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Walk Down My Soiled Love

Nineteen and married. It didn't seem real when I read the short note that Jill wrote on the reverse side of her graduation photo, the note I can still read despite how badly the ink has smudged these past two days. Truthfully, it hasn't sunk in, not yet.

*Reuben,*

*Sorry we haven't talked lately. Dave got wasted at Hannah Steward's grad party and lost my phone in the woods. Mom is mad, but the phone is under warranty so its whatever. How is your summer-term at SUNY IT going? I'm super pissed you didn't come back to see me btw. I have to tell you something though... I'm marrying Dave. It's crazy, but I love him and this just needs to happen and I want you to be a part of it. I'll text or call you soon.*

*Love,*

*Jill*

Dave is a decent guy. I just can't picture him as THE guy. He spends most of his free time on Craigslist looking up lift-kits for his truck and packing lips with the other GED kids from our high-school. If it came to a choice between the truck and Jill, it would surprise no one to see him ride away and leave her crying. Yet, he's the one. They've only been together two years. It's wrong and I have to tell her, because I love her too; more than Dave. I need Jill to understand.

After the sun sets, opaque yellow headlights light the way as I walk south. When I see that glow rising, throwing my shadow out before me, I step into the woods. I go deeper when I hear the throaty roar of a diesel engine. The men and boys driving those things are like Dave. They

subscribe to the twin gods of Christ and Coors, idols I renounced years ago in favor of Russian literature. When I found Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Nabokov; knew I couldn't stay in Oriskany Falls. People saw the heavy tomes and scoffed, even some of the teachers, and in turn I scoffed at them. The separation was complete. My love for the work of these men had no place in the land of God and guns.

I shoulder my backpack. Bottled water and energy bars bounce around lightly, my copy of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* clunks with its nine-hundred page heft. I reread the book about once a year. The sections with Levin and Kitty are my favorite because despite how difficult their struggles seem both find each other in the end. Jill read the novel, or at least pretended to listen while I read it to her. She hates Anna. In Jill's words, Anna Karenina is, "a snobby bitch who committed suicide, cause she couldn't get over people thinking she was a slut." I caught her wiping a few tears towards the end though. Dolly was her favorite character.

By midnight everything is heavy. There's a black mass of trees just fifty yards away; I know I can make it when high beams rise against my back illuminating the woods. I think to step off, but don't. It's late, nobody will stop. A truck passes me slowly. The driver is a big man, and looking at me. My stomach, now it's tight and those aches, they're all gone. Hitchhikers, people drifting around, they're the ones who die, butchered by serial killers cruising the roads.

"Come on, keep driving," I whisper as the truck slows then, "shit," when the devil-eyed taillights glow and approach me. The truck grumbles to a stop with a diesel growl; I don't know what to do. *Anna Karenina* is heavy for a soft cover; maybe I can crack the man across his forehead and run if he tries anything.

He steps out around his truck. Standing the man is even bigger. It was eighty degrees today, but he's wearing a green, long-sleeved Carhartt shirt, mud spattered jeans, and work boots; all that's missing is a cowboy hat. Yet, the man is baby faced, not even a touch of stubble to speak of.

"Who would you be?" he asks, leaning against his truck.

"My name's Reuben." I don't say more. Offer a last name and I'll be standing for an hour while he asks if I'm related to this person or that family in the narrow Central New York gene pool.

"You lose a bet on the Red Sox game or something?"

I shake my head.

"Then what are you doing out walking at 12:30? It's dangerous; you're not too easy to spot man." He squints at me. "Where you from anyways?"

"Oriskany Falls, I'm heading there now."

"How long you been walking?"

"Two days."

He jerks backwards and pushes his lips to the side looking all cockeyed. "You're shitting me. Two days in this heat? Someone drop you on your head as a baby? People've stroked out doing dumb stuff like that."

“I know it’s crazy, I just need to get back home. I’m trying to surprise my mom, tomorrow’s her birthday. I would’ve gotten a ride, but people up here gossip so much someone would’ve ruined the surprise.”

I smile, trying to sell my lie. I just want him gone so I can collapse in the woods and sleep.

“You want this to be one hell of a surprise.”

I nod.

“Have somewhere to sleep tonight, or you gunna rough it?”

I glance over at the woods and he follows my eyes.

“You want somewhere to crash, a chance to get showered up and clean for your mother? I’ll give you my couch if you’d prefer not sleeping with ticks and field mice. I’ve got work by Oriskany; I could drop you off in town.”

Just like that, my fright dissolves. Here is a chance to get to Jill sooner, looking human, instead of like some war refugee.

“Thanks a lot, a couch and shower sound great.” He opens up the passenger door and I jump in. The truck’s interior has an oily smell and the backseat is covered with tufts of dog hair. A blanket sits balled up in the corner, probably to minimalize the shedding; though it’s done little good. The man hops back in, shifts to drive, and slides onto the road.

Without a doubt he’s a country boy. The radio is locked on a top twenty country hits station, the soundtrack to my personal hell. He’s drumming his fingers along to a song about

Jesus, guns, the marines, loud trucks, hunting, and high school sweethearts, the true American dream. Jill started to listen to that garbage after she met Dave. Anytime I drove with her she subjected me to these songs.

He looks at me and smiles. “Not big on Jason Aldean?”

Aldean isn't singing, mercifully, there's just a twangy guitar solo brutalizing my ears. I don't tell him. It's his truck. What right do I have to change the radio? I shrug and he goes quiet, but just for a second.

“Shoot, you must think I'm a dick. You told me your name and I didn't tell you mine. I'm Mike, anyways.” Mike takes a hand from the wheel and both eyes from the road. I shake his gritty grease-stained hand and his huge fingers squeeze mine just a little too hard. As I flex my hand I realize Dave could be this guy in twenty years, at least from the handshakes. Judging from the lift in Mike's truck and the diesel fuel in his engine, handshakes aren't their only common point.

We pull into a doublewide trailer screened by lumbering pines. Every inch of siding is soft banana yellow and there's a small porch by the front door. As he fiddles with at least twenty brass keys, looking for the right one I hear barking.

“Watch out for Sierra, she likes to jump,” he says, jamming a key into the doorknob. With a twist and a shove he pushes the door open and a blur of black skitters onto to the porch. They wrestle together. She twists and growls, but Mike just rubs his knuckles across her forehead, jabbering and holding her tight.

I dance awkwardly when coal shard toenails come frightfully close to scraping my legs. He lets go eventually and Sierra blows watery snot over his pants before jumping on me. Mike pulls her off and shepherds me into his home while Sierra yips and sniffs our boots. The living room merges with his kitchen forming a big empty space devoid of much beyond a couch, leather chair, and TV set grouped together, and a creaking Maytag fridge shoved between some peeling countertops. Soiled rugs cover the dirty floor and where there isn't a rug bare plywood peeks up. Mike goes right to the fridge. He offers me a drink: water, Sprite, Pepsi, Kool-Aide and Budweiser are on tap. I go for the Kool-Aide while he takes a beer.

We sit down to watch SportsCenter. Mike reclines back in his black leather chair, while I take the couch. Sierra jumps up next to me and lays her square head on my lap.

"She's an affectionate damn dog," Mike says, cracking the seal on his Bud. He slurps the foam before taking a real drink.

We fumble for a few minutes, trying to talk about baseball. I only know what Dave's told Jill in my presence, all of which pertains to the Mets. When I ask *where* the Cubs play, more or less our conversation is over.

We lapse into comfortable silence, the baseball analysts filling the gap caused by our quiet. I notice Mike keeps looking down at a picture on his TV stand; his everyman mantelpiece. He's in the photo with two blonde kids covered in grime and green grease paint. Six ducks, dead in a row lie at their feet. The kids are beaming, flexing for the camera.

"Those your boys?" I ask.

He smiles. “Yea, took that picture about a year ago; ducks were flying like crazy all over the swamp.” He keeps smiling, chuckling at some private memory from the day.

Seeing Mike’s family causes me to drift into Jill. We were always together. When Dave showed up though we had to start making plans, scheduling times to hang out. I started to feel weird coming to her house unannounced, knowing he might be there, especially when Jill’s mom wasn’t around. When they were alone I felt the weight of what my visits probably interrupted smashing right into my sternum. Dave was never comfortable with me. I think he knows. When Jill hugged me, saying goodbye before I went to SUNY IT, he got red, just enough for me to notice. He knows I can knock him off his pedestal. I can elevate her out of the mire of his love. She is Kitty and I am Levin. Dave can be Vronsky and find love some other place.

Mike turns off the TV after a half-hour of SportsCenter and together we kick and smash his couch into a cot bed. It’s absolutely covered in dog hair. He tries to sweep some from the sheets until Sierra trundles across the bed, lying in the middle.

“Old bitch,” he says, rubbing Sierra’s nose. I follow Mike to a closet where he grabs a pair of pillows and a fuzzy Pokémon blanket. I feel weird about the blanket. His boys sleep with it. I don’t have the familiarity to use his children’s things, but he gives them without question so that’s how I end up taking them.

“I’ll get you up around 7 so you can shower and eat something; then we can get you down home to surprise your mom,” Mike says as he stands by his bedroom door.

“Thanks again, for everything,” I respond. I feel a bit guilty for lying, but it’s such an inconsequential lie, just a modification of who I’m walking to.

“It’s not a problem; shout if you need anything.”

He disappears into his bedroom and I settle myself in. Trying to move Sierra is useless, so I accept being pressed against the edge of our cot. She stretches, pushing me even closer to the edge. I’ll be bitten up by fleas when Jill sees me tomorrow. It’s still worth it though. I pat Sierra’s stomach, “goodnight you bed hogging dog,” I grunt before passing out.

A car door slams shut. The sharp pop snaps me awake. When I sit up my head collides with Sierra’s. “Fuck,” I hiss as she yelps and jumps off the cot.

“Stay,” Mike says. He’s standing by the door in sweatpants and a wife beater. His eyes, they’re closed like he’s bracing for something. Someone is coming towards the front door; he goes outside to meet them.

“What do you want, Beth?”

“You know what.”

“All my money, maybe my trailer?”

“I want Sierra.”

“What?”

“Stop playing fucking dumb! I want Sierra!”



“I don’t HAVE to give her to you; she’s my dog, bought in my name, in my god-damn home.”

“Bought for your sons. Cody cries he misses her so bad, Luke tells him to be tough, but it hurts him too.”

“They see her on visits.”

“That’s not enough.”

“And whose fucking decision was that? I was ok with equal custody. You cried all that bullshit in court. You don’t let them over here. Go back home. I have work in the fucking morning.”

I sit on the cot with the blanket pulled up around me; the covers almost over my head as I listen to the battle between Mike and the mother of his children. Mike sounds harsh, but I can hear the mangling his words cause, how much his actions hurt. The pain travels down to his footsteps. When he tries to return to his bed and dog Mike moves light, as if heavy steps offend the porch.

“You want to be a bastard, tell Cody Daddy loves Sierra more than him. You tell him that right now.”

Someone comes roaring off the porch, not Mike, not the nice guy who offered me a lift back home for my mother’s birthday. No, the meaty thump of flesh on flesh is feral, unreal. Cursing and peppery slaps follow, and then gravel spins as Mike’s ex-wife leaves.

He hit her. I look at Sierra. He did it to keep his dog; to avoid giving the truth to his sons. He punched her though.

Mike walks in, oozing blood from a shallow scratch across his cheek. I stare into him. I want Mike to look up so I can confront him. My insides are all boiled up as if Mike has suddenly become Dave and his ex-wife is Jill. There is no confrontation though. Head hung Mike just goes to the fridge. A six pack still in its webbing comes out and Mike settles into his recliner.

“Sorry you had to hear all that.”

He turns on the TV and cracks the first beer. Shaky button clicks send Mike to CMT, cycling through videos about country ethics and masculinity, family and love. He drains the can and throws it against the screen. Little droplets of foam scatter like a watercolor. He pulls another free, but still won't look up. He just sits, listening to his songs and drinking.

Sierra waddles to his side. She sets her head on his lap and Mike's eyes open. Something about how he looks at Sierra, it makes me nauseous. It's not what I see, but what I feel passing from him into her that makes me uncomfortable. I feel in him for Sierra what I feel for Jill.

“You gonna be ok man?” I ask, possessed by urgency; this fucked up feeling of kinship with Mike and his predicament. His eyes close; he's focused on the music and the stories about simple country happiness. Tolstoy, I didn't think you could ever find union with the world of poor white trash, but when you said every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, were you talking about people like Mike? His life, how different is it from melancholy stories of your love-sick Russians?

“No, probably not,” Mike says, pulling me from my thoughts. “I don't know when everything stopped making sense, it just happened. You're a good guy, but Reuben you don't know what this feels like, you're too young.”

I exhale slowly and nod. *I love a girl named Jill, that's why I was walking earlier tonight. I know what you're feeling. Its love that makes no sense but without it you know you'll die, so you hold onto it no matter who you need to hurt, even yourself. I know your pain I feel it too.*

I don't say that. I can't. I'm ending an engagement, destroying the happiness of someone I say I love. My goal is totally selfish, terribly different from Mike's punch but terrible in its own form. I stay silent and watch him drink. Together we listen to the music. His eyes close, but seep tears. Sierra licks his hand and he massages her square head to some man crooning about his dead wife and government taxes.

When the cops come, they arrive suddenly. A set of headlights beam through Mike's windows followed by red and blue flashes. Mike hangs his head and groans. Sierra is at the door barking so I grab her.

"I'm sorry I fucked up your mom's birthday."

"It's ok," I say, as the police officer gives a firm knock on the front door.

Dawn, and I'm in Waterbury. The county court and jail are in Waterbury. I'm forty minutes from Jill, an accidental player in a mundane tragic romance between a man and his dog. They want to take my statement. I try not to incriminate Mike, but without lying it's difficult not to. Afterwards, I pass down the Plexiglas cells caging the night's haul of drunks, thieves, whores, dealers, and Mikes. He's at the end, sitting on a solid oak bench with his head bowed. I think about tapping the glass and saying goodbye, but stop. I'm just a guy he met and shared maybe

six terrible hours of life with. What can I tell him? Good luck? I hope everything works out? Instead I walk away from the holding tanks and don't look back.

In the main lobby Sierra is yipping and jumping over two boys. They've filled out a bit and gotten haircuts. A short, middle aged woman watches. She seems haggard, and has a black eye. There are traces of attractiveness though. Ten years ago she might have been a good looking woman, beautiful with a big stomach and one of those boys inside. Fifteen, twenty years ago she could've been prom queen. Mike would've made a good king back then. I wonder if they met at prom. Did he take her virginity in the back of a truck while they drank beer? Did they sit by a bonfire until he got too drunk and had to go puke in the woods? She probably helped him so his tuxedo didn't get ruined. Maybe both happened, maybe neither. She's looking at me now trying to fit me somewhere. She knows Mike was picked up with another man; she can't place me in a bar or grocery store or anywhere in Mike's life.

Try as you will it won't ever be clear who I was. I'm just like Mike though, trying something stupid and self-destructive because I can't let go, because of the love I want to have. You probably can't remember the love you had for Mike, but it's the love he has for Sierra, probably what he once had for you before life intervened and destroyed his idyllic existence. That's all I am, so no worries. You won't ever see me again.

I've returned to Oriskany Falls. It's less a return and more a lurch. I personify inertia. The village is quiet; everyone is at work or passed out because of the heat. I draw closer to Jill's house. Twangy strains of music shimmer out of the blacktop carrying the scent of chicken and ribs. A backyard barbeque. Dave's jacked up Ford is in the driveway. I smile because I know I'm

about to fuck his day up. The hush that follows me into Jill's backyard is noticeable; even the spare ribs tone their crackling to a whisper. There's a cooler full of water and ice. I grab a fistful of ice and suck down the frozen liquid before collapsing on a picnic table.

"Hey," I croak at my never-held-lover. She's across from me right now, her hands are over her mouth, and both eyes are moist.

Don't cry. This is love, the only way I can show you.

"Reuben, how?"

"Walked," I say. Jill shudders, and the screen door slides open, "Hey Dave." I'm happy seeing him look dumbfounded with plates and a bowl of salad in his hands, him and his shit ugly beard and yellowed teeth. I shiver; the icy water just gave me a headache. Jill's at my side holding a bottle to my cracked lips. She's cradling me, tipping my head back.

"I love you." The whisper escapes my lips at last. Her eyes widen and she strokes my forehead gently. Her breathing's become heavy. She gets up and goes over to Dave. Jill's getting him to leave; oh god, she's glowing. He goes, but not without a backwards glance at me.

"How are you doing?" Jill asks, sitting down with both hands on her lap and the whine of Dave's truck fading in the distance.

"Better," I say.

Things are slowing down, turning more concrete. I really needed that water.

"I wish you hadn't done this."

"I had too. I can't let you do this to yourself. I love you."

“I’m doing what’s right, I love Dave.”

“How is this right?” I ask.

“Reuben.” She sighs my name and cradles my hand, “It just is.”

Our hands rest on her stomach. Jill works out; her stomach has been smooth since I started loving her. I can feel the stretched skin, that subtle bump burning through my hand.

“You don’t need to save me.”

My hands falls as every bone melt and my whole body sags. How? How is this it? She let him do this to her? Did she really want this, so early?

“I’m sorry,” Jill whispers, she’s crying, collapsed into my arms. I want to punch her stomach, kill the abomination growing in her. I can’t though. Somewhere in my mind I’m screaming, terrifying Jill for ruining herself like this. None of it comes out, because I love her. It’s sickening me already, the thought of hurting the baby in her womb, the child growing from half her genes.

She is my Anna Karenina, carrying an illegitimate baby of a man I hate, yet one she loves. Dave is Vronsky, but I’m not Levin, no I’m just Anna’s husband, stumbling around, pitifully on the margins of the story. I can’t do a thing, I never could. Symbolic actions and pilgrimages can’t triumph over a baby poisoning the womb of Jill, my Anna Karenina, my soiled lover. I hold her tight, swallowing the waves of rage and sadness chewing through my heart.

“I’m going to be a great mommy for this baby.”

“I know you will,” I whisper while Jason Aldean serenades us in the afternoon sun.