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BLACKTOP ROYALS

Maura Buckley

**“We were the youth
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When we were young, we prowled the streets like a pride of lions. The neighborhood was our personal jungle, where we ruled the twisted black-top kingdom like royalty. We were the youth of the neighborhood, brought together simply by where our parents decided to live. My siblings and I lived within walking distance of our closest friends and cousins in a spiral of streets designed by my father and grandfather named after us: Buckley Road, Maura Elizabeth Lane, and William Robert Road among them.

In the empty wooded spaces between our houses we fought rock wars and battled through *Manhunt*, staggering home spent and caked in sweat, bike grease, and dirt. Parental control didn't exist in the unclaimed territory of backyards and streets. Rules and laws were made and upheld by us, the royal family. The eldest of us were kings and knights who ruled as tyrants over territories of paintball huts and canoes.

They habitually switched between terrorizing the younger ones and acting as guardians, protecting and imparting the priceless wisdom of their middle school minds. Second in line were the queens of book castles with thrones of branches set high in trees. They acted as buffers between the largest and the smallest, the peacekeepers of the realms who judged with fair adjudications from their unique positions of the middle. Youngest were small princesses and princes who hung off their older siblings with wide eyes and ears,

constantly and diligently watching and listening to absorb the ways of ruling the streets that would soon be theirs.

As night fell, porch lights would flicker on with the stars and we would race to the closest house, abandoning our darkened dominions until daylight. We'd pile in, the designated mother of the night somehow always having just enough food set on the table for everyone. How they always knew, I'll never know.

As we grew, the streets got smaller, thinner, and more delicate somehow. The trees we climbed started to creak under our weight and our secret forts shrank to kid-size. It happened in the blink of an eye. The family grew though, constant and reliable as always, unchanging through its change. The elders passed their crowns, graduating into high school or college or jobs or jail. The youngest took over, well trained from their years of observation and imitation. The games continued, somehow never ending in the fight for a winner. Because there were always more: new babies, new neighbors, new siblings—the new heirs to thrones of summer nights and snowball fights.

Patronage

My father is a presence. That is one thing I am absolutely certain of. A retired Army Ranger who never gave up the haircut or the aura of old-fashioned tough. Boys I brought home would breathe a sigh of relief as we finally pulled out of the driveway. “Your dad is fucking terrifying!” I would shoot a sly look and respond nonchalantly “I wonder what he taught his daughters.” Despite the jokes, it has always puzzled me. However, I suppose to the ignorant his silence seems deadly, his stoic expression appears intimidating, and the focused intensity of his light-as-ice blue gaze is chilling.