

To The River

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I walk into Scott's kitchen, sweaty from basketball and needing something cold to drink, and there's his mom in just her underwear. Mrs. Labor's back has shallow rolls like fish gills and my eyes zero in on a raised diamond of flesh right above the elastic band. She turns and I end up looking at the top part of her crotch where dark hair pokes out.

"Joey, shit." She grabs a dishtowel from the sink and covers her chest.

I hold up my glass, words echoing in my brain: *I wanted some lemonade.* "Lemonade," I say.

"It's gone." Then she's gone. A door slams and I stand with my empty glass, my mouth open.

Scott opens the screen door and walks past me to the fridge. "Hey, did ya have to squeeze the lemons? What the fuck, man?"

"Your mom," I say.

"What about her?"

I saw her freakin' cans. "She said it was gone."

Scott rolls his eyes. "She doesn't know shit. Here." He reaches into the refrigerator and shoves a purple glass pitcher at me. "Smell it first."

We guzzle the lemonade then we're back outside and on our way to the river. Normally Scott would be the first person I'd tell if I saw some hot piece completely naked, but moms are touchy. I'd probably hit Scott if he told me he saw my mom without her clothes on. Besides, today is different. We haven't seen each other in six months, since his dad shot himself and Scott got sent away to the state hospital.

We sit on a ledge overlooking the river, throwing rocks and watching carp scatter. Everything's business as usual, like he was never gone.

"We should buy fireworks for the Fourth of July. That's, like, next week," he says. "Big ones. Set them off here. That'd be sweet."

"Are you even gonna be allowed to hang out?"

"I think so. Just with you probably. Mom's being really weird since I got back."

"But you're cool, right?"

He leans over the side of the ledge and spits into the water. "Check it out, man, they think it's food." The carp dab and nip at the white glob of Scott's spit.

“Did they really shock you?” I had heard kids talking at school about terrible things they do to people at those places. I’d seen shock treatments in movies and it looked like that could really mess a person up.

“I had to talk to this one lady a lot, my therapist,” he says. “She was all right. Then I had to be in group, where a bunch of us sat around and talked about shit.”

Everyone at school said Scott’s mom came home from the store with the rolls she had forgotten for Christmas dinner and almost ran Scott over. He was standing in the middle of the street with blood all over himself. He had been woken up by a noise, they said, and had gone looking for his dad. He said he checked his parents’ bedroom, then his dad’s office. He walked by the bathroom and saw blood-spattered walls. Then, he said, he didn’t remember anything.

“Some kids said that you tried to...”

Scott looks at me and I feel my face get hot.

“I mean, you know.” It’s my duty to tell Scott what people are saying about him. I throw a large stone, watch dark shadows in the water slide away.

“What, that I tried to cut my cock off?” He laughs and rockets a stone into the river like a football. “Jesus Christ. Do you believe everything you hear?”

“Did you?” I don’t mean to ask this out loud, and he turns to me, another rock in his hand, and for a second I think he might throw it at me.

“Why the fuck”—he curves his hand and flings the rock backward toward the water—“would I do that to such a majestic monument?” He snickers and thrusts his hips.

“People said there was blood.” I pause, look down at my own jeans. “There.”

Scott stares straight ahead. I see the line of his jaw tighten and relax.

“Piss,” he says. “I pissed my fucking pants, okay?”

I know my face changes even though I don’t speak. Such weakness is outside of anything I can imagine from him. I think back to that day and imagine him standing in the street, his father’s blood mixing with the urine on his jeans, and I wonder if that’s when his head separated. If that’s when, as my mom says, he went crazy.

“You really don’t remember seeing him?”

He shrugs. “Would you?”

I don’t have an answer. I don’t really know what he saw. I wasn’t allowed to go to the funeral; Mom said she didn’t want me exposed to death. I tried to explain I was old enough—a teenager, finally—but she wouldn’t listen.

“I don’t know,” I say.

I think about this while we walk home, our feet shuffling on the gravel, the dust turning our shoes a light brown.

In front of his driveway Scott stops and turns towards me.

“Don’t tell anyone, okay?” He pushes his hands deep into his pockets and turns away from me.

By the time I get home the sky is more dark than light and I know I’m going to be in trouble. Mom didn’t like Scott before he left. She didn’t like Mr. or Mrs. Labor, his parents, either, even though Mr. Labor and Dad used to be friends. Mr. Labor was a photographer, and Dad repairs cameras. They worked together sometimes in our garage where Dad has an area set up so the mess stays in the garage and not in the house.

I walk up the driveway, and as I reach the screen door I hear my parents arguing from the kitchen, their voices amplified in the night air.

“I won’t have him in my house!” Mom sounds like she’s had too much coffee, her voice explosive and high. I hear dishes clattering against each other.

“How do you plan to explain that to Joe?”

“I don’t need to explain anything. When did you decide that our child runs this household?”

“When did you turn into such a bitch?”

Silence carries out to the porch like fog and I hold my breath. I’ve never heard Dad swear at Mom before. When she responds, what feels like five minutes later, her voice is so low I can barely understand her. I imagine her standing inches away from Dad, her arms crossed over her chest.

“You call me whatever you want, that child is insane.”

Scott. And she’s wrong about him.

“He’s having a hard time, Susan. He lost his dad, who was our friend. And a good man.” Dad’s voice rises and each word is punctuated with grief. “And he raised a good son. Scott *needs* Joey right now.”

“Mom,” I say, walking through the entryway into the kitchen, “he’s not crazy. He’s totally fine.”

“You,” she turns to me, a dish towel in one hand, “will not bring him into this house, understand?” Her eyes are animal, frightening but wide like if I moved at her she’d turn and run.

“He’s my best friend!”

“Not anymore.”

“Dad?” I look at his face and know how the conversation will end. He looks from me to my mother, then shakes his head.

“Listen to your mother, Joe.” Exhaustion has replaced emotion. He turns and walks out to the garage. Mom and I stand in the kitchen, enemies, staring at each other.

“Bitch.” I say this word all the time at school, and Mom has said it to me when I complain about chores, *bitch, bitch, bitch*, but here it’s a weight, a foreign group of sounds that trips my tongue. Her lips press together and whiten, nearly disappearing. Her back straightens, ready for challenge. I take a step backward. She hurls the towel into the sink and leaves the kitchen. The screen door slams and she is gone.

It was the only thing I could think of to say. I’ll pay for it for weeks, maybe months. I know the next time we fight she’ll say, *well it’s too bad I’m such a bitch, isn’t it?*, emphasizing it. There will be comments to Dad, to friends that come over. *I’m a bitch, did you know that? Just ask Joey.* The word will become ugly and I’ll probably never use it again. But I’ll think it, and when I do, she’ll be the first thing that comes into my mind.

I walk out to the garage and Dad hands me a Nikon SLR. When I help him work, which I don’t do as often as I should, it’s my job to break the cameras—bend something in one spot, pull a part out of another—without him seeing. That way he can continue repairing the same set of cameras and Mom won’t bug him about money.

“Sorry you had to hear that, Joey.”

I turn and bend the film catch on the Nikon. “It doesn’t matter,” I say.

“Does Scott talk about his dad?”

“Not really. We just talked about...stuff.” I remember Scott’s plea that I not tell anyone about him pissing himself.

“What did you do?” He is hunched over a pile of miscellaneous camera parts, picking through them with his index finger.

“We went to the river, same old thing.”

“You do need to be careful with Scott.” He glances up at me. “Your mother is right about that.”

“I think he’s fine.”

“People thought his dad was fine too, Son. Sometimes people don’t feel how they look.”

I sit on a stool by the workbench. “Yeah, I guess.”

“It’s hard to lose someone. I can’t tell you how much I think about him and how many times I’ve thought of all the times he sat right where you’re sitting now,” he nods at the stool, “and I tell you, I miss him here more than anywhere else.”

“Was he your best friend?”

Dad nods and clears his throat, blinking a shimmer from his eyes. “Yeah. He was.”

I go over to Scott’s house the next day, leaving quietly through the kitchen so I can avoid Mom. Mrs. Labor answers the door. She looks like she’s been crying, all red and puffed up. She’s barefoot and has on jeans and a flannel shirt that’s way too big for her. Mr. Labor’s. It’s open at the top and I see her bra. I move my eyes to hers, but I feel my face turning red.

“Scott’s at an appointment,” she says, rubbing her arms as if she’s cold. “Do you want to come in?” She holds the door open, and I look past her into the living room. “I just made a sandwich. I’ll make you one too and you can keep me company.”

I stay because I want to, and because I know it’ll piss my mom off. We carry our lunch outside and sit on the porch swing, and I watch her feet as I chew. They don’t have any of the weird bumps my mom’s feet have. And her toenails are painted bright orange.

“I’m glad you came over. I want to apologize for yesterday.” She pauses. “In the kitchen.” She looks at me like she’s hoping I forgot walking in on her, seeing her.

I don’t know what to say, so I just say that it’s okay.

She tilts her head and smiles, but it’s the saddest smile I’ve ever seen. I didn’t know her very well before Mr. Labor died. She would appear with snacks for Scott and me, but she wasn’t around a lot. I wish now that I could have talked to her more, before.

“It must have been a shock.” She makes a sound in her throat that comes out her nose. “Appreciate your body now, how young and muscular you are. It won’t last forever.”

I want to tell her that it has lasted forever with her, that she’s the most beautiful woman in the world, and I imagine her again—her underwear, the flabby parts of her back, her breasts—and I think about what it would be like to kiss her, there on the porch swing. What she would do.

“Has Scott talked to you about his dad?”

“He doesn’t say much.”

She takes a bite of her sandwich. I watch the bread compress under the pressure of her lips. “I thought that he might have. Since you’re such good friends.”

I shrug.

“Do you know any other boys your age that have lost their dads?”

I shake my head. Scott is the only one.

Mrs. Labor doesn't say anything else and the silence becomes true silence, not just a pause. I search for something to say. "We want fireworks for the Fourth of July."

"Oh, that's coming up, isn't it? I lose track." The flush that lit up her chest when I saw her naked appears again, slowly bleeding up her neck and into her cheeks. "Are you finished?" She stands, reaching for my plate, and, when I hold it out, her index finger, the nail painted with the same orange polish but chipped, brushes mine. I let go. She balances both plates and her glass; I reach out to help her, but as I stand the bottom plate slides like a door swinging open and slips from between her fingers. It hits the porch and shatters, covering my feet with small chunks of ceramic.

"Shit!" She hands me the other plate and the glass, drops to her knees and begins picking up the broken pieces, setting them on my plate. "I'm such a fucking klutz sometimes." She looks up at me, her light brown hair falling over one shoulder, and she looks for a second like she's my age, or close. "Sorry."

"It's okay," I say. "It's just a plate."

She sits down and leans against the porch swing. Her head in her hands, her shoulders start shaking and I can hear her gasping through her fingers.

I've never seen a grown-up cry like this. My first thought is to go home, to leave her there on the porch to comfort herself, but instead I reach out and touch her shoulder. Her long hair sticks to my sweaty fingertips, and I try to pat her and tell her it's okay, but the more my fingers move, the more tangled they get in her hair, so I kneel and put my arms around her.

She tilts her head and leans against me. I squeeze as hard as I dare. She smells fresh, like soap and light, and I close my eyes. Her arms are tight around my waist. I wonder what Scott would think if he came home and saw us like this.

"Joey." She pulls away, and turns towards me. "Thank you. I—" She pauses and her eyes get this real far away look in them, like she's left the porch in her head. "I needed that."

Mom is ironing when I get home. I sit on the couch and flip channels.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"I had lunch with Mrs. Labor." I look right at her. "It was fun."

Mom opens her mouth then closes it again. She's as pissed as I knew she would be; her eyes flash. She retaliates. "The Morgans are coming here for the Fourth. We're watching fireworks at the river."

"I'm doing that with Scott."

“You’ll have to tell him you have other plans.” Steam hisses from the iron.

“What?”

“Joey, we’ve had this conversation. Your father and I think you need other friends. Not just Scott.”

I turn the volume up on the TV.

“Turn that off. Go make a sandwich or something,” she says, “then clean your room.”

“A sandwich. Right.”

I head to the kitchen. I don’t want anything, but I take a plate from the cupboard. I stare at the plate, Mom’s white china, and in my head I break it in two, right there in my hands.

“Joe! Come here.” Her voice carries into the kitchen.

“Shit!” I yell and throw the plate onto the floor. It breaks into rounded triangular chunks, smaller chips crack off and scatter.

“What happened?” Mom runs into the kitchen and looks from me to the plate then back to me.

“It fell.”

She stands with her hands on her hips and for the first time I see my mom has hips and a waist, although they’re nothing like Mrs. Labor’s. Mom is flat and straight up-and-down, like a boy.

Her face seems to close in on itself, her eyes squinting together and her mouth flattening out in a tight line. “Plates aren’t free, you know. You can’t just throw them because you’re mad.” She walks to the closet and gets a broom and dust pan. “Clean it up. Don’t cut yourself.”

“I didn’t throw it.” While I sweep up bits of the plate I remember Mrs. Labor, her arms around me, her smell. If I could do it again, I would kiss her. Not on the mouth, of course, but her ear. The lower part that meets her neck, the part that smells like light.

When I sit down to dinner that night my food is divided onto three paper towels: a slice of meatloaf on one, green beans on another, and a baked potato on the third. The juice from the green beans is soaking through and turning the white a pale green.

“What’s this?” I ask.

Dad lowers the corner of his newspaper to look at me. “We don’t break plates in this house. Not by accident, not on purpose.” He flips the paper back up. “Eat your dinner.”

I sit down and spread the meatloaf to the four corners of the paper towel, load the potato with butter and sour cream and then squash it to

pieces. I save the green beans for last and by the time I'm done, rivulets of liquid bean are spreading across the table.

"What's the matter with you?" Mom puts her fork down and stares at me.

I give her the meanest stare I can. I feel like crying but I won't give her that. I want to say "you are!" and throw my food at her and tell her that if she's going to try to keep me from being friends with Scott then she's a bigger bitch than I thought.

"May I be excused, Dad?"

"Clean up the table, Joe. Then you can go to your room."

"Craig," Mom starts, looking at my father.

"Let him go. It's enough."

Two days later, Scott and I walk to the river. This time we're quiet. He stands over a cement drain with a look on his face I've never seen before. He leans into the drain and pulls out a paper bag. He holds it weird, like it's something that might break.

"Did you get fireworks?" I reach for the bag but he pulls it away. Before he left, Scott always had ways of getting us the coolest stuff, like pepper gum that would burn our tongues and rocks with crystals on the inside.

He keeps one hand under the bag, slides his other hand into it, and pulls out a small gun. He holds it up for me to see.

"Whoa," I breathe. "Where'd you get this?" I am stunned. I lick my dry lips; my tongue feels too big for my mouth. "Mom would kill me if she saw this!"

He sets it in my hand and I'm surprised by how heavy it is but light at the same time. I put my finger on the trigger, the pad of my fingertip spongy against the thin sliver of metal. I turn away from Scott and aim the gun at a tree, squinting my eye shut and sticking my tongue out of the corner of my mouth like I see on TV. I feel the gun from the tips of my fingers to my shoulder. I'm hyper all of a sudden, imagining us taking out birds, squirrels, even the carp in the water.

Scott steps closer and I lower the gun. He runs his finger up and down the barrel and looks at me.

"It's just like his. Just like the one he used."

And like invisible fingers are pressing on it, the gun gets heavier in my hand. My excitement is gone and I look at Scott. I hear the scratching of claws on bark as two squirrels chase each other up a tree behind me.

"Put it in your mouth," he says. Scott's face is pale and the black parts of his eyes are too big.

“What? Are you fucking nuts?”

“It’s not loaded.” His voice is mechanical. He’s acting as if he’s not even here.

“What are you talking about?” My throat feels like it has a baseball in it and I blink to keep my eyes clear. Scenes from horror movies flash through my head, people running away from killers. The thought that Scott has come to kill me stops everything and I get wobbly all over.

“Don’t be a pussy. I need to see what it looks like.”

He grabs my hand and raises the gun, turning the barrel towards my face. I want to resist but he moves too fast, and in a few seconds it’s in my mouth and I can’t move. My body is rigid now, frozen. The metal clicks against my teeth like cracking knuckles. I try to swallow but my teeth hit the top of the barrel and a thick gagging sound comes out instead. The sun seems to be brighter than I’ve ever seen it and sweat pours down the sides of my face. My heart pounds and every time it thumps I’m sure I’m going to puke.

“Scott,” I start, but when I talk the barrel moves. I imagine the trigger moving a millimeter too far. I look toward the road, for cars, for a bicycle, anything.

“I bet he cried too.” He’s watching the ground, swaying a little like he’s going to fall over. “Tell me what you’re thinking about.”

I don’t know what he wants me to say.

He pulls the gun from my mouth, takes it from my hand. Our eyes connect and in that second I see that my mom is right: there’s something wrong with my best friend. I feel sick. He puts the gun back under the drain and begins walking back home.

We are quiet walking. No words seem like the right ones. When we get to his house, he sits on the front steps. “You can go home. I’m just going to sit out here for a while.”

“Do you want me to get your mom?”

He laughs. “Yeah, right.”

“What are you going to do with...you know?”

“I don’t know.” He looks at me. “Christ, Joey, I’m not going to do anything bad. You’re worse than my fucking mom.” He turns and gives the finger to the front door. “Bitch.”

I get angry. “Dude, she’s your mom!”

“Whatever, man.” He leans back, resting his elbows on the top step, and closes his eyes.

I walk away, looking back over my shoulder until I can’t see Scott anymore. His words don’t match up with the look in his eyes at the river and

my stomach feels like it's going to explode. I'm still sweating and as soon as I'm out of sight of Scott's house I sit down on the side of the road, afraid I'm going to throw up.

I feel the vibration of an approaching car and stand up quickly. It's a pickup, no one I know, but I wave anyway. I want to go back to the river, sit and think and watch the fish swim and throw rocks and pretend that today didn't happen. But the sun is getting lower and I don't want Mom more mad at me.

I smell dinner as soon as I walk in the door and realize that I'm starving. The melted cheese from the casserole begins to fill me before I can see it.

"Just in time," Dad says and hands me a cardboard picnic plate. I look at the dividers, slide my fingertips into the grooves and wonder briefly if the gun left any residue on my hands.

Mom talks about the Morgans, arriving tomorrow morning, and how they're going to the Black Hills after they leave our house. She's decided that we should take a family trip, the three of us. I drink my milk and listen to the remains of my summer time with Scott fade away.

After dinner Dad goes out to the garage to work on cameras. I follow him. "Can I try to fix one tonight?" I ask.

Dad seems pleased to see me. "Have a seat," he says, and slides his equipment over so I can watch him as he works. "You didn't say much at dinner."

"Do you miss Mr. Labor?"

Dad uses a tiny silver screwdriver to open the back of a Nikon. "I do, very much. Probably as much as you missed Scott when he left."

"Mom doesn't."

"She tries, Joe." He hands me a pencil flashlight. I turn it on and point it at the underside of the camera.

"I hate her sometimes." I whisper this, and not because I'm afraid she'll walk into the garage and hear. I look at Dad's face. The flashlight shadows his face, but I hear him sigh.

"I know you do." He turns the camera over and begins working on the lens.

I don't tell him that I wish Mrs. Labor was my mom. That I would never hate her no matter what she did.

"I'll be right back," I say, and stand up. Dad nods and hunches over the lens.

I open the door and stand halfway between the kitchen and the garage, watching Dad work alone, without his friend, and I see myself years from

now without Scott, and wonder if Dad could have done anything to stop Mr. Labor from doing what he did. I wonder if it's possible to stop the past.

Dad and I work into the night, and by the time we go to bed I have fixed my first camera. I read *Shutterbug* and think about Mrs. Labor and how even though she isn't like the girls in the magazines Scott looks at, she's the prettiest woman I've ever seen. And when I fall asleep I see her face, her hair, in small shapes against the inside of my eyelids.

A noise wakes me and my first thought is that it's Scott, that he snuck into my room. My stomach starts to roll when I remember the gun and I open my eyes, trying to focus on the furniture in my room glowing in blue moonlight. I am cold and I realize that something is wrong. I am lying on my side, and my hip is wet and itchy. I squeeze my pajama bottoms and when I smell piss on my fingers I am wide awake.

Fuck. I push the blankets back and quickly take them and the sheets off of my bed. I sneak clean sheets from the hall closet. I press my ear against my parents' door and hear Dad snoring. I finish making the bed.

The sky is beginning to change from purple to blue; it's dawn.

I walk to the river.

I reach into the dark cement drain; the paper bag is still there. I lie down on the ledge. The stone is freezing on my damp pajamas and I shiver. I press my cheek into the grit of the ledge and know that it will leave marks that I won't be able to explain to Mom. There is so much that I will never be able to explain to her.

A carp splashes in the middle of the water and I begin to cry and because I'm alone there I let everything go and scream and shake until I'm sure I'll never stop. I pick up the bag, take out the gun and look at it and imagine where it's been, and I know that nothing with Scott will ever be the same.

Keeping my trembling fingers away from the trigger, I remove the clip. As I pull it out and see the bullet inside, a static sound rushes in my ears and I dig my fingertips into the soft ground. I take the bullet out and look at it—small, sharp. I put it in my pocket. I can't feel it, it's so light, and I look down to see if it shows through my pajamas. I press around it until a dark mark appears, but when I move my hand again the bullet disappears into the fabric.

I walk to the edge of the river and lean forward. Lean until I almost can't see the edge anymore, and I look down into the water. It's like the ocean, wide and big, the current swirling through.

I get dizzy. Black spots poke at my vision. One more centimeter, I think, and I'd be gone. I'd be in the river, floating, not struggling against the current but letting it pull me south. I throw the gun as hard as I can. I step back. ☪