

Under the Stars

Every afternoon, after studying for hours in the college library, I step off the city bus and my dog sprints the fifty yards from my house to the bus stop. I kneel and offer my chest for him to slam into with affection, which always involves enthusiastic, joy-filled kisses that become tongue-in-my-mouth ravishments if I forget to raise my head up to the sky when I laugh. When he's around, I can never laugh with my mouth closed. When he's around, I laugh a lot.

But today, Rex lingers in front of my house and takes slow, absent-minded steps in my direction, his loyalty torn by something across the highway—Little Tyler Calhoun, standing in front of his fence, across from my house, wearing his big brother's letterman jacket even though his ten year old body drowns in it. He's holding something in his hand and staring at my dog. My palms tingle and ache at the same time, and I remember having that weird feeling in them once before long ago. I know that means something is not right. My dog doesn't like Tyler.

Tyler makes eye contact with me. His head starts to turn, but his eyes stay on me. He moves his head so gradually that it feels like I'm watching him in slow motion. When his head stops, he shifts his eyes, up the highway.

The bus has driven far enough down the road for the noise of its engines to be overtaken by the roar of an eighteen wheeler traveling in the opposite direction, coming for me, Rex and Tyler. I realize what's in his hand. It's the purple bunny Rex never takes out of his dog house.

The lopsided smile that climbs up Little Tyler's cheek makes the hairs on the back of my neck bristle. As the truck flies past me, he raises the toy in the air and flings it into the highway. Rex darts into the road.

"Rex! No!" I drop my backpack and run.

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My first memory of Tyler's older brother, Capers, was playing Yankees versus Confederates when we were too young for preschool. In summer we played with water balloons; in winter we used sling shots and rocks no bigger than peas. Growing up on our little island in South Carolina, the Yankees weren't the good guys and the war wasn't referred to as the Civil War—it was the War of Northern Aggression.

We wore scratchy blue and grey t-shirts from the Salvation Army (sometimes they'd have funny old-timey logos like "Keep on Truckin!") until we started middle school, when Capers' mother graduated us to formal blue and grey button-downs. The grey shirt went to the winner, which meant they got to wear it in the next battle. I may as well have nicknamed that grey sucker Moby Dick. I was luckier than Ahab, though, since I speared that shirt two times and lived to tell about it. The grey would be handed over as soon as the battle ended, and both times I won it at the end of the day, allowing me to keep it overnight. In front of my full-length mirror I

buttoned that grey shirt and felt light-headed from its majesty. I entered a state of euphoria, dry-drunk from the strength I imagined the shirt could bestow upon me. I wore the shirt to bed; on those nights I didn't have any nightmares.

In our freshman year of high school, we played our last game. The forest floor was covered in friable, autumnal leaves and it was impossible to get close without crushing a million of them and alerting the enemy. There was a small fawn in the woods, and when I was finally positioned to attack Capers, something spooked the deer, and it passed within ten feet of him—a perfect distraction. When my kill shot left my sling, my foot slipped on a patch of wet leaves, causing my rock to graze Capers' arm. Startled, he turned and released his own rock, smashing me square in the forehead.

“Jesus Christ, Katie. Are you all right?” His hands cradled my face as he stared at the damage. “There's so much blood.”

“I'm fine. Honest. It probably looks worse than it is.”

Capers pulled off his confederate shirt, then his undershirt, and slammed it on my wound.

“Ouch! Are you serious?”

“We've got to put pressure on it. Can you walk?”

“Not without my eyes. And you're hurting me.”

“Here.” He took the shirt away, wadded it up into a colossal ball, and placed it on my face as if he were kissing me with it. “How's that?”

“Better.”

We went to his house because it was empty; mine had my grandmother in it, and if she'd seen me in that state she would've given him serious hell. Capers' Mom was a nurse, so he did

all the right things: washed the blood off, made me hold wrapped ice to my forehead, and applied some sticky strips to keep the gash closed. When he was done, he grabbed a hand mirror.

“It looks great. Bet I won’t even get a scar.”

“I feel terrible.”

“It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you.”

“Yeah, well.” He stared at the floor, his back hunched. His dejected posture was painful for me to see, maybe because he always wore his confidence in his shoulders—straight and back.

“Don’t worry. I’m totally fine. Look.” I forced a smile into my eyes (since fake smiles never reach the eyes and I didn’t want him to know I was lying). I blinked and his lips were hard on mine. I tried to push him away, but he wouldn’t budge. I stood up and broke the seal.

“Katie, I’m sorry.” His hands reached towards me.

My mind screamed that he was about to kiss me again. I backed away from him. “That’s okay. Just don’t do it again.”

“I won’t.” He looked at the floor and I realized he’d left the grey shirt lying in the woods. His chest and arms were bare, but muscular. I couldn’t remember him looking like this when we’d been swimming in the river a few months before. Now, he had the torso of a man.

We kept our distance until the following summer, when Capers and his friends roped me into a touch football game with the promise of pulled pork sandwiches at half time.

On what ended up being the last play, I turned my head to receive the ball when someone tackled me.

“Goddammit!” I opened my eyes to see Capers’ face blocking the sky.

“Are you okay?” He was out-of-breath, and not moving off of me. He was so close, his eyes the color of the sky after a rain, his smell an odd combination of sweat and cinnamon gum.

I kissed him, hard and quick. When I dropped my head back to the ground, his mouth hung open and his brow was furrowed. He smiled, caressed the sides of my face and touched his lips to mine.

The rest of that summer we snuck out most every night and met at the river. We borrowed the dilapidated rowboat that our drunken neighbor used for fishing on Sundays. We left the oars in the boat, not caring where we drifted, lying on our backs, staring at the sky. My favorite nights were the moonless ones. Though harder to maneuver the beaten-down path to the dock, the star-filled sky was more spectacular without the moon outshining its neighbors.

Two days before high school graduation, we were lying in the boat, each of us on a different plank, gazing at the stars, holding hands. Our arms resembled a hammock swinging in the breeze.

“Is your Mom coming up?” he asked.

“She threatened to, but I hope not. I don’t want to see Jim.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never met him. What’s so great about selling time shares in Florida anyway? Don’t they sell those here in Charleston?” He squeezed my hand.

“Yeah, they do. I think it might be me she doesn’t want him to be around.”

“Why? Because you’re so damn beautiful?”

“Yeah, right. Where’s Cassiopeia?”

“You know where it is, you just like saying Cassiopeia.”

“I wish my name was Cassiopeia. It’s such a beautiful name. Exotic.”

“I prefer Katie. Katie’s a beautiful name.” He tugged my hand, his cue for wanting me to come to him and let him kiss me.

“Tell me again about your body shop.”

He stopped pulling my hand. “After graduation, I’ll work for Max full-time at the shop. I’ll save every cent for the down payment for Big John’s building on Riverside. On my days off, he’s going to let me work over there to bring it up to code, so there’s nothing to stop me from buying it.”

“And when will you buy it?”

“Three years. Four if you’ll marry me.”

I inhaled too fast and choked on my saliva. I sat up. He was instantly next to me. He pounded my back, trying to whack me into normalcy. “Are you all right?”

I coughed for thirty seconds before answering him. “I’m okay. Just inhaled some saliva.” I moved to the opposite plank, the one he’d been using before, and lied down.

“It wasn’t what I said, was it?”

“No. Of course not.”

“So when do you think would be a good time to ask you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Help me out here, Katie.” I couldn’t detect any of the joy that had been in his face when he’d been dreaming about the body shop.

“I don’t know. I don’t. I don’t know when I’ll be ready.”

He nodded, snatched up the oars, rowed us back to the dock, tied up the boat, and walked away.

I jogged to catch up to him. “Capers.” He turned, grabbed and kissed me. His hands in my hair, his tongue full in my mouth. His passion was contagious, and a heat started inside of me. He slid his hand under the waistband of my shorts, and groped between my legs. His fingers made me feel dirty, and my stepfather’s too-close eyes flashed in my mind.

“Stop.” I twisted out of his grasp.

Capers’ eyes seemed shiny, but he didn’t cry. He lowered his head, coughed, and stood motionless for a minute. He sighed, pulled a tiny purple box out of his pocket, got down on one knee, stared into my eyes, and opened the box. It was a diamond ring. “Katie, will you marry me?” He spoke these words with no more than a hint of hope.

Bile shot up my throat. His expression changed from hope, to devastation, but ended on anger. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He snapped the box closed and walked away.

He didn’t come to our graduation. He didn’t come to any parties. Instead of coming to church on Sunday, he was on a bus, heading to basic training in North Carolina. His final destination would be Afghanistan. By the time I asked his mother where he’d gone, it was too late.

For a month, I went to bed angry. The next two months, I cried myself to sleep. I wrote letters. He never replied. His mother stopped returning my hello waves. One time, Little Tyler was with her when I waved for what had to be the hundredth time. He returned my wave, until she slapped his hand down and half-dragged him into the house. I didn’t bother trying again.

One night, as I laid my head down on my pillow, and the usual thoughts of what I’d done began their routine trek around my brain, I decided that I wasn’t going to cry any more. And I didn’t. I didn’t cry when I got an average grade on my first college paper that I’d spent hours writing. I didn’t cry when I watched “Steel Magnolias,” my favorite tearjerker. I didn’t cry when I saw Tyler running away from my house after vandalizing it with rotten eggs. An invisible knife had removed my heart, and it caused my stagnant blood to harden until I no longer had to try to not feel anymore. I simply didn’t.

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Capers' helicopter was shot down in the mountains of Afghanistan. He was officially categorized as missing in action. I obsessed over three possibilities: he was wounded and being cared for by friendly Afghans; he was being held and tortured by not-so-friendly Afghans; or, he was dead. The first time I was alone after hearing about his helicopter, I couldn't cry. I imagined him being beaten and tortured by dark, bearded men who said they would stop if I could cry just one tear for Capers. But I couldn't.

###

Rex had lived a carefree, outdoor life, scrounging for his food, taking care of himself, before landing in the dog pound and getting put up for adoption to any Tom, Dick or Harry with twenty-five dollars. After the family who rented the house next door to me adopted him, it was obvious to anyone who wasn't stone deaf that he didn't know proper indoor dog etiquette. All hours of the day and night that mom would scream: "Goddammit Rex! You do that outside. Outside! Get outside right now!" I pictured her cleaning up poop and pee and finding their raw chicken pulled from the kitchen counter, half-eaten. "For Christ sake, Rex, stop sitting there like a dog!" Not only was that dog not long for indoor living, he risked being not long for breathing in front of that woman. The father and the two school-age kids built Rex the worst excuse for a dog house, nailed his name to a board above the jagged, cut out door, and he never went inside that house again.

One day, my neighbors disappeared. I didn't know Rex had been left behind until he followed me on my walk from the bus stop to my house a week later. He jumped on my leg, but I shooed him away. He reeked of the island dump, where he probably scavenged for food.

On my last day of my first semester of college, I couldn't help but feel happy because I knew I'd aced all of my final exams. After I stepped off the bus, I spotted Rex behind the short

chain link fence in his yard. “Rex, here.” I tossed my partially-eaten apple in his direction. With a few steps head start, Rex bounded over the fence and was on my leftover apple in seconds. He held it in his mouth, his head tilted towards me and the sky, marching like a proud soldier in a parade on V-E Day. He escorted me all the way to my front door, still holding the apple, still happily prancing. As soon as I shut my door, he ran away.

That weekend I had to go to the mall, and the pet store was next to my favorite shoe shop. It was easy to lure Rex into my yard with a fetch ball; the wash basin was another story. I tried bribing him with pieces of dog food, but they weren’t scrumptious enough to tempt him into the ominous bath basin. I took some of my grandmother’s leftover flank steak, cut it into pieces, stuck my steak-smelling fingers on Rex’s nose so he knew what his reward was for acquiescing, and held one piece over the water. He jumped in, snatched the steak, and tried to jump back out. He didn’t weigh much, and he was still wearing a collar, so I latched on to that and bathed him one-handed.

When I started toweling him off, a boy behind me said, “Why bother? That dog eats at the dump. I’ve seen him.”

It was Little Tyler Calhoun, holding a basketball. “Hi, Tyler. How are you?”

He squinted his eyes and wrinkled up his nose, reminding me of Capers the day I accidentally startled a skunk. He jerked up the side of his mouth. “Whatever.” He walked away, bouncing his basketball.

While Rex played with his new ball, I went to his dog house and swapped his filthy quilt with one I’d bought at Goodwill. I stared at his poor excuse for a home, trying to figure out how to make it more habitable. Obviously when they’d built the house, the father had allowed his kids to nail the shingles wherever they wanted. But I couldn’t let a clean Rex sleep on a new-to-him

quilt inside a leaky house. I cut open a lawn bag, covered the roof with it, and duct-taped it to the sides of the house, creating a waterproof dog shanty.

We fell into a routine. He would wait outside my front porch door for his breakfast. After, he'd walk and stand with me at the bus stop. In the afternoon, he'd sit outside my house, and when I stepped off the bus, he'd run full sprint to me, smash into my chest, and cover my nose and mouth with kisses. I never could figure out why he waited in front of my house. Maybe he enjoyed the anticipation. If I were him, I would've waited at the bus stop.

I started studying on the front porch so Rex could hang out with me. We'd snuggle in the old quilt kept out there, Rex curling himself behind my bent legs, sighing when he achieved his perfect nestle spot. At bedtime, he'd retire to my backyard, into the dog house I'd spent a whole weekend building and painting for him, and cuddle up with the purple bunny I'd given him, the one that never left his little house.

A few weeks later, I went with a friend to see some stupid romantic comedy and I cried.

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Yesterday morning, when my grandmother and I were leaving for church, we saw two soldiers decked out in their fancy dress gear, ringing Tyler's mother's doorbell. It was a ten minute drive to church, but neither one of us said what we both knew.

That day's sermon focused on living in the moment, but all I could think about as I wiped tears away was how I would never again see the blue of Capers' eyes, or taste the cinnamon on his lips.

###

I stop sprinting when the tractor trailer zooms past. I can't look at the road, so I cover my eyes with my hands, but I can't stop imagining Rex's body smeared on the pavement. My life will be

over if I have to see his destroyed body. Tyler's life will be over. I remember the new spiked collar I bought Rex as a joke last week, so he'd look tough. Is that all I'll have left of him? Am I going to have to wash his blood and pieces of him off of it?

I crumple to the ground. There's a pain in my chest and I know it's my heart ripping. Tears burst out of me. I sob harder when I remember the feeling of Rex smashing into me at the bus stop, his kisses, his soft fur. No one but Rex has ever loved me unconditionally. No one else. Not ever.

Two things hit me at once: why didn't Rex yelp? Why didn't the truck driver hit his brakes?

After I force myself to stand, I look down the highway. With all the tears in my eyes, there are multiple blurry roads. I squint until many become one. I scream.

I look in both directions before I sprint across the road. I stare at Rex who is alive, his purple bunny in his mouth, his wonky tail and entire back end vibrating with an excited wag.

"Rex!" I pick him up. Rock him. Squeeze him until he makes that weird sighing sound that makes me think he loves me.

Tyler stands dumfounded, his mouth slack-jawed.

"Tyler?" He doesn't blink, so I say his name again.

"What?"

"If you ever come near my dog again, you will regret it for the rest of your life. Do you understand?"

He stares at me with a blank expression. He closes his mouth.

"Do you understand?"

His head goes up and down just enough for me to know he's nodding.

“Get out of my sight. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

He kicks up dirt as he shuffles away.

I cannot stop kissing my dog. I kiss him as I check the highway for cars before crossing, as I jog to our porch, as I wrap our quilt around us.

I don’t know if Rex understands, but he allows me to hold him for hours. I don’t let him retreat to his dog house. I make him cuddle with me all night, under the quilt on our porch, under the stars that shine on us.