

Emily Crossen

The Tick

I brush her hair, she brushes mine.

The bristles move over my scalp. The skin on my neck prickles. We count to one hundred: one hundred strokes of the brush. One hundred quiet numbers spoken in unison.

She wants to do hair for a living. For her, I cut mine askew so she can practice fixing it. I sit in a kitchen chair and she stands behind me. The scissors close hair by hair. It falls away in waves.

Done, she says. I don't look—there's no mirror. Whatever she has made me, I accept.

We switch. I ask her what she wants. She says: Short.

I begin. On the white tile, her hair lies over mine in long coils. Mid-cut, she catches the wrist of the hand that holds the scissors and says, That's enough.

This is not all we do for each other.

We paint each other's toenails—wet red in the summer.

We zip each other's dresses.

We tie each other's shoelaces if they come untied. One girl kneeling in front of another.

When she gets a mosquito bite, I scratch it for her. She puts her legs in my lap while we watch TV so I can reach each one.

We make dinner for each other. We eat like men: steaks cooked rare, baked potatoes cut open for butter. In the morning, we drink black coffee. We share the newspaper, trading sections.

On washing day, we hang the linens side by side. The breeze blows the sheets around our bodies.

There are other things we do.

I'm sick of my boyfriend, so she takes him. I read my book downstairs—eat an apple out of hand while she's taking him.

I take hers, too. A trade. He calls me by her name. To train him not to, I pinch his earlobe, digging my nail in. I don't do anything for him the way I do for her. He grows morose and misses her but I don't care. She's not his.

I'm the one who mends her books for her. She cleans my paint brushes.

Our cycles merge, and we bleed together.

One night, she shakes me awake and says, Come see. Outside, the wind is moving the tall grass. *Shhh*, it says. Heat lightning bursts inside a cloud.

When she tucks me back in, she kisses her fingertips and brings them to the seam of my lips.

Shhh, the tall grass says.

Once, I found a tick attached underneath my waistband. She pulled it off with tweezers and dropped it in a clean jam jar and screwed the lid on. Together, we watched it move around the glass—bewildered, full of blood. Around it went, slow as the hour hand on a clock. And slowing.

It died in the jar and we left it on the bookshelf. Sometimes I see her stop there to look.