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# Girl Pictures

# The Jeremys

By Rebecca Bengal

The girls were rebelling. The girls were acting out. The girls had run away from home, that much was clear. They were trying on a version of themselves that the world had thus far shown them was "boy." Floating a raft down the Mississippi. Tucking smokes into the sleeve of a T-shirt. Having a rumble. Living off the land. Cowboys, sailors, pirates, hitchhikers, hobos, train hoppers, explorers, catchers in the rye, lords of the flies—you name it, all the dominion of boys. If you wanted a place in the narrative, you had to imagine yourself inside of it.

You went to the edges. The girls were reclaiming a landscape that had been left for dead. Hiking to the hillcrest where the gleaming heads of satellite dishes hovered over the ridge like suburban aliens, like thrust-out flowers. Loitering in the marsh down where the tugboats parked for the night. Ripping off the doors of the rusted, wheel-less sedans, those capitalist relics. The doors seriously just came off in your hand. A flattened Plymouth became a fortress, someone's old crushed lipsticked loosies in the floorboards, tape spooling out of old cassettes, perfume archived in the upholstery. They wore anachronisms; hoodies and once-white tank tops and jeans with muddied hems and grass-stained legs; they could be from any era, any time; they could morph to be any tale.

They remained girls, when they were in the mood. Victorian collectors of fairies and butterflies, wispy and impulsive, a passed-out *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, drunk on sun and hallucinating on the weird whorls that appeared when they stared too long into thin air. They were tough and wily; they were Mona stomping down the road in *Vagabond*, they were the lone chicks in *Over the Edge*. They were Pre-Raphaelite, postapocalyptic; they were punk, they were pastoral. But they didn't know any of this yet, not back then.



Still from the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975, directed by Peter Weir

Always we went by fake names. Boy names, girl names, names people didn't have around here, prissy names for grown-ups who asked if our mothers knew where we were. ("Your mother," muttered the youngest of us.) If it was a cop asking, a different fake name. If it was a creep, we made him buy us Blizzards and cones and then we jumped the fence and ran away. Privately we all shared a name, Jeremy, after a boy we secretly crushed on, a boy who won the county spelling bee but had detention when they gave out the

trophy. A boy who'd pierced a crucifix through his ear till it bled on his school desk, who'd brought weed to grade school, whose mother's name was on all the bad-checks lists at the grocery registers around town. We were all Jeremy. We couldn't decide if we loved him or if we wanted to be more like him, or both.

Because it wasn't that we wanted to *be* boys, necessarily. We wanted to plagiarize their stories. We pulled up their stakes, and plunged ours in.

This is us, Appalachian foothills. Pretend it's anywhere. Three sets of sisters, out in the woods, deep in a ravine. We built forts; suspended ourselves from trees; shed our clothes and jumped in a swimming hole that gaped in the cold creek, clear to its sandy floor. It was so cold we screamed; we lay on the rocks afterward to dry like snakes in the sun. The sky was often murky in those summers. The blue haze of the mountains and the shapes of houses showed dimly and faraway through the trees, through the cascades of kudzu that covered it all in a beautiful green disease.

No one came here. No one we saw or heard. Sometimes there were traces: a washing machine tumbled down a gully, an abandoned grocery cart, slashed couch under a vine-strung ceiling to make a derelict living room, cans in the weeds, plastic bags stuck on branches, billowing like let-go birthday balloons.

But this was our place, and it had a name too, letters stitched together from our real names to make an unpronounceable sound like muffled wind. No matter where we were, if the air whistled right, we could hear it calling us. It was illegal among us to speak its name aloud, even if we could.

There were rituals, of course. We pricked our fingers with pocket-knives and let the blood run bright and red down the rocks. We coughed on cigarettes trying for smoke rings, stuffed the soft pack in a plastic wrap, buried it under pine needles in the hollow of a tree for later or for someone else. When the third Jeremy lost the lighter, when we dropped the matches in the creek, it was still okay. After-school television had taught us that a pair of glasses could catch dry grass on fire if the sun struck right.

We were thrilled by darkness, longed for it, waited for it to descend, sought it everywhere.

Jeremys one and two couldn't be more different, secret and sure. Jeremys five and six had spent their first years on a farm, they were used to large animals and predators and snakes that showed up in the garden. "Honestly, you guys, they just sort of writhe around and go away," the sixth Jeremy said. "They're probably hatching in our midst right now." Three and four were the troublemakers. Young at sleepovers, they had made us run in the driveway and flash our nightgowns at passing cars. If they beeped, we flipped.

We went to the tunnel after two weeks of heavy rain, on the first day the sun returned through the fog. Two of the Jeremys had woken one morning to a dog barking at the rising water in their parents' kitchen. The rest of us lived on higher ground. We stole through sodden backyards, peeled through curtains of leaves, hopped the fallen branches that had tumbled into the creekbed.

We followed the creek to the bridge, where a tunnel ran under the highway, feeding creek to river. In a solemn trespass, we marched single file toward the hoop of light at the other end, and toward the roar of the rapids. Shoes laced together, looped over our shoulders or left on the muddy bank behind us, the tunnel floor too slick to travel.

The darkness cloaked around us. We rolled our jeans to our knees. We sang because we were scared, though we'd never admit it aloud. Dumb songs and theme songs and jingles we'd unconsciously memorized and hymns forced on us, and songs we taped off the radio, missing the first few notes. We sang to hear the eerie echo of our voices bounce off the sides of the tunnel, mingle with the plonk of the water's slow drip, off the rumble of traffic far above. We stood at the far end of the tunnel and looked over the edge at the river below.

The second Jeremy was the strongest, and she went first like a climber, hand over hand along the slippery rocks that did for a shore, laughing at the muddy current that rushed below. With a long snapped branch she coaxed us forward, dragged us from tunnel to ground in a one-girl tug-of-war. We screamed as she pulled us into the light, gasped in the air of the other side, the rush of the water we just escaped, bare feet sinking into bright mud as we landed. From here the tunnel looked so high.

"We're never gonna be able to go back now," said the fourth Jeremy.

"Not that way anyway," said the second.

The river roared at our heels. Later we would tell ourselves we all tumbled out of the tunnel and never went back.

We traced the skinny path that ran along the riverbank, parallel to the trestle above, gravel scattering downhill when a freight train passed. The whistle blew mournfully at the highway crossing, at the bulkhead where we found enough dry sticks for a fire, set our muddy sneakers on stones, pictured a forever like this one: curling up on the rock formations of lonely state parks, hoarding packets of mustard and ketchup, scrubbing our T-shirts in rest-stop sinks with industrial pink soap; falling asleep to the ocean sounds of traffic and waking to a fury of horns.

When the sixth Jeremy got a boyfriend, we pinned him to the ground too. Kiss or spit, we commanded.

He wasn't as cute as the real Jeremy but he would do, for a while. He let us shoot his BB gun, led us out his attic window and onto his roof, as we stood barefoot on tar paper, holding each other up as we fired at the mountains of cans of beer his father drank night after night and flung into the yard.

Sometimes on those outside nights we speculated about the future, sometimes we measured the odds. Six Jeremys. We were a statistic. One in six was bound to become . . . something. One in six was bound to do . . . blank. One in six was bound to fall in love. No, we all wanted to fall in love. Get rich. Get married. ("Gross," said three Jeremys in near unison.) Get famous. Have babies. (Another chorus of "gross.") One in six of us will like girls. One in six of us will make something, discover something; one in six of us will do drugs, get sick, get hurt. One in six of us will be a criminal, one a teacher. One in six of us will never figure it out. One in six of us will never leave here. One in six of us is bound to disappear. One in six of us, she'll surprise you.

Sometimes the sky remained an unknowable white blank, revealing nothing. One day, the first Jeremy, out of nowhere, burst out: "How weird is it that I have a *uterus!*" We all cracked up.

Some days we were so bored we walked miles on the highway for fun. A two-laner twisting up the mountain. Six whole miles to shoplift a Coke from the gas station. Cars passed us full of rhododendron peepers, and men leered from spattered truck windows. When cars flew too fast around the curve we flung our bodies against the guardrail. We made faces in the distorted mirrors that marked the hairpin turns. We saw our reflections only like this: in glassy water, in dingy bathrooms, on hubcap chrome. We ran breakneck down the runaway truck ramp and let its humpbacked mountains of bulldozed dirt pillow us as we landed in time to watch the night turn purple and dark blue, pocked with stars.

Other times we ran to cement lots, roadside ditches, empty, forgotten fields. We stared at the south-lying mountains, the new black horizon where forest fires had blazed through the pines. We lay in the dirt dreaming, feeling the cold through our clothes, pinning ourselves between ground and bare sky. Thoughts rocked through our heads. *Would you rather* and *what if. What if they found us like this? Or like this?* We rearranged ourselves like a murder scene and laughed. In the winter we made violent snow angels in the drifts, whipping our arms to leave behind ragged, torn, weathered-looking wings.

Sometimes we thought we were the only ones. Sometimes we agreed there had to be others, like life on other planets. We imagined those Jeremys, far out there, the ones loitering in subway stations and roaming dangerous city neighborhoods. We couldn't fathom that they might ever want to be us, in our burnt forests and brown creeks and abandoned houses, on the edges of something too.

One in six, we'd always said, will move away. The color of the dirt there is different, red by the river's edge, alkaline gray in lawns worn free of grass. Fire ants and blue hibiscus wander the chain-link fence. When the third Jeremy tells the story of how she got there, no one believes her. How she'd driven six states away from the other Jeremys in a van with two guys and a freaked-out cat. How they got temporarily lost in a hill-country town called Utopia. How they'd slept on a rock formation made of pink granite that vibrated and sang in the cold. When she retells it, it sounds like a fairy tale she would have made up on the spot for the other Jeremys, during some night camped out in the broken-down Plymouth, way back when. Sometimes she thinks she walked through the tunnel and landed here years later instead. Here is a back lot tucked in a part of town they haven't torn down yet, Jeremys roaming in and out, girl Jeremys and boy Jeremys alike. The boyfriend has disappeared, maybe, who can say. The other guy has become another Jeremy.

Here they share houses on wheels, a church bus with the Jesus words painted over in black, three trailers covered in silver corrugated sheets, and a falling-down house no one goes into, except when it storms and the dogs run for the closets. The ground is gritty with broken nails and sawdust. It's a place of dirt and metal and the third Jeremy is as flat as metal, as thin as the guitar she plays, sitting in a rickety wheelchair rescued from a field. She still will never say aloud the name of the secret place of the Jeremys out sometimes she thinks she can hear it, carried in the wind. Sometimes when she thinks of growing up one of six, she sees that time, that place, as a fantasy. Sometimes she wonders if she made it up too. Mostly what she thinks about is this: how a girl at the center of a rebellious narrative was once considered a fantasy.

They reached a forlorn ravine where live oaks improbably still grew; a transplanted palm had accidentally managed to thrive. They squatted to piss in fields of Queen Anne's lace; they napped in apple orchards. One day they went to the beach where they made out with boys, with each other, whatever. They stayed there till the sun fell and the cold came on and then they figured out what to do next. Maybe they'd go home. Maybe they never would. Didn't people survive in the woods, for like, months? They'd grow tanned, leathery, wild. They'd drink from streams. They'd forage. They'd learn to hunt. One girl claimed she could skin a squirrel, her uncle had taught her. This girl, she knew things. She'd show you.