

THE FRANCINE RINGOLD AWARDS

*Fiction Prize*



FINALIST

SARAH CURRY

*The Rickies*

**Y**ou didn't know me then.

We were all girls, about the same size, no more than 5'3" and under 115 pounds but that fall back on campus from study abroad we walked like we were men, nearly 6'1" and 200 pounds with a bum knee. Arms flexed and at our sides. We wanted to look like a stuffed gorilla won at a carnival by slinging little wooden balls as hard as you can at glass milk bottles. We walked as though we had sledgehammers affixed to our shoulders and our names were Ricky.

Why Ricky?

You know, Ricky the mechanic. Ricky the prize fighter (or was that Rocky?). Ricky the uncle who belches the alphabet.

It was a joke. Sort of.

We met at a "survivors" group potluck where a bunch of female college students took dainty nervous bites of cupcakes and later cried as they told their stories. Except us. One after the other we left as a circle massage started to form, pretending we had to pee or had an emergency text. We met outside and called bullshit on "survival." We didn't even exchange names. We headed to the closest apartment and drank ourselves silly. Or should I say serious?

The next morning we shed our flowing travelers' skirts, our spaghetti-strap tank tops, our black Ex Officio bikini-cut underwear. One of us burned them. I can't remember who. Someone else stuffed them in a Goodwill bin, and another cut them with kitchen scissors and threw them in the trash. I kept mine, shoving them deep into the back of the box under my bed.

We put on jeans and ironic t-shirts. We tied bandanas over our hair. See here, I still have them, yellow, purple, red, and turquoise. Sometimes, I tie one around Chloe, my dog, an Australian Shepherd. But I always remember to put them back in the box and shut it tight.

We dropped out of belly-dancing club and yoga and admitted we didn't care that much about saving Darfur (though I did stay on their email list. I don't know about the others). We went to the same corner of the cafeteria as the vegetarian meet-up and chewed on chicken legs and took big bites of Salisbury steak with our mouths open.

At Kroger, we spied a Delta Zeta limping under the weight of three sixpacks of hard lemonade, and we scowled. We professed a preference for bourbon. Bulleit. Because we liked staring into the bartender's eyes and asking for it straight, the way he scratched his bicep uncomfortably as if he was trying to dig birdshot out from under his skin. We liked that, making others uncomfortable.

In October, we got tattoos that said "Mom," and when they healed we used Sharpies to add "Never a," "Hate," and "Blame." Why was it our mothers' faults? We couldn't say exactly, but we knew we never wanted to be one. We vowed especially never to have daughters and, most of all, never to name them Lisa, Anna-belle, Beth, or Claire.

In November, we started going to the gun range for Ladies' Night. There was an acrid smell in the air there. At the range, we willed our arms to become part of the weapon and hurl pieces of metal through a paper target shaped like the outline of a man's hyperbolic death throe. There's a factory in Billings, Montana, that produces reams of these on recycled paper, neon green, pink, and black; the groin, heart, and head all "ultra-scale." We kept the factory up and running. I still do. Each round released short hollow yips that echoed into one long scream, if we pulled the trigger fast enough.

That semester after study abroad, freshmen girls with Bibles in hand-knit cozies were the worst. Anytime they saw a girl alone on campus they invited her to Bible study: *Free soda! Hot Christian guys!* We patted their heads. They were wide-eyed Yorkies in a puppy mill and didn't know it. We said sorry, we are atheists of everything. But it troubled us. Atheists sounded too positive. Nihilists was too descriptive. Ists too reductive.

We were the Rickies.

It took weeks to lose the brown skin of summer and whiten, but by November we were the color of turned milk. People stopped asking where we'd gone, if we'd had fun, if they should *ohmygod go on study abroad next year*. To be clear, after our summers

in different *to-die-for* locales, we no longer believed in the mysticism of Chichen Itza, Stonehenge, Chiang Mai, or Kathmandu, or men named Sergio, Gavin, Sonthi, or Yash.

We tried to remember and then not remember the faces of our rapists so many times and for so long that we were left with fuzzy faces as non-descript and smooth as mannequins, as burn victims growing new skin, faces that could be anyone.

So we avoided everyone.

Not one of us had a picture of her rapist, so don't look for them in the box. We looked in the corners of selfies and pictures of impromptu street scenes we each had taken, but they weren't there. There was a picture on my phone (dead now of course and in the box) of my hand holding a piece of yellow street corn charred at the edges. There is a long shadow cast over the shot. Is that the vendor or Sergio? Or is it me?

What is in the box? Belle's ticket stub from her night bus ride from Chiang Mai to Bangkok; a bar napkin Claire found in her purse the morning after she woke up puking and confused in a hostel bed that wasn't hers; and the Gore-Tex raincoat of the ex-pat who date-raped Beth in her sleeping bag in her backpacking tent on the third day of her ten-day trek through the Himalayas. The semester I met her, we got used to the heat of Beth's apartment. She would crank up the space heater so she could sleep without bedding. No matter the blanket's texture, she hated its roughness, the feel of weight on her skin at night. It didn't matter how cold it grew outside; we sweated at Beth's.

That Christmas break, as a present to each other, we went to the courthouse and stood in line with applications to change our names.

Since like Madonna or Cher we would have no last names, we each decided to spell it differently. Belle called dibs on Ricky because it was her idea. She was weird and smart and always went a little too far. Claire pouted and then chose Rickey. She complained she didn't like how innocent it looked, but Claire even as Rickey looked like a serious sweet girl painted by a Dutch artist. It fit her. Beth said she thought she would be more hopeful with a name that ended in i. She helps troubled kids climb mountains now. I'd say Ricki worked for her. I didn't know who I wanted to be, but Rickie seemed dull. I hoped Rici might look kind of cosmopolitan. Mostly, everyone asked me how to pronounce it.

We filled out the paperwork, but they wouldn't accept it or take our hundred dollars each, until we put a notice in the newspaper for a week.

"Like a paper newspaper?" we asked. We thought the news only existed online.

The clerk was irritatingly bemused but helpful. "Yes. You know how when someone gets married the public gets to object? Same thing. You might be taking someone's uncle's name. All of you." His eyebrow ring wriggled up and down.

We turned away.

We found newspapers in a box outside the courthouse that took only coins, which we borrowed from a woman standing at a bus stop. We touched the newspaper's dry skin pages. Ink rubbed off on our hands. We said, "Do you remember?" But we didn't finish, because the smell reminded us of our fathers and eating breakfast cereal in grade school and how mornings used to smell like Cheerios and ink and all of a sudden we wanted that. We wanted our fathers and Cheerios. But we weren't going to get it, so we called to place a notice. We pictured rubber-banded inked pages tossed onto doorsteps in the freezing dark blue of morning.

A few days later, in ten-point font on the last page of the local section, our notices, one each, were listed. Somewhere people who still woke up at 7 a.m. read about us. We did not know anyone who woke up at 7 a.m. Not even people with 8 a.m. classes. We pictured ourselves as cowboys at dawn at the town's breakfast table. We waited for gunslingers.

But all that came was the mail. See here the notice, which my mother cut from the newspaper and placed in this envelope and mailed to my apartment with no note. None of the other mothers lived in town.

Still, two mothers called when no texts were sent, no flight itineraries emailed, to ask when their daughters would be home for Christmas. They were sent to voicemail. "*Working on my senior thesis over break,*" Ricky texted. "*Ski trip with friends!! Barely a signal!*" wrote Ricki. The third mother did not call. She was on a cruise.

And so legally we became the Rickies.

We spent most of December and January in our apartments. We curled up on the radiators, drinking saucers of black coffee, looking out at the snow.

Then it happened. In February of all months, Rickey and Ricki fell in love. With each other. “This is bullshit,” we (halved) said. “Love doesn’t exist.”

“We believe love might exist. Especially if it’s between Rickies. Besides, you know we’ve always liked girls.” They laced fingers and called each other Ricky-baby.

“That’s not your name,” we (halved) reminded them.

That week they did not invite us to meet them for \$2 hamburger night, but we saw them there anyway. It was awkward. They talked about old films we’d never heard of. A few weeks later they moved in together. And then, inevitably, they bought a kitten.

They invited us over to meet the kitten. We made fun of the invitation but went anyway. Their apartment smelled of curry and clove cigarettes. Rickey heated up a pan in their coat closet of a kitchen. She swirled broth and tomatoes with chickpeas and potatoes.

“Rici, will you toss me the garam masala?” She pointed to a shoebox of spices under their futon. I grabbed it.

Ricki sat on the floor smoking and waving a piece of yarn for the kitten. “We don’t eat meat anymore. You guys should definitely try it. Seriously, every time we eat chickpeas or roasted Brussels sprouts it’s like insta-Popeye. You feel so powerful.”

We looked around. They had traded coffee for tins of green tea. We spied jogging shoes by the door. And there was the kitten.

“You mean spinach,” we said.

They looked at us blankly.

“Popeye eats spinach.”

“Oh, right. Well, he should have eaten kale. It’s a superfood.”

We stared at the teeny cat asleep on Ricki’s lap, tired from batting its small pink paws at things. Its name was Mittens, if you can believe it. We couldn’t.

Here is a teeny tiny shed claw of Mittens that I dug out of their rug and put in my jeans pocket. Is that weird? I liked running my finger against it to feel its little bite.

“So, what will you do with the cat when you break up?” Ricky asked.

We went weeks without seeing them.

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That spring, our last before graduation, we headed to class through a gauntlet of bodies. The quad was littered with girls in shorts and bikinis and boys tossing Frisbees. We stared straight ahead sweating through our thrift store sweaters when we saw Rickey and Ricki on a picnic blanket. We paused for a moment and stood there while they discussed cheap flights to Morocco to celebrate graduation. Rickey mentioned a summer internship she wanted to do. They ate fresh fruit. Pear juice dribbled down their chins.

We wanted so badly to feel the sun on our skin, to lick off the sweetness.

Here is the pear sticker that Ricki playfully stuck to my cheek and I moved to my scratchy sweater, which I never wore again. In the box, all my clumpy sweaters from that time tangle together into a woolen nest to give rest to other ugly things.

That night, the pear night, the two of us (the remaining Rickies) watched a movie about two girl lawyers who—*surprise*—fall in love. We sat shoulder to shoulder, the laptop askew as it balanced on our legs. Its warmth heated our thighs. We shimmied out of the jeans that were our skin and crawled into bed. We wrapped our legs around each other and kissed. We kissed again with more effort. We swirled our tongues into each other's mouth, hoping for some sweetness, like two halves of a McDonald's soft-serve joining on a cone.

Our grinding was effortful. As though we were taking some standardized test that we might pass if we could better darken the circles. We pushed our pencils down into the wood desk to the breaking point, the page torn through. We could not erase the summer. We just left streaks across a page.

We did not fall in love, get cute haircuts, go somewhere sunny, or become girl lawyers in dashing pantsuits defending the undefended and drinking lattes every day. This is not that story, though I wish it was. Because I do love Belle and now she has hair the color of a dead witch. Now she's gone and not told anyone where.

We did sleep. Oh, how we slept. We curled up in Belle's twin bed like sisters scared of the dark. The last time I saw her we slept like that.

Then one night, during the last few weeks of college, we didn't meet up. We had homework or something. We drank

bourbon and Coke in our own bedrooms. It got late. I fell asleep but then woke hyper, buzzed, tingly. It was midnight. I didn't text anyone. No reason. If I had given it any thought, I would have known then it was all ending, that our self-imposed solidarity was wearing thin.

Do not be tempted to think of me in this moment as some butterfly breaking free. We were not and are not butterflies. Do not picture orange wings. There were no orange wings.

You may imagine me as leaking caterpillar soup. You know, the point where a caterpillar has eaten itself alive, dissolved itself with its own digestive juices and is stew, an eyeball floating next to an antenna. A secret I did not tell my kindergartners when I still taught: Some caterpillars stay soup.

I do have some rocks from that night in the box.

It was an hour to closing at The Treehouse and it was packed. I ordered a drink and went to the dance floor. Maybe fifteen minutes later, Rickey and I spied each other and waved, but I didn't stop dancing in the patch of empty space I'd claimed near the girls' restroom. I used a straw to sip a white Russian. The sweetness burned my throat. Rickey was talking to this bro from poli sci, the one she had called an asshole after his presentation on John Locke. I wondered where Ricki-*baby* was.

I ignored the smell of vomit and rum punch on the dance floor. I danced. My landlocked body moved loose as a 40-peso gypsy scarf blowing in the breeze next to a stall of hanging meat shanks. That night, my body was on vacation. Albeit a kind of crappy one, a staycation.

The lights came on. The jarring silence drove everybody into the night. That's when I saw her again. Rickey was kissing that bro.

All around me tipsy students piled into their cars, kicking up gravel as they revved out of the Treehouse's lot. Dust swirled under the yellow sodium lights, and Rickey was still kissing that bro.

I stormed up to them, grabbed her hand, and pulled. But her mouth was stuck to him.

"Rici, leave me alone. I'm fine," she hissed.

She pushed me. Hard but not that hard but enough. I started to walk away, but they started back up again. Kissing. And I reached down and flung handful after handful of gravel at them until a truck caught me in its beams.

“Bitch!” some kids screamed out their window. And then I flung pebbles at them and the truck’s tailgate as it pulled away.

Just like that Rickey and the bro were gone. The parking lot was empty. At least that’s what I remember. That and I got a C on my organic chemistry final the next morning. Bye-bye, college.

We graduated.

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We stood in front of a sea of white chairs, the Rickies plus an older sister in taffeta dresses, gerbera daisies and baby’s breath in hand. We peered at Claire/Rickey standing two lengths ahead swathed in silk the color of *crème brûlée*.

The pastor said, “You may kiss the bride,” and as her now-husband, Jim, dipped and smooched her I wondered then if he knew her name, her real name, the one she paid a hundred dollars for. It had only been three years.

The couple exited and we, the remaining Rickies, squeezed hands, until one by one we peeled off to walk down the aisle.

At the reception, the D.J. announced the bridal party. His miked voice was too big for the room. My accompanying groomsman, some cousin, bolted to the bar. I don’t know where Ricki or Ricky ended up so I made a dash for the table of cupcakes and then realized maybe there was some tradition we were supposed to wait for, even though it was cupcakes and not a wedding cake. I had no clue. It was my first wedding.

The bro from that night at Treehouse, who Claire dated for six months and now calls her BFE (“best friend ex”) and must drive Jim nuts because he still twirls and lifts Claire when he greets her, approached. I acted fast, grabbing a lemon meringue cupcake and sticking half of it in my mouth. Somehow I still ended up on the dance floor with him. Alongside Claire and Jim, Ricky and Ricki, a cartwheeling ringbearer, and twirling flower girls, we grinned and shouted the lyrics. I hadn’t been with anyone since study abroad and surrounded by friends I felt brave as the choo-choo in the story I read every first day of school to my students. I was the Little Rici Who Could.

I invited the maybe-bro outside into the cool night air. I wanted to cover his neck with my new burnt sienna lipstick (worn flat now but still in my makeup bag) or at least wanted to want to

and so I did. His hands ran over the horrible bridesmaid dress and instead of lumpy and tacky and scared I felt amazing. Well, okay.

A few minutes later, I had my hand on his zipper when I realized I was moving with that same odd mix of painstaking carefulness and adrenaline as when I go to the gun range.

I unzipped his slacks and worked my way under his boxers and he managed to push down the top half of my green poofy dress so I felt like a half-naked Tinkerbell. And I was overtaken with belly-shaking laughter. So shocked and thrilled I was at our pale silly fleshiness I didn't stop laughing. His cock cradled in my hand was as light and sweet as a just-born kitten. It could be stamped out in hand or underfoot, drowned in a milk bucket, with no effort at all. Nothing ultra-scale or gunmetal gray about it.

I can't believe I just said that. Anyway, the maybe-not-much-a-bro smiled with me though he probably didn't know at what and we kept going.

We, no me, me and him, lay next to each other in the dewy grass. Naked-white and mouth-pink half-buds on gangly spring trees shone in the darkness and I stared at them a bit longer before I went back to the party. Alone.

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A few weeks later Belle and I started getting together regularly again. She was nearby at her graduate program. Back then she had Rainbow Brite hair, a cheery ombre that went down her back. It was fun to see her. I often went out with my teacher friends for happy hour, but it's true what they say about elementary school teachers: They are kind women who once dreamed of being dolphin trainers but are thrilled all the same to watch small children jump through hoops. Sometimes it was difficult to drink wine and pretend I did not want more. I had needed Belle back in my life more than I knew. When she talked about her classes I started to think maybe I could go back to school too. We talked a mile a minute about ideas and books and sometimes even guys. It was so good to spend time with someone who had more than a three-minute attention span it took me a while to realize that one afternoon, we had both just said *and then*. I had waited so long for it I had forgotten I was waiting.

And then we will. And then. And then. And then.

That late afternoon, drinking \$4 red wine at a coffee shop, was our moment in the sun. It had taken us longer than Ricki and Rickey, but we were ok. Back then we had made ourselves anew and then anew again. We were Belle and Lisa. Maybe for a minute I even believed we were butterflies. And then we lived happily ever after.

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Of course, that's not what happened.

The Rickies thing was dead. Embarrassing even. No one else ever mentioned it. Not cheerfully centered Beth and certainly not married Claire and now Belle and I didn't need it either. I put the stuff in the box and shoved it under my bed. I decided that someday, if I had a daughter, I would explain that riding in cars (or rickshaws or scooters or buses) with boys isn't something she can avoid, but with me she can be as ugly as she wants to be. She's never got to smile unless she wants to. She can leave all her dark thoughts in the open. I will take care of them.

And that's what I told Belle a couple of years later when I was finishing up my second year at vet school, and she took the train (she avoided buses) from Boston to Philadelphia for the weekend. She had short-cropped hair dyed gray-purple and was in the middle of writing her dissertation. She was on and off meds for depression and anxiety. She told me that in Ancient Egypt women dyed their hair dark with walnuts mixed with the blood of a black cat and that "everything comes back."

"Belle, did something happen?"

"Everything comes back," she repeated.

I stole two of her Xanax to see what they were like. The world swam by for an hour. She talked and told me she met a really cool guy, until he wasn't, not at all.

"Report him," I said. "Do it."

She shook her head no. "Then that's all history will have to say about me."

We drank wine, and I offered to sneak into this guy in her history department's condo and chop off his toe, because that's what has to be said when your friend tells you *it* happened again. She thanked me, and for a minute we wondered if we could do it. The breaking and entering. The threatening. The sawing through

bone. But this isn't a movie, and Belle and I figured we don't look good enough to get away with it if we got caught and ended up on the news.

We ate at a fancy Greek place where they served us a plate of cheese that came out on fire, and she stuck her hand into the flame.

The waiter screamed. I dumped a glass of ice water on her.

"Sorry! Sorry!" she said. "I thought it was fake or something."

But I'm pretty sure that wasn't what she thought, that she wanted to burn herself alive for a second, as though she were nothing more than an effigy, a dummy of herself made for one purpose: to get rid of.

And that's when I decided to show her the box under my bed, and we added the receipt from the restaurant and a small piece of her blistered skin. She asked if she could send me her long rainbow ponytail, which was in her sock drawer.

"It doesn't feel right there," she said.

"What else have you been hanging on to?" I asked.

The thing is I haven't seen Belle since that night. We finished another bottle of wine. I took my Ambien. We went to sleep in my queen-size bed, holding on to each other, until one of us shifted, and then the other. Our backs to each other but our feet touching. And when I woke she was gone. Her phone on my bedside. Her backpack missing.

Her parents filed a police report. No one expected it to do any good.

It's been months, and here's the thing. I've started to wonder if I left the box open next to my bed, if I ran my hands through it, the sweaters, the gravel, the letters, the dead skin and kitten claws, if I didn't put the lid back on it and instead let everything out, what would happen?

Could she find her way back to me?

Is she down there, inside somehow, drinking whiskey with the Rickies? Are they keeping her there?

I had told her the box keeps the Rickies alive, no matter what. And the Rickies keep us—Lisa, Belle, Beth, and Claire—alive. The Rickies live under my bed. They tame the ugly things. They are the ugly things. They are the bravest and worst pieces of us. They live in the dark on nothing but dust, so we don't have to. I hope she believed me. She said so herself, everything comes back. But I'm still waiting.