

Have you ever?

Lucy Hamilton

“Have you ever – told a lie?” Samantha’s voice plugged the circle. The question was for everyone, but she fixed her eyes on Leah.

Samantha’s question was laced with menace, intended to provoke them. No one had lied in decades, at least not anyone they knew of. Even the sound of the word felt dangerous, the sharpness of the vowel, and the lick of the L seemed to linger between them.

The three girls sat in a circle on the carpet. A few bottles were scattered, and a card game, half-finished.

Katie was the first to break the silence: “Where did that come from?”

Samantha grinned, “Well, have you?” – like she already knew the answer.

Katie shook her head and turned back towards Leah.

Leah said nothing. She kept her eyes on the carpet, waiting for the others to move on, knowing Samantha wouldn’t let them.

Samantha’s tight, crescent lips sucked on the rim of her bottle; she was smiling still, enjoying the tension she’d created. Slowly, she tipped the beer, took a mouthful and swallowed, enjoying the chink of her teeth on the glass and the fizz as the foam resettled.

Leah went on staring at the ground.

“Simple question,” said Samantha.

“Then why ask it?” said Katie. “No one has. It’s illegal.”

Her eyes flicked towards the shutters, to the pulsing glow of the camera, reminding her to be careful, reminding them all of the danger. Its blinking light was dulled by the polythene cover that Samantha had stolen and fixed over the lens, but they knew better than to trust it.

“Whose turn is it?” asked Katie.

“Mine still. You haven’t both answered.”

“We have though.”

“*She* hasn’t.” Samantha nodded at Leah.

Katie glanced towards the camera again. What Samantha was doing, it wasn’t funny.

“She has answered,” said Katie. “She didn’t drink. That’s her answer.”

Samantha thought for a second, then shrugged, disappointed. The light on the camera was pulsing, which meant for now their game was private. It was Katie’s turn. She took a card and showed them the Queen of Diamonds, then she leaned to change the music, while she worked out a question.

“Actually...” Leah’s voice was tiny, barely above a whisper. She took a breath and raised her bottle. The girls watched her swallow. The beer fizz made her eyes sting. She hadn’t said it, but she didn’t have to. That was how the game worked. Samantha stared at her, disbelieving.

Leah looked down at her drink. She’d wanted to tell them for a while now. Though they wouldn’t dare to ask what she’d lied about, even Samantha wasn’t that stupid.

“The round was over,” said Katie, quickly. “I was about to ask my question. Drinking now doesn’t count. Just shake your head if you didn’t mean it.”

Samantha frowned and turned to Leah. “Did you...?”

“She didn’t.”

But Leah nodded. She’d meant it. She sipped her drink again to confirm it. For a fraction of a second, her eyes scanned towards the shutters. Katie looked away; it was safer not to witness.

But Samantha couldn’t help it: “When?” she asked.

“I was little.”

“How little? You mean pre-threshold?”

“No,” said Leah, “Older. I knew what I was doing.”

“Are you mental?” asked Katie.

Leah shrugged. “I had to.”

She’d already said more than she’d intended.

“And was it... difficult?” asked Samantha. “I’ve always wondered what it feels like...”

“Stop,” said Katie.

“Relax. We could be talking about anything.”

Leah thought about her answer: “Was it difficult? Yes, I think so.”

“Lea, why didn’t you tell us...”

“What do you mean by difficult?” said Samantha.

They looked together towards the corner. The tiny light was still blinking, but for one terrifying second, it seemed to hover on constant.

“Don’t look,” said Katie. “Don’t make it obvious.”

Samantha shrugged and turned back to Leah. “And what do you mean by you *had to*?”

“I can’t...” said Leah.

“You can, though.”

Samantha moved a hand towards Leah’s knee, as though considering some form of contact, then she changed her mind, seized a bottle cap, and began to move it between her fingers. This wasn’t going the way she’d planned; the question was only supposed to shock them, supposed to show that she’d dare to go there, that she was brave enough to test it. She held the bottle cap in her palm and circled the inside with her thumbnail, scratching the soft plastic, wishing she’d never asked them.

She snapped, “Fine, don’t tell us.” It was more of a command than a prediction.

But it was Katie who leaned closer. “Unless...” she said. “Unless you want to?”

Leah paused. If she didn’t share it now, she’d have to carry it forever. She looked from Katie to Samantha then back to Katie. They were waiting.

“It was something that I saw...” Leah started slowly, “that for a while I thought I hadn’t seen. Or I just didn’t understand it. And so, for a long time it wasn’t a *lie* –” she mouthed, “it was just a memory with blurry edges. But then as time went on, I realised. It sort of focused, and then I knew it. But I’d always known, though, that’s the difference. I just hadn’t let myself believe it. And I think if no one had ever asked me. I could have kept it secret. But then they did ask, so I had to – do it. They didn’t leave me with any option.”

“Who asked?” Samantha whispered.

Leah nodded at the camera.

“Them,” she said, “– about my brother. And I told them it was an accident.”