

## PINCHBELLY

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Blue-cloaked in square-heeled shoes, Pinchbelly shuffling down the road, come for our Lucy.

Biannually, it occurred in those days, and our Lucy's turn came like everyone's; we had readied and she had readied. Blue-cloaked, she shuffled down the road toward Pinchbelly, and we moonfaced at our windows, willing and fearing and wanting what had come for our Lucy.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly. His hand salty and fragrant as a ham, Pinchbelly took our Lucy's dry and unscented hand, and they continued down the road, many of our moonfaces watching. We did not often visit one another; we did not often have visitors. Oh, Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

What is it, my Lucy?

Where are we going?

To the institute.

We watchers breathed relief. Pinchbelly and our Lucy, hand in hand, continued on their destined path out of town, into woods. The infamous woods where our school hunkered, where our teachers had been preparing all their careers, and where the most prized of Pinchbelly's protégés began. Where every punishment is born unto a girl.

Our Lucy!

Most of us couldn't see her any more, and took to the telephones. Never so much anticipation since Lucy's grandmother, many years past, and we remarked on our

Lucy's mature reservation, the frank way she wore her cloak and greeted Pinchbelly, the dry and unfearing way she had pecked at her mother's face for goodbye.

Our Lucy, said a voice on the party line, could be the next Pinchbelly. But the rest of us, remembering, hushed this voice.

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Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

Two PM. In the principal's office, deep in the school in the woods, our Lucy presented herself.

Whether or not these are unprecedented times, she said, I am committed to them—and to you—with absolution and devotion. We must move through these times as if through continuous rupture. Otherwise, why face the end of each day?

Our Lucy's chin strove forward, and the way she looked and the things she said were wedded, and we in our variegated homes knew our Lucy like swelling.

We had never felt so much our generations.

At the end of her voice, the punishments resumed, ringing through the airwaves directly, toward us.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

In the principal's office, deep in the school in the woods, our Lucy looked upon pupils. Recess had commenced, and one girl—square and blockish, solicitous of punishments—was called off the games. To serve as understudy.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

Every punishment began as a girl.

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We were always expecting Pinchbelly, and yet when it came we found difficulty containing ourselves. Most of us crept inelegantly toward it, wondering, daring—would Pinchbelly take us?

Buttoned and cloaked, Pinchbelly took madly. And with hands like our Lucy's grandmother's, Pinchbelly rubbed knots from our shoulders. There were so many, and cherry nails assuaged or maximized, kneading and cooing.

Punishments, punishments.



You may be uncertain at times, but not now. Pinchbelly had taken our Lucy, and now the first to be punished stood before her. Inside our many homes, we felt this. The girl like a block was Carla, dressed in scarlet. Carla, younger than our Lucy by only several months, neither winced nor flinched—she began the reception of punishments with as much éclat as our Lucy had begun doling them. And Pinchbelly! Pinchbelly came on the radio saying it was the grandest kick-off to the festivities he could ever recall. We in our homes stirred pots of warm food, and we felt certain.

Five PM, darker, darker. Sinews of winter outside stretching, branches snapping, girls one by one for punishment. Our Lucy like a toad in water, present in punishing.

The punished began to look like Pinchbelly, and several—dressed by their mothers in honor of the ceremony—wore Pinchbelly blue. There was nothing save our Lucy to moderate. Nothing save our Lucy between us and the corpses of the fully punished.



Eight PM, darker, darker. Resting hands on full bellies, grinning toothily at one another, we waited. We waited for darker darkness and for a pronouncement of the end of festivities.

Our Lucy, our Lucy—would she return?

In one hovel, her mother kept frying toast, hoping.

Thinly, we formed kisses with our lips. Those of us who had endured punishments recalled, and those of us who had not recoiled. The punishments, endured or recounted, reminded us to mourn one other.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.



Eleven PM, dark, dark. Quiet.

Radio's faintest static.

Our Lucy, more than a new Pinchbelly. It was a long time coming, dismantling. A testament to our Lucy, and to her Carla. In our homes, we came to understand the change, without a pronouncement, without sleep.

Quiet, now. Lucy's mother, no longer frying now.

Now. Lucy, our Lucy! No one to see you but Carla dressed in scarlet. This is how we bear our history. We begin.

Our Lucy and Carla dressed in scarlet, they have ascended.

The new is more gradual punishment, and any moment may contain it. And any of our girls as we watch out our windows may receive it.

Any girl at any moment.

Lucy, no longer ours, punishes like this.