Diana of the Doorknobs

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Diana of the Doorknobs

Diana called Richard and his friends knobs because the fatty curve of Richard's hairless skull where it swaddled his neck in a delineated ring reminded her of the way a doorknob met its stem. Katherine said the back of his head looked just like the tip of a penis, so she called them dickheads, but only when Richard and his friends weren't around. Diana hadn't ever seen a penis like that, not an erect one at least, so she stuck with what she knew: doorknobs.

When Richard hunched forward to look over the wheel of his new-used car, the skin at the back of his head pulled tight and shaded slightly yellow, like freezerburned cheese. "Who are these people again," Katherine asked, in the voice she used for questions she felt like she shouldn't have to ask (she'd learned it from her distracted step-mother).

"This is the street," Richard said, and quickly pulled the car to one side so that Katherine was jolted against Diana's shoulder. It was the first time since they started driving that Diana could remember being conscious of her body in space; till that moment, she'd been a disembodied intelligence, or maybe some intangible cricket-voiced thing. She'd been imagining again that she was lying in some well-shaped rectangle of sunlit carpet, her drawing board out on the floor and a piece of creamy white paper against it.

Ever since her parents dropped her off at preschool so they could have more time for golf and charities, Diana had been illustrating stories from her life, telling it like it was if anything interesting had ever happened: Orphaned at a tender age, she was left to the mercies of a family of doorknobs. She was (big flourish!) Diana of the doorknobs, and the way Diana wrote it out, there were inverted keyholes in the center of the Ds and a right-side up one in the b. Drawing comics was very cool, but not so cool she wouldn't rather be here, even driving around going who-knows-where with a group of guys she was growing increasingly confident didn't know anymore how to have a good time.

"What, you're not going to answer me?" Katherine shrielled from her seat in the back beside Diana. Her voice rose up an octave, from distracted step-mother to bratty, powerless teenager. Katherine was liquid, and so she loved the still-forming fistula of cell and bone above her abdomen. She lifted the bump at her belly with her palm and leaned against the front, "Okay, daddy." Everyone in the car knew Richard wasn't her baby's daddy, so as a threat it didn't weigh much more than the fetus she carried. Instead, her threat languished, potential, in some "could-be" future.

"We'll know in a minute. We're almost there," Bender said, his head tipped up to address the reflection of Katherine and Diana in the rear view mirror.

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mirror. Once, Diana had been attracted to Bender because of his teeth, polished and gleaming like some predatory scoundrel in a Brett Easton Ellis novel. But then she learned his father was a dentist, and he receded in her estimation to someone who could sometimes get nitrous. He tipped his head to read the directions he'd written on the pad in his lap. "There should be a left," he said to Richard. "There it is."

Worcester, it's not such a rough town if you know it. But there are pockets where something really bad must have happened because it's like the place just never got over it. This was one of those streets, where billboards counseled condom use and someone had defaced it with black spray paint scrawls, a large block cock in the mouth of the surgeon general. When they drove beneath the billboard, Katherine crossed herself and Diana tired to imagine what it would cost to hold herself like the hard girls who waited on the corner. Then Richard turned his car down a side street and the clutch of them disappeared even out of the side mirror where Diana had trapped them.

Diana looked over Richard's shoulder and saw a taxicab pull up to the curb in front of them, saw its door open and Danny step out with his brown grocery sack. He'd promised them he knew a cabby who'd buy them beer, and it looked like he'd come through. Andy climbed out after him, and then slammed the door on the cab before it pulled away. Richard pulled into the space the cab left, squeezing his mother's corolla between a Monte Carlo and a pick-up covered in tattered bumper stickers. "We're here, children," Richard said as he turned off the car.

The house that Danny was already walking up to was the smallest on the street, and looked different than the three deckers that made up the rest of the block. It looked improvised, a Victorian knuckled with peaks and gables and a widow's ledge that wrapped a black metal railing around the top level of the house. Through the broad front door into the foyer, Diana could see that the original architecture of the house had been compromised to make it a rental. "Beautiful, nasty house," she cooed to it, and patted the wall as she passed. It left a dusty film on her palm. Just past the door for the downstairs unit was the stairs that took them to the upstairs apartment. Diana climbed them, following Richard, Katherine, and the rest.

There were four doorknobs in Diana's comic, each one of them a different design; one was cut crystal, another one of those thin up-and-down rods, one the kind of thing you'd expect to find on the door where you'd find a towel to dry off after a bath in a house where there was a claw footed tub, another blue and polished like a robin's egg. And each of them had something written around the stem of the doorknob, a different enticement that she should choose it over the others to teach her about life. This was the hardest thing for Diana to decide how to render visually, because she didn't know how to message that curled ribbons that flutter. That was the idea of educations. Some didn't.

Diana spent only a few moments knocking before the door opened. "Young person?" "I know better knocking." "Dick." Dixie cups; the only twenty-something that opened from the inside. "Shall we do a trick?"

She only had a few moments to make her knees near to her palms and walk the swing high off the ground outward and made
because of his teeth, in a Brett Easton
artist, and he receded
nitrous. He tipped
in his lap. “There
But there are
faced it with black
. She crossed herself and
like the hard
his car down a side
of the side mirror

She waited for a
her knees near to where she was already standing, in the doorway to the
door in the palm of her hand, then slid it whole into her mouth. It was an easy trick,
only had a second to capture their interest, so she dropped to
her hand, then slid it whole into her mouth.

She had been a little bit embarrassed on Richard's behalf
and the playground beside her middle
made her sit on one of the loose rubber swings
while he moaned about his sister that his parents had, in his words, let
died. There was a bench dedicated to her there, that his wealthy parents
for and which Richard viewed as the ultimate stop
in his pilgrimage of grieving. It was the holy of holies to Richard, but
to Diana it was just another place where she'd shit in her diapers in the
sandbox while her nanny scored off-market diet pills. While he talked
and complained and wailed, Diana pulled the chains closer as she slowly
made the swing spin so fast the sight of Richard almost made
her sick. In the comic, it was like stepping through a door into the Field Museum in Chicago: sure, the t-rex was cool and all that, but its bones were so big that they crowded out what it felt like to be alive now.

She draped herself from the open refrigerator door and tried to decide which of the jello shots she'd like to drink, and if it was worth just leaving the party on her own, trying to find the knot of hard girls she'd seen on the way here. The bit with the doorknobs was her only trick. They were talking about her in the living room, she could see that even from here, but none of them were ever going to actually talk to her.

She slammed the refrigerator shut and was preparing to try something else, then she heard a voice ask her if she wanted to know. "Do you want to know?" just like that and that was all it said. It was more the voice than the words, though. The voice was rich with information: that's how it struck her, that there were registers to it she wasn't hearing, somehow, and that they were all talking to her. It set her humming, parts of her responding to the voice in ways she didn't know. If she drew this voice, it would come from the ceiling like it came from everywhere, the whole world you never saw or thought about, Speaking. When she wrote it, she'd do it all in caps and heavy, sketching the words from a hundred different lines for all the frequencies it covered. She stood, touched her arm to feel it shudder, unsure what to do. It asked her, "Do you want to know?"

"Know what?" Diana asked, and sneaked closer to the widow's ledge. She was sure the speaker was behind the door, was the same person who the other, tan woman has been talking to before. "Know why your prick is so small?" She hid behind the wall, ready to open the door to the roof as soon as the voice answered.

"Do you want to know why none of the boys will touch your friend Katherine?" the voice asked. Diana felched the jello shot from her paper cup.

"Tell me," she said. She looked behind her, away from the door. Katherine in the other room was chatting up a boy, leaning forward, and touched the boys arm. He stepped back like she'd smeared something on him, excused himself, walked away.

Three months ago, she and Katherine were having a sleepover at her house that already now seemed ridiculously naive. Katherine flopped back on Diana's bed and her hair spread out around her like a shattered mirror. "A riddle," Katherine said. "How do you make it so a boy knows you're the kind of girl who will go all the way?" Diana thought about it for a minute, pulled t-shirts on hangers down the closest rail in a nervous rush, past the one from Hot Topic that said "Fist-Fuck" or the school-girl one (Diana really was a school-girl, and wore a white cotton button up uniform shirt that fit her as provocatively as a hospital orderlies scrubs; the one she pulled out on its hanger now she'd bought at the mall and would never wear it to school or the one that bare it wasn't baby fat, either). It wasn't baby fat, e

"A man wants to makes you so excited it drop to the kitchen past the open door, past the open door and press in and press in and press in to let the glowing green said, and stepped be
door into the Field
that, but its bones
be alive now.
and tried to decide
worth just leaving
the girls she'd seen on
ly trick. They were
at even from here, no
er.
thing to try something
ow. "Do you want to
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a sleepover at her
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so a boy knows
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rail in a nervous
for the school-girl
otton button up
derlies scrubs; the
mall and would
never wear it to school for fear of being turned away by the headmistress)
or the one that barely even tied in the back. "How?" she asked, and when
she turned back to Katherine, she had rolled her shirt up over her belly.
It wasn't baby fat, except that it was, just a different kind.
"A man wants to pretend he's the first," the voice said. "But that's what
makes you so exciting." Diana crumbled the dixie cup in her palm and let
it drop to the kitchen floor. "I wouldn't need to pretend." Richard walked
past the open doorway to the kitchen, but didn't even look in. She heard
the screen door from the widow's ledge swing shut before she'd even
heard it open.
Here's how she wanted her comic to end: a panel as big as a page, all
of it black. She'd make it with the copier at the public library, paying her
dime in and pressing "start" with the cover still up. She'd stand there and
let the glowing green wand rake her body with light. "Touch me," she
said, and stepped back.