

Joseph Eastburn
eastburnjoseph@gmail.com

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DEAD TIME

by

Joseph Eastburn

He noticed how the bark on the beach tree outside reminded him of skin when it stretched in the summer wind. He turned in the middle of the room, staring at the space on top of a desk and bureau, small nicked pieces of maple furniture his mother had placed in that room as if he was still living there—a museum to a college student from another era, with felt pennants he had put up himself decades ago, old German mugs as symbols of beer drinking days, even a football now sagging under the impression that it might be thrown again. He pulled open the closet door, pushed aside a stack of term papers—relics from when college papers were printed out—some preserved in clear binders now yellowing and cracked. There, under the text to an English History course, was his college yearbook. He lifted it down, thumbed through the pictures of the sorority girls posed in *interesting* environments—on the slopes of hillsides or in the graveyard—all the girls with their matching blazers on, trying to look subversive.

Joan wasn't there.

He turned to the senior pictures, much larger than those for underclassmen, four shots per page with clubs and hobbies listed, the *in* jokes and favorite expressions enclosed by ellipses. He was shocked to turn a page and see her face positioned calmly on the page. Had it really been 45 years? She had a standard posed appearance, the face side-lit for drama, the background fading into chiaroscuro; a black dress, the straps just slightly off the shoulders. A strong collar bone. Yet her expression was weak,

bloodless, a timid smile with something faintly painful coming through the features, a part of her hidden, a sensuousness pushed down, masked by a prim smile. A totally unremarkable picture.

He couldn't understand why she had this power over him. Why this intensely private girl would enter his thoughts all these decades later, without warning, making him regret that he hadn't given up his life—anything to course-correct the trajectory of a single night in the 70s near the Susquehanna River in eastern Pennsylvania. He kept looking down at the picture hoping it would provide the answer. His stare passed through the paper. It drifted out the window, past the beach tree with its feminine torso and swaying limbs, past the quiet street into the distance.

It was 1970.

Tim was sitting in the college canteen staring through a glass wall at the mailboxes. When Joan walked through the doors, the wind whipped her hair around for a second; she pushed it back in place. He was surprised to see her alone, thinking such a beauty would always be accompanied by some guy. He was jolted out of his reverie by an explosion of laughs coming from a table of fraternity brothers in the corner of the room. He looked back at the mailboxes.

He'd watched Joan for almost two years now. On the first day on campus, he'd been struck by her. It would have been hard to miss her—twelve hundred students pushed into four quads which were joined by narrow, cloistered paths on the old campus, where running into someone alone could take your breath away. The new campus sat on several corn fields of a farm that had been cleared, the awkward, brick dormitories, without landscaping, sat so far apart that you could pick out friends at a distance from their gate or the color of a wind-breaker. The girls went to dinner in packs. People told ghost stories about the farm that had been cleared to build the dorms. Apparently, there had been an accident with a tractor. A little girl had slipped off and fallen under the harrow. Late at night, students would get stoned

and go out into the fields looking for her. They claimed she would appear floating in white overalls, as if she could walk across the top of the grasses. She had been seen on other parts of the campus too. Her overalls were still ripped where the harrow had sliced through her. Luckily, the gashes were not apparent; instead, there was light emanating from her wounds. If she made eye-contact with you, some people said, you'd die in a similarly gruesome way. Students spent a lot of time wishing this might happen to them during finals.

Tim knew Joan was a senior. He had asked around. Guys would smile and just nod like they shared his fantasy. Yes, Joan was one of the most beautiful women on campus; a fox, yes, but short of that, they didn't know much about her. She was secretive, enigmatic, a little distant.

He'd been sitting at a canteen table alone, rubbing the wax off a used Dixie cup, aimlessly staring out the windows, not daydreaming—that would've given him too much credit. It was more like what he'd come to recognize as *dead time*—where he'd go blank and not feel anything inside. Even his body seemed to dematerialize. He thought if he sat still and remembered to breathe, it would get better, but he only fell deeper into it.

The way Joan turned at the mailboxes pulled him out of it. He stood up and ran through the canteen doors out into the hallway where she stood hidden by a wave of hair, reading her mail. He was sure everyone in the canteen was watching him but he didn't care and walked near her, breath quickening. Luckily his mailbox was on the same bank as hers. He leaned over casually, twisted the combination lock and opened the door, seeing her glance over at him, then look away. He had to say something. He might never have another chance.

"How are you?" he blurted out.

She looked up. A smile gently began to cross her features, hazel eyes like lamps into some mysterious world, lips beginning to part.

"Fine," she said. "How are *you*?"

"Fine," he said, suddenly freezing up. He gestured helplessly at the futility of conversation. She nodded, still smiling and looked at him curiously, waiting for him to say something. He knew she had seen him around campus—surely he could discuss *that*—the times they had made eye-contact then looked quickly away. But a spell seemed to envelope him. He stared at the way her hair kept falling over one eye. She brushed the hair back, still waiting, her lips drawing over white teeth as she waited, beginning to look shy, even threatened by the way he was looking at her.

"I've seen you around ...it's Joan, isn't it?"

"Yes. And you're ... ?"

"Tim."

"It's nice to meet you," she said with relief. He sensed she preferred conversation to his staring at her. The cadences in his chest had slowed down.

"I've seen you around," he said, taking a few steps, reaching out his hand to her.

"So you've said," she remarked, smiling to herself, taking his hand, shaking it with a gentle formality. He was still staring. She smiled again, embarrassed now.

"It's a beautiful night," he offered.

Frowning. "Is it? I have to study."

He laughed. "Like to go for a walk?"

She paused, averting her eyes through the glass wall. "... Why not?" she said, turning slowly. Her hair swayed with the motion of her body, slid across the back of her leather jacket, coming to rest on her black jeans. He watched the curve of her behind as she walked toward the door. He noticed she was pigeon-toed and, as he held the door for her, she seemed more vulnerable than he'd expected. Not the Goddess he'd anticipated but a shy, quiet girl.

Outside, she seemed relieved that they were not standing under the fluorescent lights in front of the glass wall of the canteen. As they walked by the outside windows, Tim noticed that she glanced back. At the table of fraternity brothers, he saw one guy stand up, cross to the glass wall and look out through the door windows into the quad. She turned away.

"Let's walk up the hill," she said.

When the canteen was out of sight, she seemed to relax. On the hill leading out of campus, Tim began to realize a full moon shone down on her hair. He looked up. Without speaking, so did she. They reached the top of the hill and turned down the straight, tree-lined street that pulled the small downtown up next to the campus like a taught string. You could stand in the middle of the pavement, and in the distance see the traffic light of the main street. He knew she lived in a small house about half way down this block with some other girls. The trees on the street were massive oaks. The moonlight peaked through the clusters of leaves hanging in the heavy air. He took her hand. She smiled but looked nervous. After a moment, she drew her hand back, but he took it again.

"Want to go the concert?" he asked abruptly. She hesitated, turned and looked at him.

"... You know I've been going out with Paul, don't you?"

He felt something burning on the back of his neck. He knew Paul was a guy who had pledged the jock fraternity. "Up at Lambda Chi?"

"Yes. That was him looking at us out the window."

"I didn't know that." He felt that old helpless feeling come over him—of course, too good to be true. There never seemed to be a way to get close to a pretty girl on this campus. There were always other guys, prowling around, just out of sight.

"But ... he and I are breaking up," she said quietly as they resumed walking next to each other, both looking down, a little breathless.

"I'm sorry," he said, beginning to feel excitement steal back in.

"Three years is a long time."

As they stepped up onto her lighted porch, he released her hand, aware that it was sweaty and thinking she might be embarrassed. She smiled.

He looked at her sheepishly. "So, you can't go?"

She studied him then retreated into that world that descended behind her eyes, turning down the lamps. She drew the light slowly back into her eyes, blinking at him, searching his face. "Yes," she said finally, "I'd like to go with you."

That Saturday night, he got out of his car, parked illegally under one of the oaks, slammed the door and adjusted the red scarf inside the collar of his dress shirt that he had tied rakishly around his throat. He was high. But he'd put drops in his eyes so they didn't look too bloodshot. As he stood on the lighted porch, he smiled to himself, thinking back to how the guys in his dorm had stared in disbelief when they'd heard he was taking Joan out. Two of them said, in chorus, "Watch out, she's going out with Paul. The brothers won't like it." Tim couldn't abide *the brothers*. Lambda Chi Alpha was the football fraternity, and they all hated him because he didn't pledge and wasn't on the team—especially Ron, a guy from Newcastle, Pennsylvania, who played pulling guard and glared at Tim whenever he passed him on the sidewalks, eyes full of hate.

His thoughts were racing when the door to Joan's house opened. One of the girls, Polly, was standing in the doorway. She had a dead-pan expression on her face. Polly was heavy-set with short, frosted hair. She looked at him wryly, "Joan will be down in a minute."

"Thanks, Polly," he mumbled, looking around at the pictures on the wall like nothing unusual was taking place. Polly turned away, smiling like she had a secret.

"If you hear a car with straight pipes pull up.." she said. "That's my boyfriend, Glenn. He's coming down for the weekend."

"Okay." He heard voices upstairs. Down the carpeted stairs, came Joan, her ankles appearing first in black pumps, then her long legs in a pair of black silk slacks. She wore a white shirt with a black cape drawn at her throat by a jade pin. As her face appeared, her eyes were already on him. She was smiling. Her lipstick was bright red the way he guessed women might have worn it in a 40s movie. Something about the way she was dressed was so restrained, so serious. But she was radiant. She walked up to him.

"Shall we go?" she asked coquettishly.

He smiled back. "Okay." He opened the door for her. In the car on the way to the concert they didn't talk very much. It was about a twenty-minute drive to a nearby college which had a large enough arena to accommodate an overflow audience for *Sly and the Family Stone* at the height of their popularity. The concert was sold out.

It was still chilly out and they had the windows shut in the car. He kept looking over at Joan's profile in the passing neon lights of gas stations and fast-food restaurants that whipped by on the strip.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing. You seem quiet, that's all."

"So do you," she returned, a little sharply, looking over at him then back out the window. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I guess that's because I got stoned," he admitted. He didn't know why he'd told her but he wanted to shock her—to break the formality that was descending upon them. She didn't say anything. As she looked out the windshield, she seemed very far away.

"Does that bother you?" he asked.

"No ... should it?"

"You don't seem to approve."

"Well, I wish we were on the same wave-length."

"Would you like to smoke a joint?"

"It makes me nervous," she said.

When they got to the concert, the indoor arena was almost full. Joan and Tim made their way through the packed entrance into a gigantic room where white banners made from dorm sheets were strung from the balconies with the titles to several Sly songs—one said *EVERY DAY PEOPLE* in big blue and orange psychedelic letters—the school colors. He held her hand and led her through the crowd. She seemed to be delivered from the mysterious anxiety he was sensing in her, though again her palm was sweaty and once or twice she looked annoyed about something. When they got to their seats, they were up in the mezzanine overlooking the stage above a sea of students sitting on the floor below. She seemed relieved. He looked over at her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm hot," she said ruefully, trying to take off her cape. He wanted to reach over and help her but watched instead, captivated. She undid the clasp and pulled the cape around and from underneath her, blushing as she got tangled up for a second. Her white shirt was thin and he could see a lace bra through the sheer material. She gathered the cape, arched her back and folded her hands in her lap. "There," she said, trying to make light of something. She seemed agitated.

He reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. Immediately the tension started to drain from her shoulder and she seemed to calm herself. He gently stroked the nape of her neck, then not wanting to be too suggestive, settled for rubbing her white satin collar. As the lights began to dim, she seemed like she wanted him to remove his hand. He did.

The warm-up act was the *New York Rock And Roll Ensemble*, a group of classical artists that dressed in black and played rock concertos with lots of wind instruments and hard-driving drum solos. As the lights came up for intermission, the crowd began to applaud and stamp their feet in unison to get ready for the main event. Tim stood up, stretched and excused himself, saying he was going to try to find the men's room.

"I'll be here," she said.

In the men's room, he bent down and lifted a hand full of cold water and splashed it on his face. He ran both hands through his hair and took out a comb. In the reflection of the mirror, someone was watching him—a tall, thin, blond guy with gaunt features, curly hair cut short. He had on tan chinos and a striped, button-down shirt. It was Paul, Joan's ex. Tim knew it was Paul because someone had pointed him out on campus. He'd never met him and pretended not to notice, but Paul walked up to use the sink next to his.

"... My father took me fishing last weekend," he said casually.

Tim was taken off balance. "Oh, yeah?"

Paul washed his hands carefully and with great precision slung the excess water into the sink before he reached for a paper towel. "If you want to come with us sometime, let me know."

"Thanks. I haven't done much fishing actually."

"That's all right," Paul said, beginning to smile. "It's nice to get off campus sometimes. It gives you some perspective."

"I'm sure."

Paul took out his comb and ran it through his hair. "Enjoying the concert?" he asked, looking at Tim in the mirror. As he put his comb away, he saw that Tim was studying him in the reflection.

"Yes, I am. Are you?"

Paul looked down at the tile floor. "Good music."

"Yeah, it is."

"Have good seats?" Paul said, looking up.

"We're up in the mezzanine. Where are you?"

"Ron and I are down, not too far from the stage, right in the thick of it."

"You're lucky."

Paul looked down again, face darkened. "Yeah... real lucky."

"We'd better get upstairs, don't you think?"

They both seemed uncertain as they shook hands.

As Tim crossed through the crowd on the main floor, he saw Paul walk down near the stage, standing apart from his burly friend, Ron, who caught Tim's eye and stared at him—again, with hostility on his face. By the time Tim got upstairs, the lights were beginning to dim. Down on the stage level, people were beginning to jump up and down and clap in cadences. Tim made his way up to the next level. When he sat down next to Joan, she looked over at him.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"...I ran into Paul in the men's room." She flinched as if someone had hit her.

"What did you talk about?"

"Fishing," Tim said. "He's really a nice guy." There was a long silence. Joan seemed to drift for a moment.

"Yes, he is."

The entire arena was practically air-born with all the anticipation in the air. The noise grew louder. The people on the floor screamed and stamped their feet. Tim and Joan sat very still next to each other. The house went to black and Sly appeared on stage, running his fingers up and down a giant

keyboard; with his Afro, sequined suit, fringed white leather jacket, stomping giant orange and white Eskimo boots, he began to take flight. The audience was on their feet and Tim and Joan stood up with the rest of the crowd and yelled, and later smiled at each other in the dark when they heard songs they knew.

Tim pulled the car up across the street from Joan's house. The shadows of the oaks began a hundred feet up the street, shutting out moonlight that burned down. It was now a three-quarter moon, Tim noticed, but still dazzling. Silently, they got out of the car. The wind was up and Joan seemed cold, so Tim draped his jacket over her shoulders. As they walked under a tree branch, they were delivered from the glare of the moon. Under the oaks, they both felt more relaxed. Tim took her hand. This time it was cool and dry, so he took both her hands and rubbed his palms over top of them as they walked. Joan sighed, stopped and leaned against the trunk of an oak at the curb.

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Sure" he said, cocking his head.

"At the concert, you said Paul was a nice guy... well so are *you*."

Tim blinked. "I'm not such a nice guy, really."

She studied him. "Are you a lady's man?" she asked, smiling.

"In my fantasies."

"You don't take advantage of girls?"

"Not if they won't let me."

She giggled and leaned back against the tree. She did a comical sidestep away from him, around the street side of the truck, away from the windows across the sidewalk—where people might be watching. He followed her. She looked younger all of a sudden, seemed undefended for a moment, as if

a veil had lifted, and her eyes began to invite him down into her forbidden world. He smelled her perfume and felt air moving through the branches. When he leaned over to kiss her, she clasped both hands on his face and kissed him back, hard, wrapping both arms around his head and neck. Headlights splashed them suddenly. A car roared by—lighting up their faces—blinding them like animals in the country.

"I'd better go," she whispered.

As they walked toward her house, Tim looked up and saw something. Joan had taken his arm and had pulled herself snug up against him. He could look down on the creamy skin of her face, could smell her scented hair, but he was distracted now. He squinted through a succession of porch lights splashed on the sidewalk from the row of houses on her street. All the way down at the end of the block, a small girl with ripped overalls was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at them. She had a kind of preoccupied look on her face. He looked away. Joan hadn't seen her, her was sure. He stepped up on her front porch, put his arms around Joan and kissed her goodnight. She came out of the kiss, looking at his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Not a thing in the world." He stroked her cheek giving her a peck on the lips. She must have decided everything was all right, smiled warmly and backed toward the door, still looking at him. After she disappeared inside, he turned and looked back over his shoulder. The girl with the overalls that the blades of the harrow had ripped had followed him. She wore a sad face, her head cocked slightly to one side, her body listless, as if not walking at all, but just gliding toward him as if on a skateboard of air. He broke into a run and didn't look back.

It was a week before he saw Joan again. The guys on the floor of his dorm had rented a double suite at the Holiday Inn for a Saturday night beer blast. Tim found a red sweater that reminded him of Joan and a pair of "granny" glasses at a second-hand store. As he ran into the parking lot, somebody yelled out the window, "Weekend freak!" He felt nervous about the prospect of seeing Joan. He'd been thinking of her nonstop.

The giant oaks sheltering Joan's block reminded him of a cathedral as he drove down the tree-lined street. The wind was up and he could hear the leaves clattering. He looked up. Now, it was a half-moon, a clean wafer of light in the sky that kept disappearing behind swirling clouds. He walked up onto her porch. When Joan came down the carpeted stairs, she seemed distant. Outside, she acted embarrassed, her first-date formality back.

Tim drove Joan into town. The lights of the Governor Williams Bar spilled yellow across the sidewalk of the main street, but they drove through town, back onto campus and down a side road that led to the back of the football field. Tim pulled in behind the grandstand, turned off the car, letting the ring of the engine echo in his ears. The silence of the night playing fields moved in around them. Joan didn't say anything. Just stared out the window.

"I'm cold," she said.

"What should we do?"

"We could go down to the Gov and meet my friends."

"I want to look at the fog before we go down to the bar." Abruptly the half-moon swept out of the gray and disappeared just as quickly. But it was enough that he saw the girl. She hovered toward them across the football field, a wave of mist under her feet. He really stared this time and could see a glow spilling out of the rips in her overalls. He turned Joan's body toward the approaching apparition, trying to gauge her reaction. She just smiled.

"The fog looks peaceful," she said. Then turning, she stood up on tip-toe, kissing his mouth. "You don't want to go?" she said, gazing at him in a way that told him she knew him well already. But she hadn't seen the dead girl. The girl was clearly communicating only with *him*. What was she trying to tell him? He looked at Joan. There was something different in her eyes this time. It was like she was a new person every time he looked at her. He forgot about the ghost.

"It's nice out," he said. "Why don't we leave the car and walk down?"

She walked over to him and put her arms around his waist. "That would be so lovely."

They fell silent, locked arms, and gazed over the layer of fog on the playing fields. But the dead girl was in the end zone by now, closer to them, something insistent in the expression on her face. He was frozen and didn't dare speak or move. The dead girl floated toward him, her eerily askew neck and white face looming at him, into his face. She pushed him toward the car.

His body lurched backwards and he fell. He was too frightened to yell. Joan must have thought it was a game because she laughed, and pulled him up and in the direction of town. The apparition flew at him again, her cracked lips open in a kind of jagged horror, almost swallowing him whole. She shoved him more forcefully back toward the car. Again, he was struck silent. Joan laughed harder now and he wondered if she must have thought this was an elaborate pantomime of unexpressed ambivalence about meeting her friends. He also thought he was losing his mind. Was all this the real *dead time*? His eyes had clamped shut. Joan kissed his eyelids. When he opened them, the girl had vanished. Joan smiled, pulling him toward town. He started walking. Something horrific and otherworldly was consuming him. He was afraid he had missed whatever message the apparition was trying to give him.

The "Gov" was the bar inside the old Governor Williams Hotel that had been built in the late 1800's and stood with dilapidated elegance in the middle of the main block of town. The bar had an old-

world atmosphere, was small, and sported a lot of local characters and drunks. There was the waitress Judy, about fifty, whose brazen retorts to a simple request for a refill made ordering a beer a cathartic experience. But mostly it was the hang-out for the Greeks: a few sororities and of course the fraternities—even those hostile to each other on campus.

When Tim and Joan took a small table, the room was submerged in smoke and already full. Several round-tops boasted half a dozen empty beer pitchers. Tim looked nervously around and noticed the Theta Chi table—guys from the school band, drama club—the nerds and brains. The table making the most noise was the Lambda Chi table—the jocks, mostly football players and wrestlers. Tim relaxed when the waitress insulted him. She seemed to bristle when he ordered, asking if he wanted his gin & tonic, "On the rocks or stuck up."

"I'll have it rude," Tim said with a poker face. Joan laughed and the waitress seemed to enjoy it too. They guzzled their first round as if it was water. Joan ordered the second. He told her he thought the Greek system was "tribal." She laughed some more.

When Tim's eyes swept the room, he noticed Ron glaring at him with the same tight expression on his face he'd had at the concert. Just behind Ron, the girl's face appeared in a lower pane of a window. She was staring at him, her face side-lit by a streetlight. It gave him a shock. Ron stood up and headed toward their table. He was short but built like a rock.

"Mind if I sit down?" Ron said, putting his arm on the back of Joan's chair.

"Hey, Joanie," he said, grinning as he rubbed her back like he hadn't seen her in years.

"Hi Ron," she said uneasily.

"Saw you at the concert," he said.

"Did you like it?" she asked evenly.

"Yeah, Sly was cool," he said, nodding his head toward Tim. "Don't you think so, slick?"

"The name's Tim ... and yeah, Sly was great."

Ron saw his opening. "Or, maybe you were too busy."

Tim was already feeling annoyed. "You're very predictable, Ron." He looked over at Joan, who shrugged, enjoying the attention.

"*What* did you say?" Ron's nose and mouth had contracted into a knot, his expression pinched around an urgent hostility.

Tim said, "What is your *problem*?"

"My problem? I'll *tell* you what my problem is: you spent more time looking at Paul's girl than you did at the concert."

"That's bullshit. Besides, she's breaking up with Paul. I *talked* to Paul. He didn't say a word about it."

"Come on, Ronnie," Joan interjected. "Don't start trouble."

"Paulie's pretty broken up about it, Joan," Ron said.

"Just stay out of it," she said. "What was between Paul and me is none of anyone's business."

Ron's jaw began to tighten. "We just don't like to see other people horning in when the grave is still warm."

Joan expelled air. "The *grave*?"

"Nobody's horning in," Tim said. "Joan and I are just getting to know each other."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, right," he said sarcastically. "A little too well, if you ask me." His gaze hardened. "If you think you're so tough, why don't you come around the house sometime?"

Tim put down his drink, staring into Ron's tight features. "Why should I wait?"

As Tim stood up, Joan whispered in his ear. "Don't go out there," she said under her breath. "Please." She took his face in both hands—which seemed to bate Ron even more. Tim couldn't help but notice that the football player's body language had tensed even more.

He whispered, "I'll be right back."

As soon as Tim and Ron stepped outside, they started swinging. Ron hit Tim twice in the mouth, the second time knocking him down. Tim's lip was bleeding pretty badly; it had begun to swell. He sat on the pavement in front of the hotel trying to get his bearings. By that time, half the bar had piled out onto the street to see the fight. A few excited drunks had started yelling the play-by-play back up the hallway into the bar, but the fight was already over. Joan was kneeling beside Tim, cradling his head in her arms.

Polly, Joan's house-mate had just arrived. Her boyfriend, Glenn, from upstate, had driven down again in his new car. They were walking up the sidewalk as the fight ended. Glenn offered to drive Tim to the emergency room to get his lip sewn up. Joan gratefully accepted. She helped Tim up and kept kissing him, making him laugh—because wherever she kissed him, it hurt.

They piled into Glenn's Buick Grand Sport which had a 450 cubic inch engine. It was gray with a bright red roof, trim and skirts. Glenn took it easy driving out along the strip where the speed limit was 35. When they got to the hospital, they waited an hour before the staff put Tim in a cubicle. His lip was badly swollen and needed stitches. The nurse, a somewhat rigid woman in her fifties, kept shaking her head. She asked Joan and her friends to please go home and come back to see Tim the next day. She said the swelling needed to come down before she could sew up his lip. She applied a butterfly band-aid but it wouldn't stay in place.

Tim felt happy. He was proud that he'd stood up to Ron. *Well, sort of.* As Joan kept kissing him, he'd wince and she would laugh. She whispered in his ear as the nurse was writing up his chart. She said

things that moved Tim and made him smile. He guessed he'd won her over by getting beat up. When Joan literally danced out of his cubicle and waved at him from the hall, he was on top of the world.

Glenn didn't take it so easy going back into town. Luckily, they got to the bar safely. Inside the bar, everyone was excited about the fight. Students talked about how nothing ever happened in their little town, how dead it was. It didn't matter now. It was Saturday night. Life was sweet. They drank and talked about having nothing but good times ahead of them. One guy toasted the 'prize-fighters of the pavement.' Ron strutted around the bar, bragging. The owner of the Hotel made a sardonic announcement that there would be an exhibition brawl every Saturday night, out front, from now on. Everybody cheered. He even kept the bar open until two a.m.

When Glenn, Polly and Joan got into the front bench seat of the Buick, it was about 2:30 a.m. They were very drunk and feeling no pain. Glenn took the corner off the main street of town, squealing his tires for the crew outside of the Gov—so they could hear his straight pipes. He accelerated up the street toward Joan's house. It was about a half a mile before the tree-lined block started. Glenn pressed his foot down on the gas and opened it up all the way to show Polly what it could do. The pipes roared. Joan shivered as the car screamed up the quiet street. As the car approached the block the girls lived on, the car was just a blur, wailing up the pavement at the top of its capacity, until understanding and choice were lost and speed the only meaning that existed.

The car was going 90 miles an hour when it hit an oak tree. The sound, the neighbors said, was deafening. Glenn was pinned behind the wheel, Polly went through the windshield and Joan was hurled out the door. Both girls were thrown over two hundred feet as the car careened off the tree, flipped and rolled up the street, only to hit another tree and come to rest on its side, crumpled, rocking on the curb.

The next morning Tim was woken up out of a sound sleep by two friends. They told him that Joan had been killed. He just sat in his bed staring, slumped over, unable to focus his eyes, not believing what they were saying. He thought it was just more jealousy, more of the same insane reactions to her beauty, her timeless unspeakable radiance. But he was afraid it was true. During the next hour and for the rest of the day, there was nothing. He couldn't cry. He couldn't feel anything. He was back in a state of *dead time*. Only now it felt permanent.

The next day he walked downtown to get a haircut. When he sat down in the barber chair, it was business as usual. The barber gave him what he called 'a nice trim.' At one point though, the barber brought up the car accident. As Tim stared out the shop window, listening to the man explain what a terrible tragedy it was—he felt even more disconnected. The barber mentioned that the bodies of both girls had been broken *like rabbits*, the police said, *like they had no bones left*.

Tim hated himself for being taken in by the grisly details of what the barber told him. He refused to look at the oak that the car had slammed into. He was afraid it was the same tree Joan had leaned against when they'd kissed.

It took a week before he let himself cross campus and walk down the street Joan had lived on. It was night, of course. He looked up and saw a quarter-moon. They'd been together less than a month. He found the tree in the passing headlights. On the town side of the massive tree, a six-foot high section of the trunk had been sheared off.

Yes, it was the oak they had kissed under.

*

When Tim closed the yearbook, he remembered being afraid that second year of college that the *dead time* would take over on a given day, or stretch into a given night. He would stumble outside on

campus, try to find the moon and think of Joan. Years later, when he moved to Los Angeles, he'd rented a basement apartment in the Hollywood hills. He'd walk outside at night, looking over the giant basin, carpeted in lights, and realize moving across the country hadn't really helped.

He'd gone to doctors and taken medication over many years to stop the *dead time*. Nothing had worked. He'd always associated the condition with Joan. The night they'd met, when he'd seen her at the mailboxes, he was just beginning to identify that absence of feeling, the sense that his body had disappeared. When she died, it became a permanent fixture in his consciousness—even after all these decades—his limbs going numb, his mind becoming a blank white screen.

But he didn't think that now. A palpable feeling moved like a river through his limbs. He closed his eyes and there was that Pennsylvania oak tree—vibrating in his mind's eye—its trunk gouged out by the impact of the vehicle. He opened his eyes and looked out the window of his old room, upstairs in his mother's house. He could see a different tree—the tall beach bending slightly in the wind. Small branches with agitated leaves, its thin bark looking soft as skin, branches sensual and feminine, like arms. Almost human. Joan was there, bending slightly in the fall breezes, twisting delicately away then swaying back toward him.

Then he froze.

He hadn't seen it for all these years—but down the slope of the front lawn, at the end of his mother's driveway—stood the dead girl with the funny tilt to her head. The same harrow cuts in her jeans. She teetered slightly, facial features more pasty than he remembered from all those decades ago. Had he, by flooding himself with Joan's memory—called her forth?

Tim couldn't feel his legs, but found himself running down the stairs, through the living room, into the foyer. He hesitated before he put his hand on the door knob. He stood frozen there for what seemed like

an eternity. He opened the front door and heard himself gasp. The dead girl was standing right in front of him. She took a step closer. Her eyes locked on his and made him catch air in the back of his throat.

And he knew everything.

All at once he understood the mournful letters he'd gotten from his mom through the years, which read, "*I miss you every day.*" Or, "*Never a happy day since you went away.*" He thought it was because he'd moved to California.

Now he understood the incorrect headlines; he'd thought they were misprints.

The night of the accident, he remembered pleading with the nurse in the ER to put another butterfly band-aid on this lip so he could leave with Joan. She had just told him she *loved* him. No way was he going to leave her now.

The dead girl stood very still in front of him now. His mind thrashed through memories. She turned and clumped down the front stoop, down the driveway, turning back to look at him. Years before she had floated; now her shoes sounded loud on the pavement. In the middle of the driveway, the clumping stopped. She partially dematerialized. Outlines of an elbow or a shoulder were moving on the air, rising.

He ran after her, and felt himself ascend slightly into the air. The dead girl was standing on a tree branch, waving him into the sky—at which point, he felt his body ripped upward and heard a thunderous *shushing* sound as he careened along a wall of light that turned sharply like a subway train in a tunnel of air. He lost his balance on the upheave. The girl reached out and clamped an icy hand on his arm. A roar filled his ears and the icy hand still grasped his arm when they landed on the street beside the college in Pennsylvania—the street where Joan had lived and died. He had lost his balance and was staggering forward. No one was around.

The dead girl had disappeared. He heard the crash. He saw the giant oak the car had collided with. He felt himself moving toward the tree where Joan and he had first kissed, but remembered she had been

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thrown two hundred feet. Tim ran up the block, looking behind every tree. He couldn't find Joan anywhere. It was then he realized he *had* climbed into the front seat of Glenn's car, and sat next to Joan. He knew then—for all these years—he'd been dead.

A ghost haunting his own life.

The End