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Field Trip

Jonathan Vanballenberghe

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Field Trip

The troubled girls were always aroused the week before their report cards came out. They flashed their tongues when smiling and laughed in ways I'd never heard before, using sounds almost as deep as those which make up my voice. They must have known I'd already sketched on every face a letter invisible to all but me, B's and C's mostly, except for Deborah's F. She had been mangled in a dune buggy accident and was always missing school for another surgery. Her scar tissue gradually lessened; her F remained. But Tracy was beautiful, beautiful, and she was poking my stomach while her fellow tenth graders left to go home.

"Flat as a door," she said.

"Don't do that."

"Yep."

"Stop it."

"If you let me erase the board."

Stepping sideways and leaning on the chalk shelf with one hand, she began wiping my notes away in miniature swipes that took a long time to travel the board. I let her do what she wanted. Her mother was in jail.

"Let's chat," I said.

"Sure," and she showed me her arm. Had I noticed the scrape on her elbow? "I thought it would sting," she said. "But it's fine." The red cracks were crisscrossed with finer cracks that glistened. "I snagged a fence when running from the grocery man."

A chubby student walked in asking for his backpack; we didn't acknowledge him.

"Why were you running?"

Tracy waited for the door to shut. "I stole a sandwich. I've got to eat, don't I?"

She shifted her weight while leaning away from and into her erasing, and I watched her hips and wondered whether they were boney from malnutrition or because she was still going through puberty, and I wondered why she chose to linger and assume cleaning chores with me. A cry for advice? I gave advice awkwardly back then, stum-

bling and recanting, likening myself to the awkward teachers who acted in the teaching videos we watched during staff meetings. But Tracy was beautiful.

"Listen," I said. "Make a friend of school. You're talented. Your essays always have images that move the class. And me."

"Yeah," she said, picking at her scab. "My mom has a bigger scab. She got it in Santa Cruz when a man hit her with a hatchet. It's on her hip, but she shows everyone."

"Your mom got her hip chopped?"

"She's a drug dealer. The man told her that her smile had poison in it."

I suggested she write her stories down, but she shook her head. "Can I sweep?"

"What do you want to be, Tracy—a janitor?"

"No, I want to be a Marine." Standing erect she held the broom to her side like a ceremonial sword. "Can you guess why?"

"I don't know. Exercise? Adventure?"

"That's not what excites me."

"What excites you?"

"They get to gun people down."

I had a habit of trying to envision everyone's future. Schools encourage it. The speculative members of the yearbook club; the hallways lined with class photographs which the janitor dusts and centers and points at, saying, "Look at you this year"; and the college counselor with her questions about the *after life*: college. Watching Tracy sweep, I imagined she would someday be a beautiful Marine, someone in combat for me, and I felt strange to be supervising while she gathered the hairy gum and chewed erasers on the floor of room 7. I imagined her learning how to detect mines and use a compass and plan attacks, busying herself with exciting combat activities but growing increasingly lonely. That loneliness, I wondered: could it be prevented by the right kind of advice?

Not every student was worth worrying over. Overall, my students were cruel and unimaginative. I admit that I, too, was unimaginative. We all blamed our lousy attitudes on things outside ourselves. They thought their parents and friends and wardrobes kept them dull. As for me, I blamed the architecture. Room 7 was one of those portable units near in size to a storage shed, with a brown stain on

the ceiling where the cold air blasted. Through the thin walls I'd hear the principal's heels on the pavement, the horns from the truck stop, and parents insulting their children after school.

But Tracy was beautiful.

I had been used to finding comfort in a smaller image: a roadrunner. I'd see it through the sliding glass door in the back of the room. A tenth grade boy would call his girlfriend a titless whore, or two or three students would burp my lecture out of existence, so we'd have a shutdown, where the slightest utterance earned Saturday school. Suddenly the bird would appear in the burning sunlight, beak straight as a spear and glinting eyes on task, his tail the length of his body and pointing to the sun. By the time I detested even the good kids and my temples matched the purple of Deborah's scars, I was not a teacher. Without poise, you can't be. But there was the bird. The fanned wings with which he stirred prey were unpretentious and unashamed, as were the talons he sharpened on the wet pebbles after rain. He chased cats and rodents from his living space. While the children grinned vainly at each other, through the glass the bird and I saw one another face to face. I knew his breast had been jabbed by scores of thorns on the old mesquite tree.

"Do you have any Windex?" Tracy had finished sweeping.

"Let's not mess with that door."

"So you want me to leave?" she asked.

I didn't. Her hungry face would have gotten into my dreams, a mouth saying *you did not feed me*. Although it made her a little uneasy, I convinced her I was allowed to take her off campus for a snack.

"Isn't there a form or something?"

"Who cares? You've got to eat."

There was a strip club behind the school, and in its parking lot Tracy paused and rearranged the Velcro on her shoes. She could not get it right. She peeled back and placed the fabric many times. I caught the shaded eyes of a dancer smoking in the darkness under an awning. "Hurry up, Tracy." We heard her ash sizzle in the cloudy puddle between us.

Tracy stopped at the other end of the parking lot, jumping to spit her gum into the dumpster. Many weeks and several garbage trucks had passed since I tossed in the grocery bag full of ungraded papers,

but I worried they were still inside, visible on top around the rotting pizza and hamburgers the strippers had abandoned.

I had never wanted children of my own, but I would have adopted Tracy that day. At the Vietnamese restaurant she tried my favorite squid dish, made a pepper shaker disappear with her napkin, gazed at me in her soup, turned solemn all of a sudden, bounced back as quickly, and speculated about consciousness.

"It's intense," she said, knocking her fortune cookie open with the handle of her knife.

"What's that?"

"You know. This, being alive. Like I say in the poem I gave you." It was a few pages about a night during the monsoon season. "But that wasn't just poetry," she said. "It was real, the rain happened. I was on the roof with my ex-boyfriend. We were soaking wet, our hair and clothes, and our bodies."

I nodded.

"And that's when I realized how to define being alive. It's hot, wet, pounding rain, with no exit sign."

"Yes." I was ready to affirm everything. Any poetic thought sounds valid when Vietnamese music is playing.

When I paid at the counter, the host told us we made a nice couple.

We walked the long way back, leaving the strip club hidden behind two giant sycamores. I didn't want any parents spotting us there.

We stood in front of the school without talking and watched the janitor lower the flag and unfasten it from the long ropes and drop it unfolded into a container on his pushcart.

I don't know why, but I told her I'd like to meet her guardian. "Today," I said. "Before the report cards go out on Monday."

"My sister? But what did I do?"

"You're talented. I just want to make sure she knows. We'll take my car."

"I was going to take the four o'clock bus."

"Shoot, Tracy. How long does that take?"

"Something like an hour."

"I can drive you in half the time."

Occasionally the bubbles on the answer sheet float off the page and burst, the chalkboard executes any word you scrawl on it, the educational video spits a black tongue out of the scuffed machine. No one's learning. You are a baby sitter called a teacher, but unlike a sitter, you're not allowed to say "shut up." I graded most of my nights away. I answered "cooped up" when people asked how I was doing. And then I was with Tracy driving through the desert with the prickly pears blooming and the air pollution holding gold light in the sky, a sky with enough room for falcons, airborne seeds, and hot air balloons.

We even saw a suffering creature and pitied it together. Scrawny, standing in the middle of the dirt road we'd just pulled onto, a free-range cow was breathing through the cactus thorns that crowded her nostrils. Gnawed by something with sharp teeth, whether barbed wire or mountain lion, her tail was too short to disturb the flies that had colonized her matted back and festering haunches.

"That's the most wretched thing I've seen," I said. "Let's watch her a moment."

"She's in pain."

"You don't think she's numb by now?"

"Would you be numb?"

"Maybe." I had been numb for entire semesters.

We continued on the dirt road and after a short while every road sign we passed was pierced with bullet holes, the four-inch black cows splotched with sky and mountain, the miniature tractors spotted with cacti.

"We're close," Tracy said.

The road dipped and came to a dry wash. On the other side we drove up a rocky hill. When we reached the top I saw a man wearing so much dust that parts of him blended into the desert. He must have heard my tires breaking up dry ground, but he didn't look back at us. Slightly limping, he was pushing a motorcycle.

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll just pass him. Roll up your window. Lock your door."

But she quickly leaned out to him.

"Bit it hard," he yelled.

She told me to stop.

"You know that guy?"

"Jed's my sister's boyfriend."

By the time I stepped out of the car she was hugging him tenderly and kissing the places on his arms and cheeks where the road had opened him. He was a small man and Tracy did not have to strain to peck his face, but she stood on her toes anyway. Perhaps he made her feel small. He kept his hands on the motorcycle and received the kisses without acknowledging them.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

His hand was too scraped for me to shake. Tracy explained that I was her English teacher and I wanted some kind of conference.

“But are you all right?” I asked. “You were limping.”

He stared at Tracy as though trying to interpret how much she liked me. But she wouldn’t face him.

“I’m not concerned with me!” he snapped. “Observe the state of my goddamn wheels!”

“Are they—is it beyond repair?”

“Does it appear to you that I’ve got the funds for that?”

I couldn’t tell where he picked up his dialect. Everything he said sounded like a mixture of poverty and Princeton. I couldn’t decide how to speak to him.

He sighed and gradually relaxed a little and brushed the dirt from his red mustache. At Tracy’s suggestion we lifted his motorcycle into the back of my station wagon. I helped him remove his shirt, and the three of us drove away.

He said he had gone to college. Yale, in fact. In fact, he had studied English. “But in the end, a classroom’s just four walls and a ceiling. Yep. I’m a little wiser today, and I’ll tell you why. I was catching air off the top of that hill. It feels like you’re flying. But my balance was off that last time, and I knew it soon as I left the ground. Those pre-accident epiphanies exist. That’s what I’m talking about. Insights coiled tight like a pissed rattlesnake. Like your large intestine. Right before crashing I had the metaphysical opposite of a smash. Everything shot out far away from me. I saw my memories floating ten feet ahead. You have to agree, Teacher, that it was educational.”

I didn’t answer.

“But my goddamn wheels,” he added.

“How will you get to work?” I asked.

Tracy winced.

Jed laughed and said, “That’s humorous.”

He directed me to a lot without a mail box or visible address. The area had an odor I couldn't place, smoky, but sweet, too. In the center of the dirt lot was the old Airstream trailer in which they lived: Jed, Tracy, and Kath, Tracy's older sister. Kath walked out yawning.

"I bit it, Baby." Jed was about to put his arm around her.

"Wash your hands before you touch me," she said. Behind her the shine of the aluminum walls was filmed over with mold and mud, but she made him wash his hands. He was limping and Kath was concerned with getting dirt on her skin. I suppose living in cramped quarters leads one to construct exaggerated personal boundaries. I found it strange, then, that before she knew the first thing about me and how I knew her sister, she invited me inside. While the others unloaded the motorcycle from my trunk, I was given a tour.

In shape and content, the Airstream resembled a tool box, the long kind without any trays or drawers. There was a circular saw in the shower, files and blades on the kitchen floor, used sandpaper in heaps on the heater, and in all corners measuring devices and cutting instruments I don't know the names for. Apparently Kath had collided with them many times. Her arms had cuts up and down. Her clothes were scratched, too. She wore an undershirt with many holes, a few of them very near the areas over which certain magazines place black dots.

When we were crammed between the sink and the linen closet, she said, "Tracy's sweet. And real pretty."

"I like her very much."

"How much would that be?" She was staring at me.

"I'm her English teacher. I came out here—"

"Without calling."

"The school doesn't have your number."

"We don't have a phone," she said.

What game were we playing? "I'm sorry, Kath. I just thought we could discuss how Tracy is doing in school."

She dropped her head forward and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. "Talk to Jed," she said. "I'm tired." She settled into a bean bag and waited for me to leave.

Outside Jed was kneeling beside his motorcycle in the center of a blue tarp he had spread and covered with tools.

“He could help us,” Tracy said, retrieving various wrenches and sockets.

Jed grunted as he removed the front wheel. “He *will* help us. First with the meat.”

Behind the motorcycle was a washing machine out from whose lid a steady stream of smoke was rising. Jed put on some gardening gloves and opened it. “Chicken,” he said. “Maybe I’ll send you home with some.” He had turned the shell of the machine into a smoker.

After removing the racks he told me to hurry up and flip the breasts. But they were slippery with hot olive oil and burned my fingers. Jed appreciated the entertainment. “You’ve got baby hands,” he said. “All that chalk preserves them.”

“But I didn’t come out here to work. I came to talk.”

“We’ll talk while working. This needs to be finished before dark.”

For straightening the bent rim, Tracy fetched a sledgehammer and Jed made me drag an anvil from his shed to the edge of the tarp.

“Hey, look!” he said. “It’s Joe.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You know Joe. He’s the blacksmith in Dickens. Haven’t you read *Great Expectations*?”

The guy was something, ordering us around and laughing. He lifted up Tracy and placed her behind the bike and found a stick for her to use to scrape the dirt from the muffler. For a moment Kath was singing. A lovely voice, too. I thought it would soften the mood. But Jed threw a rock at the flimsy door and the singing stopped.

“You know,” I began. “I want Tracy to do well in her classes.”

“Bring it down flush with the rim,” he said, holding the sledgehammer in front of me. “Tracy’s a genius. She’ll do fine.”

Instead of the rim, I hit the rubber tire and the hammer bounced back toward me.

Tracy laughed.

“You’ll buy me a new one if you pop this,” Jed said.

“She’s one of the most precocious writers in the school. She could really excel.” This time the hammer landed in the right spot. The steel against iron rang a clean high note.

“And her teachers will help her,” he said.

Pretending not to hear, Tracy was busy poking her stick again and again into the metal tube.

I raised the hammer a third time. "Yes, her teachers will do their jobs. But she won't do her best unless you—all of us—encourage her."

The blunt head came down at an angle and skipped over to the spokes, snapping one into two curled strips.

Jed threw his gloves at my feet. "Crap. You're ham-handed."

"What?"

"You're fucking clumsy, inept, maladroit. Ham-handed!"

"I'm sorry. I'll pay for that."

"You check up on everybody?"

"Tracy is special."

"And no one besides Tracy has a goddamn gift?"

Tracy kept at the hole as though it contained ten pounds of dirt. I heard her humming under her breath and I realized she was afraid of him, which made me fearful, too.

"Listen," I said. "I'm not trying to interfere. I don't know why you're angry. I teach Tracy. I want her to do well. I just want to talk with you."

At that he pointed to my car. "Let's go."

The open desert muffles footsteps. The sounds fly horizontally and hardly reach your ears if you're my height. I could barely hear my footsteps until we walked past the trailer where they bounced loudly back at me.

Surprisingly, he opened the door for me.

"Wait, don't turn that key yet," he said. "We're going to converse."

I craned my head so I could see him without putting my neck within his reach.

"Would you answer *yes* or *no* if I asked if I seem like a reasonably intelligent person?" He looked down with humor in his eyes.

"Jed, I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"The question is clear. Am I intelligent?"

I threw up my hands. "Sure. Yes."

"Thank you. If you got to know me you'd find that I'm very knowledgeable. But not because of school." He was laughing inside. "School's school," he said. "Reality, reality is education."

"I think I understand," I said.

“You don’t understand.”

“All right, Jed.”

I started the car, but before I put it in gear Jed opened my door and jerked the legs of his pants to above his knees. He motioned for me to look down. Between knee and ankle his legs were as thin as sink pipes, two calves that you wouldn’t identify as human anatomy were you to see them isolated in a pan.

“Birth defect,” he said, smiling. “I’d like to see you teach that subject in class.”

I rolled away from that household and passed through the land without really taking it in, only waking briefly when I drove over a cattle guard. But then I fell back to thinking again. It wasn’t that I wanted to save her, exactly. I didn’t believe a visit from Teacher would significantly alter her home life, or even that her studies would improve with a probation officer checking on her mother from time to time, whenever that would be—a few months? Two years? Tracy was beautiful, and I couldn’t entirely sort out my intentions.

I found myself remembering an event that happened years ago. I was a reckless child playing with a camp stove in our backyard. I knelt down to it with a match while my friend poured gasoline from a coffee can. Jed was right. With accidents come insights coiled like pissed rattlers. Only, it seemed my insights had held off for twenty years and I was just receiving them. I remembered looking at the gauze which wrapped my hot face, the nights when I rose from bed to look in the bathroom mirror and peeled back a strip of the medical tape to make a tiny opening. Not because I was in pain. I had pills for that. I was thirteen, fourteen. I suppose I just had to look once more at the inflamed, blistered skin. It was somehow thrilling to observe in the middle of the night.