

The Boys Are Out Back

Words ~ 4,200

I do remember you. To be honest, when I haven't thought about you for a while, I seem to think about you a lot. Like a kind of trapdoor that opens with enough weight. And when I do think of you and that time back then, I remember you most by the summers. I think about the sticky Alabama heat draping us like wet wool on the train tracks behind your mother's house, about the skateboarding, the punk band in my dad's toolshed—the ceaseless pines, too. I think about the skimboards we made from sheets of plywood, and the flecks of mud and grass sticking to our skin in the hot rain like leeches. The laughter we found rising, collapsing in the Gulf. And the girls. Christ, all the girls. I think about how cool and quiet you were to them. How you got farther than all of us did, even though you only said one word at a time and barely made any sense at all.

“Your eyes are so pretty,” they would tell you.

“Thanks,” you would say. And then you would smile that way you used to and tuck a blond lock behind your ear, your blue eyes the size of half dollars shining back at them.

“I heard you're in a band. What do you play?”

“Guitar.”

“Oh, my god. I love guitar players.”

“Nice.”

Grinning, nodding, glancing.

“So,” they'd always draw it out, “do you have a girlfriend?”

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

“Too many to choose.”

“You're stupid,” they would tease, pushing fingertips into your chest.

And then they would fawn over you and your wobbly machismo, your enduring resignation so kiddish and luring. Your softly chiseled face looking like a beautiful woman's that would soon be a man's, the kind we'd only ever seen in magazine cologne ads.

After we dropped out of school, I remember you riding your bike to play guitar at my house. Seven miles down four lanes of highway traffic. I can't remember exactly how many nights-turned-days we spent trying to record our ticket out of that shit-hole town. But I do remember how loud Toby Mahon screamed the night you nearly pulled his balls off for talking so much shit to me about my singing. And I do remember the sound it made when you popped Ray Ray Baylor for dissing Kurt Cobain: like a two-by-four smacking squarely against wet cement. That surprised me because of how scrawny you were, but then we started saying that you were wiry, even though no one really knew what it meant.

I remember when you, Josh, and A. J. broke into the youth room at church and ate all the snacks and drank all the lemonade. That would've been pitiful enough for them to forgive you all, but Josh had to stuff the drains and let the faucets run overnight, ruining the whole floor because of Marilyn Manson. At least that's what the preacher said the next day at morning worship when he banned all three of you. You were all just lonely kids, hanging around the church to feel love and safe, as though someone might be interested in you, so it didn't rattle you in the way of regret or change. It just left you without a refuge.

It was awkward after that. That weird youth pastor—the one that would make the slow kid, Kenneth, sleep with him on overnight trips—he would glare at me if he saw you waiting in the parking lot. You didn't see his face, so you could never understand when I told you that no one gets angrier than the men of God. Even when he came to my house to tell me about my hell-bound father and how I would be too, you still didn't flinch. "He's a faggot anyway," you said, but you said that about a lot of people.

When we cut grass for a summer so you could have weed money and I could pad my savings, you always worked until you were red in the face. I thought you were allergic at first and that you were choking, but you assured me you were fine and kept going. There was that woman with the six-acre yard, the one with the broccoli hair and the body like a water balloon with rubber bands tied around its hips and chest. Remember that one? It took us all day to cut and edge it. We even cleared it of an old pigpen and sprayed it for fire ants. But then she said forty bucks was too much. "Gonna have to do better than that," she told me. I got nervous and took thirty. But you went back at night and put bologna on her car, so I guess we were even in the end.

That was just our way back then. It was how we got square, how we hustled the world being built around us with so many walls, so many boots pressing on our fingers, and with so few consequences for them. Those cruel, cowardly packs hunting for weaker, slower things, they drooled over our crippling circumstances as much as tired wolves would. So the sounds of teenage power and assertion came in a whoosh of, “Eh, fuck it.” And to that soundtrack, like some beating of heuristic rhythms, we began blooming into what we would unknowingly always be. But how could we have known? Really, how could anyone?

When I got a license, we would drive to the high school and watch everyone leaving. So happy and windblown, driving away from us. Sometimes we’d get in the line to see how it felt, but mostly we just stared at the girls’ asses and tits in their tight, pocketless khakis and white cotton polos. The best ones looked like fat Boston butts wrapped in butcher’s paper, with knees shoved into too-small shirts and tucked over thongs we couldn’t see but could imagine. Most of the time, a few of the packs would giggle, and the boldest one would wave and call out, “I like your car,” or something like that, while we leaned on my hood and smoked cigarettes. We’d smile back at them and nod with our chins, watch them strut away like it was the last thing we would ever see. Like we might go blind because of it later. Then the jocks would eye us and take their shirts off, feeling less dictated in the white tees underneath. They never said anything to us. Just bowed up and scowled like caged cats, their boyish faces peeking out of men’s bodies like creatine turtles.

I started dating that girl Meagan around the time you wanted to drop acid. I told you I’d do it too, even though I never did anything except drink Coca-Colas and drive you and Trip around when you had the munchies or needed more weed. I had to after that time Trip’s dad, Uncle Bob, said he was going to pick up a quarter bag and a pizza for us but took our money and went to the VFW instead. By the time we found him, he was too drunk to move and the fat bartender told Trip to fuck off. We were waiting in the parking lot listening to Pink Floyd when Trip came running out, shouting for me to floor it. The bartender waddled out behind him holding his bleeding skull and threw a pool cue at us, threatening to call the cops.

A few days later, Uncle Bob made it up to us by playing paintball war in the old cement mill. He said he was a Vietnam marine and that nothing could hurt him—that we’d never see him coming. But then I heard his thick South Boston accent scream out, “Right inda fuckin’ balls!” and blood started running down his leg as he limped across the wide-open space right in front of us. When we got back to the trailer, he showed us what looked like flattened, weeping grapes on his sack,

stomach, and waist. You snuck him two Budweisers and a menthol when Trip wasn't looking and saluted him.

Now I remember that the VFW wasn't the only time I drove the getaway. Before Meagan's dance performance at her high school's graduation, you made me stop in Crossroads to buy those two tabs of acid from the church band's drummer. I waited outside until you came running out with a two-girls-at-once kind of grin. You plopped down into the passenger seat and pulled out two paper squares like they were Hendrix's guitar picks. You wouldn't even breathe on them. Then the pastor came out waving his hand and saying, "Excuse me, boys," but I punched it and left him in a spray of dust and asphalt shards. You called him a faggot, too.

I chickened out and by the time we found our seats in the football stadium, you thought the lights were lasers. "Holy shit, dude. Those are some fat bitches!" you said, and everyone around us glared and sucked air over their teeth. But you didn't notice. You did spot Meagan's mom making her way to us, but you thought she had two heads and started rubbing your palms up and down on your thighs. "This shit is freaking me out," you said. Then you graciously recessed into the cobwebbed corners of your dark and muted mind. I watched you closely from the corner of my eye, but you mainly just grunted otherworldly like and stared at the stars with eyes as though you were having an orgasm, adrift somewhere so far away that I thought you might never return. And maybe you never really did. Meagan's mom was a counselor for troubled youth, but she just thought you loved astronomy. They were all dumb like that.

We met that kid Zane later, the one with the strung-out dad living deep in the woods like a bushwhacker. "The CIA's after me," he said. He was serious enough for silence to fall in the wake of such insanity, but you actually came alive. "Don't any of you tell a soul I'm out here. Not a word. Not a fucking peep. You hear me? I can bury you. You know that? Fucking *bury* you." He cooked acid in fifty-gallon drums covered with ghillie suits near a camouflaged camper, so we believed, without question, that he really could make us disappear. But you, in your rampant quest for all things subversive, thought he was the coolest motherfucker you'd ever met. And because everyone knew he wasn't a cool motherfucker, he gave you a lifetime supply in exchange for your rarity.

Then there was that really hot summer when Clint Denton's dad strangled him in their front yard, with Clay still in the basement restacking the scattered magazines. Apparently the hotheaded fuck had been complaining about the mess all morning before he erupted from the bowels of familial secrets out into the open air. The stepmom sprayed them with a garden hose while they

wrestled on the lawn, filling Clint's nose and mouth as he fought for air. Joey Carrillo, the Latin kid down the street, called Donny Manes because no other cop was on duty, and Joey had never seen anything like it on any other morning walking his dog. According to Joey, all the stepmom ever said was, "Ronnie..." but by then it was too late. He was still squeezing Clint's muscular neck like a gator's mouth when Donny started prying him loose.

Everyone said Clint's dick was so big that he busted Heather Simms's gut with it and had to take her to the hospital, so we never thought he could die like that. But he did. Right in his front yard on Saturday morning. Wet and blue as a stillborn.

After that, Clay moved into the shed out back and would run away sometimes and sleep at your house or Josh's or whoever had the room for him, forever lost without his big brother. By the next summer, no one really knew what happened to him. Some said he went to Idaho to live with his mom, but we didn't know where that was and it sounded too far away for anyone to care.

We went to evening worship a few times to pray about it, but there wasn't enough room in the pews, so we would leave and drink Wild Irish Rose in the parking lot instead. Then, when Larry and Jason from soccer decided to join the congregation and everyone had to say "I" to accept them, my sister heard a woman in the bathroom say, "Can't *believe* they're letting niggers in here now." We didn't try for a pew on Wednesday nights after that. We figured God had decided what to do with Clint by then anyway, and I guess we didn't really fear God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit or any of that shit anymore either. To us, they all started to look like the soles of boots and the tongues of wolves, wrapped sloppily in vague Bible verses, telling us how to hate because of love, how to rise on the souls of the fallen.

Everyone changed that summer. Everything felt like a lie, like all the adults had lost their minds and really were trying to choke us out. The band broke up, and I started working in the fields down in Loxley. You started dating that girl with the short, stringy hair like shallow waterfalls of black licorice. What was her name? Whatever it was, I didn't see you much after that.

You came to visit me at work a few months later, but I was so tired and so busy I could barely open my mouth. You asked to borrow my butterfly knife, the one with the long, curvy blade we got up in Gatlinburg on a church retreat. I didn't ask you why, and you didn't say.

But a few weeks later, when I wanted it back, you took me into the projects. We found a group of bangers playing dice on the concrete picnic tables, and you started hollering for them to come over. I told you not to worry about it, that I'd get another one, but you insisted. "Ey! Where's

that knife at?” you said loudly. And then, out of a deep pocket, a man pulled it out and passed it through the window. He clapped your hand and we drove away, never saying anything else about it.

After I found out I had gotten into college, we went to Subway and ate while Starla and Chris mopped the floors. I told you that you could go too, that you could get out. I remember how you shook your head and looked up and away into the fluorescent lights, like you didn't want the tears to fall out. “Nah, man. That's for you. That shit ain't for me,” you said, just like that. But then you took me around to houses I'd never been to and told people I'd never seen untrue things about me. “My boy's a fuckin' genius,” you would say. “He's goin' to college. He's gonna be somebody.” And then you would slap my back hard and grab me by the top of my shoulder, squeezing as you clenched your teeth and smiled. I remember one room of heroin junkies with their eyes sunken into darkened pits simply staring with mouths agape back at us, wordless, thoughtless, hopeless. At Mike the Pipe's apartment, he just asked if I needed any lead pipe from the factory. “Got rubber grips I can put on 'em if you want,” he said. “Best beater around for twenty bones. Fit in a suitcase proolly.” We met a group at the Waffle House later on, but they just said shit like, “Cool” and “Good for you,” and then stared at me for a long time like they wanted to punch my face in for thinking I was better than them. You bought me a Coke and some cheese-covered hash browns, said it was a celebration. No one really cared except for you.

We talked a few times while I was alone in my dorm room, but the meth was starting to rip you farther away than the miles between us. I had so many new friends, so much to learn about the world outside too, that I guess I enjoyed the distance more than I wanted to say. A lot of the times when we talked it was about things that I didn't want to hear, and I would end up saying “For real?” or “*Shiiiiit*” a lot more than I usually did. You talked fast about the guns and the slinging. The beatings and the bloody ditches. How you had pawned all your guitars, then how you were arrested for trying to rob the place a few weeks later. How the Marines kicked you out before boot camp even started. The car accident when you almost killed that girl. How the cops said you had so many drugs in your system they thought you were trying to kill yourself. You spent the night naked, strapped to a chair, alone in a bright cell with a big window. It felt like you were in a tailspin, and all I could do was hope you stayed away and crashed softly in a lush cornfield like a UFO.

Then, when Nichole and them stabbed Scotty to death and burned his body out by Tim's house, you called me and sounded different. You seemed angry but far away, like you were screaming into pillows. You said they tied him up after he came home early and found them stealing his PlayStation for crack and meth money. I remember thinking you sounded like you'd had enough. That maybe you finally wanted out. Then you said they also did it because Scotty was gay. You asked me why. But you had never asked me why over anything before, and I didn't know what to say. "Some people are just fucked up," I think I said. You sighed and said you had to go. You knew what it was like to be strange and unequal, to have the world lock you out and forever push you away like a disease. You never called Scotty a faggot.

Were it not for Scotty, though, things might have been much more grotesque for you. His murder seemed to have shaken you loose, and I remember that night when you called and asked me to be Aiden's godfather. You sounded like the sun was on your face, and I could tell your words were jittering over smiling teeth, maybe even damming a full-on laugh. You said you took a girl named Karly to Wal-Mart for a ring and had run into Trip. Said he smiled a lot and had a car. Said he spent a lot of time in Florida, working outside and living with his aunt.

You got married at the courthouse where we would skate and try not to go home until the arguments were over. You said the town had built a skate park finally, after years of running us off. I said they should've named it after you, but you just said, "Nah."

I asked you for a picture of Aiden, and you sent me one I could fit inside my wallet. It said he was born on December 11th, two days before I graduated. I kept asking you for more, but that was the only one you had. The hospital had taken it. It's hanging on my fridge.

I came home to see you and the baby once. Your veins looked like they were vacuum-sealed in the skin, like they were the only things between the bone. And your chiseled face was concaved and dry now, older in an unnatural way. I helped you lay tile in a Montrose mansion well into the night, and when we got back to the doublewide, you fell asleep on my shoulder while I held your baby boy in my arms. Later, Karly took him and laid him down perfectly in a crib filled with terrycloth animals and a blanket colored in pastels. It matched the baby blue you'd painted on the walls. A ceramic cross hung over him, and he slept peacefully away from us, like hair blowing in the field, like he was safe and adored. Like the life ahead of him would be easy.

Then the next day I took you down to the methadone clinic, where they said they'd never seen anyone take a higher dosage but kept giving it to you anyway.

When you got home from rehab the last time, Karly had another man in bed, with Aiden asleep in the crib next to them. I was surprised you hadn't tried to kill him, that you had left and she had chased you down in the Cavalier across the front yard, missing you only because of a pine tree. I wasn't as surprised when you started using again and lost Aiden for good.

I knew we were fading out of each other's lives, but I didn't know how to be something you could still understand. And when I spoke with you, I remembered all over again how different I had become, how far I had drifted from who I was but no longer wanted to be. I've learned now that the only way to see a place is by not seeing it for quite some time. But not seeing you allowed me to believe nothing had changed.

It's probably what keeps us all apart in the end, the telling of lies to create our own truth. In that way, I could tell myself we both hadn't rolled so inconsolably away from our ideals, eternally becoming the space growing between us, outward from the place where we began—the one where you and I were the same. And there was some resemblance of triumph in that.

It's a funny thing, that word, *where*. Only spoken by the lost or the ones who know the way. I hated saying it, because I never felt like either. But when they called and told me someone had found you in the morning with your wrists slit on a bench, the only thing I could think to ask was, "Where?"

"The skate park," they said. "He's in the hospital," they said. "We're not sure if he'll..." But then everything started ringing and I thought I couldn't breathe.

I remember crying and pounding my fist into the wall until it bled, thinking that I should have taken you with me, that who the fuck was I?

Apparently the blood was everywhere, but you managed to survive, stubborn against even yourself. You would actually survive one more time after that. And after each time, you said you were fine. You acted like it was no big deal at all. Even when Uncle Bob died and Trip had to find him in his hospital bed with sores all over his VA-insured corpse, a catheter that hadn't been changed for days because Trip was working three doubles in a row, you still told me not to worry. I felt like an unforgivable asshole. Like a fucking snob. I felt like a phony hiding a secret,

an imposter among all these people I knew I wasn't. But you said it was OK. You always told me not to come back.

I knew I'd become what I said I never would, become comfortable there even: a wolf on the other side, locking you out. And the shame I had for it began to feel like I was the one choking.

Then, six years later, I got a picture in an e-mail. It was of you and Aiden in a pine-wooded park with a fake Stonehenge in the background, plaster dinosaurs grazing nearby, large butterflies flapping overhead. You were both smiling that smile. You said you had bought a motorcycle and wanted to get out for a while, feel the wind in your hair. I thought about those blond locks tucked behind your ear. I thought about those piercing blue eyes like half dollars. I thought about the pop of a two-by-four. I thought about the girls purring all over you. I thought about you with the world by its balls. I thought about you with your clenched smile that night.

And then, I started to breathe again.

That's why I'm writing you back. I wanted to tell you that I do remember all those times, back when we were kids. And I do still think of you, only now when I do, I think of you like that. That boy beside you now, glistening and reborn. The one you could have always been.