How You Won't Go Back

The first time you leave home—say you're eighteen and go to college no more than a day's drive from anyone you've ever known—you believe everything will be the same when you return. Your father will still work at the local plant, hunt deer every November, play poker Wednesday nights in the back of the union hall, wash both his truck and your mother's car every Saturday the weather allows. Your mother will set the table just the way she always has: you, the older brother, on your father's left; your left-handed brother to your father's right—their elbows in constant conflict. Your mother's baked beans will always have three strips of bacon fanning out across the top of their caramelized surface. There will always be a homemade dessert on the countertop. Dinner rules will never change. No arguing or under-table kicking. No belching or farting. Be on time or call to say you won't—and have a good reason. Always ask to be excused. Carry your plate to the kitchen.

The first trip home—say it was supposed to be Christmas break but you were homesick and used a month's spending money to get a bus ticket for Thanksgiving—proves you're right. Your room is as you left it. You can still lie at the foot of your bed and watch the moon travel across the sky. Your sheets smell like your mother's homemade lavender sachet—not like the ones on your dorm bed you wash every other week—at best—while you read unassigned novels in the Laundromat. Your clock radio is still set for 8:30. Your dog snuggles at your feet the way he has since you were twelve. If you're not up by 10:00, someone will throw open your door, call you something worse than a sleepy head, and the smell of sausage frying and real-brewed coffee will get you up like nothing else can.

A few days later you are throwing clothes in your bag while wiping tears from your cheeks and vowing to come back here to live in something less than four years. No matter what. Maybe with summer school, even sooner. You catch the last bus back to school on Sunday evening, lingering with your dad on the loading platform until there's no choice, not caring whether you get a seat to yourself. You depart the bus some hours later with not only a stiff neck, but with hands and feet so cold you wonder if they'll ever be warm again.

Two weeks later your dad surprises you by sending a round-trip plane ticket for holiday break. The return ticket is for late January. Your insides surprise you. They're unsettled. You had been considering a ski trip you've been invited on by a dorm buddy. His family has a condo north of Saratoga Springs. They go there every New Year's and stay at least a month. Your dad's note says he can hardly wait to watch bowl games with you. The Rose Parade. Like old times. You tell your buddy you're sorry. Maybe next time. You fail to mention you've only downhilled once before. For a weekend. A senior trip. Maybe his is a world you really don't know and aren't sure you can handle. Besides, you've not gotten around to discussing the cost. All of a sudden, you feel tremendous relief.

By finals' week you are caught up in the excitement of the holidays. Before leaving you buy gifts with your school's insignia for your mother, dad, brother and even Aunt Sherene. Have them wrapped at the campus bookstore. Arrange them in a shopping bag you'll carry on the plane. Imagine your entrance into the airport: your parents and brother waiting at the gate—smiling—tears in your mother's eyes. Your dad will hug you the way he did before you boarded the bus. Your brother will talk a mile a minute about the high school's basketball tournament. He'll have bought you tickets as a Christmas present. You'll call high school friends and it'll be like old times: afternoon

pool at Joe's bar; cards and beer late into the night at whatever kitchen will have you; a holiday dance in the school gym (dates optional). And, most of this will happen just as your imagine it. So much for Thomas Wolfe's predictions, thank you very much English Lit 103.

But by mid-January your mother wants to know what's bothering you. She notes you seem unusually cranky—"edgy" is the word she uses. Says you sleep too much. Why don't you make a date with that girl who used to call you last year? You make yourself smile as you tell her everything is fine. Give her a big hug to prove to both of you that you're right. You watch slalom races until your dad comes home. He gets himself a beer; brings you a soda without asking; settles into the chair you were sitting in until a few minutes before; searches for an NBA offering without saying a word. You start to object to what feels like an outright disregard for your feelings, but think better of it. Instead, you start counting the days 'til it's time to go back to school, sometimes use it as part of an exercise to put you to sleep. You count backwards: 17, 15, 14, 12, 9…. Wonder if your ticket can be changed without incurring a fine. Without hurt feelings at home. Decide to check it out.

You call an old girlfriend—say the one your mother mentioned. She's home from school as well. From one of the Seven Sisters. You can't remember which one and you've not thought about her in months. The girlfriend you *don't* call broke your heart and married your best friend. You and the once-best friend haven't spoken since June.

You and "Seven Sisters" plan a date. You arrive at her parents' door 7:00 sharp, as agreed. She's ready at 7:20. Previews started at 7:15. You pay her way. She expects it. Spend more money on popcorn and soda than the movie costs. She fails to acknowledge this rather significant fact. Or thank you. The two of you sit in your dad's truck out in front of her house until the pauses in conversation are longer than the

conversation, itself. She's wearing a gold locket on a heavy chain. When she thinks you're not looking, she fingers it and smiles to herself. You don't ask. You'll not call her again, even though you say you will.

Three days before you leave, the weather—which has been one long and dull shower of rain and snow all mixed together—finally breaks. One-on-one with your brother, then some guys from the down the street, does your tensed-up shoulders a load of good—not to mention your ego: the guys are three years younger and you run them in the ground. You mother smiles relief when you return home soaking wet and smelling of sweat. You finish filling out the application for summer work with the local Parks & Rec that's been lying on your desk since before you came home. Yes, the old hometown is looking pretty good again.

But, on the day to leave, you're up at 5:30 a.m. for an 11 o'clock flight. The sky is pitch dark. No moon to brighten it. You're packed by 7:00. Read the newspaper through twice. Your mother bakes ginger snaps for you to take with you. There was a time when they were your favorite, but these days you'd much rather have plain old chocolate chip. You decide to keep that tidbit to yourself. You insist on going to the airport a full two hours before the flight. It is a fifteen-minute drive. (9/11 is far into the future.) Your parents stay until the assigned seat number is called. You jump up immediately, relieved that your seat is one of the first to be called.

By spring of your junior year, you know what you want to be: a marine biologist or, maybe, an oceanographer or, perhaps, you'll join the merchant marines or Green Peace. The application for the GREs is taken care of and the date of the exam is circled in red on your wall calendar. You've spent months gathering college catalogues all along the west coast. Mail is sent directly to your parents' address while you work all summer on a

fishing boat off the coast of Maine. Twice a month, your mother puts all the catalogues in an envelope and mails them to general delivery, care of whatever village you're near—say Calais or Machias or maybe Boothbay Harbor. She complains you're choosing a life that's too complicated, but you know she's relieved to have a reason to keep track of your whereabouts. In the little spare time there is, you reread Jacques Cousteau's biography, imagine yourself a member of his research team. Check to see if his programs are still active—even in his absence.

When finally you have the opportunity to spend a couple weeks at home, your dad complains he never sees you. Your mother's smile dims a little more each day. By now, you know her tears can be counted on hours before each leaving. You say you're sorry it's not possible to stay longer. Promise next visit will be different. Then stay out until 4:00a.m. the last two nights at home. Sleep in 'til noon.

Before returning home for Thanksgiving break, you purchase a roundtrip plane ticket for Miami, where your soon-to-be-alma mater is playing in the Orange Bowl. The two game tickets that took eight hours of standing in line to get your hands on are now in safekeeping with a pretty premed major from Baltimore who has added both Stanford and UCLA to her shortlist in lieu of Johns Hopkins. You've added San Diego and San Louis Obispo to yours. Guilt sets in. These were the very tickets that years ago you'd hope to buy for your dad if, ever, State made it big.

Miss Someday-to-be-a-Doctor celebrates the high season—whatever that is—in Fort Lauderdale at her retired grandparents' winter home every year. No exceptions. Her family has sent word at least a half-dozen times since October that everyone can hardly wait to meet you and would have you stay nowhere else but with them for as long as you're in Florida. Of course, you and their future "doctordaughter" can have the

guesthouse to yourselves. It goes without saying, though they're saying it repeatedly. You figure a minimum of five days with your parents is necessary to avoid hard feelings. Imagine how proud your dad will be when he invites his union buddies to gather 'round his TV during the big game in hopes of getting a glimpse of you in the crowd. As you go over how you'll tell him that you are cutting the customary holiday visit short, you are in your apartment bedroom and looking into the small wooden-framed mirror over the dresser. All you can mange is a weak, self-pacifying smile. You hope he doesn't ask what the pretty premed's last name is or what her father does for a living—as he doesn't (the family made its fortune in WW II sugar—probably black market), or whether he belongs to the Knights of Columbus like every man in both your mother's and father's families do. (On further consideration, perhaps it'd be better not to mention the premed student.)

GRE scores arrive the same day finals end. You rush to your apartment—having moved from the dorm long ago—to have privacy while opening the half-glued, half-perforated edges of the envelope. Before one side is torn away, you decide it's better to wait until you're on the plane going home for the holidays. On the plane you decide to wait to open the envelope at dinner so your parents can share what is fully expected to be the key milestone that propels your future into motion. After all, it's the future all of them have wanted for you. Right? Right!

The scene at the airport is like all the ones before. Your dad stands at the window near the gate with your mother behind and slightly to his left. She waves the moment she see you and he nods ever so slightly before throwing his arms around you and delivering the strongest bear hug he's capable of. Your brother, who still lives at home and attends the local community college while working swing shift at the plant, is waiting at the baggage entrance with the family's car running. He talks you through the entire drive home as

though you're new to your own hometown. Points out the pool hall. Gives directions to the new running track behind the community college. Says he's made plans for you—just as he always has—and it's at the moment he mentions the area high school basketball tournament that you realize you should have prepared these dear persons—the ones you've loved more than anyone else in the world until a few short weeks ago—for the changes you've made for their and your holidays. Instead, you smile meekly and make noncommittal grunts under your breath and figure you'll think clearer once past a good long nap in your old room. You spend the afternoon nursing a headache with aspirin, ice and a pillow over your head.

At dinner—say it's one of those cornbread, beans and kale offerings that are never served to company—you are surprised to see five plates set. Your mother motions you toward the usual seat as your brother ushers in a small, brown-haired girl who looks to be no more than seventeen and who bears some resemblance to a pigtailed and freckled kid who used to hang around the neighborhood. Her name escapes you. You note she knows where to sit without being directed. Then, you notice her stomach is disproportionately large for the rest of her body. Your father uncharacteristically cups his hand for prayer as he lowers himself into his chair. You flinch in surprise and glance toward your mother, who has lowered her head while tears stream down her cheeks. Yet again. You tell yourself you're starting to reimprint the image of her as though she sits on the others side of a rain-soaked windowpane. Immediately your stomach aches; you feel your sphincter valves involuntarily tighten. Cynicism, you've heard, eventually settles in one's bowels.

"Oh, dear Lord in heaven," your father begins, "thank you for giving our parish Father Patrick, who has so dutifully carried out your wishes by blessing the marriage of our son Daniel and his lovely bride-to-be Jeannene, the wedding mass to be held

December 29, this year of our Lord, the first Saturday…. Bless… our firstborn …who will carry out his duties as his brother's…."

You do the math. Count the number of days from Christmas to the first Saturday. One day before the Orange Bowl. Four days shaved from Florida sun. From a guest house for two. From the beginning of *your* future. They could have warned you! And then you become aware of your brother's eyes staring at you. Of his reddened face searching for some sign of *your* recognition. Of your mother's disappearance from the table. At that moment Jeannene is only a blur, an amorphous mass whose shape will sharpen and change the configuration of this family. *Your* family. Forever. You try your hardest to give your brother what you believes he wants. What you would need were you in his place. Yet, your voice is hollow with congratulations. Your handshake a poor substitute for an embrace.

In your room you peel back the thin address sheet that conceals the GRE scores that determine your future that now feels to belong only to you. They're high. High enough—say—to get serious attention from a Berkeley or a Stanford or even a MIT, if that's what one wanted. You feel as if you have crossed a line. Perhaps it is a line only you can discern, that is only perceptible to those who *do* cross over it, who are *not* left behind. And the persons around the table? Have you left them? Are you irretrievably gone from the lives they live here? Are they even remotely aware?

As you dial Area Code 954, you wonder whether you're allowed to make long distance calls from home without asking permission. The question has never come up in the almost-four years you've been away. You decide not to ask. The woman who answers the phone has a voice that could just as easily be from Boston as it is from a southern beach. This fact—your impression—is oddly comforting. She recognizes your voice without your identifying yourself. Tells you they are ever so anxious for you to join their

festivities. That they want you present for the maiden voyage of their new boat. That there's still time to plan an announcement party. At least an informal one. Could your parents come down as well? You tell her you'll ask them. You know you won't.

You pour out your guts to the pretty pre-med student soon-to-be-fiancée whose existence you plan not to reveal to anyone who'll attend your brother's wedding. You tell her now is not the time. That it wouldn't be fair to your brother. That you must stay for the wedding. And, of course, she says she understands, but in her next uttering she offers to leave the sun, to come to the gray skies of the Northeast, to stand for your brother and his bride, to use her presence as a way to introduce herself as a concerned member of the family. You feel your shoulders tighten and you voice strain to maintain its current tone. Tell her you hear your mother calling. You'll call her right back. These words constitute the first lie you've knowingly told her.

And there you are. Feeling shaky and off-balance. Straddling these two disparate worlds—incompatable as they are. And it is then that you realize neither holds your future.