Bad Girls

At Seventeen—Spring 1957:

If you stick out your tight-sweatered breasts, spread scarlet lipstick on your mouth, and look boys straight in the eye, as my older sister Margo used to do, or dip your head down a little so your eyes look up like steamy Lauren Bacall, then the boys will swarm around you and you’ll get them for sure, their mouths, their arms, their hips. But you could get hurt. They could suddenly jerk your bra up around your neck, mash your breasts with their big hands, kiss you so your red mouth smears like a clown, and rip your clothes crooked. They might grab your wrists and press you flat onto the cracked leather back seats of their cars or the cold sand of Blackfield beach. And make you do it.

It could happen. At least I’m afraid it could.

The fear is in the 1950’s air. It’s in me, at seventeen.

It started, perhaps, when I was twelve, before Margo left for college. Back then, when my parents were away on their spring cruises to Cuba or Curacao, and our sitter had the night off, I’d ride my bike home at dusk to find strange cars parked every which way in the driveway of the large stone house we’d moved to on Dogwood Hill Lane in suburban Connecticut. Our back yard was strewn with high school boys, lying on the grass in the shadows of the beech trees, their arms locked around girls, one of them Margo. Or I’d find her in our darkened living room, her body spread on the lap of a boy who lounged in my father’s red leather chair, his beer can soaking one of my father’s psychiatric journals, his cigarette dropping
ashes on the Oriental rug. Margo’s arm would be flung around
the boy’s shoulder, her breasts in her tight sweater pressing
against his chest, her bright red lips brushing his ear,
whispering words I couldn’t hear, didn’t want to hear. Other
couples lay with their limbs enmeshed on the two matching
couches my mother had just bought. Liquor poured from silver
flasks, and I worried they’d spill their drinks, throw up, or do
things I didn’t want to see.

Sometimes a few stray boys cornered me in the
kitchen or dining room, grinning, shifting their slim hips,
emptying their beer cans and crunching them in their hands,
while they tilted their heads and quizzed me—Margo’s little
sister. What was my name? Did
I want a beer? A swig from their flask? I was scared of what
these thick-muscled, electrically-charged boys would do,
scared that sex would burst out from them and smother or stab
me. I didn’t question why I felt this way. I was, simply,
unsafe.

But now, years later, at seventeen, I too want these
electric boys. I want to smell them, put my nose in their sweet
hair, and press my face into their white T-shirts. I want to rest
my palms on their tight forearms, interlock my fingers with
theirs. I want their thick arms around my shoulders, their
hands in my hair, thumbs on my cheeks. I want their lips.

But I must draw them to me with great care. I will be
a good girl. I will wear my sweaters loose, my lipstick light. I
will not be like Margo, cannot be like Margo. For she has now
crashed, broken down and dropped out of college. My parents
whisper words I cannot hear, and my mother rushes up to her in Boston. No one talks to me about Margo, or explains what’s happened. But I know. Somehow, it’s about her wildness, her sexiness in the world.

I will not flitter my eye lashes for the boys. I will not dip my head down like Lauren Bacall. I will not push out my breasts like a pin-up girl. If I act like a good girl, I can get a boy and still be safe.

I’ve been practicing with Carl Gunderson. I remember the day a few weeks ago when Patsy, Gail, and I leaned against our lockers at school, watching the boys go by, our blue canvas notebooks, piled high with books, held in front of our chests. I wore my favorite emerald-green tweed suit, buttoned over my cashmere sweater. The three of us talked about our Science Project and the digestive organs we’d been molding out of clay in Gail’s basement. But I was waiting for Carl, the football captain. He wasn’t a college-bound boy, but he was cute, and I’d heard he was clever, funny. His hair was in a zip, not like his friend Jim Zalbo’s, a hood with a motorcycle, which had a slicked back DA like that sleazy singer Elvis.

When Carl sauntered down the hall, I didn’t turn my head, but followed with my eyes. The world (my friends) would not see this. “How will we get the damn intestines to stick on the poster board?” is what came out of my mouth. But inside I shouted, “Carl, Carl, look at me!” When he bent at his locker, spun his combination, and stared clean at me, I gave him the tiniest of smiles.
The next week Carl picked me up for a date. He rang the bell and entered through our front door with the massive lion-head knocker. He looked so good in his sharp white T-shirt, his Marlboros rolled up in one sleeve, that I didn’t care when he shook my parents’ hands and said, “Nice t’uv met yuz all,” a phrase my father would mimic three times the next day while my mother stood by, mute. This popular, football-captain boy had chosen me even though I’d used only my good-girl ways. No one had seen me ask. I told myself that would make all the difference.

Yet despite my cautionary ways I feel bad. I have not escaped. On Saturday mornings, after my Friday night dates with Carl, my father corners me by the refrigerator, his tight, curled lips asking, “What time did you get in last night?” His tone implies that even if I’d stayed home knitting socks, it would not have been enough to satisfy him about my good girl-ness. I stare at his angry mouth. My face burns hot. Yet I’m afraid to answer back, to tell him I am an OK girl, not a bad girl. He will yell at me, so sure he seems of my guilt.

In truth, I’m not so sure about my purity. There is that photo of me, snapped a few weeks ago by my neighbor, Paulie Zucker. It’s the photo I hide in my green padded diary I lock with a tiny key. It’s the photo that falls out from the pages onto my blanket some nights when I open the diary to write. And I grab at it; terrified my father will walk through my unlockable bedroom door and see my sins. There I am, on the bar stool in Paulie’s basement rec room. My right hand holds playing cards, my left, a cigarette. And I am dirty.
My small breasts are hidden behind the cards, under the heavy wool sweater with the sports stripes on the upper arms. My white blouse underneath is buttoned tight at the neck. Yet I might as well be a bare-breasted stripper. My shiny clean hair is smoothed into its neat flip, yet the careful effort it must have taken to produce this perfect curl is evidence enough of my impure intentions. Even my white skin seems too dark—(surely I’ve never looked as dark as I do in this photo)—further proof of how bad I am. A dark Jewish girl. No Christian friend of mine would look like this. My blond classmates, Sally Clark and Candy Wilson, would emit white light in such a snapshot. That I look straight into the camera, flaunting my cards and my cigarette, is most dangerous of all. I show myself—without apology. Like Margo.

I hate the photo. But for some reason I don’t understand, I won’t throw it out. I hide it and remain fearful my father will find it.

Do I think my father will know by this snapshot of his brazen dark daughter what else has gone on in Paulie’s basement? It is often there, right next door to our house, that my friends and I have parties on the weekends. Can my father see through the photo into the days past, see behind the cards, see through the smoke how I slow dance some Friday nights to Paulie’s 45’s of Johnny Mathis and Nat King Cole, so close to Carl that I can feel the rod-like skinny part that presses against my belly or my hip, that erection that none of us ever mentions, that I never touch, that I’m not expected to touch?

Perhaps my father can see what it is I do want on those nights when I’ve had several beers, when Paulie has
turned the room dark, and Carl and I sit in the pine-paneled corner, kissing. Or even more, when I go out parking with Carl at Blackfield Beach or on dead-end streets. I like his tongue in my mouth. I like when we’ve kissed so long in the front seat of his car that my lips are sore, my ears ring, and my breath is hard to catch. It is then, when I’m gloriously lost in the air, my brain drugged on the kissing, my underpants soaked, that I let Carl put his hands on my breasts on top of my loose sweater, and when I am very daring, crazed, let him succeed at unhooking my bra and putting his eager hands, sometimes his mouth, on my skin, my nipples.

But I let this go only so far. Sometimes Carl lies on top of me in the back seat of his car and rubs his whole body against mine, (his pants closed), kissing me harder and squeezing my breasts. I grasp his head, my thumbs rubbing hard, unconsciously, against his bristly crew cut. But this is when I know to say, “Stop Carl. We have to stop.” He protests, “Aw, come on!” but it’s only show. He knows the rules.

I feel guilty, sure I’m giving Carl “blue balls”—what we girls think happens to such poor fellows. But I can’t go the next step or even imagine what we’d do next if we kept going. Exactly what would go on below the waist is fuzzy—like the blurry glass placed in front of people’s faces on TV to protect identities. In my mind, the same wavy blur rests over all our high school genitals. I know the technical facts, of course, but how the boys’ parts will fit with mine and how this will feel is a mystery I’m happy to solve in the future. For I am a good girl.