

## **The Sadness of Sophistication**

The sun set over the playing fields, an expanse of flat, fertile grass hedged in by mature oak and maple hardwoods. We played shirtless, our half-naked, lithe bodies tanned a golden raw umber from a summer outdoors. Thin like geckos, with limned muscles, we were humans in the kind of condition that years later we would lament as age and inertia filled out the sharpness in our bodies.

Seated on the grass, switching out of cleats into running shoes, I looked up into the darkening sky and whatever stretched beyond. I don't recall exactly what I thought at that moment, perhaps it was something about leaving home – and I was taking that first backwards view of life. Or maybe not: more likely I was gathering the will to complete the difficult run back to my house. My mind could have also been travelling ahead to later that night, to meeting up with my good friend Rip and two wild girls.

Under the late-August, fuchsia sunset, my feet ran over the graveled edge of the road. On my jaw spread the early wisps of a teenage beard and on my head, short-cut brown hair wolfed out on the sides. I squinted as I evaluated the surface moving towards me: the crumbing side of the street, the oncoming cars, tree branches jutting out at my head, homes set deep off the road. Backpack strapped to my bare shoulders, during a pause in my breathing I could hear a cricket's first hesitant note. While I didn't know much of anything different, I somehow understood that the moment was special—and fleeting.

Up a hill, past an old cemetery with slanted headstones, I picked up the speed, checking my watch. I increased the pace, climaxing with a full sprint down my street until I reached my house where I stopped and lifted my hands over my head to breathe easier as I walked up the driveway. In the front window, I saw my reflection: a young caveman with only small shorts as a loincloth.

Inside, I was shocked by the air-conditioning, as if I stepped into a freezer. At my ankles, the soft fur of my dog brushed against my leg and then her small terrier paws greeted my thighs. I scratched behind her ear and then under her jaw as she licked my forearm. Kicking off my shoes, I

passed through the kitchen where my mother stood at the sink and my father sat at the table with a newspaper.

“Its freezing in here,” I said.

“Put some clothes on,” my mother responded.

My father said nothing.

I went upstairs and my dog followed me to my room. I called Emma.

“When are you coming over?” she asked.

“I have to eat dinner with my parents.”

“Come now.”

“I need to eat here. My mom cooked.”

“Please? I can’t stay up late. I open the pool tomorrow.”

I showered, got dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, and headed past the kitchen. When I reached down to grab my running shoes, my dog licked me once more.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” my mother asked.

“I’m going to Emma’s,” I said, lacing the shoes onto my bare feet.

“I cooked dinner.”

“I’ve got to go now.”

“You have to eat something.”

“I’ll get food on the way.”

“I cooked dinner and you’re going to eat fast food?”

“I may sleep at Rip’s tonight,” I said on my way out.

I headed to my car which was parked in the driveway. It waited there on the blacktop like a cowboy’s reliable horse. Clean, in fresh clothes, I hopped inside, turned on the music, and raced out of my driveway. Off my street, I rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. A rock song, popular all summer, played on the radio. The music, the open windows, the cigarette – those few simple things – always made me feel like the person I wanted to be, free, alive, and happy.

Down in Emma's basement, the glow of the television lit our faces an array of changing colors. I slid my hands over her body, stroking her legs, smoothing her hair. I could caress her endlessly, and I often did, for hours. I loved her body and I loved her. I couldn't wait through even a few minutes of the movie, and neither could she, so I slipped her underwear down from her tennis shorts and she pulled my shorts down to my thighs. Trying not to make any noise that would travel upstairs, we swallowed our gasps and moans as we clung to each other. With her parents above us, we instinctively kept our clothes on in case they came down, but by the end of the movie, with the credits rolling and then the screen turning black, caution succumbed to passion and we were totally naked. On top of her, face to face, her arms pulled me tight as our open mouths exchanged breathes, like oxygen masks to each other. And finally finished, the screen inert grayness, she lay in my arms and I could hear her sobs.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're crying."

"I'm sad."

"Why?"

"Because you leave in two weeks."

"I'm sad too," I said, feeling her cheeks, finding the tears, and rubbing them off.

"Everything will be okay."

We heard movement upstairs, near the door, so we rushed to get our clothes.

"I'll let you get to bed," I said, pulling on my t-shirt.

"Don't leave."

She grasped onto me with a tightness I felt excessive – but what did I know?

"Everything will be okay. Two weeks is a long time," I said, but even then, I knew it wasn't.

My car glided through the neighborhood, winding through the quiet, tree-lined streets, the only life occasionally glimpsed in other solitary cars or Edward Hopper-like scenes inside the lit windows of homes: a man at a dining table, a child in front of a television. I remembered the blood of our first time, a large red splotch on my flannel sheets, sneaking them out of my house in a gym bag, and then throwing the sex-stained linen into the garbage container behind the diner. But already Emma seemed in the past, like a team I left for a better one, a predetermined phase that I needed to move on from whether I liked it or not.

The emotions surged inside me and I let myself cry, for I felt a sharp sense of loss and a fear of the approaching unknown without her. Yet it was hard for me to distinguish if I was crying due to the imminent loss of my girlfriend and the closeness we shared or the loss of the life I so enjoyed, or even if it was the loss of my parents from my life, which I felt to be happening – or if it was something else entirely, something nameless.

Further east, closer to the city, I entered the older, patrician suburbs. Dark, stately mansions lined the street behind tall trees. I pulled the car into a shaded driveway that led to a three-story home with overgrown landscaping. Ivy covered one entire side of the house and I didn't see any lights on inside. Rip answered the door when I knocked.

“Whose place is this?”

“Melissa's house sitting,” Rip said. “Some great-aunt.”

I followed Rip through the cavernous house to a set of stairs in the back. The house looked like it hadn't been remodeled in years.

“This place is huge.”

On the second floor, in a small sitting room, Melissa and Rebecca were splayed on a couch in short cut-off jeans, drinking cans of beer, their bare legs draped over each other.

“This place is massive,” I said to her.

“We think it's haunted,” Rebecca said.

“I'm scared to go into the basement,” Melissa added. “And the third floor.”

On the table were empty cans of beer, a funnel, a full ash tray, some magazines and pot paraphernalia – a plastic zip-lock bag with the greenish-brown weed, rolling papers, and a one-hitter. Rebecca stood up and gave me a hug. I handed her a cigarette and sat down next to her, putting my hand on her bare leg – strong, tanned and shaved smooth. We watched Melissa funnel a beer down expertly, laughing afterwards as she let out a burp.

A few days earlier, Rip introduced me to Rebecca and Melissa. They lifeguarded at Rip's country club, and leaving work that day they had left the window open to the indoor pool. That night, we snuck in through the window and skinny dipped, and while Rip fooled around with Melissa at one end, Rebecca and I explored each other on the opposite end. She was starting college too, going to play field hockey. We didn't have full sex in the country club pool but two nights later, I picked her up and we went to a park and did it on a rough wooden picnic table, her on top of me.

“You have a lot of catching up to do,” Rip said as he handed me the funnel.

I held the funnel aloft with one hand and plugged the tube with my thumb as Rip cracked two cans of beer, pouring them into the cone. I put the tube into my mouth and let the two beers flow inside, sending the frothy liquid straight down my throat to my stomach – I gagged and almost threw up but did my best to look unbothered.

“Two more,” Rip said.

When I had funneled five beers, and smoked some of the pot which calmed my stomach, Rebecca sat down on my lap. We were all laughing now, stoned and buzzing. Melissa then pulled Rip by the hand into the room where she was staying. Before closing the door, she said, “You guys can use that bedroom.”

I carried Rebecca into the bedroom. Her body was sleeker than mine, muscular with a defined stomach. Being the second time that night, it was hard for me to finish and we just kept going, at a fast and frenetic pace, persistent and determined, working up a full naked sweat. The sheets stripped after an hour and we continued in all types of positions on the bare mattress. When we at last emerged from the bedroom after a couple hours, faces flushed, our fatigued bodies were

subdued and sobered. Outside the hot room and back in our clothes, it was almost as if we were two different people than the youthful animals in the bedroom, both with a shared secret of what happened behind the closed door. Rip was on the couch, slouched, pretty much passed out. Melissa was smoking pot by herself.

“Finally. You guys took forever.”

Giggling, Rebecca sat down next to Melissa and smoked some of her joint.

“What happened to him?” Rebecca asked, looking at Rip who could only weakly raise a hand to show he was still awake.

“Quick Rip. Finishes after just the tip,” Melissa said.

Both girls giggled more and Rip was too wasted to defend himself or even to move.

I didn't want to smoke or drink beer anymore. Depleted, I was thirsty for water and I wanted to rest quietly by myself. I wanted to sleep in my bed.

“I'm going to go home,” I said. “I have work tomorrow.”

“Are you going to take him with you?” Melissa asked, motioning to Rip who was now fully sleeping.

“He'll be fine.”

It was almost four in the morning. Back in my car, listening to classical music, I drove the empty roads through the quiet and suddenly calm night. A feeling of heightened pleasure – of living to the utmost of my knowledge – coursed through my blood, like I had filled a void in the only way that I knew possible. And I was satiated, and even happy. For a moment, I felt that there was no other place I wanted to be than driving on that road, and that sensation – which did return at moments, though rare, later in life – was something I was lucky and grateful to experience. However, that night in the car, the elation also brought apprehension, that to continue feeling that way would require quite an effort, and with all challenges, even to the most confident, there was a nervousness that I would not be able – or not find a way – to live up to it.

My bedside alarm harshly woke me at 7:15 and after a speedy drive, I punched in two minutes early at 7:28 AM.

“You look useless,” Dick told me.

“Its great to be alive,” was my response, what I said on those instances like wind-sprints, hangovers, or an early morning after a late night.

Among the other workers, we walked into the garage where the fleet of trucks waited: two massive hydraulic rear-loader garbage trucks and six smaller side-loader compactors, along with a few other maintenance trucks. Near the garage’s front entrance was a cage about the size of a prison cell that had been empty the past two summers. In the cage paced a Siberian Husky that I first mistook for a large wolf.

I approached the animal.

“The cage is too small for this guy,” I commented.

“No cage is big enough for him,” Al, the garage manager said, walking over and admiring the animal. He crossed his arms and rested them on his stomach.

With a long stare that was part fatigue, I watched the dog in the cage, the animal body like a coiled spring, bundling raw visceral life—energy, movement and wildness that couldn’t be reconciled with the managed suburban setting.

“Hey useless,” Dick yelled. “Stop messing with that dog and let’s go.”

I climbed into the truck and we drove out. With Dick behind the wheel and me riding, we operated one of the smaller garbage trucks that Dick navigated down each driveway on our daily route. At lunch, we’d return to empty our haul into the larger trucks, which was the worst part of the job. I needed to hold my breath because the awful stench would creep into my mouth.

After cleaning up at the garage sink, and eating my sandwich, I visited the dog again. Al was filling up a water bottle with a hose near the cage.

“Why is he here?” I asked.

“The police brought him in last night. He killed a toy poodle. Just showed up in a back yard on Maiden Lane, grabbed the poodle in his mouth and shook it violently until the thing died. Right in front of the poodle’s owner.”

“So what are they going to do with him?”

“They’re sorting that out now and storing him here.”

“Is anyone feeding him?”

“I am,” Al said, pouring the water bottle through the fence and into the dog’s bowl.

“You should let him go.”

“He can’t run free around here. He doesn’t know how.”

“Whose dog is it?”

“They don’t know. He’s got no tags.”

I noticed a leash hanging from the outside of the cage.

“Can I take him for a walk? The cage is too small.”

“Hell no. He’s police custody.”

I leaned against the cage, fingers hooked into the fence and forehead pressed to the metal. The dog eyed me, and I was unsure how he felt, if he sensed that I was friendly or if he was confused, if he’d play nice at first and then launch at me with his sharp fangs.

Al, maybe recognizing what was going through my mind, or perhaps he had the same thoughts, said, “Careful there; don’t want to loose any fingers. That fella’d rip you apart.”

He grinned at me and then walked off, joining the rest of the guys on the stoop outside the lunch room where they sat in the sun sipping coffees and smoking cigarettes.

“Hey boy,” I said to the dog.

The animal’s eyes looked right at me and seemed not the eyes of a beast but smarter, almost human. The dog let out a tense whimper and replanted his feet, as if about to run. Another whimper released from the back of the animal’s throat as he looked up at me in an appealing way, in a primal language that we both understood clearly, asking if I would let him out of the cage. I nodded, smiled, and the dog understood as his whimpering grew into an expectant whine, almost a



pleading whisper to me. Right there in the maintenance garage, we connected – a boy and dog. I remembered the books of my youth: *Souder*, *Old Yeller*, *Call of the Wild*, *Incredible Journey*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Those books touched me profoundly, though most boys probably felt that same way. Due to those books, I always felt a special connection to dogs – not just my own.

Feeling that the Husky sensed my good intentions, I opened the cage and attached the leash to his collar and the other end around my wrist. The dog was frantic with excitement, darting out of the cage and pulling at the leash with a primordial power. We dashed down a long space in the middle of the garage between the parked trucks, heading towards the open back door. I was fast at the time, at the peak of my athleticism, and I pushed the run into a full sprint. I ran alongside the animal, accelerating with the dog and even passing him. Increasing my pace to the fastest I could move, I felt the leash pull a bit behind me. We sped out the back door and toward a curve in the drive, which switchbacked down to the salt pit. As I sprinted at full speed with the animal, I looked back over my right shoulder and the dog wasn't there, and then I realized that he had darted around the left side of me at an even greater speed. I felt the tug of the leash on my right wrist and my body twisted. I was in the air – just as I turned to look back the dog had sped ahead of me and leapt off the drive to the lower section of the road and, being attached to the other end of the leash, I was taken for a ride, backwards, sailing through the air off the ledge. I felt the unusual sensation of a wind against all the parts of my body at once – I was flying.

I landed on my back with my head tucked forward so I wouldn't smash it on the concrete. The leash tugged my wrist and I let it slip off. After a quick physical inventory, I seemed to be okay. I was in a bit of shock that I didn't get badly injured and I checked the rest of my body. Besides what I knew to be a scrape on my back and likely bruising, I was fine. When I got up and looked around, I saw the dog a distance away, heading into a yard that neighbored the maintenance department.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Come back!”

He ran off.

Still rattled from the hard landing, I tried to chase the dog but had no chance as he disappeared two houses away. I felt fooled by the animal as I walked back into the garage. Some of the guys were returning from lunch and heading back into the trucks. Soon Al was standing near the empty cage, and I told him what happened.

“What the hell did you take him out for?”

“I wanted to let him stretch his legs. That cage is too small.”

“Why did you let him get away?”

“He dragged me off that ledge in the back and the leash slipped off my wrist.”

“Ah, you fucking idiot kid,” he said and paced off.

That evening while training at the fields and on my run home, I couldn't understand why his words – *fucking idiot kid* – kept burning me up inside.

Later that night, on the thirty-minute drive downtown, I rode shotgun again with Jack driving, two of our other friends – Sal and Chris – in the back seat. The music played over the wind blasting through the open windows. We drove past the old steel mills, black and sooty, some shuttered, the live ones spurting out hellish flames. Our destination was the city, a pulsating and electric setting which was a place of wonder and danger for us, coming from the quiet suburbs. At that age, fears of being caught underage and drunk, of being exposed for who we were – imposters in that world – were real fears. But our teenage brains thrived on that fear; we drank that fear like alcohol, recklessly and without restraint.

We arrived downtown to a former industrial zone by the river that had been turned into a busy nightlife scene, large bars with outdoor decks over the river, strip clubs, and small concert venues. The biggest of the bars, and likely the most well-known and busiest in the city, was our destination that night. The large restaurant with a huge multi-tiered deck held a prosperous bend in the river, and when night came it turned into a massive drinking scene with numerous bars and pretty girls selling beer out of icy tubs, along with loud live music that intensified the mass drunkenness. To drink, you didn't need any stamp or wristband, you just needed to get inside, past

the bouncers at each entrance who checked ID's. Though back where the bar bordered a marina, a wall stuck out past the deck over the river and we were able to climb the fence to the marina and then sneak around the wall one by one, dangling briefly over the water, and enter discreetly. Once inside, after our nervous covert entrance, we were able to relax and drink freely, entering the adult world in disguise to experience what we couldn't otherwise wait to join.

For a crew of teenage boys, there was no other place we would want to be – drinking and dancing among drunken adults and older women. Entering the fray, we were a wholesome addition: young, healthy, tan, fit, glowing with full heads of hair, clean complexions, white teeth. Our appearances resided in that the brief period of time where nature made us the perfection seen in magazines or on television, that older men tried to emulate as the years added on the difficulties.

After a spell of rapid drinking at the bar with my friends, pounding beers and shooting whiskey, and slamming a nasty combination of both that we called a boilemaker, we roamed in pursuit of the sexual unknown. We danced but were too shy to approach any of the older women. Returning for more drinks, at the bar we had drunken and repetitive sports conversations with swollen, red-faced men, men that I found wise and interesting. Walking on the deck with a beer in my hand, I smiled giddily as I looked at the city lights and the crowd of which I was a part of but also an observer. Fully entertained, I was in love with life, with a deep appreciation. At that amplified moment, I also began to acknowledge the powers of alcohol.

When I ventured off by myself to buy another drink, I found an open spot next to an attractive blond lady at a side bar. She was a woman rather than a girl, somewhere in her late-twenties or thirties – it was hard for me to guess ages of adults back then. Her attractiveness was the kind of a sexy flight attendant or a hair dresser: abundant make-up, dirty blond hair done at the salon, and a thin body kept fit and trim by a carefully watched diet, helped by cigarettes and diet cola. There was also an overall hardness to her look that wasn't present in younger girls, making her sexy instead of cute.

She smiled at me and I knew her to be drunk. But in her smile I could sense, by some unknown signal, an invitation. Her eyes indicated that I should speak to her and that was what I

finally summoned the courage to do, offering her a shot. We took the shots together and soon we were talking in a free-flowing, drunk repartee full of sexual overtones and innuendos. I found it easier to speak to her than to a girl my own age – she was more direct and in charge. As the time passed, growing more and more confident, I felt that I was riding on top of a wave, being pushed along by an exhilarating natural force that was beyond my understanding.

She began calling me “sweetheart” and touching me, first my arm, noticing my muscle, and even moving her hand to my thigh. And her touch to me was that of a woman, different than anything I had felt before, confident and forward and magically sensuous. And at the bar, the drinks and her advances gave me the confidence to kiss her, and the kiss was new too, her mouth experienced and in command, and her lips not as soft as Emma’s.

“I like your style sweetheart,” she said after we finished kissing.

Then she moved much closer, using not just “sweetheart,” but “baby” and “honey” and “cutie.” She even touched my face. But then, just as I felt everything in the world to be just right, she said she needed to use the “little girl’s room.”

“Want me to go with you?” I asked, feeling the need to accompany her, to make sure no other man swept her away or she didn’t change her mind and decide to leave the bar.

“No, sweetie, I’ll be okay.”

“Make sure to come right back,” I told her.

Her womanly wiles perhaps sensed my worries and she whispered into my ear, in her raspy seductress voice, “Don’t worry, honey. I’m coming right back.”

I watched her stand up from the bar and saunter through the crowd towards the bathroom, and I admired her lower half, which I saw for the first time.

Looking in the direction of the restrooms, with each second that passed, I worried more and more that she would not return, that I did not understand what was going on, that she was a dream or some sort of trick.

Soon my friends crowded around me.

“We’re leaving,” Sal said. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll find my way home,” I told them. “I’m staying.”

“The bar’s about to close.”

“Dude, you’re so lucky,” Jack said. “She wants it.”

Sal was worried and he tried to talk me out of staying. He thought I would be putting myself into some sort of danger. He even put his foot down and appealed to the others to physically drag me back to the car. With each word that Sal spoke, my anger towards him grew. I tightened my grip on the beer bottle, wanting to break it over his head but I knew that I could never do that. I wanted to call out his obvious jealousy but I didn’t want to escalate the situation, I just wanted him to leave.

“Where does she even live?” Sal asked.

When I told him, he was convinced it was a bad part of town.

“She’s not even coming back,” Sal said. “You’re going to be stuck here.”

“So I can always take a taxi home,” I said, although I had never taken a taxi before.

“How much money do you have?”

I checked my pockets, locating a total of twenty-eight dollars in crumpled bills.

“We’re not leaving you here,” he said.

“Why do you care? Just leave. You’re being a tool.”

“I’m being a good friend.”

“Quit being such a loser,” I told him. I was furious. I looked to Jack for help.

“Come on,” Jack said to Sal. “He’s a big boy.”

And that finally got them to leave. As they walked out, Jack returned with twenty bucks in his hand. “Good luck my friend,” he said, and we both laughed. I was relieved to be alone at the bar, though the peaked elation from before was hard to rekindle since I was desperately afraid the woman would not return and I would miss my ride home, and then would have to waste my hard-earned money as well as Jack’s on a taxi.

I waited, hunched over a beer, excited by an open, indeterminate night in front of me.

Whatever was going to happen, I was ready. Finally, she emerged out of the crowd and walked over

to me and ended up between my legs, pulling me close to her by my shirt. I was back on top of the wave. We both took another shot at the bar and I paid. She then turned to me and said, "Let's go to my place," and the line shot through my groin like a bolt of lightning.

Walking through the parking lot, her gait wobbled and I steadied her. At her car, she pressed against me and we kissed again. I got into the driver's side seat and she turned the key. I knew she was very drunk and probably couldn't drive well but I was happy to take the risk.

She told me that she lived five minutes away as we turned out of the parking lot and the back wheel bumped heavily over the curb. Soon, we were out of the bar area, away from downtown, and onto some dark roads in a neighborhood of old, small houses. She spoke as she drove, in a harried and slurred way, while smoking a cigarette. I saw we were heading directly towards a bearded man walking his German shepherd. Since she seemed in charge, and had gotten us that far safely, I assumed she had experience driving in that state and didn't want to say anything but then I realized that she didn't see the man and his shepherd. At the last moment, I reached across and turned the wheel to avoid them. As the car swerved away the lights blanched their frightened faces and I saw the fear of imminent death in their eyes – both man and dog.

We parked in a detached garage and entered through the kitchen where she poured us glasses of wine. I didn't drink wine, so I just held the glass. She led me through the house and into the living room, where children's toys were scattered on the floor. At the door of one bedroom, she said, "This is my darling's room."

"How old is she?"

"Eight."

"Where's her father?"

"He's where assholes go."

She played some music that she liked, music from an earlier time that I didn't know so well or have a taste for. After listening to a few songs, we began kissing again and she increased the pace. She took my belt off and unbuttoned my pants and then pulled me into her bedroom and onto

her bed. We had removed most of each other's clothes when she rolled off me onto her hands and knees and said, "What are you waiting for? Put it in me."

And when I did, she thrust back into me to indicate that she wanted to go fast and hard. Sex to her seemed like a medication, like she was taking a long-awaited and desperately needed cure to some painful ailment. Her head banged against the wall and since she didn't reposition herself to stop it, I assumed she liked the pain or couldn't feel it. She yelled loudly, urging me on, and I thought she looked possessed. When I looked down at myself, my penis seemed larger and manlier, thicker and even a different hue, reminding me of being small and in the pool locker room and seeing other adult penises, which always appeared bigger and different than mine.

Soon, we were done and laying on the bed. She was still breathing hard and calling me all the names from the bar although it didn't seem like she knew where I was as she was just saying them into the air. She seemed to fall asleep and I stayed awake, looking at the ceiling and the adult woman's naked body next to mine. I must have known that it all wasn't part of a normal youth, that my fun wasn't regular, that in a way, I was dodging bullets, that all around me was pain and alienation, discontent and frustration. Yet for some reason I was able to indulge. I was just starting to wrestle with the thought of why I was alone in strange parts of town, with women, when most of my peers were not.

It couldn't have been fifteen minutes later that she awoke, startled.

"Who the fuck are you?" she said to me, out of nowhere and in a panicked voice. "What are you doing here?"

"It's me. What do you mean? We met tonight at the bar."

"Why are you here? Why are you in my bed? I don't know you."

I wasn't only confused about her words, but she made no effort to cover herself, her breasts hanging perfectly, so I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not, if she had truly lost her mind, or if the whole thing was an act.

"You drove me here," I said.

"Who are you? Get out!"

“What?”

“Who the hell are you?”

I gathered my clothes and she kept haranguing me as I picked up my belt from the floor.

“I’m leaving, sorry. Okay, I’ll leave.”

“Who are you?” she screamed at me one more time.

Closing the front door behind me, I knew I would never see her again, and I never did. I sat on the curb to collect myself and pulled the final bent cigarette out of the rumpled soft-pack. I smoked it on the dark street outside her house, on the other side of the city from my home, at close to four in the morning. I needed to punch in at 7:30.

I stood slowly and walked the sidewalk towards what seemed to be the lights of the main stretch of a more commercial street. A leaf blew by my feet and swirled into the darkness. I could hear the crickets chirping, a car in the distance, but nothing else.

Then I heard someone, the voice of an adult man, say, “Look at that jackass.”

Another voice, separate, laughed. I could see dark forms on the front porch of the home I passed.

“Jackass,” one said. “Little bitch,” the other added.

I walked by their house without looking into the shadows where the two voices lurked.

“Keep walking, you little bitch,” one said.

Halfway across the sidewalk of the next yard, I stopped, turned, and looked into the shadows where I discerned two men, one standing, puffing out his chest, and the other seated.

“What?” the standing one challenged me.

The standing one slapped the other on the shoulder and they came down off the porch and into the street light. They both held beer cans and looked to be in their thirties, the one who was seated was overweight, with a scraggly beard and sloppy long hair. The other was clean cut with no sideburns and had his shirt tucked into his shorts, like someone in the military.

“We got a tough guy here?” he asked.



“What kind of losers sit on a porch jerking each other off in the middle of the night?” I said to them.

“You won’t be talking like that after I starch your ass.”

“Neither of you could catch me, especially the fat ass.”

“You little bitch, you’re going to run?”

“Why would I fight two losers who are both bigger than me? Why don’t you rednecks just go back to jerking each other off?”

After I said those words, I ran. And I could hear their footsteps behind me but when I turned my head to see, I had gained more distance from them and the fat one looked to already be quitting, not having more than a rhino charge in him. I took off down the block and instead of heading toward the main commercial road, where I knew I would have to return to find a payphone, I cut down an alleyway that led me across rows of dark garages. When I got to the end, I turned back and the guy had given up; he stood at the entrance to the alley holding up his middle finger. I dropped my pants and mooned him. Then I jetted, taking a right, away from the commercial street and kept running. Cutting through the blocks, occasionally taking time to hide in bushes and survey the quiet streets, I ran for a fifteen minutes, keeping in the shadows. My body began to calm and the night grew quiet again. Far from where I started, I headed to the commercial street where the stores were closed and dark but the signs still glowed and up close let out an electric whine. At an open and brightly lit gas station, I located a payphone and in the telephone book I found a taxi service. I checked the street and gave him the address and he said they’d be there in twenty minutes and it would be thirty bucks to get me home.

I went inside the gas station and bought a new pack of cigarettes and a plastic container of orange drink, the cheap, generic kind. I sat on the curb in front of the station and pulled out a cigarette. As I was putting the cigarette in my mouth I heard fast movement behind me and started to get up but was tackled by a massively heavy force, crushing me onto the orange drink. The fat guy from the porch was on top of me with a weight I had never encountered, stinking of sweat and beer, and I couldn’t move. His friend circled too, I saw his sneakers and heard the scraping of his

soles on the pavement, and then I felt his punches on my head and I could only defend them with one arm as the other one was pinned under me.

“Fat-ass, huh?” the fat guy punched me in the nose and it hurt, much more than the other punches that were hitting my head.

“Hey!” the gas station worker’s voice rang out. “Get off him! I’m calling the police!”

The fat guy pushed off my head to stand up, grating my face against the concrete. I felt liquid in my nose and mouth, not sure whether it was snot or blood. The fat guy kicked me in the midsection, I felt his toe connecting with something deep in me in a painful way.

“Hey! Stop!”

“Little bitch,” the fat one said.

The two proudly strutted over to a pick-up truck that was parked under a tree on a side street. They triumphantly high-fived before separating to each side of the truck. They yelled “bitch” one last time as they drove through the gas station and continued on their way. The front of my shirt was soaked in orange drink and I put the cap back on since half of the drink remained in the deformed container.

“You okay?” the gas station attendant asked.

I stood up.

“That kick hurt.”

“You’re bleeding all over your face. I can get you some napkins to clean yourself up. You want me to call the police?”

“I just want to get the hell out of here. Where’s that fucking taxi?”

On the highway, I rode in the backseat with the window down and let the noise block out all other senses. My fingers probed my face which felt swollen and stiff. I finished the last of the orange drink. The sun was coming up for another day yet it was before the commuters hit the roads, so there was a sense of peace on the highway. I put my face to the edge of the window and let the wind hit me like my dog used to do, and it numbed the pain.

He dropped me off in front of my parent's house and I walked up the driveway in the quiet morning light. Everything was still and seemed sad to me. It was the first wave of nostalgia that I would feel when looking at my childhood home, a feeling that returned more intensely on subsequent visits as the years passed and my parents grew old and moved on, out of that house to another part of their life, and I aged and moved far away too. That morning I felt that the house was a dead object of my past, a relic, like it no longer belonged to me. And my parents sleeping inside were still my parents but I had left them too, not necessarily by choice.

I didn't want to enter the house, I felt that I couldn't go inside, that I couldn't enter that space, that I didn't want to soil the home that belonged to my child self. It was as if that young boy was in my room, sleeping happily with my dog, and I did not want to disturb them. And it was all so sad.

I changed out of my blood and orange-drink stained shirt into some wrinkled work clothes that I kept in my car, and reclined in the seat for an hour until 7:00 AM. Then I drove to work. I was first to punch in and headed to the garage to wait for the others. The Husky was back in the cage and looking forlorn.

"Look who's in early?" Al said as he approached me. When he got near, he smiled uneasily and said, "I hope the other guy looks worse than you."

I just smirked, knowing that playing it down would gain me a bit more respect among that crowd. As the others arrived, I took some ribbing but it soon died down as some of them seemed concerned – sensing there could be something larger than was wrong, something deeper and personal to me.

When I saw the police captain heading towards the garage I worried that somehow I was in trouble. The captain's face, normally jovial, looked disturbed and glum. The captain nodded to us, took an extended look at my face, and headed directly to the cage where the dog paced. I don't know if the police knew that I was the idiot kid who let the Husky loose. Apparently not, or he didn't care – or I wasn't that same kid anymore. The captain opened the door and put the dog on the

leash. The dog ran out, towards me, but snapped back from the leash and then pulled hard against it as the captain tightened his grip.

“Where you taking him?” Al asked.

“We’ve got to put him down.”

“That’s a shame,” Al said after some silence. “He don’t know any different.”

“I don’t want to do it, but we have to.”

I watched the captain walk off with the dog towards the police house, the dog pulling on the leash, trying to run. I couldn’t tell if he knew he was going to die that day, if he could sense that in a short time his life would be over.

As the rest of the work crew filed into the garage, I took some more abuse about my face, no one believing that it was me against two others. My nose was swollen, as was my lip, and the side of my face was scraped. On lunch break, I told Jack the full story, filled him in on what happened after he left – the drive back to her house, the strange music, that she had a daughter, the sex, leaving in the middle of the night, being chased by grown men and then getting jumped outside a gas station followed by the cab ride home. But I left out the part about the woman turning on me, questioning who I was, because at that time, I wasn’t sure of the answer.