

**chapter three**

The first picture I took of Sophie after she came to stay with us shows her standing on her head in the middle of the guest bedroom (now hers), surrounded by piles of clothes dumped out of Kroger’s sacks and black garbage bags. It’s 3:27 a.m.—you can just barely make that out on the alarm clock to one side. Next to Sophie’s head sits Bartleby, the kitten, who had finally crept out from under my bed a full 48 hours after we brought him home. Dad bandaged his paw—a minor cut—after which he skulked right back into hiding. I told him that the kitten refused to come out again. “He must prefer not to,” he said. Then he got all excited, talking about how he always thought it’d be perfect to name a stubborn cat Bartleby, after his most favorite stubborn scrivener in American Lit.

I was surprised when Sophie agreed to the name immediately.

In the foreground of the picture, there’s a cowboy hat on the floor—one Sophie had ganked from her mom before she split. She spray-painted it black in our backyard one lazy afternoon, maybe the same day she started talking about moving to New York to get into fashion. And next to the hat is her prized possession: her deck of tarot cards, its old box falling apart and reinforced with duct tape. Normally she kept the deck in a little purple and silver drawstring bag. I don’t know where that bag was when I took the picture; maybe mixed up in one of the piles of clothes scattered equally between this room and mine. Sophie seemed to have so much stuff. And she

changed—the leer had left and he was pure concentration, pure sick lust, his eyes boring into me but not seeing me at all. Seeing whatever it was he wanted to see.

I had seen and done some things myself, with Josh. And I had tried to do them right. I hadn’t been a pro, even though what we both wanted to happen eventually did happen. My hand had felt too big, small, rough, soft, clumsy.

This hand looked like it had never done anything else. Like muscle-memory was in full effect.

“You sick fuck,” I whispered.

I refused to run. I just took very long strides, my legs stiff, my toes wound up tight in my sandals. Behind me I heard a car accelerate, but I didn’t look back to see if it was him until I was at the dragon, a few feet from Nick and Sophie, who broke apart and wiped their mouths. They were wondering why I’d barged in awkwardly on their make-out session, no doubt.

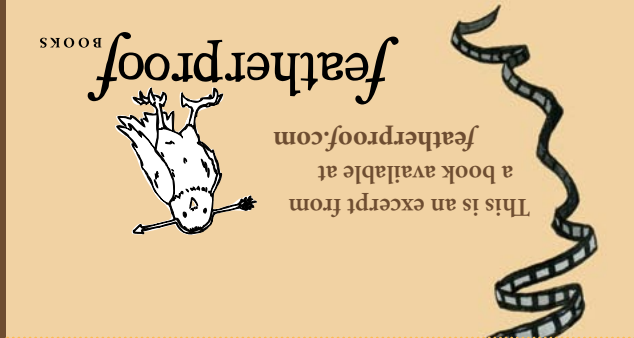
The cream Buick was gone. I wondered if he’d just turned down a side street to stop and finish what he started. I wondered if he’d come back.

“Sick fuck,” I said again. Any other words were crowded out of my brain.

“Huh?” Sophie said.

All I’d wanted was to take a stupid picture of some stupid fluttering moths. And I couldn’t help but think that if I’d been, like, making out with Byron instead, what just happened never would have.

“Nothing,” I said. “Sorry. Never mind.”



At the beginning of a lonely summer, 16-year-old Vaughn Vance meets Sophie Birch, and the two forge an instant and volatile alliance at Nashville’s neglected Dragon Park. But when Vaughn takes up photography, she trains her lens on Sophie, and their bond dissolves as quickly as it came into focus. Feltz keenly illuminates the pitfalls of coming of age as an artist, the slippery nature of identity, and the clash of class in the New South. *This Will Go Down on Your Permanent Record* is a sparkling and probing debut novel from a rising literary star.

Susannah Feltz’s stories and essays have appeared in *McSweeney’s*, *Pindeldyboz*, *The Sun*, the *Chicago Reader* and other magazines. This is her first novel.



was horrible in the bathroom, leaving toothpaste spit-blobs all over the sink.

Her face looks a little funny in the picture, as she's upside down and blood is pooling in her cheeks and behind her eyes. She claimed it was healthy. I think she just liked the dizzy rush when she sat up. "It'll give me sweeter dreams," she said. But there wasn't much chance of that. I'd finally given in and eaten trucker speed with her that night. I was right: the pills made my heart pound and my hands shake, which probably contributed to the fuzziness of the shot. Still, I liked the picture.

When I got my first pictures of Sophie developed, I didn't want to show them to her for some reason. It was almost like there was a girl I'd invented on my own, and I could pin any story on her I wanted. If I showed Sophie the pictures, that girl would be lost. The pictures would be more hers than mine. Maybe I was selfish, or maybe just chickenshit, afraid she'd laugh or say they were stupid and my delusions of grandeur, or whatever you want to call it, would crumble. I decided I'd wait until she bugged me about them—and she did, that night.

She toppled down from her headstand and said, "Did you get that roll of film back from that day we rescued Bart?"

"Yeah, I got it," I said.

"Well, come on. I wanna see!"

I took another picture, and she lunged for the camera. "No more until you show me, Vaughn."

"I'm not ready yet."

"What do you mean you're not ready? What's there not to be ready about?"

"They're not that great," I said.

"Big deal. They're just pictures."

"Not yet."

Sophie bolted out of the room and down the hall to my own, and started throwing open drawers. She threw balls of socks and my underwear at the ceiling fan, which hurled them off into corners of the room.

"OK fine!" I yelled. "Get out of my stuff!"

The photos were tucked away on the floor of my closet, in a Doc Marten's shoebox. Sophie squinched her nose up at some, smiled at some. She stared longest at the one where she was holding Bart but all you could see was her neck, chest, arms and that infected bellybutton. "This one's cool," she said.

"It's my favorite too," I said.

"Except my bellybutton's all nasty?"

"That's what I like about it."

"Really?" She stared at it some more. "You got talent." She covered up the bellybutton in the picture with her hand, then took her hand away, then covered it up again. "You could be, like, a real photographer."

As if the thought hadn't crossed my mind like a hundred times since last spring. Someday people who mattered would know my name. Les Trois could forget all about me. "Maybe someday," I said. "So don't complain anymore when I take your picture."

"When do I complain? I'm fine with being your model," she said. "Your whatchamacallit?"

"Muse," I said.

"Yeah, that. As long as you make me look hot."

"I can't promise you'll always look hot."

"Whatever, then—just take cool pictures." She took her hand away from the photo, showing the navel again. "Maybe you're right about that."

attempt to take any more pictures. I wanted to toss it out, but that seemed wasteful.

It was right then, I think, that I heard a low whistle and turned and saw this cream-colored Buick sedan, not unlike the one my Grandma Vance used to drive before they took away her keys, idling next to the sidewalk. The driver's side window was down, and when the guy in the driver's seat reached up to flick on the interior light I saw a curved slice of fat hairy belly pooching out from beneath his undershirt.

And beneath that, the undone top button of his pants. Like his fat had wedged the zipper down. I saw this.

"You're too young to be smoking," he said.

I looked straight at him. He was old, this guy, maybe 40, 50—I don't know, just old, and sweating and stubbly, like he probably stank. There were a bunch of yellowed *Tennesseeans* stacked on the seat beside him, and a spray can of Deep Woods Off, and one of those el cheap Styrofoam coolers on the floorboard: all of this was acid-etched onto my brain. I somehow saw it all and committed it instantly to memory, even the grimy seam of the fake leather armrest dividing the front seat in two.

"Why don't you put that out?"

He smiled. No, he didn't smile. He leered. And that was maybe when all the blood in my body stopped flowing.

"Why don't you take a picture of this?"

Later I'd ask myself a thousand times over: why'd you keep looking? Hadn't you seen enough? Why did you obey?

I looked.

He got his dick out. He was rubbing it furiously, and I could see the slit stretching open wide when his thumb slid over the head. And I don't know if I looked at his face again, but I could feel how it had

the Marlboro he'd just lit. The cigarette was wet where he'd had it in his mouth.

I stole a glance at Sophie and Nick. Her legs were draped across his; she couldn't get close enough. I took a picture even though I knew it was too dark and I was too far away from them for it to come out at all.

Under the streetlights these giant moths fluttered madly in the night haze. Looking at them made me itch. I took off my sandals and rubbed my feet on the cool grass. A cop cruised by, and Byron muttered "piggy," tensing up. Lately cops had been coming by more frequently, harassing anyone hanging out, and we'd heard they'd busted some people with pot. We watched the car silently until it turned and was long gone down the street. There were a few other clusters of kids around, flicking lighters and talking quietly. Every so often somebody shouted something, people laughed, someone belched.

I told Byron I was going to try to get a shot of the moths.

At the nearest streetlight there was one as big as my head, hovering and darting in the orange glow. I almost stepped in a fresh spot of hocked-up phlegm on the sidewalk. Empty bottles, potato chip bags. I thought about the time Sophie tried to pass off her piss as Gatorade. I thought about what she and Nick and Byron might say if I started picking up litter.

I took a picture of the trash instead. "The Aftermath," I thought of titling it.

From here the dragon wasn't much more than a big dark mass. Kids gathered around its humps and curls, almost invisible from the street. Sophie and Nick were two figures melted into one. One of the mutant moths flew in my face and I jumped back, flailing at it with my cigarette hand. I had to finish the cigarette before I could

Sophie's mom called once a week at first to check on her, then less often. Sometimes if I answered the phone Sophie made me pretend she wasn't there. "I ain't got nothing to say to her," she'd tell me. And she didn't care about her uncle's sixth surgery on his ankle bone, or the oozing sore on his favorite mutt's ear that her mother was shelling out a mint for in vet bills. All her mother really wanted to talk about were her problems, she said. "I have better things to do than to listen to her grippe," she said, picked at her toenail cuticles while I kept the receiver wedged under pillows. "Tell her I'm like—what was that word you said last time?—*indisposed*."

We walked up to Dragon Park almost every day. Sometimes we'd turn around and walk right back, fleeing the heat. We'd come in the house and stand in front of the open freezer door in a chilled fog. Letting all the cold out. Wasting energy. We did it anyway.

It was in the 90s for weeks, just like every Nashville summer I could remember—the sky white with a few light blue smears by day, masses of pink clouds blending together in a pearly haze in the early evenings, everything out of focus in the humidity. It was like looking through clouded glass. My upper lip beaded up with sweat the second I stepped outside and my legs grew slick against any surface. The earth got drier and drier. The grass at Dragon Park burned the color of sand.

"Less than two months till school," I said one day when we'd taken up residence on the dragon. I was sort of looking forward to school already, anxious for the photo class to start. Except school meant a return to the orbit des Trois.

"Great. I'm counting the days," Sophie muttered. "I had to go to



summer school last year," she said. "There was no air-conditioning and it was like four-hundred degrees. And this fat redneck had a crush on me. He always tried to sit near me, and he stank. I think he lived on a pig farm. For real."

"Don't look now," I said, "but someone's on his way over here."

Nick was one of the skateboarders, a regular at the dragon, and it was clearly just a matter of time before he and Sophie hooked up. At the same time Sophie claimed it was so obvious that Nick's goofy sidekick friend Byron had a crush on me. I didn't see it. Anyway, too bad for Byron. The feeling wasn't mutual, but he did make me laugh. We talked about how long it'd take Sophie and Nick to hook up.

Here they came, Nick and Byron on their boards, both carrying 22-ounce Mountain Dew bottles they spit brown juice into every few minutes. Lately they'd taken up dipping, in addition to the usual cigarettes. Sophie said she wanted to try it—the guys claimed the nicotine buzz was way stronger.

"Hey," Byron said, "where's your camera?"

I'd left it at home for once. The heat made me lazy, and besides, I was out of film.

"Aw, man, and I wore my favorite shirt." Byron pinched the fabric of his T-shirt together so that its strange silk-screened symbols became words: FUCK OFF.

Nick sat down next to Sophie. He never said anything much to me. Big loss, I thought, even if he was kind of cute in a scrungy, rat-boy way. He didn't greet Sophie, either. Just sat down next to her and showed her these serial killer trading cards he'd picked up at the Great Escape.

"Those are gross," Sophie said after flipping through them. "You ever had your tarot cards done? I'll do it for you sometime."

"No way, you'll pull some death card."

"Our bet. You know what I'm talking about. How long it'd take them to get it on."

I had my camera with me this time, and Byron was messing with it, pointing it at me and twisting the zoom lens back and forth wildly.

"We didn't make a real bet. Put that down. I only want to be behind the lens."

"Lemme take your picture."

"No way. Give me that, Byron."

"I won. Lemme take your picture."

"There was no bet!" I said, grabbing the camera from him.

"What're you taking pictures for all over the place anyway?" he said.

I shrugged. "Nothing better to do."

"You're not a narc, are you Vaughn?"

"Yeah," I said. "Your mom hired me, actually. She wanted to catch your drunk ass with her liquor once and for all." I focused on him, my finger poised on the shutter.

Byron cackled and put his face right up next to the lens.

*This'll be a great close-up of your big oily blackheads*, I wanted to say. "I just don't want to forget anything," I said instead.

"What's so important about remembering this? This is mundane. This is, like, everyday shit."

"This is the point!" I said.

"Whatever makes you happy, man," he said. He fished a cigarette out of his back pocket.

I heard myself asking if I could have one. I heard Byron asking since when did I smoke.

"Just give me one, please," I said.

"Aw. OK. But only because you said please," he said, handing me

by some old lady driver while they're crossing the street. I used to maybe that's the last time I'll see them alive...they'll get run down turned the corner I had one of my out-of-nowhere morbid thoughts: for like the zillionth time that mine looked just like hers. As they hair, and Sophie's long skinny legs in their tiny cutoffs, and I wished Sophie could keep up. I watched Nick run a hand through his shaggy I watched them walk away, the guys rolling along real slow so it."

"Shut up, Byron. And shut up, Vaughn. You know I'm good for time," I said, tossing another dollar at her.

"Oh damn, I heard that," Byron said.

"I hope your cards say something about paying me back next "Can I borrow? All I needs a dollar," she said.

handing her a five. She looked at the money.

and hey, get me a roll of film. 200 or 400 speed, 24 exposures," I said. "They're Slush Puppies, not Ices. But no. Get me a Mello Yello—" "You don't want anything? An Iced?"

"Go on," I told her, "I'll wait for you all here."

Sophie shrugged. "You wanna, Vaughn?"

"Come?"

"We're going down to the Mapco," Nick said. "You wanna "Voodoo shit?" I said.

"Shut up, Byron," Sophie said.

"Your voodoo shit."

"She probably wants a professional reading," Byron said, "not "I'm not afraid," I said. "That's not it."

"do hers"—she shoved me lightly—"but she's afraid."

"Seriously. Let me do your cards. I've been trying to get her to let me "That doesn't have to be a bad thing, dummy," she said.

have crazy thoughts like this every time Josh would leave my house. I finally told him, not because I was freaked-out for real, but just to fill space with words. I thought he might think it was funny. "You're so weird, Vaughn," he said. And then I think he squeezed my boob.

The dragon was warm and scruffy against my back. I stared up at the sky. Nothing but dull white, the sun an oily pimple on its face. I could stare and stare and it wouldn't burn up my eyes. The air stank of tar from where a road crew was filling potholes nearby. Drops of sweat formed on my face and I smeared them off with my arm, again, again. The sweat never stopped coming. I wished I could just run out.

It made me sad how hardly any little kids came to Dragon Park anymore—just all us bored teenagers, leaving cigarette butts and empty bottles to mark our territory. But nobody else was around now, and I was glad to have the place to myself. Since Sophie had come to live with us, I was never alone.

Except for when I went to the library. I invited Sophie along, but she never wanted to go. The previous afternoon I'd gone and was thumbing through a book of essays on photography that the friendly bad-teeth clerk, whose name I'd learned was Sheldon, had recommended, when someone tapped on my shoulder. I turned and was face to face, well, chest with Anders Steele, a fellow rising junior NASTy.

Id never realized he was so tall. We'd never been close enough to notice...or maybe he'd grown in the last month. I certainly didn't know much about him; he was just one of the guys filed 'freak' among Les Trois. Not quite to the point of open ridicule, just harmless, forgettable and weird. Like me, I guess, according to Josh and whomever else.

And, OK, maybe because he sometimes wore a fedora, and rode

"I'm sure he's wondering the exact same thing" walked off. "Do you think I get on his nerves?" she asked me.

down at the Mapco and started talking and ignoring her. So shed "Where's Nick?"

said.

my film, and she had cigarettes: "Lenny Vac bought 'em for me!" she back, touching a cold bottle of Mello Yello to my stomach. She had "Just as I was shipping into some weird lucid dream, Sophie was dragon. Who cared if I looked totally lewd?"

this crumpling sculpture. I let my legs fall out on either side of the I liked it. I wished I had a pear tree to lie under, but all I had was wanted to be in blossom, just like that tree she always sat under, but it had such an effect on me. Sure, it was a little cheesy, the way Janie she's starting to feel happy about being a woman. I don't know why. She's sitting under this tree, and there's all this blatant sexual imagery. over it. There was this part where the narrator, Janie, is sixteen, and reading on the couch before Sophie woke up, I got all choked up summer reading for school. Earlier that morning, when I'd been My mind drifted from Anders to a book I'd been assigned as

The whole thing made me feel weird. never would've known.

place? He could have skulked, hidden in the next row over, and I trying to be friendly. Otherwise, why come up to me in the first at me once. He seemed arrogant. Then again, it seemed like he was Afterward I couldn't stop thinking about it. He hadn't smiled the street, out of sight.

carrying to a platform above his back wheel and pedaled away, down front lawn to his bicycle. He strapped the three books he'd been Through the window I watched him walk across the library's

his bike to school. That was enough to get Anders dumped in the weird bin.

"You're the first NASTy I've ever seen here," he said.

I don't know why I was surprised to hear him use the term, but I was. Not that it sounded so wrong coming out of his mouth.

"Likewise," I said. "Everyone's gone for the summer."

"You're not?"

"Yeah, well. I'm sorry," I said. "That you're stuck here too, I mean."

"Don't be. I'm here by choice," he said.

I almost said "me too"; instead, I just nodded. He was standing a little too close for my taste, and I felt like I was craning my neck to meet his gaze. I took a step back.

"On *Photography*," he said, catching sight of the title of the book I was holding. "I've heard of that."

"Where?" I asked, and immediately wanted to kick myself. *Who cares where he heard of it, Vaughn? That's condescending.*

"My brother's a photographer," Anders said. He took the book from me and paged through it carefully, as if looking for a particular passage. "So are you, I take it."

"I've just been experimenting a little this summer."

He nodded like this was something we'd discussed on a previous occasion.

"You going to take that photography class in the fall?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Me too."

"Cool."

"You going to check it out?" he said.

"What? Oh...the book," I said. "I guess so."

"I'll get it some other time then," he said. "Well, take it easy."