

To Health

So I saw my old friend Brian at a party the other night. He looked great, I mean, really great. He'd gotten a haircut and shaved his beard. Not all the way, just enough to seem mysterious but not like your creepy pediatric dentist. Rebellious, but not a matador on strike.

Hey, where's the Jew-fro, I asked him. I can't help it, I know it isn't PC but that's what we called it in high school and we weren't PC in high school. When I thought back to high school Brian, I remembered his curly, wayward hair, the giraffe costume he wore for our Halloween dance, and the way he tried to convince everyone he had a British accent for the first couple of weeks.

Brian shrugged. He smiled when I sat down next to him and let me bum a lighter for my cigarette. There was a bonfire at this party, because even though it's South Carolina, it's still cold enough in the winter for jackets and a fire. We watched the flames and smoked and drank our beers.

How's Wofford, I asked him. He finished the cigarette and ground the butt in the dirt with his shoe to make sure it really went out.

Remember, only you can stop forest fires, I said. He laughed and drained his beer. He started to walk away and I followed. He was the same height as when I'd last seen him, but his shoulders had shaped out, and he'd lost some of that high school baby fat. Also his clothes fit him better, not the wrinkled polos and t-shirts he wore senior year but a button down with little frogs on it, a pair of dark jeans. I wondered if he had a girlfriend dressing him back at Wofford or if he'd just read some style articles on the internet.

Hey, hey man, I said, trailing him like a lost dog. You look like an H&M model. Hey, do you remember high school? Remember how you guys smoked weed and I was too pussy to join

you? How we both got rejected from like, every college we applied to? What a waste of time, man, what a huge waste of time. All that stress.

Brian laughed, but didn't answer. We went into the kitchen, which was eerily quiet, since everyone else was outside with the fire, or down in the basement with the band, and most of the Party Juice had run out. Brian pulled down a bottle of Evan Williams and poured us each a shot.

What are we drinking to? I asked him, but he'd already taken his, and was pouring another.

You know, in Scotland, I started to say, but I stopped. I didn't want to sound like one of those girls who studies abroad and then starts every fucking conversation with— Well when I was in blah-blah-blah like a pretentious twat.

But Brian looked at me directly, waiting for me to continue. He looked so much older, more mature, without the crazy hair and with the short beard.

Well, I continued, when I was in Scotland my friend told me to do shots like this— I took the glass of bourbon to demonstrate— You raise your glass, clink— I clinked it against his— And then you go down, all the way to the floor— I bent over, awkward in my tight jeans—and then lift back up and clink again. Then you say whatever you're toasting to, and drink. What are we toasting to?

Brian just stared at me. So I said, to health, and we drank.

He poured more shots. The world was getting all water-color-carousel, like it does when I've had too much to drink. I knew I needed to sit down, and Brian followed me out to the front porch with the bottle and the pack of smokes. Some students were hanging around in clusters, smoking and laughing, but they weren't paying us any attention.

You know man, I told him, as we lit another smoke. The week after you died, I threw a table at Deirdre Dishman.

He raised his eyebrows.

Yeah, like an actual table. One of those long ones, too, during poetry class. Then I stormed out of the room. It was dumb, but I was just so mad. You pissed me the fuck off, dying like that.

I didn't look at him. I didn't want to see his response.

You know, right before you died, I was reading *Music of the Swamp*, by Lewis Nordan. And there's that scene, at the end of the book, where the kid shoots himself in the face. And Nordan describes the hair and bone and blood and brain everywhere. The way the room looked.

I know it's morbid but that's what I think of. When I think of you dying, what you did. I think of all those gristly things but I also think of the river and the blues music and the pink dolphins. I think of the train tracks where you used to smoke dope and that time we walked down forever and found a mouse and a killdeer. You remember that bird? The way it tried to run away from its nest like it had a broken wing? To protect its young?

I accepted the shot Brian gave me and drank it without looking at him.

What did the gun taste like? I asked the space in front of me. Brian shifted next to me, looking down at his nails. Was it warm? Or cold? Did it taste like cinnamon or sweat or baking chocolate?

I turned to Brian and put my hand on his shoulder so he was forced to look up at me. Even in this older face, his eyes were the same ice-gray-blue. His glasses were still smudged and laced with streaks of who knows what.

You know when I tried to off myself, as soon as I downed all those pills, I felt this huge wave of regret. And that's why I'm still here. 'Cause as soon as I felt that I ran down stairs and told my mom and they were able to get me to the hospital and pump my stomach.

I paused, to let the heat of the conversation evaporate.

I just keep wondering if you felt the same, I said.

Brain moved his head in a non-committal gesture. I took his hand in mine and squeezed it.

You're right, I said. It doesn't matter. We're here now. Everything's in front of us. Come on.

Even though I was drunk and should've probably stayed in place, I took Brian's hand and pulled him off the porch. He followed me down the road, past the crumbling duplexes and apartment buildings where University students lived, past the red dot store and the abandoned gas station and the used car lot where there were a hundred stray cats. We walked out of the city, down to the river, which smelled like sewage and waste. Past the baseball field and the picnic tables and the cracked signs showing what wildlife you could find in this polluted vein. Supposedly there were otters but I had never, not once, seen an otter.

Brian didn't ask where we were going, which was a good thing, since I wasn't really positive myself. All I knew was the general direction, forward.

It was good to see you, tonight, I said when we finally stopped, sitting on a rail bridge overlooking the river, far enough from the lights of downtown that you could see the stars. The water roiled under us, thick and brown from iron oxide lapped off the banks. I found myself telling Brian about how when the river flooded, a couple years ago, you couldn't see the tops of trees for the water. How the current carried all manner of bodies with it, things that had drowned,

things that had gotten trapped, things that had lain buried until the water churned them up and exposed them. How far away, the river seemed now. How easy it would be, to tilt over the edge and fall into its arms, be silenced in its swollen breast, lay yourself to rest in the silty bottom and let the fish pick you apart day by day. I turned to Brian and saw him looking at the moon, a fat yellow womb of light, and I knew he imagined becoming a star.

Were there only two ways to go, that night? Up, or down? I guess not, because I found myself walking home at three in the morning, when the birds started chirping and the very beginnings of dawn polluted the dark. I came home smelling of river and fire. My roommates were all sleeping and so I crept through the house like a ghost, went out to the back yard and watched the sun rise over the old pin oak tree. I remembered Brian's face, but not his hands. His words, but not his voice. As the sun rose that morning bits and pieces of him vanished in the light, and I found myself speaking softly to the trees.