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E. J. Graff

ARE WE NOT MEN?

SOME MOMENTS anyone would regret, although not all of us for the same reasons. After my mother calls and tells me my childhood friend Paul is dead, I head downtown, shooting all the betrayal and loneliness I can find, and then stay up till dawn seeing what develops, the chemicals burning my eyes and throat. How can you justify having been a stupid, meat-hearted boy?

I'm in the passenger seat, Paul's in the driver's seat. Moonlight clung to Paul's linebacker forearm as he shoved Jenkins' foot away from his headrest. "Keep your filthy feet to yourself."

"Filthy? Mr. Headbreaker calls *me* dirty?" As Jenkins sprawled in the back, he stuck his foot through the gap between our seats, wriggling his toes through his sneaker's hole. Outside, trees roared by in the dark, black on black.

"Shut up, you jerks." I threw gravel at Paul's shoulder, which he ignored. Since I had suggested Jenkins as Paul's math tutor, I decided it was my job to keep them from killing each other. Which I found very funny, considering how I felt that night. I reached under the seat and offered them the bottle.

A sly look slid across Paul's face. "Paper cups in the back."

Once, back in the lost territory of elementary school, Paul and I had been the Dynamic Duo, pantsing girls in the pool's deep end, piloting Apollo capsules through the moonscape of the cow pastures, fighting over who got to be Neil Armstrong and who had to be Buzz. Then came junior high, his famous jaw, his cool grin. We drifted. "Why, he's a regular Greek gawd," Jenkins once whispered scornfully as Paul smiled his subterranean smile at a cheerleader talking about the team's candy sales. Paul's Big Jock thing never bothered me the way it did Jenkins—Jenkins, a consolation prize of a friend, walking like a question mark from his locker to class. I had no intention of telling him—or anyone—that, two weeks ago, my father had moved out, or that the inside of our house felt knee-deep in snow, my mother and baby sister stumbling from room to room like wooden dolls.

Except I might someday tell Moira, who yesterday had put her multicolored fingernails on my jacket as we left the school newspaper office. Later, when I called her for the French homework, we ended up talking for hours, her hurry-up voice turning to a horse's laugh, lowering to a prickle down my spine. We talked about things I never talked about before. When we sat silently, unable to hang up, she said, Now we've gone and told our mountaintop dreams, our anti-gravity dreams. Afterwards I forced myself not to jerk off. I snuck outside and walked past the yellow porchlights. As dawn edged up the half-bare trees, I shivered on the back porch and thought about her getting out of bed as I escorted my little sister to her busstop. Instead of going to homeroom we sat on the back stairs. She read my palm, her finger on my skin a terrible shiver, interrupted by the bell.

At the bell, Paul prowled up the stairs. He spotted us, and his black eyebrows crooked slightly higher. He put his paw on her hair. She looked up into his eyes.

Now I tossed more gravel at his jaw. He gave me his patented look of disgust, a look as far away as Mars. "Grow up, Meyers. What about that bottle?"

Jenkins made glub-glub noises as I poured. Over my shoulder he added Pepsi to the cups, spilling some down my neck.

Pump it up! growled the radio. We roared at the top of our lungs, Paul pressing the pedal so we surged with each beat: *Pump it up! Until you can feel it! Pump it up! Though you don't really need it!* Jenkins air-guitared along with the plunging bass line.

The Nova's lights made a smooth sweet blur. We crossed the Kemp Road bridge, over the culvert where my older sister and I used to trap crawdads, a hundred years ago, before she escaped off to college. As the Nova took the bridge, the world lifted up warmly like a wave, and came back down like a roller coaster. Overhead the stars smelled like rotting leaves and manure, blurry behind the shifting clouds. It reminded me, I couldn't say why, of the heartbreak movies my older sister and I used to watch, late nights, waiting for my father to come home from his business trips, saying nothing as we fell asleep in our chairs. It made me want to call Moira.

"Get him back in here," someone said. I felt someone dragging me, replacing the smeared clouds with the tattered plastic of the car roof.

It ain't necessarily so, whined Bronski Beat's falsetto. Jenkins pounded the door to keep time, Paul pounded the wheel. The car door held me in as we served into a plat. Ranch houses and split-levels slept behind driveway lights.

"Mail box! Mail box! Mail box!" shouted the back seat, and Paul swatted him to shut up. Gravel crunched under my shoes. One, two, three, heave, and the mailbox snapped off. Jenkins cheered, hairy fist shooting up, and Paul shoved his hand over Jenkins' mouth so hard they staggered, so hard I gasped for a minute at what looked like but couldn't be Jenkins biting back, until they both ran to the next one, Paul's crowbar alongside me and one, two, three, the box came into my hands this time, mottled black and white like a cow. I banged on the corrugated metal and howled. Paul shoved me back into the car, Jenkins standing on the edge like a running board, fist pumping the air, until we pulled him in.

Next street over, one, two, three, heave, we got a miniature covered wagon, bleached canvas over its top. One, two, three, an ordinary black box slamming open. In back they piled up at angles.

"We'll get all the mail in the world!" I reached into one box, pulling out an imaginary letter from Moira, waving it right in Paul's face.

I woke parked on a ridge, high above the base airfield, starry stripes of light blinking in the dark.

"Hey. Dudes." My voice echoed in the car, alone. I stepped out, queasy, as dirt clods slid under my feet. My shoes slipped toward thorn bushes that scrambled up the cliff, but I kept walking the edge. Unzipping, I sprayed into the wind over the decaying leaves.

The rocks I threw over the cliff left no sound in the bushes and hollows, so I searched for bigger ones, mulch grubbing my fingernails. Stumbling among the skinny trees, I found a big white rock. It was a sneaker.

When I finally looked, a long moony body was half-shivering under a tree. Another person strained behind him, shadowy among the half-leaves. What might have been a familiar jaw pressed against the other's neck. The low howl of the wind shivered with what couldn't be grunts.

I blinked until I had double vision, as if we were tripping instead of drinking. I wanted my camera, so I could frame this in one place and force it to make sense. Of course I was wrong, these bodies in the trees could not be my friends. Any minute now Paul would appear. If he saw

this he'd want to bash the queers; I'd have to talk him out of it. Or would I?

The air base shivered in the dark. Time started up again, my heart jackhammering my chest. The day my father sat me down and told me he was in love with a woman who was not my mother, it was like someone took a scissors to the sky and started ripping the pieces apart. I couldn't even breathe. He stared at his palms and started to cry, a thin sound that frightened me more than anything I'd ever heard.

The mailbox was in my hand before I remembered walking back to the car. There came back a soft thunk—not nearly enough—and wind whistling in the teeth of the trees.

“Benjy boy! Back among the living? Did we have a nice nappy-poo?”

“Hey dude. Long time no see. Too bad we smoked all the weed.”

I made my fingers into a camera and click-click-clicked on Jenkins' sneakerless foot, a twisted sock coated with leaves. “Evidence,” I said.

He squinted at me, his eyes flicking over to Paul. They watched while I leaned in the car window, pulled out his other sneaker, and dangled it high in the air. Nobody breathed.

How often do you have the power to decide somebody else's life? Maybe the future spins around us like a spider web, like the black-lit highways and shuddering runways pointing the three of us to so many possibilities beyond Beaver creek, beyond Ohio, routes more complicated than they seemed. What if I *had* exposed them to the high school's ridicule, spreading rumors, posting polaroids in the cafeteria, ending with guys beating Paul up in the locker room, hooting *faggot* as he passed them in the halls, like they did, later, with Jenkins? My wife would recoil if she knew I had these thoughts, my wild-hearted wife, who before me had mostly women lovers, as if this were a joke on me by God, thinking I don't know how much she sometimes longs for women again, how thinly she is tethered to me. Would Paul have married his girlfriend to prove everyone wrong? Probably not. But maybe, if he felt it wasn't a secret any more, maybe he wouldn't have moved to San Francisco, where, my mother tells me, he died? Maybe he would've lived more like Jenkins, who shot straight through MIT into Bell Labs, like he had something to prove, and who—rumor has it—now lives with another man. Alive.

Or maybe I should've done the other thing—let Paul know he was my friend, instead of fading into the newspaper and yearbook crowd, pretending I didn't know him or Jenkins, either one?

Jenkins' skinny arms were squeezing his T-shirt tight, as if holding his ribs in place. Paul's eyes were edgy with something I'd never seen. Not for weeks did I realize it had been fear.

I tossed Jenkins his sneaker, like a stinking fish. "Keep this asshole away from Moira."

As I slid into the back seat, letting Jenkins sputter about being forced up front, in my mouth were words I wanted never to say: *Homos. Faggots*. Jenkins leaned over the headrest, staring at me like I was the quiz. Paul glanced at me in the rearview and glanced away, fingers drumming the steering wheel. Gravel crunched under the wheels as we backed down the hill. When the bottle rolled toward me under the seat, I took the final swig, turned belly down, and clicked open the door. The white stripe rushed under me. My finger on the asphalt was almost flammable.

Someone grabbed my shirt and pulled me back in, almost strangling me as the car shuddered to a stop. I jerked away and stumbled out. Moonlight scraped the corn stubble like a bad shave.

Paul closed my hand around a mailbox. He pointed to the asphalt's black edge crumbling into dirt. "There's the line." Behind us paced an alien body, a wild-haired pod person inhabiting someone who'd last week said he was my best friend, now chanting a countdown: "One. Two. Three. Throw!"

Our mailboxes smashed into the broken rows. Paul's tumbled a few feet beyond mine, its flapping tongue banging the field. Metal echoes flushed wings from a rotting barn, bats making their agitated way who knew where. Moira said she was going to learn to fly, she wanted to find her way through the sky by the numbers, her own hand on the throttle. You be my parachutist, she said, I'll drop you back to earth.

"Loser," I said to Paul, my hand out to shake. His grip was fierce, our usual joke, as if to wrestle me to my knees. I shook him off like a dustrag. His black eyes kept shifting back and forth between mine, trying to see what I knew. Behind him headlights exploded into life, the

beam erasing his face into a black blur haloed by dust.

I decided I didn't give a shit what they did. I started walking home, although we were at least ten miles from my house. When they pulled up alongside me, throwing open the door, yelling at me not to be a fucking asshole, I ran jeering alongside them through the roadside ditch, framing my fingers and clicking like some lunatic paparazzi, until they disappeared.