“I guess so,” said Margaret and walked around to the pas-

genger side. Bits of stuffing protruded around the corners of the

seats. No matter how much Margaret smoked, she couldn’t cover

up the smell of old people that lingered in the upholstery. She

shifted her thighs on the wooden beaded seat covers and kicked a

fast food bag out from under her foot.

“We're gonna street luge today,” Sam said as he slid the

drivers seat forward.

“Cool,” Margaret replied, “Does dad know you do that?”

“Nah,”

Sam drove the fifteen miles to town on the gravel because

he wouldn’t have his permit until August. He parked at the top of

a tall hill at the north end of town. A pickup was parked nearby

with the windows open and the stereo booming. Sam’s friends

were messing around on their skateboards in the street. Margaret

got out and leaned on the hood of the car. “Yah' ready!” Sam

hollered holding his skateboard up over his head. He placed the

board on the yellow line, lay down on his back, lifted his legs off

the ground, and went careening down the hill.

The boys cheered as he hiked back up to the top. “That was

fuckin' sweet dude!” “Fuckin'A! I’ll race yah!”

“Good job kiddo,” Margaret said. “Well, I’m gonna go into

town. See yah later.” She climbed into the station wagon and

drove to Main Street. Several cars were parked in the lot of the old

Nelson's Auto Body. Margaret drove around the block and parked

on the side.

She strode across the lot, hoisted herself into the bed of a

white pickup and plopped down on a cooler next to Andrew

Peterson. “Hey,” he said. The Hansen brothers, Lance and Cody

were smoking a joint. Cody nodded and exhaled a series of smoke

rings in her direction.

“Man, I'm fuckin' tired,” Andrew said, “had to do a pick up

last night.”

“Who was it?” Lance asked.

“Jensen's great aunt. The boss's wife had to ride with 'cuz

he's outta town. I can't stand that bitch. She's such a fucking hose

beast.”

“Why can't yah go by your self?” said Cody.

“I've got to have someone with me if it involves a body,

until I get my certification.”

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At eleven the light on the Caseys sign switched off. It had cooled off a lot. Margaret tucked her knees up to her chest and wished she had worn jeans. Andrew handed her a Gatorade bottle. She took a gulp and winced. “Half Everclear,” he said grinning. Margaret rolled her eyes and chugged some more. A police car rolled to a stop in front of the parking lot. Lance pinched out the joint and shoved it in his pocket. “Aw, it’s just Mike,” Andrew said, “I drink with that fuckin’ guy.”

“You guys stayin' outta trouble?” the young officer shouted.

“You know it ocifer,” Andrew slurred pretending to lose his balance on the cooler.

“You been smokin’?” Mike said, looking at the Hansens. Lance and Cody glared at him. “Yeah. Well then, I don’t suppose you got any beer in that cooler either.”

“Sorry ocifer we dun drunk it all already,” said Andrew. “Oh, and Miss Lewis, you better get that brother of yours home. You may not take curfews seriously, but I do,” he squealed his tires, and sped away.

Margaret hoisted herself up off the cooler. “Well, I suppose,” she sighed and climbed out of the truck.

“Later,” said Andrew.

Margaret lit a cigarette as the station wagon sped toward town. She rolled down all the windows. Thick humid air filled the car and thunderclouds bore down on the highway. The sky was grey, hidden sunrise. She passed the gravel pits and the feed lot on the South end of town. She flicked her butt out of the window as she turned onto Main. She waved at Nita, the owner of the Red Barn Café. Nita was sitting on a picnic table by the dumpster feeding her stray cats.

It was 7:45 AM; the outdoor lights at Caseys were turned on against the unusual darkness. The dry chill of the air conditioning hit Margaret as she stepped in from the parking lot. “Hey, hun,” the manager, Linda, said from the back room. She was sitting under the no smoking sign sucking on a Parliament 100. “Big storm comin' in,” she commented. “Go out and read the pumps will yah?”

Margaret grabbed the notepad from under the counter and
stepped back outside. June bugs dive bombed her as she squinted to read the numbers. A large rain drop smacked the top of her head; she ran inside just before the sky cracked open.

Jack Holderson stomped into the store wearing mud caked boots. He filled up his thermos with coffee and grabbed a glazed doughnut. Margaret rang up fifty cents on the cash register. “Need some Sweets too,” he said.

“Oh right,” she grabbed a pack of cigarillos from the shelf behind her. He paid and continued to stand at the counter. Margaret looked at him uncertainly. “Matches dear,” he said and winked at her.

“Sorry,” she blushed, and slid a pack of Caseys matches across the counter.

Jack stood by the window drinking his coffee and watched the sheets of rain fall against the window. As the morning wore on more trucks pulled in and a group of farmers gathered around the counter drinking coffee and flirting with Linda. When the rain let up around eleven they reluctantly headed back out to their pickups; leaving behind a muddy mess on the floor. Margaret mopped up while Linda went back to the kitchen to throw out the breakfast food and get ready for lunch.

“Hey, can you grab me some leftovers?” Margaret asked. Linda brought her a cold sausage and egg biscuit. Perched on a stool in the back she swallowed the congealed grease with gulps of hot coffee. The front door dinged and Linda’s son Jake walked in. He was a tall gawky sixteen year old wearing a grass-stained pair of jeans cut off at the knees. “What's up Jakey?” Linda hollered and he headed back toward the kitchen.

“I heard somthin' on the scanner,” Margaret overheard him say, “Somthin' happened out at the Larsen's.”

“Huh, don't surprise me too much,” Linda replied. A few minutes later Margaret heard sirens wailing. The two local police cars sped down Main Street out into the country.

A truckload of construction workers pulled into the parking lot. They all loaded up on chips, soda, and hot dogs. Margaret worked the register and wiped their grimy hand prints off the counter. A couple of them waited around for Linda to finish making a pizza. “It's gonna be a bitch workin' in that mud,” one remarked.

“I know it man,” the second replied. “So'd yah hear ol' Bill finally went and shot himself?”
“No shit, yeah that place has been goin' under for a long
time,” he gestured toward Woody's Tavern across the street.

At two Geena came in to start making the evening pizza
orders. Geena had worked in the Caseys kitchen ever since she
retired from her job as a school lunch lady. She'd brought her
grandson Travis into town and Sam was with them.

Geena and Linda went into the back room to have a smoke.

“Right out on the front porch,” Geena said, “his kids were home
and everything.”

“That's horrible,” Linda replied.

Sam and Travis wandered around the store putting each
other in headlocks, looking at magazines, and fiddling with the
fancy lighters on the counter. “Hey can I borrow two dollars?”
Sam asked.

“No,” Margaret replied

“Oh come on! I need some lunch,”

“Fine,” she sighed.

The boys gathered up armloads of pizza, chips, laffy taffy,
and sixty four ounce sodas. “Just charge us for refills,” Sam whis­
pered pointing at the sodas. Margaret sighed and rang up their
purchases. “Spose you heard about Bill Larsen?” Travis said.

“Man his wife is so nasty,” Sam chimed in, “she sits with her
fuckin' boyfriend at all our ball games. Then they go make out in
his truck!”

“Yeah man what a slut,” Travis muttered.

“Watch your mouths boys!” Geena hollered from the back.

The boys went out and sat on the tailgate of Geena's truck
to eat. Margaret tallied up the register and handed it over to
Linda. “See yah tomorrow,” she said and headed out the door. The
sun was shining now, heat waves radiated off the parking lot.

It was mid afternoon and Margaret was alone in the store.
She was leaning on the counter reading The Weekly World News.
She had already dusted off the candy shelves, refilled straws and
ice, made coffee, and stocked the cooler. It wasn't time to mop the
floor yet. A red sedan pulled up to the pumps, the box to her left
beeped and Margaret pushed the flashing button to activate num­
ber four.

The manual instructed employees to memorize the features
of each person who filled up; in case they drove off without pay-
ing. On slow days Margaret enjoyed practicing her suspect identification skills. The female at the pump was about 5'3. She had shoulder length brown curls and was wearing a black suit.

The woman left her dark sunglasses on when she came into the store. She tore a check, already made out for ten dollars, from her checkbook. “Do you know how to get to Ditzenbach’s Funeral Home?” the woman asked as Margaret rang up the gas.

“Sure,” Margaret said, “Take a right out of the parking lot. Go down to the last intersection before the nursing home and take another right. It's about two blocks down on the left.”

Margaret finished the tabloid and decided to dust the shelves of ceramic cowboy and indian figurines. While she was squatting behind the counter looking for the feather duster the door dinged. Two sweaty men in white starched shirts and shiny black shoes came in. Each of them had a stack of small pamphlets in his breast pocket. “May I use your phone?” the older man asked. Margaret directed him to the pay phone next to the door. The other man went to the cooler and got two bottles of Gatorade. After paying he stood by the counter and waited for his friend, “Nice town you got here,” he commented. Margaret nodded.

“Mind if we wait in here until our ride comes?” said the older man when he got off the phone.

“That's fine.”

The two men settled in on the stack of soda cases under the window and discussed their pamphlets. Margaret got out the duster and went to work on the knick knacks.

After the dusting she grabbed a broom and began sweeping up the June Bug carcasses behind the counter. Tires squealed and a horn honked outside. Andrew hopped out of his pickup wearing a black suit. “What're you all dressed up for?” Margaret asked, ringing up his usual 64 ounce soda refill. “Funeral,” he said pointing to the notice on Ditzenbach stationary taped to the counter. “Oh right,” Margaret said, “Woody.”

“Yep,” Andrew replied, “Hey is it okay if I grab some of these too,” he winked at her and reached into the jar of beef jerky sticks.

Margaret groaned, “I suppose.”

“Thanks!” Andrew ran out to his truck. He leaned on the horn as he tore out of the parking lot.
A Rolling Stones record spun on the turn table. Gimme Shelter poured out of the two small speakers on Margaret's desk. Oh, a storm is threat' nin' my very life today If I don't get some shelter I'm gonna fade away. She shimmied out of her stained khaki work pants and a grabbed a dirty pair of jeans out of the pile on the floor. She slid a Marlboro out of the pack lying on the bed. Standing in front of her mirror she lit the cigarette and slowly exhaled. Thunder rumbled outside the open window. She could feel the electricity when a chilly night breeze stirred the curtains.

Tires skidded on gravel as Andrew's truck whipped into the driveway. She crushed out the cigarette, shoved the mason jar ashtray back into it's drawer, and ran outside. Cody swung the door of the truck open and she climbed into the seat behind him. "Yah, ready for some storm chasin'?" Andrew said as the truck roared out of the driveway.

"I guess so!" she said.

"Toss me a beer," Cody said tossing his empty out of the window. Margaret reached into the case of Busch Light on the seat next to her.

"You can have one too," Andrew offered. She cracked open a can and chugged half of it. A country music song crackled on the radio, suddenly a long high pitched tone sounded. "This is 94.7 K-Rod up to the minute weather watch. We've got reports of a tornado touchdown near highway 65 South of Trout Creek."

"All right! here we go!" Andrew whipped around a corner onto a gravel road and sped toward the wall of black clouds. Unfamiliar hills rolled toward the county line. Large rain drops began to pelt the windshield. The truck swerved back and forth in the wind. Margaret tossed her empty can on the floor and cracked open another one. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth fighting the sheets of rain. A flash of lightning illuminated banks of udder shaped clouds hanging over the fields. "Man I don't know about this!" Cody shouted.

"Yeah," Andrew yelled back, "you wanna see what's up in town?"

"I've gotta pee," Margaret said.

Andrew turned the truck around at a T-intersection and headed back toward town.

The rain had stopped by the time they turned onto Main. Two cop cars were parked in the middle of the street in front of Caseys. Andrew parked next to them. He and Cody climbed out of
the truck, Margaret followed. They joined Lance who was sitting on the doorstep of the laundromat. A crowd of people were milling around outside the bar across the street. Red and Blue lights reflected off of the wet pavement. “What's up?” Andrew asked.

Lance shrugged. “Somebody fucked with Woody’s wife. Think she smashed a bottle on his head. Saw ‘im comin' out all bloody n'shit.”

“Who was it?”

“Dunno, couldn't tell.”

Margaret lit a cigarette and leaned back against cement wall. She watched the smoke rise up in the cool damp air. Gnats swarmed around the bare bulb above the door. She listened to the dull thump of their wings endlessly bumping against the glass.

“I didn't know you smoked,” Andrew said.

Mike, the young cop strode across the street towards them. “Y'all need to clear out of here!”