

HOME FROM HALF MOON LAKE

Peter Orner

When I'm sinking from all this, and I'm often sinking from all this, I think of the story you tell about the drunk fraternity moron who jacked up your window at two in the morning and barfed. Some big blonde oaf stumbling into the third floor room of his economics professor's high school daughter, muttering how he was going to fix Doctor Asshole now. Grabbing you with sweaty hands. How you ran shrieking downstairs, and your Dad went up to your room with a baseball bat and a catcher's mask, but by that time the goon was gone. Rattled down the fire escape to freedom. How your father didn't believe you until you described the guy down to the Greek letters on his shirt, groping hands, and mustard breath.

I think about the seven cats who used to roam around your old house, the farm house you grew up out in Ortana, Pennsylvania. How one day a car ran over two of the cats in one shot and your mother ran out into the street, pointed at the flattened cats and instead of crying, broke down laughing and said those two always were inseparable like two peas in a pod, the fat gray one and the little thin Tabby, like Abbott and Costello, your mother said. And the painter who lived in the barn behind the house and did huge paintings of birds he'd never seen using pictures from an Encyclopedia Britannica. How you and Sarah used to watch him pace for hours, kicking petrified pig shit, muttering to himself. Like an artist, you said. You said he was what he was. Nobody great - but that he was the real thing and that if he kept at it, one day he would be good - and sure enough he's in New York now doing exotic bird murals for 2500 dollars a pop.

And your neighbor, the alcoholic astronomer, lying on his back in your yard with a telescope and a bottle of Jim Beam, raging at the clouds about his ex-wife and the 14 moons of Jupiter.

I think about your father's '57 Ford Falcon convertible collecting dust under lawn furniture and storm windows in the garage waiting for him to get excited about it again - as he does every couple of years - and clean it up and drive around the neighborhood, honking and waving like a politician in the

Fourth of July parade.

Your high school boyfriend. He had a van with orange shag in the back. He was decent and simple and he loved you and when I met him at the bike shop he shook my hand way too long, and looked straight at my forehead like I was a priest.

And the story of your parents' wedding in Cincinnati. How both your mother's mother and your father's mother refused to sanctify the union of an Irish Catholic girl and an anarchist Jew by attending the ceremony so they sent their respective husbands. Your mother's stoic white-haired father, standing near the alter with his hands clenched, his face a ruddy, healthy red. Your father's father, a kibitzer, a tiny wisecracking Vaudevillian named Marty who kept pointing to your mother and saying - She's a beautiful girl, a beautiful strawberry girl, for Christ's sake. What's all the fuss? Why the dissension over a strawberry girl?

And I think of your third floor room in your parents' house on Broadway Street in Gettysburg, the one your father rented after you all got evicted from the farm house. Your room. Your books. They line the low shelves. Musty paperbacks with white creases down the bindings. I know every single one of them. V.S. Naipaul, Dorris Lessing, Noam Chomsky, the Autobiography of Malcolm X. Walden II. Raise High The Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour an Introduction. All those books you read and read until your senior year of high school when you discovered Russians. The huge endless tomes that went on and on and on and you'd sit up in your room in that wicker chair deep in Brothers Karamazov and then go out with your friends and get stoned in the field by the rocks where Major General George Pickett's men began their suicidal charge.

About the day the landlord came over while we were making love and jammed his finger into the buzzer like he knew what we were doing up there and from the window I could see the top of his head as I pushed and pushed and you said - Finish - Fuck - I think it's the landlord. And we led him downstairs to the basement to show him the structural defects your father had called to complain about. Your neck the crimson and red delicious red it always is after sex. How I pinched your ass and you jumped halfway across the basement and told him that you felt a bug on your head. How he gruffed and said, no damn insects down here, and he knelt down and felt the crack along the wall and mumbled something about water damage from the flood of '74.

Of course there is more. There will always be more. Think of Starved Rock, Illinois. Think of the basement room at 832 Church Street #1 and me creeping out the back porch door in the dead of every morning so your roommates wouldn't know I was living there permanently. Think of posing on the hood of my Ford Granada at Half Moon Lake, Michigan, and wrapping your legs around the hood ornament and swinging your head down past the bumper and laughing as the old ladies in loose flowered shirts wagged their heads. Think of the lightning storm on the beach at Nkhata Bay, the thunder cracking above our heads like God was choking and you said, now I know we're gonna die.

Think of the Motel 6 in Ypsilanti, Michigan in the summer of 1990 when

you said, I'm happy here. We can live here. And you moved some pictures around, shoved the bed under the window, tossed the Bible out the door, and said something would have to be done about them lipstick marks on the wallpaper, but other than that it's home. Ours, you said, and yanked the bedspread off the bed so that it floated in the air for a moment before landing, rumpled, filthy, on the carpet at your feet.