

FLASHBACK: ZERO HOUR

(An excerpt from an untitled work in-progress)

by

Melissa LoBianco

Had I just gotten on the bus without ever having smiled, everything surely would've been different.

I remember thinking all the way to the bus stop that I should just ditch school that First Day. I thought if I could ditch just that one day I could get over that unfamiliar, lonely fear - somehow - overnight. I would go in the next day. I could beat that First Day and move right on to Day Two; surely, Day Two couldn't feel as badly as all this. Along the way, I remember looking down at my shoes a lot, a habit I still have, and being compelled to keep my hands moving.

I decided that, never having met me, the teacher wouldn't miss me. Maybe she would think that I'd changed schools or something. I didn't know any of the kids there, either, so my absence would go unnoticed.

By the time I'd manufactured a scenario whereby I could feasibly hide out in the grasses behind the houses on the creekside of the street, I found myself already at the corner of Riverside and Herbertsville.

The area wasn't strange to me. I hadn't lived there long, but I had explored it with my brothers, had played chicken on the main road with them there. Across the street was that house with the boat in the driveway that was rumored to have fallen off its chocks onto so-and-so's little sister. I could see the salon where mom took me to get my haircut. Behind me, the dirt road that leads to Godfrey Lake. Still, I was uneasy.

I have always had this fantastic notion that someone is watching me. I'm sure it began when my parents would take my brothers and me to church, before Brick, back in the Keyport days. Before they dismissed the children to Sunday school downstairs at our First Baptist Church - as opposed to the Second Baptist Church, the necessity of which in a town exactly a mile square already boasting a First Baptist Church still baffles me - we were subjected to our version of Mass. There were red hymnals and blue scripture books and little pencils like the ones daddy used when he'd let me pretend I was his caddy on golf Saturdays. There was a collection basket passed along by a young man named Walter who would wink at me every week and who, consequently, became the very first - albeit, prematurely - in a long line of crushes I formed based on an impossibly misguided inference of affection. There was a lot of singing at church - that was my favorite bit - and there was a sermon.

What I took away from the sermons was that God is everywhere, and He is within everyone. In Sunday school, Mrs. Hyer taught us the principles of Godliness as well as the lyrical mantra, "Yes, Jesus Loves Me," and that God sees all things. I was mindful of all eyes - real or imagined, corporal or Otherwise - on me from then on.

Never quite comfortable with the audience, my time by myself was fidgety and self-conscious. That morning, I kicked a single rock five blocks to where I stood there in an effort to appear mentally occupied - an idle mind is the devil's playground, they said. I would zip, unzip, zip, unzip. I was zipping again when -

"Hi!" she opened. I'd seen her coming, pretended I was invisible anyway.

I don't remember what her expression was. I don't remember what she wore. I only clearly remember that she seethed with self-confidence. The most assured six-year-old you ever did see - or, at least, that I had. Even in her almost-introduction, she showed her upper-handedness: "What's your name?" she asked.

"Missy," was the most I could muster. That was it; no sense putting forth much effort.

"I'm Tasha. It's really Natasha," she said, putting emphasis on the Na-, "but they call me Tasha."

She may have said a hundred more things. Or a thousand. Or nothing else at all, see: that I don't remember. But with her voice, that

seemed to come from just behind her nose, and her freckled, apple cheeks and her close-set blue eyes - she was a girl puck who came off the true antithesis of vulnerable - she made me smile. Instantly attracted, as polar opposites tend to be.

And then the bus came. The door folded open, revealing to me what might well have been the herald of everything thereafter mutual to us riveted to the third riser: **WATCH YOUR STEP**. If it was an omen, I ignored it.

From that smile on, without conscious decision on the part of either of us, we simply became inseparable. That smile that was contrary to my natural sensibilities wax-sealed our co-alignment in the universe. Some damn how, it is unbroken still, in spite of us.
