2202374 Fiction and Fact in English Prose
Week 6 – Wednesday, February 12

Snuff (from *One Story*)

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There was a group of guys I knew from school gathered in a garage out back of Billy's house, and Billy had hung a bed sheet up on the wall and propped the projector on a milk crate stacked on a folding chair. He told us he'd gotten the movie from somebody's brother's best friend's cousin, and we all stood there and watched the film from start to finish, no credits, no title, no names, no sound. When the last jumpy frames of 8mm finally spun through the reels, everybody started talking at once, and Mike Toth said, No fucking way, and Lenny Richter leaned into me and whispered, nothing but corn syrup and food coloring.

I was sweating even though the sun was long set, and I couldn't seem to get my mouth around anything to say, so I checked my watch and saw that I was close enough to curfew and decided it was best to leave. Without a word, I slipped out to the main road to chance hitching home. I lasted fifteen minutes walking with my thumb out on the empty asphalt before I bent and broke and went to the pay phone at a two-pump gas station, the only lit building as far as I could see in either direction, and I called home, hoping my sister Charlotte would pick up fast. She answered on the first ring.

Charlotte was seventeen and had always been pretty, but not beautiful. That summer she had discovered Fleetwood Mac and changed. My dad started making rules, more rules than ever before, asking things like *Where have you been?* Everything was a privilege, and bedroom doors had to be left open, phone calls were monitored, and, as Charlotte liked to say, Privacy was part of the old regime. I sensed there was a battle brewing and it was going to get ugly fast. My dad may have had more power than Charlotte, but she was smart and quiet as a sniper, and sneaking out had become her specialty.

"Why the hell are you way out there in the country?" she said on the phone. "Can't you get into trouble closer to home?"

I cradled the receiver between my shoulder and ear and dug my hands deeper into my pockets. "It's not that far," I said. When I left Billy's, talk had been loud, and there had been a lot of clapping and shouts, and by the time I started walking down the driveway the decision had been made by everyone else to watch the film again. I had seen all kinds of trouble that night, and for once I hadn't been the one in it, but I didn't say that to Charlotte.

I was six months away from a driver's license, and had a whole lot of nothing going on ever since I'd quit football. My dad said I had to have a job if I thought I was going to get a car, but jobs were hard to get, so I was mostly bored and looking for something to do. When we'd hitched out to Billy's together earlier that night, Lenny had said this was going to be the best kind of something.

"I can't get a ride, Charlotte. Please."

"Dad's home," she said. "But he's been talking with Johnnie," and I knew she meant Walker, but she didn't need to say it; it was our code for drunk.

I relaxed the phone into my ear and felt its warmth and could see my dad in his armchair, the footrest kicked up, the TV on, the glass empty. Around me the wind took less than a minute to become more than a gust, and I felt the edge under it and knew the August night was false, and even though the summer had mauled us, it was now packing to go. "I'll pay you," I said. "Twenty bucks."

"Stay where you are," she said. "I'm coming.

The girl in the movie had dirty blond hair, and she was thin and was standing and bent forward onto the bed. I could see her spine rising up, bony and knobbed, and her skin was pulled tight, her head away from the camera, with just her shoulder blades looking out like hollow eyes. I had stared at her back, at the blankness of her skin, and it was so smooth that it looked fake, except for the raised red

marks that could have been a handprint, and I flexed my own fingers and wondered if they were big enough to fill that space.

In the parking lot the only other sound besides the wind was the bugs beating themselves blind against the single overhead fluorescent. It was a sickly sodium light, too bright and artificial, and the cloud of insects swarming made strange shadows on the cracked cement below. I could smell wet grass, irrigation, farmland, and creosote seeping from the railway ties that served as the borders between asphalt, fields, and roads. In the distance a dog barked and barked, over and over again, a tired and monotonous sound, and there was no shout to quiet down, no hassled owner opening up a door and forcing the animal to come in, and I wondered what purpose a dog like that served if there was nobody to pay attention. There could have been a thousand things to bark at and nobody to teach it about real threats. Above me a bat circled, clumsy and big, and I watched until its path took it out of the arc of light. I tied my shoelaces, retied them, sat on the curb and checked rocks, counted moths, listened for a car to come from the distance, and finally it did. The first and only car to come down the road, my father's Dodge Royal Monaco two-door hardtop that I recognized from the engine whine when my sister drove, the 400 Lean Burn V-8 held in full restraint under the hood, and the left hideaway headlight door stuttering like the engine to open up.

Charlotte had the heater on and the music loud, and I wondered how she had crept the car out of the driveway, but the very fact that she was there confirmed she had gotten away with it, and I was happy to slide in and pull the door shut and fold myself toward the warm vents in the dash.,

"Stab and steer," I said.

Charlotte looked at me without blinking. "What?" she said.

"You never get anything. Just punch it and drive. I'm cold."

There were no cars on the road, no headlights in either direction, just house lights, and they were scattered few and far between, set back in the distance, as sparse and dim as city stars absorbed by the night. Charlotte signaled as she left the parking lot, though there wasn't reason to, and then we were swallowed by the fields on both sides of the road, the staggered fence posts. Even though I had been walking in the dark, I did not realize the immensity of it until it had become a throat hold around us, and the broken yellow line was lost beyond the one good headlight.

After the accident I would wonder if I had seen it coming, the shift in shadows, the sudden definition of a shape, a thickening in the air like a premonition, because when something goes terribly wrong there is always a before and always an after, but the moment itself is vague and hard to gather, and time jumps like a skip in a record, and so I tried to remember the before, tried to trace what happened during, but in the end it all came down to after and we were spun hood up into a dry drainage ditch, the broken headlight suddenly finding its too little too late and pointing straight and strong at nothing more than wide-open sky, the windshield shattered and fracturing the night into a thousand web bed pieces, and Charlotte bleeding from her nose and me with my mouth open to say something, but instead everything just hung quiet and still.

"What did we hit?" Charlotte asked, and she rubbed the back of her hand under her nose and the blood smeared across it, and in the weak light the blood was more black than red. I thought about what Lenny Richter had said, nothing but corn syrup and food coloring.

"We didn't hit anything," I said. "Did we?"

"I saw it," she said. "I just couldn't stop."

The engine was still on, the radio picking up the end of Kiss doing "Christine Sixteen," and I turned around in my seat and looked out the back window at the rise of ditch behind us, tall grass and weeds pressed against the bumper. I realized the car was still in drive, and Charlotte's foot was on the brake, because the slope of ground was lit bright and red.

"Turn off the car," I said.

It took her a moment to cut the engine, and then there was a different quiet, with only the headlights telling us nothing except that we were off the road and looking at the stars. I opened my

door and I could smell the grass torn up where the back end had swing around when we spun, and there was a sharp burn on fresh rubber on asphalt hanging in the air, but I could not remember Charlotte hitting the brakes at all. The wind had died down, or we were far enough in the ditch to be out of the gust, and I could hear crickets, a million of them in all directions around us, and the sound of something on the road just over the soft shoulder above where I stood, something ticking out of sync with the noise of the engine cooling, something struggling to get its legs under it, something trying hard to get up and walk.

I heard Charlotte's door open, and the angle of the ditch forced her to put her weight into it so she could swing it wide enough to get free, and then she was walking up the short incline toward the road, and I stood there watching her, listening to the crickets, and trying to make sense out of the sound.

"Son of a bitch," she said. And there was a sadness in her voice that made me want to get back into the car and shut my door and slide onto the floor, let Charlotte deal with it and wait it out, because Charlotte was older and had always been the one to take the brunt, but I wouldn't do that this time. I was the one who had called her out here. She came for me.

My eyes adjusted to the dark, which had settled and thinned on the road. Even the smallest detail was defined and clear – the broken asphalt where the shoulder met the road, the yellow center liner, the metal fence posts set back on both sides, leaning and loose with rusted wires marking acres. Behind me the wide, shallow ditch ran along the roadside, full of nothing more than dense grass gone to seed, trash, and my father's Dodge Royal Monaco, nose up and cooling quietly with both lights shining into the air. The bugs had already come, gnats and moths in greedy clusters, so that the beams held their movement like dust.

There was a body in the road – Charlotte had been right about hitting something – and it was bigger than something as simple as a raccoon or a cat. As I got closer, the shape took definition, and I could see that it was just a deer lying in the center of the road, one back leg still kicking out for grip, and Charlotte was standing over it, hands squeezed tightly in front of her, watching the struggle. I stopped walking, and from where I stood I saw its head rise up from the pavement, watched the panicked white of its eye roll around and see nothing, and then the deer dropped its head and the back leg tucked in. All of it went still.

Charlotte crouched down and reached out and touched the deer, and part of me wanted to stop her, tell her not to, yank her back to her feet and down to the car, but I knew if I had been closer, I would have done the same thing, reached out and touched it too. I watched her run her hand over it, ribs to thigh, and I watched the way her hand lifted over the slope of its side, the stomach distended and pulled tightly back from the ribs.

"I can feel it," Charlotte said.

"Feel what?" I asked. Everything around us had gone quiet; even the crickets had slunk back into the thicker grass and the night was still and the air felt warmer than it had before, the breeze now barely strong enough to bend the ripple the fields. I looked at the sky above us and there were a million stars. All of them seemed as if they were arranged in patterns I was supposed to understand, but I couldn't recognize anything except that they were brighter and closer than I had even remembered them to be.

"There's a baby," she said. "I can feel the baby inside." I walked up next to her, careful to keep my footsteps quiet, and then I realized that the deer was maybe dead and there was nothing left to startle. I squatted down next to Charlotte and reached out my hand. I wanted to touch it, let myself feel the hair, stiff and coarse, and I knew I would be surprised by how warm the deer would feel, her skin radiating heat, and I would rest my hand against her rough side and hold it there, waiting for something to happen. But I could not touch the deer. I just stood there with my hand holding air.

"Is she dead?" I asked. I stood up and pushed at the deer with my foot, hooked the toe of my tennis shoe under her ribs and tipped her side up and off the asphalt. Charlotte grabbed my leg and pushed me backward, hard, so that I lost my balance and fell onto the warm road.

"What's wrong with you?" she said.

"I was seeing if she was dead."

"She's dead," Charlotte whispered. From where I sat, I could see around Charlotte to the deer's head resting on the ground, one eye open and fixed and staring up at nothing and her jaw slack, widened just enough so that her tongue lolled out and over the darkness of her lips. There was blood on the road underneath her, spreading around her shoulders and neck.

"The baby's still alive," Charlotte said, and she started rubbing the deer's side in small, tight circles. "I think we can save it."

The asphalt was comforting and warm, and I was surprised at the way it held the heat from the day despite the wind and the dark. I could feel small rocks biting into the palms of my hands and I reached forward and rubbed them clean on my jeans. I looked over the deer and down the road, looked in the direction that we have been going before we found ourselves spun into the ditch, and I looked for a pair of lights that would signal the approach of a car, the intervention of someone else to help us pull the Dodge out, move the deer, and get us back on track toward town, someone to interrupt the things that my sister was saying and gently tell her that what she wanted was an impossibility that should not even be thought about, let alone said out loud. But there was nothing around us in any direction, not even the promise of lights, no cars, no more barking dog in the distance, no houses with porches cast in a soft yellow glow, no gravel driveways, no mailboxes marking homes.

"We have to go," I said. "I want to be in my room before Dad wakes up." I didn't really want to be there, but I didn't know of anywhere else we could go, and Charlotte had Dad's car and we'd have to go back eventually.

At the mention of our father, Charlotte stood up and walked to the edge of the road and down the incline to the driver's side of the car, and I thought for a minute she might just get in, start it up, and leave me stretched out on the ground, but she pulled the keys from the ignition and kept walking and I could hear them rattling, knocking back and forth on the ring, and then the trunk lid popped up and there was light from the small bulb inside and I could hear moving things around.

"Dad's tools are in here," she called to me, and I stood up and went down to watch her.

In the light from the trunk I could see the blood drying on Charlotte's face, a cracked thin smear across her upper lip and over one cheek, but there was no fresh blood and she looked all right to me. Our dad was pretty organized and not one to carry anything he didn't need, but the contents of the trunk had been tossed around and nothing appeared useful. There seemed to be too much and too many of everything, screwdrivers and wrenches, spilled nails, bolts, and washers, drill bits and sockets, some flannel shirts, a water jug, and a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam.

"Perfect," I said, and I pulled the bottle out, unscrewed the lid, and took a long drink, and it felt good. I realized I was thirsty and my mouth was dry and I swallowed all I could before my throat closed up against it.

Charlotte was picking up tools, holding them up for inspection under the trunk-lid light, and setting them back down again. "What about this?" she asked. It was a 12-inch flat-head screwdriver, and I thought about her bent over the deer, cutting it open with a screwdriver, and how much effort it would take to punch through and saw into the skin, and then I remembered the movie at Billy's, and how they had started with box cutters, the two men who tied the girl to the bed, and how she had been facedown and struggling, but not really, and maybe it wasn't real, or maybe she didn't actually know what was going to happen to her, didn't possibly think it was going to get as bad as it eventually did when they started with the box cutters and they were not kidding around.

"I have a knife," I said. It was a little 3-inch Smith & Wesson single combo-edge blade, smooth and serrated, a gift from our dad on my thirteenth birthday. He made me promise not to hurt myself or

use it on anything that I wasn't supposed to, and since then I had used to carve my name into picnic tables at the park and once to gut a bluegill that Lenny Richter and I accidentally caught on an empty hook out at his grandpa's pond.

"Give it to me," she said. She reached out her hand and I dug it out and handed it over to her, the black handle scratched and worn down over the past couple of years, and she took the knife and shoved it into the back pocket of her jeans and held her hand out toward me again, waiting, and then I gave her the bottle and she smiled for the first time since she had pulled into the parking lot to pick me up. In the dim light the shadows made her cheekbones dark and defined, and her lips were full and red, and with her straight blond hair tucked behind her ears and her face holding colors in a way that I had not seen before, I knew why our father worried.

"Are you going to help me?" she asked. She took a drink from the bottle, and I noticed its level was dropping fast and I wished there was more.

"This is crazy," I said. "You do know that?"

Charlotte picked up a flannel shirt from the trunk and used it to wipe her nose off. "I'm going to be in advanced biology next year," she said. "People do this all the time. Emergency C-sections. It's not that hard."

Above us, on the road, I thought I could hear a car coming in the distance, the drone and shift of an engine rounding a bend. I walked back up to the top of the ditch and looked in both directions, but the road was open and clear and dark as far as I could see.

"There's no cars out here," Charlotte said. "I learned to drive on this road at night. I was lout here for hours and never saw anybody else. It's weird," she said.

"I didn't know Dad took you out here." I tried to think of our dad doing anything after the sun went down, anything that didn't involve the TV and his chair, or the tool bench in the garage, and a drink half full named after somebody else.

"I wasn't with Dad," she said.

I walked back toward the deer and looked down at it. From that angle it was harder to see how pregnant she was, if her sides were actually wide enough for her to be carrying something more than herself.

"Come here and help me," Charlotte said, and I went back to the trunk of the car, where she loaded me down with the flannel shirts and a dirty blue tarp, and she carried the bottle and a flashlight, and we went back to the deer and she lined everything up like a doctor would.

"What are you going to do?"

She spread the tarp out onto the road and tucked it under the side of the deer. I didn't like the sound it made when she moved it on the asphalt, a stiff and artificial scraping noise that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"We're going to deliver the baby," she said. "We have a chance to save it. We killed its mother, but maybe we can still give it a chance to live." She took my knife out of her back pocket, opened the blade, held it up toward what little light hung in the air from the headlights that neither of us had thought to turn off, poured some Jim Beam on the blade, and wiped it clean on one of our dad's flannel shirts.

"I don't think you have to sterilize it," I said.

Charlotte looked up at me. "It's not for the mother," she said. "It's for the baby. Just in case I go too deep."

"Charlotte, what are we going to do with it?" I felt warm inside, maybe a little bit drunk, and the air felt good against my skin, and I could hear plants rustling, settling back and forth together in their even rows in the fields. When the wind died, nothing moved around us, nothing shifted, nothing bent or made noise, and I could feel the stillness like something I could touch.

She laid the knife down near her on the tarp and started ripping the shirts, first one and then another, into long neat strips like rags, and the last one she spread open and wide beside her. The

crickets had scattered and were suddenly loud and distant, and the only sound that was clear and close was the noise of Charlotte moving around on the tarp.

"Dad can build a pen in the garage," she said. "I can raise it and feed it from a bottle. I can take care of it just like its mother."

A bird suddenly called from somewhere across the road, somewhere deep in a field, and it sounded big and close but I could not see it.

"Nothing works out like that," I said. "You can't just cut a baby deer out of its mother and take it home and call it your own." Our dad had never even allowed us to have a dog, because he hated pets. He said he hated the noise and the smell and the responsibility of looking after something else in the house, and even when we begged and promised we would do all the work, he said it was impossible, that he had been young once too, and he knew that kids failed, and it would become his dog and he didn't want one.

Charlotte tucked her hair behind her ears, sat back on her heels, and looked up at me standing over her. "You know Dad hates me," she said.

I thought about the way he yelled, the way he put his hand on her arm when she walked in the door sometimes, the way he yanked her around in the kitchen. *Where have you been?*

"That's just Dad," I said. "You know how he gets. He worries." I felt like a liar, making excuses. People were always doing that.

When I saw the girl in the film for the first time, I thought the men would be younger, that they would be in high school, that for some reason they would be boys, and I hadn't thought about them being anything else, but they had been men our father's age, or maybe even older, and they had tied the girl to the bed and her spine had stood out in a rail of bones, and I had seen the shadows of the men first, saw their shapes moving across her white skin like clouds, and she hadn't seemed scared at all, and I had flinched for her, felt something familiar in my stomach curl up and pull tight.

"He loves you," I said. "He's just weird about showing it."

"He hates me. He wishes I would just move away and never come back so he could say that he just has a son."

The headlights behind us had become so much of a presence I had almost forgotten about them and then the left one sputtered and the hideaway window folded it in with a soft pneumatic sound, a hush like an automatic door closing, and we were cut down to one weak beam staring up at nothing and the darkness filled in. I could hear Charlotte breathing through her nose, and the sound was thick and heavy.

"You know he caught me in June," she said. "Right after school got out. He caught me making out in front of the house. It was late and we were parked on the street and I thought everybody was asleep – the house was dark – and I didn't want to come in. You probably don't understand what I'm talking about, I don't know, but maybe you do. I can't really explain it and it doesn't make any sense, but I just couldn't stop, even though I knew I needed to go in. I just didn't."

I wanted to tell Charlotte that I knew all about what it felt like to feel something and not be able to stop, but instead I tried to imagine who Charlotte had been with and I couldn't. I had never seen her sit with anybody other than girls at school, had never heard her talk to a boy on the phone, had never heard her mention a name, or act strange, or get nervous. I had never known Charlotte to pay attention to anybody except for her best friend, Macy.

"It wasn't Pete Holbrook, was it?" I asked. He was the only one I could think of Charlotte liking and that was only based on the fact that I knew he had liked her the year before, had followed her around at lunch all the time – I had seen him in the cafeteria, trying to get next to her in line, sit by her and Macy at a table – and I knew he had asked her to a dance once but she said no.

Charlotte laughed. "Pete? God no," she said. "Not even close." She moved onto her knees, and I could hear the tarp shift underneath her, and I could hear her take a deep breath and hold it and then

exhale. “Hold the flashlight, okay?” She clicked it on and handed it up, and the unexpected heaviness spun the light backward, blinding me for a second.

I pointed the beam down at the side of the deer, and I thought I was still seeing spots from the light, but then I realized they were ticks, standing out like blood-filled moles, and I wanted to look away, but Charlotte was pushing on the deer’s stomach with her hand, running her fingertips over the brown skin, pulling the back leg so that she could see the entirety of the white belly underneath. I was shaking badly and I tried to hold the light steady, but it kept jumping around and landing everywhere except where Charlotte was pointing the knife.

“On the count of three?” she asked, and I nodded but said nothing, and she looked up at me, waiting for an answer.

“Okay,” I said.

We both took a breath and started counting in unison, “One, two, three,” and then Charlotte stuck the knife in, center of the stomach, buried to the handle, and there was blood, a darkening around where the blade went in, and I could hear Charlotte inhale hard through her nose, and she pulled the knife out and there was more blood and it flowed freely, thick and red.

I shifted the flashlight and caught the knife in the beam, and the blade was red and there were white and brown hairs stuck to it, and I realized that Charlotte’s hand was shaking worse than mine and together we couldn’t hold anything in focus for more than a second. She wiped the knife clean on a piece of flannel shirt and sat back from the deer, pulled her knees to her chest and hugged her arms around them.

“What time do you think it is?” she asked.

I looked down at my watch and could see the two tiny glowing hands beneath the glass. “It’s after two,” I said.

“Dad was asleep when I left,” she said.

I imagined how it would be when we pulled into the driveway, our dad not knowing Charlotte had gone, his windshield smashed, the tires caked with dirt, bumpers full of weeds, and us carrying a newborn deer wrapped in one of his old shirts from the trunk. Part of me hoped that everything would happen like something on TV and we would make breakfast even though the sun had not begun to rise, and we would be inspected for injury, turned this way and that under the kitchen light, and our dad would take the fawn and come up with a way to feed it, make it a bed in a box, and he would look at the car and shake his head and be happy both of us were fine, and we would tell the story of how Charlotte had delivered the baby on the road from the deer we had hit and out dad would be so impressed that he would put his arm around her shoulders and say, That’s my girl! and he would repeat the story to his friends, too proud to keep from telling it over and over again for the rest of the week. But really I knew it would be nothing like that; it would be something that my mind did not want to imagine, and there were no pictures stored inside my head to give any kind of meaning to how it really would be, and I think that Charlotte knew it too, but maybe she believed in her own TV version a lot more than I did, or she had more hope, or more need, and maybe those were the things that made her put the knife into the deer again while I stood there, and make another narrow gash next to the first.

“You can’t just keep stabbing at it,” I said. “You have to keep the knife in and cut.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

When the men in the film had the box cutters in their hands, I didn’t think they would really do it, that they would put them against the girl and carve into her back, so that narrow lines of darkness rose to the surface of her skin in shapes almost like words, and Lenny Richter had been standing beside me, and he had put his hand over his mouth, and I thought for a second he was trying to stop himself from getting sick, and then I realized that he was laughing. He had his hand over his mouth and he was bent forward and he was laughing. I had felt all the spit dry in my mouth, and my tongue had gone thick so that even if I had wanted to laugh and pretend I was not sweating through my T-shirt, I could not. All I could do was watch and not move.

Charlotte had the knife in a tight grip, and I could tell she wanted to drag it sideways, tear through the thin wall of skin that divided the second cut from the first, turn the 1-inch slit to 2 inches, but just when I thought she might do it, go ahead and run the knife the distance of the belly and make a line big enough for her to open the stomach and reach in, find the baby inside, and pull it out onto the tarp, she took her hand off the handle and sat back on her heels and left the knife stuck in the skin. She wiped her hands of the thighs of her jeans and stood up. She turned away from me and started walking back toward the car.

"I need to think for a minute," she said.

I stood there with the flashlight still pointed down at the deer, the beam suddenly steady, the knife just a small interruption in the slight curve of belly that was divided now by a thick line of color. The deer didn't look as swollen as I had thought she was in the dark. She was just a deer, caught in the open between one field and the next, dead on the road. I clicked the switch and cut the light and turned around and followed Charlotte over the embankment.

Charlotte was sitting in the Dodge, drinking, and I wished she had the keys back in the ignition so we could listen to the radio, but they were still hanging from the lock in the trunk. She passed me the bottle and I noticed with the door shut the car was too quiet and too still.

"Would you miss me if I left town?" Charlotte asked. She pushed the knob on the headlights and the single swath that had cut into the darkness went out and the gathered bugs scattered in confusion, and there were only prismed stars above us through the shattered windshield and the slope of the ditch rising around us outside the windows.

"I would miss you," I said. "But I don't think you'll go."

"I might," she said. "I might surprise you." She had a piece of flannel shirt in her hands and she was rubbing at her palm, trying to get it clean.

"Who did Dad catch you making out with in the car?"

I took another small drink and turned my head toward her so I could see her face. She was staring straight ahead, staring out the broken windshield and into the darkness.

"It doesn't matter anymore," she said. She stopped rubbing her hand and wadded the shirt into a ball on the seat beside her. "Do you think we can get out of this ditch on our own? I don't want to wait until the sun comes up for someone to drive by.

I looked over my shoulder at the angle of the car in the ditch, the way the back end hadn't slid so far that it was wedged into the slope, and if Charlotte cranked the wheel hard enough and put it in reverse, she could ease us down into the bottom of the gully and we would have a chance at punching our way up and over the incline if she was willing to wind the engine tight and hit the gas hard.

"You could do it," I said.

She took the bottle from me and emptied it in one long swallow. "Help me gather everything, okay?"

We collected the things from around the deer, rolled up the tarp, folded it all together with the torn shirts, put them back in the trunk, and went back to the road. We both stood looking at the deer, and Charlotte crouched down and put her hand on the doe's side and petted her.

"She's cold," Charlotte said.

The air around us was getting thinner, and I didn't have to look at my watch to know that somewhere over the horizon line the sun was on its approach and the darkness would begin to soften and give way to light before too long. There were more birds making noise, but they were still too far out to see, and the crickets had almost given up, and I realized I was tired and ready to be home.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said. For a second I thought she was talking to me, but she had said it to the deer, and her voice was quiet and I knew that she was crying even though I could not see her face. "I tried," she said. She kept running her hand over and over the side of the deer, and then she reached forward and slowly pulled out my knife and handed it to me, bloody, and thick with matted hair, the handle sticky, the blade too stiff to fold.

I rubbed the knife against the hem of my shirt and was finally able to get it to close, and after I shoved it back into my pocket, Charlotte pointed me toward the front of the deer and she stayed at the back and we each grabbed a pair of legs and pulled. The deer had settled into the asphalt so that it was hard to free her, and it took us ten minutes to get her across the opposite lane. We dragged her to the side of the road and pushed her down toward the bottom of the other drainage ditch, away from the car. Her legs did not bend and she didn't make it very far down the ditch, but she was out of the way and off the road and nobody else was in danger of hitting her. We both stood on the blacktop shoulder, sweating and breathing heavily, looking at her dark body lying in the grass like nothing more than shadow.

"Why did you stop?" I asked.

Charlotte bowed her head and said nothing for a second, and then she wiped both her eyes and turned back toward the car. "It wouldn't have lived," she said. "It wouldn't have been natural to force it like that. It wasn't meant to be born yet." Behind her, in the thin light, I could see the narrow stain in the road.

She did just what I told her to do – eased the Dodge into reverse and turned the wheel so the entire car slipped back into the very bottom of the ditch, and we were only at a slight angle with the driver's side high-centered on the incline. I told her to put the car into drive and floor it, get enough forward momentum to push the car up the side and out of the ditch, and to keep a tight grip on the wheel and not let the car slide out from under her in the grass and the dirt, and she did those things too, and we hit the top of the ditch so hard we caught air and crossed to the other side of the road, and Charlotte had to guide us into our lane without overcorrecting, and she did that, and there was a little bit of fishtailing and the sound of tires breaking loose, and then we were on our side of the road, with one good headlight pointing out the direction.

In the movie the girl had been almost naked; Lenny had said she would be, but it had taken a while. They had tied her across the bed and she had been shirtless without a bra, her back nothing but blank skin and bone, and she had been wearing panties, white and thin, and when she twisted around on the bed, rolling up off her hips, trying to loosen her hands from where they were knotted above her head, I saw the panties were the kind like my sister had for a while, the ones she used to hang out back on the line to dry, the kind with the days of the week on them, and the girl had been wearing a pair that said Tuesday. I was suddenly embarrassed for her, in the same way I was embarrassed when my sister did our laundry and hung everything out in the yard for the neighbors to see – all of our private things exposed.

I rolled down my window so the air would keep me awake and I could lean out to help guide Charlotte down the road. Everything smelled wet and sharp and alive and I watched it all fall behind us as we passed. We were finally leaving the country, the fields, and the fence lines, and I wasn't sorry to watch them go. Outside my window was the sound of metal on metal and tire rub as the car tried to shake broken pieces loose.

The knife was shoved deep in my pocket, like a warm spot against my thigh, and when I looked at it again in the daylight, unfolded the blade, there would still be blood on it, and strands of light-colored hair. Charlotte had her hands gripped tightly around the steering wheel, and I wanted to ask her what it had felt like to cut into the deer. If it had been me who had held the knife, I wanted to think that things would be different now. Maybe I couldn't have gone as far as Charlotte did. Or maybe I wouldn't have stopped.

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https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/06/11/walkabout-2

WALKABOUT

By Jeffrey Eugenides

Odd, in a way, that we should have something called “the summer movie.” The temperature-controlled timelessness of movie theatres should argue against seasonal categories. Back in the days of drive-ins, with the car window down to admit the croaking speaker, it was possible to notice the humidity. Inevitably, too, an insect would crawl across the projector’s lens and be magnified on the screen. A bug that big would remind you that it was summer.

But inside a theatre it could be any season at all. Maybe that’s why, thinking about summer movies, I find myself returning not to a first-run cinema rumbling with some blockbuster’s rigged detonations but to the ballroom of our old yacht club in Detroit. In that vast, velvet-draped space, whenever a boozy regatta party didn’t intervene, movies were shown. One July evening, my mother and I ended up at an Australian film we knew nothing about beyond its mystifying title: “Walkabout.”

Summer explained why we were alone together. My oldest brother, a folk musician, worked nights. My father and my other brother were racing our sailboat up to Mackinac. And so my mother and I got into her car—which used to be my father’s until it got old and temperamental—and made the long drive into the city.

“The oil light’s on,” I said, as we were crossing the Belle Isle bridge.

“It does that,” my mother said.

The film began unthreateningly. A father drives his children, a teen-age daughter and young son, into the outback. At first, all seems well. They picnic. The sister and brother go for a walk. Suddenly, the father fires a gun in their direction. Hiding behind a rock, the girl looks back to see her father dowsing the car with gasoline. In the next second, he immolates the vehicle, along with himself.

Lost in the wilderness, the girl and boy are doomed. But fate intervenes: they meet an Aborigine who is in the midst of the test of manhood known as the walkabout. He hunts game for them and teaches them how to siphon water from the ground. The parched, lizard-ridden landscape becomes lush as they journey. Soon the Aborigine and the girl are cavorting naked in an oasis. Later, as they near civilization, the Aborigine performs a mating dance, to which the girl doesn’t respond, and the next morning she finds that he has hanged himself in a tree.

Two suicides. A lengthy montage of Edenic, but fully frontal, nudity. And all without my mother putting her hand over my eyes. Beyond the wondrous excitement of all this was the message the film conveyed, and for which there existed no better recipient than a twelve-year-old growing up in the wake of the sixties: civilization was evil, technology deracinating, and the only solution a return to nature. I’d had a glimpse into a world of adult seriousness, in which fathers despaired of their lives and children, abandoned, had to fend for themselves.

As we went to our car, my mother and I made appreciative noises about the film in order to disguise the awkwardness of having seen it together. It must have been clear to my mother that she was losing me to all the film depicted, not only to sexuality but to a life without a parental center. The film’s suggestion, that a father wasn’t something to be counted on, we left unvoiced, but that general idea—of the irrelevancy of fathers—always hovered between a mother and son.

Further exploiting my father’s absence, I rolled down my window. He would never have allowed that—not in the city at night. My father would have secured the doors and windows and turned

the air-conditioning on full blast. My mother was too busy to notice. The red oil light had flashed on again. I watched her frowning at it, then turned back to the window.

In the reeds along the river, radios were playing. People were lying on blankets on the grass, or dancing together in the gazebos, bottles glinting in their hands.

I was older than I'd been two hours earlier. I was ready to get out of the car right then and there. I could wander into the woods of Belle Isle, go back over the bridge, past the Chrysler factory, all the way downtown. Over to Canada, even. Or south to Toledo. Or at least to college someday. Wherever my walkabout would take me.

"I'll tell you one thing," my mother said, rapping her knuckles against the oil light. "I'm about ready to set this car on fire."

We had a good laugh over that. Outside, I could smell the river, the blowsy cattails, the throat-coating, Kaopectate wind from the cement factory on the opposite shore. ♦