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The Places & Things We Think We Keep

IT IS A PLACE CALLED JUBILEE. A series of riverine bluffs and hillsides masquerading as a park, contained. Concealed within its tree lines are buildings of an old abandoned pioneer college that's now attended by a few women and by some park rangers who have nothing better to do than engulf themselves in the smell of old wood rotting and stacks of Reader's Digests from the nineteen twenties, bound by string and ties of leather shoelaces, while their pages tether away like lost butterfly wings in the last tepid days of summer. Women and men in their early twenties, thirties and forties who have given up on anything that might resemble success or fame. Men and women whose skin is so pale and faded, who have glass bead clear liquidy eyes, whose hands and feet are so hard-worked that their fingers and toes are permanently chapped pink. People whose job it is to tend to history, to remember and record, whom we should ask questions to but we never do. People who are the most real people of us all. And we rarely see them.

They are in places where what is mostly heard is birdsong. So far off the highway, the highway itself surrounded by rolly-polly farmland, and if they are not living history cemeteries, these villages that call themselves cities, then the cemeteries that encircle them staffed with way too many Voorheeses to even be mildly funny, then what is?

It is this place called Jubilee. It of course has its own turn of the century cemetery. Defined most notably by its wrought iron fence that introduces the ruin of the college's founder's house, wherein lived his wife and who knows how many mistresses (they have secrets that if we made them up, they would have already been true) in a typically Midwestern gothic existence. Trees, mostly oak but some cedar, dripping with vines, a tendrill transplanted from a patch of green from Louisiana. Fence now tilting once painted blue now painted (badly) black, leaning in its attempt to hold down a plot of land. Failing to do so. Rolling into the netherworld of the woods.

It is and has been a place where for centuries young people come to consummate their lust. The ritual probably originated in a spring school picnic. In sixth grade, classes from the local private religious schools were taken out to Jubilee for lunch and afternoons of baseball or hiking or doing whatever could be done while being monitored by apathetic teachers, some of them young enough to feel the yearn of the season.

Always, every year, there would occur an unstoppable water balloon fight between boys and girls. The reason this happened was obvious to everyone involved. Amateur wet t-shirt contests. The hormonal soup we rained upon each other was a blessing with no disguises. Near strip tease shows in white button downs and Polos.

Makes sense to return to the very locale where Lisa M. was chased into the park service's women's bathroom. To hunt her down for nailing you on the top of your head with a fat round light blue balloon, thus wiping out your hair, thus making you look like a wet dog, flat-headed fool, fag.

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Oh, the infamy of it. Her saddle shoes a blur of zebra skin. Sweet cherub laughter when you tackled her in the crispy autumn leaves.

Lisa M. . . . a brown-haired, olive-skinned maiden of fair-weather Lebanon. The first crusade of Prince Lionheart. We return to our victories and defeats as if they were cathedrals built over springs of emotion. Waterfalls of memory lost somewhere in the forests that surround. Look around in them and you'll find nothing and some of its traces. Empty beer bottles, some paper burnt, the key to a house that no longer even stands. Baseball cards with their quartz-ified pink tongues of gum. Simple apothecaries of believing, especially ingesting anything for the reality it promises. A gram of memory, or a memory gram.

On the hillside of the tiny cemetery, a shaded place in a bed of leaves fallen last fall, above the creek that ran so clear it was believed to be a spring that paused for a moment where a tree had toppled over some rocks (or were they blocks of concrete?) into a pool. Pausing into pools of each other. Another wicked writhing.

The innumerable number of these places in an America that is sprawling out of control. What has since been created is living cemeteries of strip mall mortuary. Inside of which anything can be acquired for a nominal fee. No one realizing that a purchase is a transaction— a form of trade— giving something for something else, bills and coinage for some equally useful or useless object, or service, or trademarked illusion. That what it is isn't about anything at all, the sell of absence, the purchase of nothing, and the strip malls keep encroaching and promising the end of architecture as an act of aestheticism. The vision is simple and even scarier than that at the end of the Planet of the Apes. Badlands. An abandoned K-Mart, its door swinging open. From inside, the sound of clean version music. Behind it, a garbage dump of a Walden eroding into ever dimming sunsets.

But before this happens everywhere, back to Jubilee. A patch of forgotten valley and woodland. Nothing special. A meadow off a small, cracked up and tarred back together blue-grey highway. Forgotten to time, it forgets time too and grows vines and vines of itself, dirt and hillock on which trees climb. And worms eat everything below. Including bones and secrets. The produce section of carnality. A branch creaking in the wind.

On a lighter, more airy note. Driving a car at night to the weave of loose gravel white rock road in the farmlands was the perfect way to try to find and race UFOs. With a six pack on the floor ready to be opened and nursed into empty aluminum can oblivion. Unlike the mythical, government sponsored sightings in New Mexico or Colorado or Arizona where there's so many air force bases that it's pretty obvious what's going on, here, in the farmlands, who knows what's up?

They cross the skies almost every night, especially when you aren't looking, but then, nothing escapes the corner of the eye. This was way before some idiots in England went out to fields and made landing patterns that were so totally fake. This is before that. This is when life from other realms actually used the anonymity of cornfields and forest ravines and riverbeds as rest stops for their summer vacations. Complete seclusion. Far from big cities.

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To track them all one needs to do is to drive out to the square-grided country roads of farmland, past the city's limits, their outer limits, and keep driving, while sipping and looking up. It's pretty hard to not get lost and quite easy to not be found.

You roll the windows down, put the heat on low, turn the radio on even if it only plays AM. Then you go get one of your best friends at the time so that he or she will open and serve you a beer while you both slowly move through the night, looking up, illuminated only by the headlights and dashboard's dusty glow. With luck, the local police won't pull you over on your way out of town, after having shone a light into the vehicle, having seen arms gone akimbo in an attempt to hide the beverages in question, then pull you over for a lecture and an emptying party, libations to our youthful stupidity. Just in case, as a big boy scout, you must be prepared.

Gently, secretively, as a gourmand might sip at a glass of Château Neuf du Pape 1912, you, holding a can between your legs, *pssssshsssst* it open and taste in gradually larger and larger fizzy, wretched, tin-tinged gulps, to become slightly more and more buzzed while piloting. Incremental bliss.

In small amounts, two to three cans of the ass-cheapest you rationalize as economical and drinkable, will do. Known as bottom of the barrel, completely overlooking the taste found in Mexican, European, or Japanese brews, you sip a liquid that tastes of sheet metal, burnt and liquefied.

Driving through big scary weed trees, wild roses, fields of yellowing corn in a late summer, hearing the static of 1970s hits on WURL and laughing about anything that isn't even funny. Driving slowly into fogginess under a clear blue ocean sky of lightning bugs and stars, looking up above in silent wonderment. What were those occasional moving lights? Falling stars or meteorites crashing out of sight like we eventually would, like our dreams and songs of illusion never brought to a boil. Looking for tracers of ourselves who have passed and are incapable of remembering their one-time famous gigs as stardust.

Youth, the unplanned sojourn in a motel of no one's choosing. Take the Sleepy Bear Inn of Quincy, Illinois. It had a postcard rack in the front office that was stocked, from top to bottom, with Sleepy Bear lollipops. Not suckers—these were *real-er*—big hunking white disks with a bas relief of the Sleepy Bear in orange flavor. What it was supposed to taste like was something indecipherable, maybe a kind of mango sandwich or a tangerine on a stick. The best thing was that you could take all that you wanted to because there were probably boxes of them next to the laundry room.

Motels right off small, eminently boring little city streets. Old cars driving by that no one meant to preserve— it just happened that way. Didn't drive them much, time went by. Old cars that cannot be remembered by model name but certainly you could place an Edsel or a Thunderbird that floated by oblivious to time.

The Sleepy Bear Inn had a swimming pool surrounded by a chain link fence. Blue luminescence painted by chlorine and atomic age cleaning agents thousands of times the strength of Lysol. The furniture of the large, double-bed room, which meant you'd have to sleep again with your sister,

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was exclusively made of formica products. Stippled with cigarette burns. Beautiful cave temples with light purple shag carpeting and lingerie green curtains. The bible in the telephone book drawer was a vintage Gideon.

What appeared to be late at night except for the high beams bouncing off the ceiling then hall bathroom mirror, the time the television was turned off for a while and we laid in bed while our racing minds began to nod off, was really a flashlight signal to my sister. She was 14, skin the color of summer and caramel, brownish blonde mane, thin as a cinnamon stick, lips full and glossed for kissing. She'd met a boy and he'd come around looking for her. This time when she doesn't respond to his maverick flickering of D batteries, he leaves a can of soda pop and a note.

We never found out what the note said because she wouldn't let anyone read it, not even mother, so we are left to assume it mentioned love, or something better, and a sadness of conviction that only a signature might reveal.

It was one of those birthdays that nobody but you celebrate (beginning three days prior to), not even your older brothers or neighborhood friends who at that moment in time might be in a coalition of hating and not speaking to you. One of those birthdays that turn slowly throughout a day uncared about, not even by you.

Then it gets made sadly classical by a gigantic, multi-layered cake that's a sugar wafer clay-mation of frosting the colors of no naturally occurring food nor phenomenon. A cake bought at a grocery store made by bakers who you've never met. Cake with mom and grandma and then perhaps an evening of Lawrence Welk reruns.

On that birthday of unremembered annotative quantity, sister decides to runaway from home due to some debate of the relative terms set by an all-controlling mother's mental leash on a daughter's teenage libido. Living in a small town atmosphere can turn any innocent God fearing soul into a harlot in search of dangerous and naughty fun. Never, never forget to thank parents for the hidden gifts they bestow on us that will one day assure closets full of skeletons.

She went to who knows where, maybe a friend's house or maybe she lived and spent one night in her plaid fabric-seated Duster. She leaves the house teary-eyed and screaming in a fit of cat fight feminine passion. Vindication of the rights of sister. So then all's quiet for a day and a half. Quiet enough to hear the sea monkeys cavorting.

Then she comes back home later in the day to drop off a package for me, my present. In a large manila envelope, she has carefully inserted three comic books, two boxes of candy, and a card bought from the pharmacy because it smells like medicine. I look to see if the themes of any of the comic books have something to do with the worst birthday ever. They don't.

Her face was red from crying. My face was white from understanding what this meant. That one day she wouldn't be around for me, my sister mediator. That one day that we all have to go away. That one day I'd have to fend for myself. The realization that all best buddies eventually go it alone.

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I thought I heard wolves baying that night I ate ice cream and frosting, stoned on sugar in front of the t.v.'s blue light curtain of fake neon pre-sleep luminescence. Ahhh, the premiere of something new: MTV.

Today, it is still inconclusive. How many neighborhood girls did the narrator actually cavort with is a figure that is never to be known. There was that little blonde one, but all little girls are blonde. She went by the name Kim A. She lived in a small fairy tale cottage ranch house on Parliament street, across the street from the Delaney girls, one of which had a real life kid-sized baking oven in which cookies and brownies could be made. With extra ingredients added. Parliament street because all the streets in the neighborhood were named after things and places English. All neighborhoods are illusory creations of better places.

Kim, however the little darling that she was and the elegant lady of a woman she now must be, wore make-up at the age of ten. Her mother, a skinny model of a woman with straight dark brown hair and a chiseled face, could have been a news anchor. Kim, like her beautiful brunette of a mom, a mom we boys didn't consider a mom, had a figure that was more bones than meat but even back then she knew she'd grow up perfect.

What got into me that day we were playing Barbie Dolls— making them dance, making them drive a red plastic sports car, making them hug and kiss, I don't know what. I can't quite recall but soon it turned into a backyard scandal. Word got out that I offered her five cents to pull down her shorts.

What makes such blasphemy worse is that, according to her, I reneged on the deal after she had complied. She even said that after she pulled down her shorts, I would not do the same and I do remember mouthing the words, "how do you make pee?"

Having gotten wind of this rumor, as all mothers eventually do, psychically or not, I was interrogated on the matter, which I blatantly denied. Of course, I was forbidden from seeing her, ever. I could never ever play with her again because my mother said she was the kind of girl who was easy and would grow into the type that has babies when she's still a baby. This is how the innocence of men is promulgated through the centuries.

What to do on boring days when there's no one around to play with you. No one. One thing is to construct out of plywood a bicycle ramp that splinters in half the first time you hit it head on, going ten miles and hour, but feeling fifty, to be airborne for all of three seconds. Handlebars twisted around the wrong way as you come down legs scissoring the frame and the wind knocked out of you, lying on the pavement, front wheel spinning, no breath in your lungs and a pain, a deep pain in your middle-racked.

Each day's accomplishment is a more futile attempt at fun invented. Some days it was like being in a prison in which you devise the means of torture. Finding an elastic blow up ball, the multi-colored neon jaw breaking kind that are really meant for dogs to chase because they can't get their mouths open on it, the ones you tuck in between your knees in swimming pools so you can float, and bouncing, said amazing toy of a ball, off the roof of the house, avoiding the gutter if possible (the sound of a rattlesnake's charm to your mother's ears). Serving it up into the sky, that

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you think stretches to everywhere so you don't think about it too much, volleyball style. Letting it bounce one, two, three, times on the roof. As it arcs down toward the earth, toward the ground, its trajectory shielded by the overhang of the roof (the sport of it... the mystery), you intercept its rendezvous with the yard, hitting it back by whatever means possible overhand-underhand, spinning, the outfielder's shoestring dive, the lob, and then the baby kill shot. Of course, you're only killing yourself, because you're the only one playing. The sport of roofball inventing itself out of the solitary of youthful being.

And you do keep a rigorous score. Because it's you against you and you can't let yourself win. Sometimes it's player A against player B and sometimes they even have different names or at least opposing egos. It is understood that the game is played to total, utter defeat and complete surrender to the victor. Play to the bitter end until your sweaty body falls to the grass and lies vanquished staring upwards at a clear, white cloud firmament while getting your face licked by the just let out dog.

Because there really was nothing to do and what was more severe— a lack of good suggestions— there was the library.

The first one that didn't resemble one in any way shape or form, but did have that old musty book-y smell, was the one located in what must have once been a classroom in the newer section of the Catholic grade school.

Modern building off of University avenue. Nuns in their holy robes of asexuality. Like penguins or judges or black tie Muslims. Corridors of rooms that are kept clean by Roy the one-armed janitor who wore flannel shirts and suspenders and couldn't talk real clear. He smoked Viceroys, and we were allowed to know that.

A basketball court, lunch rooms directly attached to it— both could be magically transformed into a chapel if need be. The velvet curtains signified this. The makeshift alter was disassembled and tucked away in a closet. No one thought to use the building as a place of holy basketball games featuring last suppers of cornbread and soybean burgers as sacrificial lunchroom fare. The body of Christ as day old peach cobbler.

Across from the all-purpose, smack dab square in the middle arena, near the bathrooms, near where there was a staircase to a lower level, and tucked in a left-handed corner of this transitional space in the uninspired L-shaped warehouse of learning, was the library. It was split into front and backrooms filled with books. Some were even in dark brown varnished bookcases that served for the backdrop of our class photos. The books were bought and donated and found by those associated with the diocese.

There were a few tomes all right. Many encyclopedias and large thin picture books, most of the classics of British and American literature, and even a few books a kid might open up and read.

It wasn't hard at all to be left alone in the back room where you could, if you wanted to, pocket a book or two just to see if it was possible. It was an era before they invented electronic devices that publicly didn't trust humans.

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If you checked one out, the volume came with a small manila inner pocket inside the cover page. In the envelope there was a lined card on which names of people who checked out the book were scrawled in pencil with the dates they were borrowed. The dates were stamped in vibrant blue ink in a due date blood tattoo. A time when stamps meant trust or something like recognition rather than ownership. When we had the right to copy.

I took, at first, books with interesting covers. *The Turn of the Screw* (paperback), *Alas, Babylon*, some early Ray Bradbury collections. Read them at home with a gravity of feeling that these were mine, forever. I'd never have to take them back. Books that generations of kids and maybe some adults had checked out, had opened their minds and homes to, in reading beds and favorite blankets, sometimes under the cover by flashlight. About this devious crime, I felt no guilt. It was pure thrill. And it must be more than recollection, though that's a good word for it, because I still have to this day, those books. A mother, lost. Four dogs, lost. Two wives (those could never have been had) yet lost. But the books stolen from the first childhood libraries are now stacked next to a stereo speaker that a trustworthy and loyal feline has a habit of dozing on.