

Hailey and the Artist

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HAILEY AND MAY WERE OUT RIDING bikes on the highway when they came across a big chunk of shredded tire, and Hailey knew right away what to do with it. Old broken tires in this county went to Old Billy for his mural of Saint Patrick. She'd never met him, but his place was something grown-ups talked about.

Just three miles outside of town, Billy's mural was a display at the front of a home in

a cleared parcel of dense, orderly pine forest. They knew nothing about the owner though they'd seen the colorful fence, bursting with painted junk, from the backseat on many different car rides. It was a rare display of creative energy. People only talked about it when they spotted piles of blown out tires on the side of the road. Kind of like how you never think of a glass of water unless you have a thirst.

Hailey picked the tire up and it was hot against her forearms. She soon realized that the idea of hauling rough tire on a ninety-degree day on a bike wasn't easy. May said they could quit, but Hailey was determined. This would be something different for once. Her arm and neck had red marks from holding the hot rubber over her shoulder. She dismounted, balancing the biggest piece on her bike seat, the other pieces on top of that, and pushed. She was still almost as fast as May riding. May daydreamed. She didn't look like a sloth—she was pretty—but she was as slow as one. It took her half an hour to leave her house, as if coming through thick fog, spending long minutes considering a Chapstick for her pocket or not. Hailey knew that if May wasn't satisfied with her clothing she should just leave and come back in an hour or two.

When they got to Old Billy's, they saw the famous fence, a riot of colored paint emerging from the pines to catch the sun. A woman stood in between them and the fence, pushing a wheelbarrow of wood to stock up a stand of it for sale. If campers stopped to gawk they could buy wood for their campfires while they were at it.

The heat was accentuating their moods. Hailey felt keenly noble, suffering and adult. She was the bearer of shredded tires, ready to be appreciated. May was getting tired and crabby, ruining the vibe. Hailey wanted to go look at the mural, but they'd have to talk to this woman. May stared down the road towards home. Maybe if Hailey had money they would stop for a slushie, the cheapest treat at Dairy Queen.

"We, uh, we're here to see Old Billy."

"Okay," the woman said.

The girls looked around, their sweat on their skin cooling in the shade.

"Is he here?"

"She is," the woman shook her thumb at herself.

"You're Old Billy?"

"For Beulah."

Somehow this changed everything. Hailey had always just assumed Old Billy was a man, and old.

"You're not that old."

"Well thanks."

"We, uh, we brought you this."

"I see it."

May rolled her eyes and she was kicking at clumps of dug up sod, but Hailey was fascinated. Hailey sometimes let her friend's boredom determine what they'd do, but not today.

Neither of them knew it yet, but they were drifting apart. They'd been best friends since second grade, since they sat next to each other and sleepovers started. By their sophomore year of high school, they would hardly talk to each other. A year from now May would spend long hours learning to dye her hair; she would nestle into a group of malcontents. Hailey would turn inward, getting more familiar with the history books in the library and whatever websites she could access within the uptight school content block software.

History contained a lot of questionable content. But not even the history of two girls' friendship, the many evenings and weekends and secrets and texts and tubes of Pringles shared, none of that could keep them together.

"Well, come on I guess if you want to see it," Billy said.

Hailey nodded yes.

"You can bring that," Billy said.

The woman looked at the tire in an unthrilled way. It wasn't the reception Hailey had imagined. She did not get much attention at home and had imagined this stranger would be excited to see her.

Leaving the wheelbarrow and bikes behind, Billy said that when she first moved back to this house on Nye Highway where she'd grown up, she walked the highway after dinner and collected a half dozen blown tires—lord knows the county boys didn't pick them up. Crows and turkey vultures and fox took care of roadkill, but litter and auto parts remained.

When she got the idea for the mural she started on an eight-foot-tall privacy fence. It shielded the house and its long front porch somewhat from the road and, more importantly, served as a barrier for snow that got plowed up in the wintertime.

They stood in front of it, looking.

St. Patrick was almost life-sized, in a bright green priest's robe and a bishop's hat. His legs were spread wide, feet planted in a bumpy drawing of Ireland. His arm flung out, pointing, showing the snakes where to go. His hand was a muffler, painted a pale, pinky flesh tone. His halo was a busted hubcap, spray painted gold.

The snakes, many of them, were painted chunks of shredded tire. Green and brown and gold, in various shades of repair or sun-bleachedness, dozens and dozens, maybe even more than a hundred snakes were nailed to the fence. Thick ones and thin ones, they coiled and frazzled off the wall how blown out tires do, unholy things being sent away.

Up close and standing still you saw things you didn't see zipping past in a car going sixty. St. Patrick's face and hands were beautifully rendered; he was pink in the cheeks with a hint of a five o'clock shadow. His eyes looked like he was fed up with snakes. There was ornate detail on his hat and shoes. The water surrounding Ireland sparkled. Even May would admit later it was beautiful.

"In my thirties I came home to take care of my mother," the artist said. "Now she's dead and

I'm still here. I had to do some soul-searching about five years into the mural. I stopped going to St. Perpetua in town. Eventually I converted to Judaism . . . " She raised her hand to her neck and tapped a tiny Star of David on a gold chain. "But the tires kept coming."

"Why do you keep building it?"

"I don't know," Billy stared at it and laughed. "I've had to reinforce the back side of the fence, it's so heavy. I'm a fifty-five-year-old Jew living in my dead parents' house and I keep building this Catholic shrine out of garbage because people keep sending me the tires."

"You could stop."

"Once I took a month to get to a big one when my mom and I both had the flu and I was real run down. You know what happened?"

Hailey shook her head no.

"They sent me a letter. Whoever it was, they left garbage in my driveway and then they sent me a note; they mailed me a goddamn note in the mail, asking me if it wasn't time to add the new big piece they'd dropped off because they were waiting for it."

The girls didn't know if this was funny or not, though Billy laughed. Adults were weird. Now they knew why Old Billy kept adding to the wall. And it wasn't because she was inspired. Or devout. She wasn't even Catholic. May pouted on the ride home, and Hailey didn't have any money for Dairy Queen. They each turned off to their own houses with neither of them bothering to discuss it.

Hailey went back to talk to Billy later that week. It was a scorching hot day when May wanted to stay in and watch *Project Runway*, but Hailey couldn't bear Tim Gunn's certainty or to be stuck in her own house with her cooped-up, humidity-rattled brothers or to go to May's where there were cats on the dining room table, cats everywhere.

It wasn't as if going to see the fence ruined their friendship. It was just the middle of July, and it would take all summer for the girl's friendship to finish unraveling. The incident at the movie theater, for instance, when May ditched Hailey to sit with a guy two years older than them—that didn't happen until August. That was a bigger deal, but both events proved their diverging interests.

The second to the last time May and Hailey talked, they had a huge fight.

They were at Hailey's, and she asked May why she'd ditched her for Tommy. There were names called: traitor, goody-goody, vain, baby. They'd never talked to each other like that before. May grabbed her backpack and stormed off for home. They each waited until they were alone to cry. May called Hailey the baby—clingy, not interested in boys—but it was May who stomped home with a backpack containing BunBun, the ratty stuffed animal she'd slept with since she was a toddler. The mended tear in BunBun's ear was from May's old family dog Ranger, who got hold of BunBun during a fifth-grade sleepover.

The last time they talked had been a phone call, an actual voice call. "My mom says you need to return her black shirt with the cutouts," Hailey said flatly. Her mom had made her call. "Okay," May said. "Okay," Hailey said. It was quiet for a bit. You couldn't say "thanks" to someone when you were outgrowing each other, and it was breaking your heart. You couldn't say "peace" or "later."

The second and last time Hailey saw Old Billy, the time she went without May, was before everything went to hell between them.

That day Billy invited her in. The reluctant artist gave Hailey iced herbal tea and put out a china saucer of spelt cookies sprinkled with raw sugar. The house was small and low but every window was wide open and wind chimes tinkled

indoors. The ceiling was painted the blue of the sky. The kitchen cupboards had no fronts or backs so you could see through the dishes and things, straight out to the other side. Hailey had never been anywhere like it. It seemed beautiful and far different from the dank hundred-year-old homes Hailey was used to.

Years later, when Old Billy was actually getting old, her place was almost featured on a BBC travel show called *America's Weird Roadside Attractions*. Billy was not particularly interested in being on television, but ultimately producers did not need her consent. In the end they passed on taping her location because there was nothing else interesting in the county to pad the segment. By that time Hailey had gone away to school and wasn't planning on returning, but Billy's snakes and Saint Patrick were one of her fondest memories of the place, even though remembering the fence came with a pang of losing May.

That afternoon Billy asked the girl what subjects she liked at school, if she had any good teachers. The visit ended when Billy stood up and said she had work to do.

Hailey was surprised by the sudden closure; she'd been enjoying herself. Impulsively, she hugged her host, a big squeeze childlike hug, which Billy had not expected at all. Then she blushed and ran out to get on her bike.

Old Billy had yelled out, down the driveway behind her.

"Be true to yourself, kid. Even if they dump tires in your driveway. You can deal with the tires. It's just fucking tires. But be true to yourself."

It was good but difficult advice to give to a twelve-year-old girl on a quiet summer day. Hailey was stuck thinking about it, a big idea like that, as she biked back through the pine forest to her home in town. ♦