

The Camper

Sometime in the night the camper exploded and the trees caught fire and burned like matchsticks. Ryan was inside and so was Ms. Vicky, Fletcher's mom. They both died. There was a funeral some days later but I wasn't allowed to go. Daddy said it was good that she had died because if she hadn't he would of killed her himself, and that burning alive was probably the easier way to go. We were thirteen, Fletcher and I.

She had moved to that plot not even a full year before in the early fall when school was just beginning. The air was still warm and the trees still clung to their leaves and the nights were muggy and still. Fletcher was allowed to visit his mom every other weekend and I would go with him— at first for some moral support, and then because it's all I wanted to do. Ms. Vicky would pick us up on Friday afternoons and we would drive out to the trailer off the highway and stay there until Sunday night when my mother would come to get me.

The woods were an Eden then. They were thick with saplings and briars and the ground was buried with rotten logs and anthills and leaves piled up to the ankle. We cleared them out in a month. The pitch that Vicky used to get Fletch and his little brother, Ben, and essentially me, to the house was a golf-cart she'd come about somehow, so we tunneled through the trees, diminutive roadmen with machetes and hatchets, cutting crude paths through the brush for our beaten-up cart.

One evening the dogs came, a small pack of pit bulls stumbling half-crazed by starvation through the woods. When we looked up they were stopped there and one of them growled and we all three turned and ran to the trailer and went up the rickety stairs by twos. When we got inside we saw that Ben had wet himself.

“Jesus Christ,” Fletcher said pointing to Ben’s crotch. “You pissed.” He looked down at the stain on his pants and then back up.

“It’s not funny faggot,” Ben said. “I was scared alright?” He flung his machete at Fletcher and the blunt side banged against his shins and onto the floor. “Don’t like no fucking dogs.”

“Hey,” Vicky said from the kitchen where she was cooking bacon. “Watch your mouth.” She was always cooking something. Ben turned to her and Fletch walloped him on the back of the head.

“Don’t be throwing no damn knives at me.”

We stayed in the house that night watching music videos on the little television. For a while Ms. Vicky sat on the red shag carpet cutting Fletcher’s father out of family pictures and putting them into frames and covering the paisley wallpaper with them. When it got late, she locked herself in her room as she often did and we pulled the mattress from out of the sofa and slept, all three of us together, beneath a quilt that smelt like dust.

The men always woke us when they left (never when they came) and in the mornings it would feel like a dream and we would forget. They would trip on something in the hall or drop one of their boots and we would look up and see him, whoever he was, and he would smile a black toothed smile and we would lay back down and the screen door would slam and we would sleep again.

My mother was leery to let me go over there when I asked her.

“Why doesn’t Fletcher come over here?” she’d say, but I’d wheedle and nag until she gave in. I’d say it was mother’s intuition, but looking back now, I see that there was little that she had to discern. It was all out there in the open.

After that run in with the dogs, Ben took to sitting in the windowpane with his pellet gun pumped up ten times over the limit. The first time they came through they spooked him, I think. He went to the kitchen to get a Pepsi and when he came back they were there on top of the trash cans, rummaging through the waste. He hiked up his pants and kicked the door open, screaming like a banshee and shot up amongst them.

“Damn man,” he said as he slammed the door and tramped back in through the living room. Fletcher and I were on the couch tossing a Nerf football back and forth.

“You get you one?”

“No.”

“Well, you sat there long enough.”

“I know it.” He sat down beside us and sipped on his Pepsi.

“You got to pick one out,” I said. “Pick out that big ugly one, the white one, he’s the leader. Line up your bead on his ugly mug and light him up. The other ones will get gone.”

“Boy can’t shoot,” Fletcher said.

“Shut up fat boy, I’ll shoot better than you.”

When the dogs came back again he was ready. He had the window cracked open and he’d been sitting there for an hour. By that time it was almost dark and Fletcher and I were watching the Braves game. I saw him bring the gun up out of the corner of my eye and I heard the pellet when it left the gun and I heard the dog yelp as the pellet lodged into its eye.

“Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. Momma!” He stood up and started pulling at his shorts and twisting his legs all around like his insides hurt. We got up and ran to the window and looked out. The dog was laying on its side muttering and kicking itself in a circle with its hind legs.

When we went out to him he was bleeding out of his eye and as we came up on him he stopped and started growling and foaming at the mouth.

“Good shot,” Fletcher yelled.

“Make him quit man, make him quit.” Ben cried from hunched over at the window.

“Momma!”

“Go in the house,” Fletcher said to me. “Quick. Moms got a pistol in her room.”

“Momma, Momma,” Ben cried out across the house, unable to move or take his eyes off the dog twisting in the dirt. I went inside and to Ms. Vicky’s room but the door was locked so I knocked but she didn’t answer. I waited and knocked again and still nothing. I went back outside.

“She ain’t answering.”

“Well, alright.” He spat and stood up tall and cocked his head and looked around like he always did when he was thinking.

“Please Fletcher, please just make him stop,” Ben called

“Would you just shut the fuck up, Ben?” He stood still for another minute thinking.

“Nate,” he finally said. “Go get me that cinderblock.”

“Nate, don’t do it,” Ben said. “Nate, I’m sorry.” I went and got the brick and took it back to where the dog was writhing around.

“Alright,” Fletch said. “Alright, I’m gonna do it.”

“Goddammit Fletcher, please, I’m sorry.” Ben said. He had his lips pressed out of the glass, “I’m sorry.”

“Shut up Ben. Just shut up.” He took the cinderblock and crept up behind the dog and I guess it could smell him because it started growling again. He inched up closer and closer until

he was in reach and then he brought the block up over his shoulder and smashed it down on the dog's head. Ben screamed, the dog whined and flopped on the dirt. Fletcher raised the brick up again and brought it down and the dog was still. There was blood on my legs and on Fletcher's hand. The window slammed shut and the trailer shook.

We buried the dog in the woods by flashlight and when we went back inside Ben was on the couch grinding his little knuckles into his hand, his face red and splotchy.

When Vicky finally came out of her room, she looked bony. She stopped.

"What's wrong Ben?" she asked.

"Nothing," Fletcher said.

Fletcher and I had been friends since the fifth grade. He was put on my baseball team and he came to practice late and they made me take him to the outfield and warm him up. He had a good arm, so I started chunking it back pretty hard, but eventually I let the grip slip on one and it drilled him on the bottom of his leg, right above his ankle.

"Dang," I said under my breath. "My bad man." He picked up the ball and slung it back to me.

"No worries," he said as he threw it back. After that we were friends.

I think he was always pretty aware of what was going on, at his mom's house and everything. The things he said and the way he acted, I think he knew. I was oblivious, just looking for a good time, but I think he knew we were straddling a pretty serious line all the time. I guess it was my upbringing that hid it from me, being from a white house with a fence out past the suburbs. Those kind of things didn't really happen. That's what we pretended anyway. And even if they did, it wasn't us, it was never us.

Things had a way of turning up around that old trailer in the middle of the night and staying there forever—it was like they were always there and we just hadn't ever noticed them—buckets full of tools, Xboxes, new baseball bats, the camper. All of it just appeared and stayed there forever. Ryan was the same way. He was a tall, lanky man with a smooth, beardless face. When he started hanging around Fletch said he knew him, said he'd just sprung out of jail, but I thought he was lying. He ate breakfast with us one morning around the table and none of us said anything but after that he acted like we were old friends. He brought us pizzas and Pepsis and DVD's when he came over in the evenings.

When the camper first appeared, Ms. Vicky said it was ours, said she'd gotten it for us from the salvage yard where she cut keys. She told us to clear a place in the woods and we could use it as a clubhouse. We spent one whole weekend readying the spot for it and when the next weekend came around we talked everybody in to letting us go back over there to set it all up. Everything was torn out of the thing except for the counter tops and the toilet in the back. We hung up Greg Maddux and Andruw Jones posters on the walls and propped lawn chairs up in the open spaces and we would sit out there in the evenings and talk and smoke stolen cigarettes.

Somehow Fletcher came about a thick stack of old porno magazines, like from the eighties with the women with real tits and hair all over their bodies. We would sit around in a circle and look at them and pass them back and forth until one of us finally learned how to jackoff and then we kept them in the bathroom in the empty toilet tank and went back there to look at them privately. Even Ben journeyed in there from time to time but I don't think he really knew what he was doing.

One afternoon after we'd smoked a couple of cigarettes we all got up and left the camper to go toss the football around and Ryan was waiting outside.

“Holy sheep-shit,” Ben said as he opened the door, grabbing his chest like an old woman.
“You liked to scare me.”

“Watch how you talk to me, boy,” Ryan said. Ben chuckled.

“Fletch,” he said and turned around. “Fletcher. You hear this Eminem looking fucker talk to me? He thinks he’s funny.” He winked and smiled at us, but when he turned back around, Ryan slapped him across the face. Ben ran his hand over his cheek and looked at it and then he ran up to Ryan him jumped and grabbed him around his neck, trying to choke him. The man laughed as he stumbled around.

“I warned you, boy.” Ben clawed at his face. I stood there frozen. I didn’t see Fletcher.

“You ain’t my daddy, bitch.”

“That ain’t what your momma says.” Ben started crying and screaming and beating at the man’s eyes. Ryan slung him down off of his shoulders into the dirt. “Little bastard.” My chest was swollen but I couldn’t move. He walked up to Ben and kicked him in the ribs and Ben howled and curled up tighter. Fletcher came out of the woods from behind me then with a golf club in his hands and he walked up to where Ryan was wiping at his face and swung the club like a baseball bat. It hit with a muted thud on the back of Ryan’s head and he fell down limp as a flower. Fletcher picked Ben up off the ground and carried him inside and I followed.

After that we weren’t allowed in the camper anymore. Vicky said it was Ryan’s idea to give it to us and if that’s how we were going to treat him, then we couldn’t use it anymore. They locked the door.

The woods turned into some kind of defanged bone yard. There was no underbrush and the big trees were all scarred and stripped of their bark from the golf cart and there were cigarette boxes and paper bags lying everywhere and the dogs had come back and dug up their dead and

strewn the bones all over the ground. We spent most of our time inside playing Xbox or watching music videos.

The day we found the pills was when everything went to shit, when our whole little operation got shut down. Fletcher and I were playing Grand Theft Auto on the couch and Ben was pacing around the trailer, handling everything in sight. He found the bottle somewhere and brought it to us to ask what it was. We didn't know the name that was on them but we found out they were oxycodone and we looked them up on the internet. After that Fletch and I decided to eat a couple. Ben tried to take them back but we took turns holding him down while the other took the pills. He got mad and went outside.

I didn't really feel anything at first but after an hour or so my jaws started vibrating and the walls began to move. We played Grand Theft Auto for five straight hours and then got tired really quickly. By ten o'clock the two of us were already sprawled out on the sofa bed staring at the ceiling fan. I could hardly hold my eyes open.

"I'm so tired man," I said.

"I know, I am too."

"But I don't want to sleep."

"No choice." We held still and the only sound was the fan and the TV blaring from behind Vicky's locked door.

"Fletcher, I'm kind of freaked out."

"Yeah," he said. "Me, too."

"I feel like if I go to sleep I might not wake up."

"I know." We were quiet for another minute.

"I can't fight it anymore," I said. "I'm so fucking tired."

“Go ahead.”

“Fletcher?”

“Hmm?”

“If I don’t wake up... I love you man.”

“I love you too bro. Now go to sleep.”

When I woke up it was late in the afternoon and I felt like I’d just been birthed. I rubbed my eyes and wiggled my fingers in front of my face. I couldn’t believe I was still alive. I woke Fletcher up and we ate another handful of the pills.

When Ms. Vicky figured out that we’d stolen the drugs, she was seriously pissed. I don’t know for sure how she found out it was us but I think Ben probably told her. He was always good in his core. But anyway, she was real mad, and so she called my mom and told her that Fletcher and I had stolen her medication and that she didn’t want me coming over anymore.

I didn’t see Fletcher for months outside of school. I didn’t leave my house. My dad whipped me harder than he ever had before and made me call Ms. Vicky and apologize. When she answered my voice began to shake and when I finished she laughed.

When my parents finally decided I had been punished enough, that I was human again, they let Fletcher spend the night over at our house. It was early May. We ordered Chinese food and my mom rented a movie and we all sat together in the living room around the television and ate off of TV trays. Fletcher sat rigidly the whole time like his backbone itched. He asked my mom before he got a drink of water. When the movie was over we went to my room and watched Sportscenter.

“How’s Mom’s without me?”

“Shit,” he said. “Complete shit.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know man, it just ain’t the same.” A highlight came on where a left fielder ran through foul territory and crashed over the wall and missed the baseball. “Ryan moved in, I told you that, didn’t I?”

“No.”

“Well, he did.”

“So what, he’s like your mom’s boyfriend or something?”

“No,” he said. “Definitely not. Mom said she don’t like him, he just needs a place to stay, she feels bad, you know?”

“Hmm.” The Braves highlight came on and we were quiet and then somebody knocked on the door. “Come in.” It was my Dad.

“What’s up fellas?” He came in and shut the door back behind him. “Y’all watching the game?”

“Highlight,” I said. “Game’s over.”

“Hmm.” He walked around the room, touching everything. He picked a book up off of the shelf and flipped through it, then set it down and picked up a baseball and then moved a little deeper into the room and pretended to study an old photograph. “So,” he finally said, “you boys doing alright?”

“Yessir,” we said.

“School’s going alright?”

“Yessir.”

“Well, that’s good.” He put the baseball down and turned around and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Fletcher, how’s your mamma? She doing alright?”

“Yessir,” Fletcher said. “She’s doing alright.”

“That’s good, that’s good. How about your Daddy? How’s my old buddy Todd doing?”

“He’s good, I guess.”

“Well, that’s good,” Dad said. He stood up and brushed at his pants legs. “You tell him I said hey, alright?”

“Yessir.”

“You boys be good now, okay? Try not to be too loud.”

“Yessir,” we said. He smiled and walked out and shut the door behind him. We sat there for a minute, quiet.

“Anyway,” Fletcher said. “It just ain’t the same there without you.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

That night when we got ready to go to sleep I got in the bed but Fletcher insisted on making a pallet on the floor. He put out quilts and a sheet and couple of pillows and then he turned off the light and took off his shirt and laid down and folded himself up in it. Laying there, I noticed on the tops of his shoulders these long lines stretching like X’s down his back. As I studied them and my eyes began to adjust to the light, I saw that they were bruises—long and yellow and muddled on the edges with purple and black. It made my chest hurt. After a minute or so I rolled over.

“Goodnight, brother,” I said. But he was already asleep.