

linell's hold; or, where were you when you were here?

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A group of old friends, an old car, and older magicks come together in ways you might not see...

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Where Were You When You Were Here?

for lee, who gets it every time

I'm not aware of too many things

but I know what I know if you know what I mean.

-Eddie Brickell

Pied Piper, play that piccolo; tell me

The train is coming slow and coming fast.

-Erica Dawson

When everything's made to be broken,

i just want you to know who i am...

-Goo Goo Dolls

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one.

it's been almost twenty years since i graduated from high school, and to turn a bad phrase into an even worse jab, good riddance to bad rubbish. When my parents dragged me halfway across the country, kicking and screaming, i was fat, had an accent, wore glasses, and had more than a handful of cells in my brain that would

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work together at any one given time, so i'll let you do the math. Suffice it to say i was the lowest kid on the totem pole and leave it at that. Children can be cruel- the cruelest of all creatures, it has been said- and my life was not easy. At all. i didn't have a date, much less a girlfriend, until my second year of college, after i had finally left the shitsplat town my father set up his law practice in on the eve of his retirement and no one i was around was around while i was loosing my baby fat, suppressing my accent until it only resurfaced while i was drinking or talking in my sleep, and graduating from the industrial machine framed glasses my father always bought to the thin wire rimmed, no line bifocals i worked three months to pay for.

The nerds respected me but didn't like me- i was into writing and reading and playing guitar while they were into chemistry and physics and computers; the shop kids looked at me as an anomaly, and thought i was some sort of spy sent in by the other smart kids or, worse, a narc the administration had planted in their midst; and i think i really fucked up the radar for the AP and gifted kids, because they hadn't been around me since second grade, as they had most of their peers, so they had no idea how i fit into their tightly knit, if somewhat oddball and almost short-bus community. Aside from the small group of friends who were my only means of survival then, i did my best to forget each day of school- the day that ran from 7:45 a.m. until 2:15 p.m.- at 2:16 p.m.

But i remember Billy Murphy very well.

two.

There were five of us.

Joey Napolitano was one of those long, tall kids that seem to be a pre-requisite in all American schools; you usually hear those kinds of kids described as head and shoulders above their classmates- the heads of most of our peers came up to the middle of his ribcage at best. When i was in college, i heard someone describe a person like him as a person who would disappear if they turned sideways; that one didn't quite work for me- but years later, when i saw the Tim Burton remake of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, i laughed hysterically when i saw what had happened to Mike TV after some time in the taffy puller. It was Joey Napolitano to a "T". My then girlfriend looked at me alarmingly as i laughed hysterically until i cried, holding my glasses in one hand and my ribs with the other, unable to do anything but get dragged along for the ride as my body reacted to it. Now that i think of it, she stopped returning my calls right after that.

Beverly Driscoe- we all called him "Bevvie"- was the son of the town drunk. His mother had died when he was twelve- killed by a drunk driver, and how's that for proof that the universe has a sense of humor?- and he had retreated into one of those worlds that people now see as dangerous but back then we all saw as cool- the kid could draw anything. He would take our half-baked ideas and turn them into a black and white reality that we sometimes spent afternoons blue skying about, sometimes yearning to fall into the pages ourselves and leave the harshness of our Monday through Friday lives behind. Even in his war stories- the ones we always knew would end with everyone in the platoon dying horribly, painfully- we wanted to be players; at least there was an honor and nobility to the abuse those paper soldiers were subject to. The abuse we put up with had no rhyme or reason other than that we were different.

Maddie Lennon was the only girl who would talk to any of us, and even more important because she talked to all of us. Even with the huge slant towards Republicanism that was rampant in that part of Michigan then, even with the NRA being the most common civic organization listed on people's life resumes, even though every truck or car had some bumper sticker equivalent of the old YOU CAN HAVE MY GUN WHEN YOU CAN PRY IT FROM MY COLD DEAD FINGERS mentality, her obsession with any projectile based weapon was scary. And not only was she obsessed; she was good- it didn't matter if it was a firearm, a bow and arrow, or a frisbee she plucked out of the air at the city park or a piece of something she picked up out of

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the gutter; she knew where things would go when she aimed them. It wasn't a learned thing- even then it was still weird for women to like and appreciate guns- but one she seemed to be born with. To the girls, she was the weirdo, the aberration- to the boys, she was competition when November rolled around. It didn't help her any that the only time i saw her in a dress was in the photo albums her mother kept, or that she didn't give a whit about make-up or fashion or celebrities; the only moisturizer she used was the machine oil she was forever walking around in a faint cloud of.

And there was Billy Murphy. He was one of those kids who started taking apart the appliances in his house when he was old enough to get some torque on a screwdriver; it drove his parents absolutely batshit. If it had moving parts, Billy could figure out how it worked; his hero was the engineer of the Starship Enterprise, and he was whispered about in that almost cult-like legendary way by all the kids that took the shop block out at our vocational center. His parents wanted him in AP classes and other high-end curricular things that would attract the attention of college recruiters; he wanted to get into the Navy or Air Force so he could work on the really big engines, the ones he said moved the world. Two of the shop teachers privately went to him whenever they were stumped, and it was no surprise to us when he started working on his first car: a piece of shit Plymouth Valiant he had found mouldering pleasantly under a tarp at one of the junk yards that were all over Jackson County then. He built an engine for it from the block up, and the transmission had lived in an old clawfoot bathtub behind his dad's garage for two months while he took it apart and rebuilt it with nothing to guide him but his knowledge of what it was, how it worked, and the information that seemed to travel from his hands to his brains and back again with eerie speed.

And there was me.

We started hanging out together because of that weird social glue that brings all kids like us together: we couldn't sit with any of the other kids at lunch, there was only one other table open, and we all had to sit somewhere. We were almost feral by this point- none of us could relate to anyone else our age: we didn't understand why they didn't like us or want us around when, in our eyes, they were just as weird as we were. They had the camouflage of conformity to protect them; the only thing that protected us was each other. Years later, when everyone was shocked and horrified by the actions of Klebold and Harris when they decided to fight back and take out their common enemies- while everyone was pointing the finger at ultra-violent video games or the lyrics to whatever heavy metal band it was cool and trendy to hate just then- i understood it completely- it wasn't about any of that, wasn't caused by anything other than the desire to finally bite back.

We even had one of our number who was a crack shot with anything she could throw- hell, we wouldn't even have needed to bring guns, just a really big box of pre-sharpened pencils.

three.

Billy finished rebuilding the Plymouth in the Fall of 1992, and he strutted like a peacock, having birthed the mechanical equivalent of a Phoenix. By all that's sane and orderly in this universe- not that i'm sure there's too much of that anymore; sometimes i think God wound this pocketwatch of a world and then forgot about it- that car should still be rotting under a tarp somewhere, the engine still something to be drooled over in a mechanic's catalog, the transmission so many sticky gears and gummed up fluid taking up space in a landfill. Billy had gotten it into his head that he wanted to be able to drive us to graduation in it, and by God- come the fall of our senior year, it was drivable, faster than half the brand-new pretty pieces of shit in the student parking lot. The body was still in six different colors as he had pieced it together but ran out of money before he could paint it and the inside still smelled like someplace ten or twelve generations of junkyard cat had shared, but... that engine didn't just hum- it purred; he had enough exhaust on it that you had to put your hand on the hood and feel the vibration to make sure it was actually running... and he could bury the tachometer in

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third gear and the car would laugh the mechanical equivalent of "Oh, yeah? What else you got?"

And he loved that ugly fucking thing. He told us once that it was because it reminded him of us- everyone else shied away from it in the parking lot, saw a piece of mechanical garbage that was one engine failure away from the great big junkyard in the sky, but the people who bothered to ride in it knew what she was really capable of. He talked about it constantly and one night while we were all out, we bet him he couldn't get it up to a hundred miles an hour. It had started out as that typical high school ribbing- albeit a more cautious version of it, since we had all felt the sting of the merciless kind more times than we cared to admit, even to ourselves- and had escalated senselessly, idiotically, in that way that only taunts and jeers between friends who are still children can.

And he died, proving us wrong.

He had started at the end of Riverside Road where it comes off the state highway, and when he came around the last corner, the one by Ocean Beach where all the fire roads start, a deer jumped out in front of him, he lost his grip on the wheel, and the car went end over end over ugly fucking end, finally fetching up against a tree and lighting up the night with a fire that would have even shut Jim Morrison up in its glorious, barbaric, almost offensive brightness. When they pulled what was left of him out of the wreckage and got around to examining the car, the speedometer was frozen at 104 miles per hour; the accident reconstruction specialists figured he was doing at least that when he left the road. It was noted on the police report and the car was hauled back to Linell's, which, ironically, was where Billy had found it in the first place.

four.

We started to drift apart after that, as if Billy was our center... or, more aptly i think, as if he were the engineer that understood how we worked together, how the pieces all fit and worked with each other. Without him there to keep the machine running at top form, without him to replace the social lubricant of our time together with new jokes, without his innate sense of how the machine behaved when such and such was done or said, without him to make patch jobs in our group until we could get some time to examine the real underlying causes and then repair things, the engine of our friendship stopped running smoothly, started sputtering and missing, stopped firing on all cylinders, stalled, failed, and died- and truth be told, none of us had the heart to try and turn the engine over again. Pretty soon there were only three of us at the table for lunch, and then there were two, and then, well- you went to high school: no one wants to be seen eating at the empty table by themselves. Sometimes we were working through lunch, boning up for the ACT or getting college shit together; sometimes it was just too painful to sit there and think of that stupid bet, to see how each of us carried our own piece of that collective guilt. And sometimes, it was just easier to not be together anymore.

No one else ever sat at the table after that, either. One of the pretty girl cliques that Maddie was always so acerbically bitter toward tried to sit there and three of them ended up with burns when the table leg pulled just so and their trendy coffee drinks from the local Starbucks ended up dumped in their laps. There was the macabrely funny, almost Laurel and Hardian encounter a jock had with the chair scooting out from underneath him- he came down just so and broke his leg in two places. And not even the teachers were immune to it- old man Hodgkiss got his thumb cut on the edge of it and ended up needing four stitches across the meaty part of his palm; he swore the table bit him. Eventually the table was rolled into whatever storage place evil pieces of furniture go to when their true natures are discovered; but that empty spot- as conspicuous and painful, if not more so, as the empty table- that empty spot glared like a too bright flash bulb every time my eye fell on it.

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i don't know if that empty spot did the same thing to the others- we never talked about it- but it always got my attention when i walked through the cafeteria on my way to anywhere else, and the night after graduation i had an endless nightmare caught on a loop in my head: the table was rolling after me, singing to me, the gap between it's edge and the edge of the seat shaped into a mouth, the words to Creep by Radiohead chasing after me: i wish i was special... you're so fuckin' special...

i woke up with cold sweats, went downstairs, and crashed out in my old man's Sleepy Hollow chair, convinced that if i went back upstairs i would be forced to sit down at the table the next time it surfaced in my dreams. And i didn't know what scared me more: that i would have to sit there, by myself, or that i would never be able to walk away from it again. i don't care if it hurts, i wanna have control, the table would sing to me, and i would be stuck there forever, floating like that feather in a beautiful world where the five of us were together, again, before we learned to be cruel to each other in only the ways people who love each other can.

five.

After high school we lost touch with each other; it happened with that slow and sneaky speed that only the first handful of years of adulthood have, when you go out to the mailbox one day and there's the birthday card with the flag on it that reminds you to register for the draft and the next thing you know, it's the day you get the postcard from one of those real eager-beavers in your graduating class, telling you that your five year high school reunion is coming up and would you please RSVP?

So i called the number on the card. A child answered the phone, asked my name almost politely, and then bellowed MOMMMMMMM! at the top of its androgynous lungs; there was a clunk as the receiver was dropped on the table, and then the phone was answered by one of those still almost annoyingly cheerful voices. i dimly remembered the girl- to my credit, only half of her name was the same; she had since married the guy who was the all-star quarterback our senior year and was now the manager at the local used car lot, still getting beers at the local watering hole on the story of how he had thrown the game-winning touchdown in the junior year homecoming game. "Nicky?" She said, almost-doubt in her voice.

"Nicholas," i corrected, thinking no one had ever called me Nicky, not even the girl i had been dating while i spent a summer interning at what we charmingly called Mackatraz. i had an idea then, even then, that i would be writing things, chronicling them, as an adult. "Nicholas Bauer."

"Oh, um, oh, yeah!" she said. "The guy who moved here from Texas! You gave the eulogy at Billy Murphy's funeral, and did that acoustic version of that song that was all over the radio then..." she trailed off; i could hear her children arguing in the background, the slam of a screen door. "It was a beautiful song, made me think of how we all felt then..." Like you have ANY fucking idea, i thought to myself, and then said "Yes" before she could apply some other saccharin sweet platitude. To distract her, i said, "Do you know if Joe Napolitano or Beverly Driscoe have called back yet? i've sort of fallen out of touch with them..."

"Didn't you know?" she stage-whispered. "Bev Driscoe died this past September. He was out at Linell's junkyard, taking pictures for one of his new books. A freak accident, they said; one of the crushed cars fell on him."

When my mother came home almost an hour later, i was still sitting at our dining room table, the phone against my forehead.

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six.

2002 found me teaching at a community center in the Upper Peninsula, near Iron City. The school district i was working in had recently had their budget severely slashed- there had been talk of a millage, which had been defeated soundly in the local polls- and i was doing okay, so i volunteered my time there out of some misguided but well meant sense of community service. Most of the students were lucky if they could read the job applications they would occasionally be forced to fill out whenever a job opened up around them and the people at the unemployment agency got wind of it; trying to get them to write something as arcane as an essay was akin to asking a mechanic to perform an appendectomy.

i had started getting a nasty headache that threatened to turn into a migraine around lunch time and had asked the woman who was holding the community together through prayer and forced good humor, as well as some almost guerrilla-tactic fundraising if she could handle the place for the next two or three hours by herself- when the sun went down in the UP in September then, most people were getting their six packs or cases ready for the night- when my cell phone rang.

It was my mom, so i took it out into the hallway to answer it. She rarely called anymore- my father and i had had a fantastic fight when i told him what my plans for graduate school were, and she had gotten caught in the middle of it- and so my heart leapt into my throat as i answered it.

"Mom?"

"Nicholas...didn't you go to school with Madelyn Lennon?" That was my mom, princess of the preamble.

"Maddie?" I asked.

"You might want to come home for her funeral," she said. i sagged against the wall in the hallway, the wind knocked out of me. It wasn't that we had been close, or even that we had talked recently- i had run into her, briefly, when i had gone home for the Festival of Lights three years ago, right before the spectacular fight with my dad about grad school ("You'll starve, and you'll be poor," he had told me, and then stormed out of the room when none of his other arguments could gain purchase) but hadn't talked to her other than an occasional email on my birthday or hers. "Maddie's dead?"

"Apparently some sort of freak gun accident," she said, the disdain in her voice apparent; when she was a girl, other girls didn't play with guns. i could hear the disapproval through the digital connection, could see my mother sitting at our old dining room table, picking at the lint of the tablecloth while she chose her words. "She was shooting rats, Nicholas," she confided in me. "Down at Linell's junkyard- and what a woman was doing at the junkyard, honestly..."

and the world grayed out for a while.

seven.

And when i heard about Joey's death, in 2007, i started to put it all together. Three days before i read about him dying in the paper, i started having dreams. Inevitably, i would find myself standing outside the chain link fence that surrounded Linell's, the piles of smashed cars and cast off metal making weird sculptures of metallic misery in the moonlight, and the music would start, that almost spacey guitar riff with the heavy drumline...when you were here before, the voice would sing, i couldn't look you in the eye...

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And then there would be the burr and gasp of a silent starter and a pair of headlights would come on, the old sealed glass ones you had to change with a screwdriver and realign if you weren't careful, the ones that looked like bright squares of white instead of the blue blobs of today's cars and that eerily silent car- the one you had to put your hand on the hood to reassure yourself it was running, Billy's car, the one he had loved so much because it reminded him of us, the ugly ducklings all clustered together like so many pieces of mismatched body work, and the song would get louder as it came closer to the fence; i want you to notice when i'm not around, the voice would sing from the speakers in that half scream, half swoon...

and then i would wake up screaming.

eight.

It's been September for about two weeks according to the calendar, but i knew it was really here this morning when i woke up to the retro station that's all the rage here now; Ninety Minutes From the 90s! is their battle cry, and this morning, they were living up to it. Instead of the burr of the alarm clock i had developed the talent of sleeping through while writing my dissertation, i set it to a music station, the louder and more raucous, the better.

And this morning, they didn't disappoint. i knew the song instantly- it's been on my mind the last few days. But i'm a creep, the radio tells me, and i remember the first time i heard the song, sitting in that Plymouth with the smell of old interior in my head and my friends, the only ones i could truly count around me, all of us singing at the top of our lungs. i'm a weirdo... what the hell am i doing here? i don't belong here...

i am going to post this to my blog, because it explains what happened.

And then i am going to Linell's, to be with my friends.

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