

The Fallout | Max Gershon

Two teenage girls sat on a rickety doorstep, passing a joint back and forth under the safety of the night sky. Uneven wood pressed into their skin but both of them ignored any discomfort. They paid no mind to the bite of the chilly November air that had long since made their noses go numb. They listened to the rush of passing cars that could be heard from their backyard, if it could even be called that. A miniature slab of weathered concrete and empty pots where flowers used to need tending. The older sister watched her younger sister and laughed when she coughed, after taking too big of a hit, or too little.

“Poppy, be quiet.” Lina warned her. “Just because it’s your first time doesn’t mean it won’t be your last if *they* hear us,” she warned in a hushed tone, not bothering to pat her back.

In between choked gasps of air, Poppy managed to get out an “I’m trying,” which earned another lopsided smile from her older sister. Poppy’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She composed herself and shook her head. “I don’t understand how the taste doesn’t affect you, Lina.”

“You get used to it,” Lina laughed again and took the joint back, forefinger, and thumb to her lips, inhaling deeply as if there wasn’t ever enough to go around. Maybe for her, there wasn’t.

Poppy’s eyes widened and her eyebrows shot up. It might be easy to keep secrets from parents, but sisterhood is funny like that. Lina slipped lighters into socks, acting as if she was putting laundry away while Poppy saw from the hallway. Lina carried the step ladder into her room when their parents were still at work, Poppy noticed her taking a screwdriver to the smoke detector, “Checking the batteries like Dad asked me to,” Lina would say casually when Poppy had asked what she was doing. Soft scuffle of cautious footsteps and delicate tucking of a faded Winnie the Pooh towel against the locked Jack and Jill bathroom door at night. Countless times, Lina returned home in

different clothes than she'd left in her patchy dark hair wet from a fresh wash.

Whatever the reason for this sudden change, Poppy was glad to have her sister's attention for now. "How many times have you smoked?"

"How should I know? I've lost count over the years, I guess," Lina shrugged and offered it to her little sister again. The smoke trailed off the end like tiny ghost hands reaching out of the warmth within. "Tommy's the one who did it first, but no one remembers that tiny detail," Lina mumbled under her breath.

Poppy wrinkled her nose up but took it anyway. She tried and sputtered again despite the effort. The bitter wave of smoke crawling down her throat made her stomach churn. Poppy had always heard weed was supposed to make people feel good. Just having her sister include her in something for once felt better. "I'm not sure I like this. I don't see the point, I don't even feel anything," Poppy said.

"You will," Lina chuckled, reaching for it again. She let her lungs expand fully and tilted her head back skyward to admire the stars above them. When she exhaled, she pursed her lips and released the smoke directly upward. Poppy watched it disperse into the air, disappearing and losing shape in only a second or two before becoming one with the night.

Poppy followed Lina's gaze and did the same as little sisters often do. She waited for her sister to say something, give a reason, or explain how it might affect her, or what was supposed to be so great about it as her head began to feel light, her body buzzing softly. "How will I know?"

"You will," Lina repeated in a far-away voice. Poppy drew her legs onto her chest and rested her chin against her knees, unsatisfied with the response but knowing she wouldn't be offered anything better. "I like to think that wherever we go after, we're somewhere up there," Lina said then went quiet as she often did and Poppy resisted the urge to touch her shoulder. Instead, her forefinger dug into her thumb as she fiddled with torn skin.

Poppy tried to play along, hoping her sister wouldn't begin her usual cycle again. "Like he's looking down and watching over us how they say in movies?" Poppy lifted her head and brought her hand to her mouth, chewing her thumbnail cautiously.

"Yeah, exactly. Hey, big brother!" Lina tried a joke that fell flat between the two of them. Lina's dark eyes turned hazy, and a lump in her throat became audible. Poppy noticed Lina's fingers itching ever so slightly toward her hairline before she caught herself.

"You think so?" Poppy watched Lina's expression shift and regretted the words as they left her mouth.

Something had told her this was just wishful thinking but maybe her sister had needed to believe it. Or at least be given some sort of validation that Poppy failed to give her.

"I have to," Lina swiped her sweatshirt sleeve across her face and hid her snuffle with another hit.

Poppy scrambled to redirect Lina's attention with one of their stories. "It's over a year now since the crash, Thomas is twenty-two now. He's in his last year of college playing football at UCLA—"

"He didn't want to go," Lina interrupted their usual game. She looked as if she was going to offer Poppy the joint back but decided against it. Lina kept it for herself for one more hit before putting it out on the concrete. She stared at the ground now, maybe lost in thought or memory, perhaps both.

Poppy stalled, unsure of what or how to say it next. After a while, she broke the uncomfortable silence that even singing crickets couldn't fill.

"To school?" Poppy wasn't expecting an answer at all but was still hoping for one.

Lina shook her head slowly, appearing to choose her words carefully. "No. That night."

Poppy had been told next to nothing that night and ever since. Recalling the memory now, she remembered hearing Tommy and Lina talking. After a late family dinner, she'd returned to her bedroom to continue reading *The Hunger Games*. The familiar tap of buttons Tommy made while playing one of his games. The broken sound of Lina's hushed voice as she asked him something she couldn't make out before the door closed. Long after her mom and dad had made her put the book down, and said their goodnights, Poppy had fallen asleep and startled awake at the sound of the landline's shrill ring. Poppy had turned over in her twin bed and pulled the pink ballerina sheets closer with a groan before she heard the slap of a light switch and her mother's frantic voice directed at her father in the other room.

Poppy willed herself back to the current moment.

"He didn't want to, but I made him go anyway," Lina said while avoiding looking her in the eye.

"Why?" She asked, knowing she likely wasn't going to get another opportunity with how her parents refused to speak with her about what had happened and how Lina would go back to barely acknowledging her existence after this.

"Because I needed a ride to Nelle's party."

The girl Poppy knew their parents liked to pretend didn't exist when it was convenient for them or tried to keep Lina from seeing when it wasn't. Poppy had watched Lina struggle with a lack of acceptance for years. The grudges Lina held against Tommy and his girlfriend who their parents already treated like a daughter-in-law. Endless invitations to dinners, movie nights, weekend trips, always finding ways to encourage her to stay the night. Poppy had lost track of how many times she'd seen Lina shut herself in her room, clearly attempting to avoid it all.

All those months ago, Poppy watched her parents giggle with the happy couple over comedies or action movies on the sofa with nothing better to do. As the hours ticked by, Poppy kept herself distracted by dystopian YA novels while she waited for the crack of the window

opening when everyone else had presumably gone to sleep. She recalled the anger on her parents' faces when they used the spare key and found Lina's room empty in the morning. In the kitchen, their golden child, eldest, only son made coffee while happy-go-lucky, rosy-cheeked, didn't even know how good she had it, girlfriend used the stove like it was hers for pancakes and eggs. Poppy had set the table, silent and unsurprised though she would never have admitted that much.

Poppy shook her head in an attempt to clear the memories that threatened to overtake her. Lina cleared her throat, "I convinced Tom to drive me so I didn't have to take the bus," Lina said in a tone barely above a whisper. Poppy could see the tears forming in her eyes even though she tried to hide it. "He dropped me off but he wasn't meant to come back to pick me up. I was going to spend the night there."

Poppy understood without her sister needing to say it. Lina's relationship had ended that night and the look on her face said she was going over in her head how she should've seen it coming.

The rest of Poppy's memory was bits and pieces of running to Tommy's empty room, jumping into the car, seeing Lina in the hospital bed with a broken leg, the look on her parents' faces, the ringing of their cries that can't be described with words, the dull thump of her heavy heart when Tommy's car never came back home and neither did Tommy. She recalled the fallout in scattered details, a funeral with his football photo, teammates, new friends from college, his girl losing it in her gasping attempts to read her speech, dropping her fistful of dirt on the white casket.

Poppy still felt numb. What she remembered most was the increase in Lina's self-isolation. Seeing her ex-girlfriend approach at her locker between classes, trying to offer shreds of sympathy or support and the way Lina brushed it off, walked, or as much as she could on crutches, away like nothing between them had ever existed at all. Only a week before she'd heard the two of them making plans for after graduation a few months away.

At first, Poppy and Lina rode the bus to campus every day as they had all those times before but she quickly ended up riding it home alone when her older sister never joined her. Until Lina stopped showing up altogether, this was when worried teachers and the stressed vice principal came to Poppy asking about Lina since they couldn't reach their parents. Lina denied herself a diploma and traded it for all the hours Mom and Dad made her put into therapy. Poppy watched her sister go in and out of in-patient programs, gone for months, home again, and back. Pretending to have changed this time, talk big around the dinner table about what she'd learned, how she was going to enroll at community college when Poppy had already found the stash in the back of her closet again.

She never had any intention of turning things around, Poppy saw through Lina's pretty lies her parents were too eager to believe. It stung at first, broke her heart a little more but in time she understood how she couldn't help someone who didn't want to be helped, even if that someone was her own flesh and blood.

"It's funny how everything important fades. How people say they'll never leave but can't seem to stay." Lina brought Poppy back to the current moment. Poppy wondered then if she was talking about Tommy or herself, though she'd probably never know.

"Tommy didn't want to go," Poppy nodded more for her own sake than Lina's.

"No, he didn't," Lina turned away. Poppy watched her sister grow quiet and begin to shut down or rather shut her out as she always did.

"You did," Poppy whispered while that thing in her chest quickened, threatening to break from its cage.

Lina didn't hear her, or if she did, she didn't show it. "Come on, let's go inside. I'm freezing my ass off out here, sis," Poppy fixated on the last word. Lina never called her that. Being part of the same family was something Lina never acknowledged.

Poppy looked at her sister. "Will I see you in the morning?" She asked, already sure of the response she would get but asking anyway. She held out hope that maybe she was wrong or, at the very least, begging her to reconsider.

Lina's lips formed a small smile. She put her hand on Poppy's shoulder, drawing her in for a hug. Poppy stiffened for a moment, not sure what to do with it, before she wrapped her arms around her sister. Poppy squeezed her skeletal frame as tightly as she could but was reluctant to let go even when Lina already had.

"Of course, I'll see you bright and early." Lina's voice rose slightly at the end as she opened the back door. Poppy waited for Lina to go inside before following her. The following sounds were ones she wouldn't forget. The soft creak of the door, the click when she locked it behind her. Another sniffle as Lina wiped her nose on her sleeve again. The sound of Lina's clammy hands rubbing together before she pushed them into her pockets, hiding the evidence in one of them. Her black and white striped socks padded across the wood floor. Poppy's breathing was heavy in her ears while she watched her sister go from her room to their shared bathroom. The door closed, and the sound of the faucet starting made Poppy jump. She could hear the curtain's rings complain as they were drawn back. The drain groaned, taking its final breath before deafening silence like a dying clock.