

Susannah Hendrey

Class of 2011

## Stillicide

### I

After the first time he saw the girl in the silver bikini, he saw her everywhere. The first time he saw her, it was on the beach in East Hampton. The top came to a point over her stomach that reminded him of a belly-dancer's costume, and the back was tied precariously with thin silver straps. Automatically, he looked her over. Blindingly pasty. Too thin- and not the Zone Diet thin of the girls he knew, but sicklier and more careless, somehow. Even if she got a tan, she'd still look weird here. Bathing suit aside, she looked like she belonged on city streets so late at night it was morning. She was pretty, but not his type, so he went to get a beer out of his cooler and watch the tanned girls play volleyball.

The second time he saw her, it was in Central Park. He recognized her because she was still wearing the silver belly-dancer's bikini. All sorts hung out in the park, of course, but she still looked like she shouldn't be out during the day. He looked her over again, although he had already classified her as not his type. He saw how thin her shoulderblades were above the knotted straps, the blue veins visible through her skin, and the smeary eyeliner that looked like it had started out as mascara.

"Hi," he said, "I saw you out on the island. In East Hampton? I don't mean to be sketchy, just...funny, huh?"

"I don't remember you," she said.

“We didn’t talk. I just saw you. You were wearing that same bathing suit. I mean, small world I guess, running into you twice. I didn’t have much to say. Just wanted to say hello,” he muttered, more nervous than he should have been talking to a girl who was not his type.

“Hello,” she said. He waved awkwardly and left.

The third time he saw the girl, she was wearing an ice-blue satin dress. It was at a party in the meatpacking district. Some girl had rented out the whole club for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and invited pretty much everyone she knew. He wondered how the girl in the bikini had gotten in, who she knew, since she was alone and spoke to no one. He gave a half-wave across the room, and she tilted her head, as if trying to place him. Embarrassed, he turned away to order a drink.

Several hours and quite a few drinks later, he wandered upstairs to find the bathroom. It was confusing and the room was wobbling, and he really needed to take a piss. He finally found the door, tastefully concealed behind an array of potted plants. He swung it open, only to reveal the girl in the silver bikini (in her silver-blue dress), in the exact middle of taking a pill only a little darker blue than the dress. She smiled at him for the first time.

“E,” she said, “want one?”

“No thanks,” he said, “um, can you get out? I need to pee.”

“It’s okay, I’ll close my eyes,” she offered. He was drunk and desperate and unsure of how to deal with her enough that this seemed like an acceptable compromise. He stood

before the urinal and unzipped, and then closed his eyes too, trying to forget she was there. Halfway through a very relaxing piss, she spoke up again.

“I’m getting very hot. I think I’m going to take my dress off.”

He clenched his eyes tighter, and focused on peeing and not falling over. The room spun worse with his eyes closed. When he turned around and opened his eyes, the dress was in a frothy pile on the men’s room floor. The girl was once again wearing her bikini. Written on her stomach with marker were the words, “A STILLICIDE IS PAINLESS.” Fuck, he was drunk. He was pretty sure that didn’t make sense.

“You mean ‘Suicide is Painless,’” he said, gesturing to her stomach.

“What?”

“You meant ‘suicide,’ like the M\*A\*S\*H song.”

“No, ‘stillicide’”

“Oh...is that like, a kind of abortion or something?”

“No, it’s a falling of droplets.”

“Oh.”

“It’s too hot in here. Come outside with me.”

He followed her, not knowing why. She led him down through the party, walking along a clear path, though the rest of the room was packed. She didn’t stand out, in her silver bikini, but rather seemed to be part of a different party, that happened to be moving

through the first. Outside it was the borderline between night and morning, and it was just beginning to rain. She stepped out, not quite into the streets, but into that horrible line of water that dripped from the eaves, the thick fat drops landing in her hair. The rain began to pick up from a drizzle to a respectable shower as she stood there, and the water falling from the eaves made solid splashes against the ground. The silver bikini was wet and plastered to her skin, and her straight hair began to curl, taking on a new, glistening shape. She turned to him, pupils huge and starry, skin wet and shining, silver bikini gleaming coldly in the thin, early light.

“See?” she said, “Painless.”

## II

The right words could twist morals around more than most people would like to admit- for example, a stillicide was nowhere near as unethical as it sounded. A phantonym, they called it, a word that sounds like it ought to mean something, but doesn't, or rather, means something else.

'Terminated' wasn't a phantonym, exactly. It was a euphemism, a nihilnym. It meant something, but it didn't sound like it meant anything at all. He walked faster as he reflected. He liked walking. It was no syllables at all, just one foot in front of the other in a reflex even tiny babies were born with. They were too weak to lift their little bodies and big heads, but if you held them up, their legs would move like they were walking while they cooed wordlessly.

They should outlaw words over two syllables, he thought. They should slap a tax on synonyms. Everything he still had was under three syllables. "Pride." "Morals." "Grief." And a lot of his problems were over two.

It wouldn't have changed much in his life. His girlfriend could still point to her stomach and say, "Kill it." "Murder it." Murder was still two syllables. But they would have called things what they were, and he could have been angry. How could he be angry at her for terminating an embryo? She could even say fetus, two syllables, but that was just another chickenshit synonym for *baby*.

It was easy to become numb when you sat there and they told you lots of long words you didn't know. It was easy to just let the unfamiliar sounds lie instead of saying it to yourself and knowing for certain and forever what had happened. It was easy to let go when they made everything sound like some exotic disease, not the sort of thing that happened to people like you so maybe it hadn't. He didn't want to forget. He didn't want to find forgiveness for the doctors and his girlfriend and the whole damn world buried under syllables. He deserved his fucking anger. Anger was two syllables and goddamn it, he still had it left.

"It's over," despite being one syllable and two syllables, was surprisingly hard to understand. It was just sounds coming from her mouth for a full minute and he had stared at her, trying to understand. He did understand eventually, though. But this 'abortion,' this 'terminated pregnancy,' it was far too many syllables and far too much taken from him for him to understand.

She told him not to call, after she took all her things and gave him back her keys. It was hard some nights, but he didn't. And then she called him, two months after she left. He couldn't hear the words she said, only her voice.

"Could you say that again?" he'd said, determined to listen and not be swept away by the images her voice brought back.

"I'm pregnant." Her voice thin, empty.

"Oh," he had said, struggling to make it mean something, "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Voice almost breaking.

It had taken him a long time to wring even a little sense from that. "Pregnant" meant "baby." Baby was two syllables and still hard to wrap his mind around. He had seen babies, even held them, but it was still too much to understand the thought of a child of his own, but he could have tried, with cradle and milk and son and love.

He was just starting to understand a little, to think about the word "father," when she called again, and any sense he may have built came crashing down.

"You're a vegetarian! You won't eat a fucking burger but you're considering-"

"I don't know what else to do."

It was pretty fucking clear in his mind, compared to the alternative. She could have the baby and he could hold it and then things would make sense. A gaping hole in his life left by a son that never was, that was beyond comprehension. "Baby," he thought to

himself, and he still couldn't really understand what it meant, "baby" - he couldn't stand the thought of never getting to.

"Baby, baby, don't. It's just nine months, that's all I'm asking, only five more months, really. You've given me two years, can't you just give me five more months? I'll take care of it, you don't even have to see it, baby baby our baby."

"I don't know- I can't-"

He called her again and again, after that, ranting and begging and trying to make her see the unfathomable enormity of what she wanted to do. She told him to stop calling and made threats about a restraining order, but that was just syllables and sounds.

He was almost back to the motel now. He had been staying there since they broke up. It was sleazy and actually more expensive than renting a little place, but rental contracts were full of lots of long words that made him tired. Also, the motel did not feel like home. He was not ready to have a home, with only one bedroom because he did not have a son. The motel made him feel like this was just a trip, and soon he'd pack up and move back to his life. He permitted himself this small self-deception.

He unlocked his door, locked it behind him, and collapsed onto the squeaky bed. He was tired, always tired. He stared out the motel window into the rain. It fell in a sheet from the rusty, leaf-clogged gutters. A stillicide. If only all words were like that, sounded bad but then someone with a white coat and a big book told you it didn't hurt after all. Medical advice: Apply fluffy towel and rub until shivering ceases. He had a towel, although not a particularly fluffy one, but he wrapped himself up in it all the same. Maybe it would help.

She said never to call her again. But he just needed one thing, one little thing. He dialed her number which he still remembered even though she didn't want him to. We can't all forget like you, honey. He should remember to tell her that.

"Hello?" her little voice said, and he almost forgot how much she had done and how angry he was.

"Who is this?" she asked, after he said nothing.

"We can't always forget like you, honey," he said, before he forgot.

"Well, how am I supposed to recognize your voice if you just stay there breathing like a creep? I told you not to call me."

She was angry. *She* was angry. That was rich.

"I just want one thing, okay, and then I'll forget, I promise. Just say you killed our baby. Just say it for me."

"I had an abortion. Fine. Now will you stop calling me?"

She sounded bored. He wished he could be fucking bored.

"No. Say it like that. All these long words, they all lie. Like stillicide, you know? It sounds like some kind of late-term abortion and you know what it is? Rain falling from the roof."

"I know that!" she interjected. "I taught you that word, remember?"

“Of course I do. I should have known,” he said bitterly, “I should have known right from when you used that word that nothing means anything to you.”

“You still don’t understand, do you?”

“What is there –“ he started angrily, but she continued over him.

“But you don’t need to understand anymore. I don’t have to try to make you understand anymore! So just tell me what you want from me and go away.”

“I want to hear the truth. Say you killed our baby.”

“I killed our baby,” she said flatly.

He couldn’t believe it. He asked for it in the simplest words, in the truest words, in the words you knew for so long that they were identical with their meaning, and those words meant nothing to her.

“Didn’t it hurt? Didn’t it fucking hurt?”

How could it not hurt her like it hurt him?

“It didn’t hurt a bit,” she said, toneless and flat as an automated voice messaging system.

### III

She made another valiant attempt to enjoy her dinner, but she couldn’t. She could hear the damn thing scratching away, and it put her off her food. The worst part was, she couldn’t tell where the noise was coming from. It wasn’t behind the refrigerator, or in the

cupboards, or even behind any identifiable section of wall. It wouldn't have been so bad, if she could keep track of it. She closed her eyes and focused on the sound. It was coming from the left, definitely. She stood, eyes still closed, and moved a few steps to her left. Was it in front of her, or behind her? She held her breath, listening. No, it was to the right! Was it?

She'd never had a rat before. She wasn't the fussy type, she could happily coexist with spiders and ants and even a roach or two under the fridge, but this rat just made her skin crawl. It was definitely the noise. She wasn't used to living on her own, and the apartment had seemed empty and silent when she first moved in, but she had gotten used to it. She had even grown to enjoy the solitude, keeping things as messy or clean as she pleased, eating cereal for dinner or cooking up a three course meal just because she wanted to, full of hummus and quinoa and other things her ex used to dismiss as 'vegetarian food.' She decorated in a way that would have made her ex sneer. She had hung up the paper lanterns and bead curtain that she'd taken down after he said it made their bedroom look like a 'Turkish whorehouse,' and she loved it.

And then the rat had shown up. It had nibbled the extension cords to the lanterns, but that wasn't the real problem. What it did was rustle and squeak. It made the place seem vast and vacant again, when she lay in bed alone with the covers pulled up to her chin, trying to ignore it and go to sleep, but unable to stop herself from listening, trying to figure out where it was. She would imagine it scurrying around under her bed, climbing the comforter, and she could hear the whispering sounds of fur and tiny claws digging into cotton, until a thump in the kitchen convinced her it must be in there. She wanted someone

there to get rid of it, or at least tell her she was imagining things when she heard it next to her ear. It made an echoing mausoleum out of her three-room apartment. It made her feel small as a mouse and lost, everything looming far above her in the dark.

Giving up on her dinner, she brought her plate to the counter and put it in the sink. The rat was still scuffling, somewhere. She had tried to get rid of it. She bought three different humane traps, until the man in the store started cracking jokes about building a better mousetrap, but two sat untouched and the third was triggered with the rat nowhere to be seen. She called a pest control place, but they found neither hide nor hair of it and charged her fifty dollars. She ground up the sleeping pills she couldn't take in case it snuck up on her and mixed them with ricotta, but no rat appeared. She had a suspicion she gave it the best night's sleep it ever had, curled up by the radiator, or maybe in her clean laundry.

It was stupid, she knew, to be so stymied by a single rodent. When she tried to tell her friends how crazy the rat was making her, they asked incredulously why she hadn't just poisoned it yet. She tried to explain that it would be worse, that she really would be crazy if she killed a defenseless creature just because she couldn't stand it, but they just looked at her with pity and didn't understand.

She had a box of rat poison under the sink, but she hadn't used it yet.

It wasn't like she had a clue how to go about killing a rat. Could you mix it with ricotta, like she had tried with the sleeping pills? How could you tell when it was dead? She wondered what it was like to die of rat poison. She had a cartoonish vision of a rat convulsing, foaming acid green at the mouth until its eyes turned into X's. If she mixed more sleeping pills in too, would it just go to sleep and never wake up? She pictured a rat

peacefully drifting off in its little matchbox bed. But if it was in its bed in the wall, she wouldn't be able to see the eyes change, and she would never know if it was dead, and she would lie awake every night wondering if she could hear it. Maybe she could make it another little bed and leave it in the middle of the kitchen.

The poison she got came in a cheerful yellow box. The back said it was specially formulated to provide a humane death. No foaming, no convulsions. She wondered how they knew. Did they ask the rats? Maybe the rats lay in paralyzed agony. Maybe their little rat lives flashed before their eyes. She opened the cupboard under the sink and looked at the sealed box, in its soothing shades of buttermilk and lemon meringue, and then closed the cupboard door again. She did this sometimes, but she never took the box out. She wondered if the poison was yellow too, but she was afraid to open it up.

Her skin was itching, as if the rat was crawling on her instead of somewhere behind the baseboards. She thought it was behind the baseboards, anyway. She decided to take a shower. In the bathroom, she quickly pulled off her clothes, stepped into the shower, and pulled the door closed. Safe. She surveyed the little beige cubicle. No rat, and nowhere for a rat to hide. The water ran cold at first, but soon warmed up, and she began to relax. She was clean and warm and most importantly, the rat was not there.

But hot water doesn't last forever, and she began to worry that the rat would be there when she got out, squeaking and scrabbling while she shivered, wet and naked. She peered out, but the glass door had fogged up and she couldn't see. There was a dark shape on the floor. Just a sock. Just as she looked away, she could have sworn she saw it move. Had it? Where had she left her socks? She strained to listen for the rat, but she couldn't hear

over the sound of the shower. She turned the water off. The rat was rustling around, but she couldn't tell where. Was the shape moving? She couldn't see through the door, but she was afraid to open it in case the rat rushed in with her.

She couldn't take it any more, this damn rat that had her hiding in the shower and checking under the bed like a toddler. She couldn't live like this. It was driving her insane. She cracked the door, scrambled out of the shower, and stood with her back to the wall, surveying the room carefully. The shape was indeed a sock. She could hear the rat, but didn't see it. She had to get rid of it. She knew she was overreacting, pressed shaking against the wall as if it were a murderer loose in the house, but that was the worst part. It was the rat that was doing this to her. She wasn't like this normally. She had to make it stop.

She wrapped a towel around herself and ventured into the kitchen, looking everywhere for the rat. A dollop of ricotta, *splat*, right on the floor. She opened the cupboard and pulled out the box. It gleamed with cleanliness, silence, salvation. She ripped the seal off and dumped a generous portion onto the ricotta. It wasn't yellow, but pure white, and soon it soaked into the cheese and became undetectable. Scrambling onto the countertop where the rat couldn't reach her, she wrapped the towel tighter around her and began her vigil. Twenty minutes, the clock on the oven said. Forty. It began to rain outside. An hour, and she could have sworn she heard the rat coming closer. It was hard to tell, with the rain battering against the windows, but it didn't matter now, because she was sitting right here until she had watched the damn thing die.

Another ten minutes, though, and it appeared. It was huge, a filthy brown monster of a thing, and the click of its nails on the linoleum raised goosebumps on her arms. She sat very still and tried to breathe quietly. It sniffed, twitching its whiskers, and scuttled to the cheese. Yes! Eat it, she willed, eat it. It did. It buried its nose in the cheese and guzzled it. She was glad she had barely eaten her dinner, because she began to feel sick. A globule of ricotta quivered on the end of one of its whiskers. It ate until the last trace of cheese was gone. Again, it looked around and sniffed, and scurried off towards the bedroom. She wanted to scream. It couldn't escape again, couldn't lurk everywhere, driving her crazy, couldn't die behind the walls leaving her to wonder if it was only biding its time.

But it began to slow. It wobbled now, as if it were drunk. It changed directions a few times, and she prayed it wouldn't make it to one of the walls. Finally, it lay down under the coffee table and curled into a little ball. She remained huddled on the countertop still. She wanted to be sure it wasn't going to get up again. She didn't check the clock this time, only stared at the rat intently, checking for any signs of life. After a long time, she felt safe to climb down.

Now there was a new problem. What do you do with a dead rat? You couldn't just throw it in the kitchen trash. She got a pair of salad tongs, keeping her eyes firmly on the rat, and knelt cautiously next to the table. When it still showed no signs of life, she gingerly prodded it with the tongs. Nothing. Turning her face aside as if it still might spring to life and attack her, she dragged the rat out from under the table and lifted it, struggling between keeping a good grip with the tongs and holding it as far from her body as she

could. She stood there, hair still damp, with a dead rat hanging from her salad tongs. There should have been instructions for this on the box.

She could just throw it out the door. It didn't matter, as long as the thing was out of her apartment. Someone else would deal with it. She opened the door to the communal patio, and flung the rat away. It landed just under the eaves, where a line of water fell.

The whiskers quivered as water hit them, as if it were only sleeping, but the rest of its body was terribly still. It looked much smaller now, and fragile, lying limp with its fur plastered to its body. She wondered how she could have been so terrified by this little thing. It looked like it should be shivering, with the water from the eaves splashing down on it, and she had to remind herself that even though its eyes were open and gleaming, it was dead.

She shut the door and locked it, and the deadbolt, and the little chain.