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The time ahead: Collected works

Jill Leonard

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The time ahead: Collected works

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**THE TIME AHEAD:
Collected Works**

by

Jill Leonard

**An Honor's Thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for Departmental Honors in
Language, Literature & Writing**

Eastern Michigan University

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PREFACE

In writing the following honors thesis, I wanted to take the opportunity to explore themes of human connectedness through a creative medium.

Before leaving this university, I wanted to be able to reflect on what I had learned and draw from many of the talents that have been developed and discovered over the past four years. With this in mind, I felt that a collection of short stories was well suited to the task because to write well is to draw from a broad knowledge base.

When reflecting on my college career, academic achievements and the knowledge I've gained certainly top the list of accomplishments, but another equally important lesson learned is that of self-discovery.

Everyone goes through many periods of transition in life, but at college, a major life shift is thrust upon students and we are forced to grow and change quickly. We rely on our friends and family for support and find reserves of inner strength we didn't know existed to help get us through.

Through these periods of transition, we occasionally lose our sense of self, act in ways that seem out of character, and say and do things we don't mean. These things all build character in an individual, and when writing, they add the flaws a character needs to become believable.

It is these very topics that interest me most when writing. Exploring these themes and discovering what drives an individual reveals a sense of community across boundaries. While no two people are affected by the same situation in the same way,

they are in some way affected. Catching a glimpse of an individual struggling, or getting to the heart of the matter is what drives the following works.

The Time Ahead

Inside, we'd stand near each other, our bodies leaning away from one another, as we listened to what wasn't being said. Some days we'd stand near the front window, looking out over the traffic. Sometimes I'd sit on the couch beside him and watch the bobble head above the dish rack nod when it was warm and breezy. Never as comfortable with silence as me, he'd tap his foot against the end table in agitation.

When it was cool or rainy, and the windows were closed, I'd glance along the edge of the couch and count the dust. I can recall a time when he was talking and I reached for a rag in the cupboard beneath the sink. He walked out. Just grabbed his jacket, feet bare, and walked out the door.

I kneeled before the couch dumbfounded. He hadn't even remembered his shoes.

When he returned, I asked him where he had been. Perhaps I should have apologized, but at the time, I hadn't been able to stand there and look at the dust any longer; it needed to be taken care off. And therefore, an apology wasn't the first thing on my mind.

He didn't answer, but I hadn't really needed one. I had stood at the window, and watched him walk around the building. When I saw him pass for the second time, I went up to the roof, and walked around in circles with him, staying level with him, twelve stories above. I stepped up onto the raised concrete wall and placed my feet heel to toe with my arms outstretched for balance. Whenever I saw him getting too far ahead of me down below, I'd jump down from the wall and jog to catch up, periodically peering over the side to see how much progress he'd made.

But he didn't know that.

I sat down on the couch and looked at him while he watched me. I knew he was expecting me to say something, but no words came to mind. It wasn't possible to explain something to him that I didn't yet understand myself. I looked to him for the answers, but could see he wasn't able to offer them to me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, and he seemed unsure where to begin, or how much to say. Rather than spewing out the turmoil within, he blinked, and cleared the thoughts away.

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I left the next day. It started out as a drive to relax, but I kept going. I pressed my foot to the accelerator and held the wheel straight. I'd wait till the last moment going into a curve, and then whip the wheel, barely staying on the road. The speed and daring were exhilarating and I reveled in the sense of freedom this gave me.

I kept driving, the city no longer visible, and saw what I thought was the most beautiful tree. It reminded me of New Orleans, and Spanish moss. It was an old majestic tree, gnarled from wisdom and learning, with branches draped in green and gray that reached out as far as they could. It made me want to pull over and lay my head against its roots.

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After seeing this, I turned around and began the drive home. It started raining and I heard the water hitting my car. I sped up, just to slow down, so I could listen to how the sound changed.

I opened the windows to feel the wind. I didn't mind that rain came in. The wind toyed with my hair, pulling it into the backseat before flinging it across my eyes. I shook my head and laughed.

When I reached the apartment, I slid my key into the lock, turning the tumblers. I hesitated before opening the door. Inside the lights were dimmed. He sat there waiting for me. I went to the chair across from him and my eyes looked to the dust that had built up in my absence. He asked where I'd been. I met his eyes and watched him blink.

"I was just out for a drive."

"You were gone for days. There must be more to it than that."

"No. There really isn't. It was just a drive."

I knew he hadn't been walking around the roof with me as I had been with him, but I could see the path from the doorway to our bedroom, clear from any dust, as though he had spent the past days pacing up and down in his socks.

Unfold. Unravel

Amy stepped out of her apartment and the wind chilled her legs. She was barefoot, and as she walked down the steps, her feet slapped in recent puddles and rain fell on her head. She leaned back over the railing and tilted her head to catch the rain. Straightening, she opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue as though she were a child catching snowflakes. As her mouth opened, worms and maggots dropped out, unnoticed by Amy, and fell to the wet ground, evaporating with a sizzle as soon as they landed.

With a slight hop and a twirl, Amy landed on the sidewalk and began walking. Her arms glided back and forth, swishing her skirt and each time her fingers touched the fabric, they left behind a slight stain, as though her skin were soiled.

She bobbed her head at passerby and doffed an imaginary hat to the children she passed. When she skipped past frogs or lizards, she'd stoop down to brush a kiss and tell them hello.

Three blocks from her apartment was a fruit stand with the freshest strawberries in the city. She withdrew folded bills from the inner band of her skirt and bought a pint. Before leaving, she cocked her finger back and pointed it at the man in a gesture of playful goodbye. Blue and green light left her fingertips and came to rest on the front right side of his shirt before sinking in. He smiled and nodded her on.

The rain was pouring off of Amy by now, leaving a faint trail behind her of brown and gray that was continually fading the longer she walked. She twirled and danced and smiled at those she passed while walking across town with lighthearted abandon. She

took a bite of the fresh succulent fruit she had just bought and smiled as the juices coated her throat.

Her step lightened. She was no longer walking on the sidewalk, but above it, as though she had happened upon an invisible staircase. When she looked down and realized her feet were no longer on the ground, she was surprised, but then she rejoiced that she had finally dropped the weights that held her captive. Her joy caused her to stretch out her arms to either side and with a slight tilt of her weight, she was spinning in the sky. She laughed and it seemed to echo for miles, bringing smiles to the faces below her as it mixed with the rain falling on their heads.

Amy stretched her arms above her head and dived into a cloud. She came out the other side into a blissful eden. Before her was a sparkling pool that was lined with rock and seemed to be lit from within. The startling blue was more vibrant than any color she had ever seen before and she marveled at it. Surrounding the water were vines and flowers, coupled with birds. It was as though Amy had stepped into an oasis, a fantasy world. Not even in her dreams had she ever seen anything so beautiful.

She swam in the water and felt happier and more refreshed than she had in years. The birds spoke to her, telling her jokes while the vines offered her embraces and the flowers caressed her. She lay on the water's bank in blissful repose and allowed her eyes to drift into sleep while a smile played about her lips.

She woke to a sharp buzzing, intruding on her dreams, and in her state of sleepy wakefulness, tipped herself over into the pool. It seemed to wrap arms around her, holding her under and when she rose, gasping for air, the pool pulled under again. It

became a struggle to breathe, and Amy kicked and stretched trying to reach the side. She wondered if she would break free.

Her fingers slid over the rocks that were now covered in slime and moss, and her skin was coated in an oily film from the now dark water. She couldn't escape. She watched the vines begin to grow towards the pool. She reached out, hoping they would help pull her free, but instead, they formed a webbed net above her head. The flowers slapped at her face, blinding her and making breathing even more difficult, while she heard the birds titter and laugh.

She felt emotion build in her chest – anger, fear, hurt – and tried to keep it all in as she struggled to break free. It was no longer possible to breath, and unsure of what to do as her mind began to cloud Amy, began to cry. Her tears fell harder, and slowly her vision began to clear. Realizing that she could see once more, Amy rubbed her hands over her eyes and they came away clean. She batted at the vines and flowers and they slowly began to recede. She forced her way to the surface of the water where her hands were now able to grip the side stones and she pulled herself up, gasping for air.

Dangling half in and half out of the water, her chest heaved as she struggled with breath. She could feel tugs at her ankles and calves, urging her back, but she was too exhausted to break free. She felt as though she had seen too much and could never go back to where she had been.

After resting, Amy rolled herself over twice and fell off the edge of her cloud. She landed in a puddle on the sidewalk in front of the strawberry vendor. He looked down at her and frowned. She returned the look and struggled to her feet, falling twice in her attempts. As she walked back towards her apartment, worms fell from her lips in an

uncontrollable rush and dropped from her clothing as well. She could feel herself spilling out and wrapped her arms around herself, doubling over in hopes of containing it all.

She watched people look away from her and finally decided to focus on the ground instead, to shield her mind from their disgust. On her walk home, she accidentally kicked one of the frogs she had so eagerly greeted that morning. He emitted an angry rabbit in protest.

Amy sank to her knees upon reaching her apartment steps and began to crawl up them, sapped of strength, as though she were a child again. She felt as though she were an infant, expelled from the womb. A heaving struggling mass pushed forth, then abandoned.

She made it to the elevator, then collapsed as the doors slid shut and she began to rise towards her floor. The worms continued to fall from her, and snakes began to slither from the edges of her skirt. They were filling the bottom of the elevator and came up to her waist. There was no sign of them stopping. She felt like she would suffocate. Glancing up in panic, she saw there were three more floors to go. After one floor, the elevator stopped and the doors slipped open. The snakes, worms, and dirt rolled out the open doors in a wave and continued down the hall. Two older women joined her in the elevator, but she went unnoticed. Where their feet stood on her skirt, holes began to form. She tugged to get the fabric free, but it shredded in her hands. The women laughed and waved their arms above her head as they told of their luncheon the previous day. Fake flowers bobbed on their heads.

Amy could see their perfumed aura emanating from their bodies and watched it creep closer to her. She was still exhausted, and unable to move, but her mind was in a

panic. Pink haze fell from their lips and glowed red when they laughed. It rolled down their bodies and splashed onto the floor.

It reached Amy's feet first, and they slowly began to disappear. She tried to pull back into the corner, but her attempts were feeble at best. One more floor. The women shared a particularly hilarious comment the fiery smoke poured out faster. Amy whimpered, but was not heard. Her legs were now gone to their knees and more of her was quickly disappearing. She began to cry, and tried to use her tears to make her limbs return. They didn't. They helped slow her disappearance, but her legs and lower arms were gone. By the time the elevator rang and the doors were about to open, all that remained of Amy was her chest and head. The women standing above her laughed once more, and their skirts swirled as they stepped off, into the hallway, erasing what remained of Amy.

She now rested there on the elevator floor, bodiless and completely detached from herself. She had been erased and didn't know where her self had gone. She didn't even know where to look. She was too exhausted to lift the corner of the rug, or reach out and open the elevator doors once more to see if her body waited for her in her apartment.

A Sense of Curiosity

When she was a girl, her father and brother went out for hours at a time together. Sometimes they went fishing, sometimes they visited friends. But they were always gone for hours upon hours and she was left wondering where they had gone.

When they returned home, they'd say they had been down by the river and lost track of time, or had run into Cathy, her dad's former secretary who had diarrhea of the mouth. She didn't know what this phrase meant at the time, but thought it sounded disgusting.

Their words never measured up though. It didn't seem possible that they could lose all sense of time while near the water or that one person could stop them for so long. She believed something extraordinary must have happened to fill the gap between when they walked out the side door to when they returned that they didn't want to let others in on.

She dreamt of what they could be doing. Playing with her dolls, she'd come up with scenarios. She only had one male doll that she pretended was her father. She chose another from her collection that was somewhat smaller for her brother. She dressed him in overalls and tried to tie back his hair with a rubber band, but her brother doll still didn't look quite right.

When her mother was napping on the couch one day with the TV on in the background, she snuck into the kitchen and opened the junk drawer that came to chin level. She wasn't supposed to use the sharp scissors on her own, but her own paper scissors upstairs hadn't been able to cut through the thick strands of yarn.

She took the scissors upstairs and retrieved her brother doll before going into the bathroom and trimming its hair over the toilet so that it was short and cropped just like in real life. She smiled at this and went back into her room to play.

Here she would send them to the ice cream parlor, or place them in a park. She tried to make it look like her dolls were laughing and waving their arms while they told stories, but they were too stiff for the motions to look natural.

When she tired of this and they still weren't home, sometimes she'd go out in the backyard and pump her short legs on the swing, swaying higher and higher until she imagined she was touching the clouds with her stretched fingertips.

Yet still, the thought that she was missing something lingered and this only made her want to be a part of it all the more. She knew that they held back a part of themselves that only they knew about and shared, and longed to have a relationship like this that she could hold inside and know it was special and important.

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One morning in August, her father and brother exchanged looks with one another before turning to face her.

“Would you like to come with us?” Her father asked.

“Yes, oh yes.”

She ran downstairs to grab fishing poles and the tackle box they would all share. After the poles, tackle, and lunch were packed into the truck, they drove down to the river and unloaded.

“We’re using live bait today,” her father told her as he opened a small blue plastic tub. “This is a grub, you just stick it on the end of the hook like this. See?”

He had speared it on the end of his hook and she saw liquid drip out of its side.

“That’s gross. I don’t want to do that.”

“If you want to be a fisherman, you have to bait your own hook. Here, I’ll hold the pole for you.”

She took the plastic tub from him and held her fishing line loosely in the other hand.

“Go on. It’s not gonna bait itself.”

She slid her hand down the line and grasping the hook between two fingers she balanced the tub between her hands and rooted around in the sawdust trying to find a grub.

She felt one wriggle against her finger and jerked, driving the hook into her flesh.

“Ow!” she said, dropping the grubs to the ground.

“Ok honey, let me see that. It’s alright, just a scratch, there we go, that wasn’t very deep at all. Now try again.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You are such a girl!” her brother called to her from over his shoulder. He already had his line cast.

“Leave your sister alone,” their father said to him. “Ok, let’s try again.”

He scooped the grubs and wood shavings off the ground and back into their container, then handed them to her.

She reached in with more confidence this time, determined to grab one on her first try. Holding it between her fingers, she jabbed it onto the end of the hook with her face scrunched and eyes only half open.

“Doesn’t it hurt them?” She asked her dad.

“They don’t feel a thing.”

“But I did.”

“Bugs are different, let’s go cast.”

He led her to the edge of the river, a distance from her brother, and showed her how to pull back her arm and told her just when to release the reel. She fumbled at first, and ended up snagging the grass behind her once, but after a few tries was able to get her bobber to land a ways out.

After this, all three sat next to each other in silence with their lines cast, and feet dangling over the edge of the sidewalk that lined the water. She could see her bobber, bobbing in the gentle waves, and wondered what it must look like from underwater. She thought about the grub, speared on the end of her hook, and imagined fish swimming nearby. She thought about how picky she was with her food and figured maybe she’d picked the wrong grub to bait her hook with. Maybe she picked a dud and none of the fish in the water thought it looked appetizing.

After a while, she started to get restless, kicking her feet against the sidewalk. She began to talk about the project her class was working on in school and how they were making totem poles that would be displayed outside their classroom door.

“That sounds nice honey.”

She went back to watching the water, but she saw nothing more than ripples glistening in the sun.

She glanced to her side and saw that her father was sitting cross-legged with his pole held in front of him and his mind elsewhere. The girl emulated his pose and tried staring to the other side of the river. But she couldn't seem to make her mind drift. It stayed there in that moment and she felt unsuccessful.

She looked over at her brother. He was leaning back on his elbows with his pole resting between his legs. He was relaxed and his eyes were closed. He looked so calm. She positioned her pole in the same way and leaned back, but her legs weren't strong enough, and she could feel it begin to wobble. She didn't lift herself off her elbows, but tried to find a balance for it. Through her struggles, she heard her father sigh as he took her pole from her and waited for her to sit up before handing it back.

He rested his hand on her thigh.

"You're going to scare away all the fish if you keep this up. Maybe you're too young to come out with us."

She didn't reply.

After a long pause, she asked him, "Just what is it you two do out here when I'm not with you?"

"What are you talking about? This is exactly what we do. We fish," he told her.

Kaboom!
The explosion of a relationship, as well as....

A man and a woman stand in a room, the tension in the air an unspeaking presence. Outside, the snow gives way to the rain, and glistens become drops melting the ice crystals that they touch.

He stands near their bed, back to the door, while her anxious body fidgets, unsure which way to move next. She chooses to walk to the dresser, and picks up his comb resting on top. She forces her body to still, pushing back her mounting tension, and watches his unhurried movements as he folds his pants precisely.

She turns the comb in her hands, then gently presses on one of the plastic tines and slides her finger down its length. The sound reminds her of placing playing cards in the spokes of bicycle tires as a child. When she speaks, she speaks to him, to the rain falling outside, and to the comb she tenderly places back on the dresser.

Did you used to go bike riding when you were young?

He doesn't respond to her question, but rather keeps adding clothing to the open suitcase before him.

Taking a step closer to him, she takes a different approach.

I can't believe you! So damn quiet when it matters the most. What's wrong with you?

Still, he ignores her. Pulling the lid of the suitcase closed, he pushes with both hands to try to force the zippered edges close enough to be zipped.

She stands with her arms crossed behind him. She begins tapping one foot, then finding this annoying to herself, which only makes her all the more angry, shifts her position.

Lightning flashes outside, which startles her. Why would it be storming now, when just the day before there was fresh snow?

He steps around her and walks over to the rocking chair near the window, gliding his hand along the worn finish of its arm.

What do you think you're doing? Get away from that chair!

Why? It was my mother's. She used to sit up with me when I was colicky and rock me to sleep. He seems lost in a moment of remembrance.

Well it's the same chair that I sat up in and rocked all of my babies to sleep when they were restless.

Our babies.

Whatever. It stays. Get out.

I'll come back for it. It was my mother's.

He turns and walks to the bed without saying another word. After picking up his suitcase, he starts down the steps without looking back.

A clap of thunder sounds so close the frames on either side of him rattle against the wall. She stands in the doorway watching him descend the final step. After hesitating, she follows him down and out the front door.

She stands on the porch watching him start his car, and then walks out to him. He rolls down his window.

She means to say, Maybe you should come in for the night until the storm passes over. Instead the words that come out of her mouth are, You can't have the damn chair, it's mine!

At that moment, a blinding flash of lightning strikes with a deafening clap of thunder. The scents of ozone, then smoke, fill the air. Any words left unsaid by the pair remain unspoken.

Lil Ed

When I see Teri walk into Penni Anne's Diner, I know I'm in for it. I like to come to the diner after we fight. The way I figure it, she'll come after me and assume that because I've come to the place where we first started dating as kids I'm reflecting on our relationship. The fact that Penni Anne has a great set of legs has nothing to do with it.

Brownie points aren't going to get me anywhere this time though. You don't live with a woman for over 10 years and not know what expressions mean trouble.

She looks both ways after walking in the door, and when her eyes meet mine they narrow. I know any sentimentality will go right out the window in this confrontation and I brace myself against the back of the vinyl booth, holding my hand around the base of my soda, trying to look relaxed.

She stops next to my table, anger coming off her in waves, hands on her hips, not caring if she makes a scene.

"Johnnie Luke, I don't know if you still love me, but if you do, you'll come home right this minute and save us from this embarrassment," she tells me, hands still on her hips.

I hold my tongue. If sentimentality has no place in this argument, then neither does reason apparently. Boy could I call 'em.

"Honey, now come on babe. Why don't you just sit down with me here for a few minutes? Let's order you a soda to help you cool down." Crap. "It looks hot out."

She doesn't notice my slip and holds her ground.

“You’re damn right it’s hot out. It’s the middle of August. And here you have me running all over town trying to find you, all because you can’t answer your cell phone. What a lot of good it did me buying that for you last Christmas. I swear Johnnie Luke, you just don’t appreciate anything.”

She wasn’t in the mood to discuss, so I did the only thing I could do. I made it worse.

“You’re right Teri, I don’t. Not anymore. You and Ben made sure of that.”

“Oh! Oh sure, I have one one nightstand and it’s a big deal, but what about you? How many little *indiscretions* have you had, huh? You are such a fucking hypocrite.”

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That night, I sit on a barstool, seeking answers in the bottom of a glass. I know if I want to keep her I should be begging forgiveness at this moment, not getting shitfaced, but that’s not the answer I want to find. When I’m staring at the last swig of the fourth, I stop caring about what I’m looking for any longer and start enjoying the buzz.

All this is ruined when Jared walks in. I keep my back to him, watching in the mirror in front of me as he makes his way across the bar. Even without the mirror I’m facing I would have known when he walked in. I hear his Caterpillars on the wooden floor, *clunk, clunkscrape, clunk, clunkscrape*, as his left leg drags behind. He doesn’t meet my eyes, but already I know I don’t want to hear what he has to say. Finishing my drink, I turn to face it.

“Hey man,” he pauses. “Your girl has all your stuff tossed out onto the front lawn.”

He looks apologetic, and feeling sorry, I pass him a shot down the bar.

“She put your dog out too, Johnnie.”

I look at his rain-slicked jacket, dripping to the floor around his barstool.

“She can be a cold bitch, can’t she?”

“Sorry man, I didn’t want to be the one to tell you. If you need a place to stay, all you need to do is call, ya know?”

“Fuck man. Don’t get all sappy on me.”

I pull myself off the stool and head for the door. I hesitate, then go back and ask for one last drink. I toss it back and head for the truck.

“Hey man. You shouldn’t be driving.”

“No worries. That was my first one. I’ll see you around. Thanks for telling me what’s up,” I say as I walk away with a wave of my hand.

**** * **** * **** *

I sit in the cab of my truck with the heat blasting. It’s finally happened. After 8 years of marriage, she’s kicked my ass out.

She’s tried to do it before. She’s told me to leave, that she’s done. But until now I’ve been able to convince her that I still love her and think the world revolves around her just as much now as when we were first married. I know it sounds like a crock of shit, but it’s the truth - I offer her sweet words that she sucks like candy, then she offers up her

honeyed lips and we're back on track for a while. I have a feeling this time around not even a new kitchen gadget would help make things right.

I crank the engine and turn the wheel, fishtailing on the slick road as I pull out of the lot.

I drive the three blocks to our place, then drive around the block twice trying to decide whether I want to knock on the door. I would have kept on going, but the first time Lil Ed sees me drive by he starts barking up a storm and comes running after the truck. His ears are flapping and his too long legs seem to fly in every direction at once. If I keep on driving around, I figure I'll end up hitting him or Ms. Agnes's azaleas, neither of which sounds like a good idea.

I pull in the drive and park behind her red Geo. Never trust a woman who drives a red Geo. As I'm getting out of the truck, an empty potato chip bag gets out with me. I look at it, then pick it up and toss it back on the floor of the truck.

Lil Ed starts licking my hands and slapping my legs with his tail trying to get my attention, so I give in and squat down next to him.

"Hey there, boy. You still love me, huh?"

I loop my arm over his neck and turn, facing the house.

"I guess it's better to just leave her be tonight and let her calm down. I can't say as I've ever seen her get quite this pissed before."

I look out at the house we've been sharing for the past four years and shake my head. From the beginning, Teri called it our 'bumblebee house' because it had bright yellow siding and black shutters. We used to joke that I would chase her with my stinger.

I look around and see my clothing everywhere. Now I'm not just talking all over the lawn, I'm talking about my favorite pair of blue jeans being tossed up in a tree. This pisses me off and I walk over, yanking them from the branches. I wad them up and toss them towards the truck, watching them fall short and land in the wet grass.

I kick the first thing in reach, then see photos fly through the air and scatter.

“Seriously?! Our wedding photos?! I can't believe you'd do that Teri,” I yell towards the house.

Lil Ed whimpers, but I ignore him and bend down to pick up what I can. Most of the photos had spilled out of the box when she threw it onto the lawn, and now they're stuck together with rain. I gather these, along with the ones I had kicked, and put them all back into the box and carry it to the truck.

I almost get in and drive away then, but the only motel in town charges by the hour, and the thought of spending any more time than I need to there, listening to the moans and screams from my neighbors, doesn't appeal. Not if I go there alone anyway.

I turn back to the lawn and my old boxer shorts the dog uses as a chew toy are right there in front of me. What would the boys say if they could see me now? I pick up the boxers first and stuff them under the seat of the cab.

I lug armloads of dripping clothes to the back of the truck. I hope that she's watching. It's a struggle not to glance up at the windows and see if she's there. She always had too much of an independent streak to want a man who came begging on his knees, choosing the rebels and a select few jocks to date when we were in high school, not bothering with anyone whose hair wasn't slicked just so, or anyone who wore a momma's boy belt.

I look into the bed of my truck and realize she'd done a pretty complete job of it. Toothbrush and everything had been tossed out on the lawn. She hadn't even bothered to put a cover on it. Of course, now that the toothbrush looked like it was ground into the mud beneath her heel it was pretty much useless, and whether it had been covered to begin with didn't really matter. I slam the truck gate closed, then decide to toss in one of her lawn gnomes for good measure.

“Come here boy. Come on Lil Ed.”

Nothing.

“Damnit dog, come ‘ere.”

I march up to the door and when I realize he isn't going to cooperate, I coax him towards the truck with the promise of treats. Poor thing was drooling, which almost makes me feel bad for deceiving him. When I get him to the truck, I grab hold of his collar with one hand and his ass with the other, tossing him up into the cab.

I pull away from the house, and Lil Ed turns on the seat to look out the back window.

“Yeah, boy. I know.”

Lil Ed starts to whimper.

“Hey now. What's that for? Aren't ya happy to be with your old man?” I say with a rough scratching behind his ears.

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Jared opens the door for me. We don't say a word as he pulls blankets and a pillow from the hall closet and tosses them on the couch.

Lil Ed immediately pounces.

"Down boy. Those aren't for you. On the floor."

I swear that dog looked at me like he was pissed at me for making him move.

I lay down and as soon as I'm under the blankets I fall asleep. I guess there's one good quality to alcohol. It kills the brain.

When I wake up the next morning I can't breathe, and I think Teri has fallen asleep across my chest again. I reach out to stroke her hair and get a lick running the length of my face. Now that doesn't feel right. I crack open one eye and promptly close it again.

"Lil Ed. If you don't get off me before I count to 3, I swear I'm gonna kick your ass. 1..2...." He must feel my tension, because he leaps off just as the number 3 is beginning to sound and curls up on the floor.

I try going back to sleep, but notice the phone near the foot of the couch. In my semi-conscious state, I pick it up and dial Teri's number before I think about it. She doesn't pick up, so I get in the shower.

By the time I finish, Jared is up and has fishing gear by the door.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Sure. Let's go, we can take my truck."

We hit the road and go down to the best secret fishing hole in town. By the time we get there, 7 or 8 other fishermen have already laid claim to their part of the riverbank

and boats are on the water. Well. It had been a secret from me for the longest time anyway.

Jared and I walk till we find an open spot and cast our lines.

“Hey man. If you wanna talk...”

“Nah. Everything’s cool.”

“Ok. I just wanted to let you know, ya know?”

“Yeah,” I give his shoulder a brotherly shove and almost knock him in the water.

After that, he gets the point, and we sit in silence for the next few hours reeling in our poles at imagined bites and coughing when our lines come in empty. We throw sticks for Lil Ed at the other fishermen, pissing them off. It’s good for a laugh.

But Jared, never willing to let things drop, brings it back up while we’re sitting on the bank. Always the mediator, he feels that he can help solve everyone’s problems. In actuality, he tends to make them worse.

“So what’d you do this time?”

“What makes you think I did anything?”

Jared looks at me.

“Alright, so I normally screw up somehow or other. We were arguing at the diner and she caught me looking at Penni Anne’s legs the other day.”

“What, that’s it? You’ve always managed to worm your way back into her good graces, and you couldn’t find a few slick words to say to her? Your tongue couldn’t work it’s magic?”

“Don’t be crude.”

“Excuse me, when did you grow a conscience?”

“Nothing to do with conscience here. I just don’t want you talking about her like that.”

“Alright man, no harm meant. Wanna go out hunting tomorrow?”

When the sun gets too hot, we leave to get lunch at Vern’s. All the boys are there and get quiet when we walk in.

“Hey guys, catch anything?” Mitch said.

“Nah, just some seaweed.”

“Where’d you cast at?”

“Over near Ol’ Ned’s place. No bites for anyone today.”

“I wonder why,” says Ned as he walks in behind us. “You boys and that damn dog scared away supper for everyone. Damn kids.”

He shuffles off to his regular table. Grabbing a peanut from the bowl on Mitch’s table, I skip it his way, just missing his foot’s path.

We sit down, and Norma Jean comes to take our orders.

“What can I get you boys,” she asks leaning down and offering a clear view down her top as she places beers on the table.

“Just the usual.”

“Alright. You too Jared?”

“Yes, ma’am. Unless you’re offered as a side today, just the usual.”

She walks away tittering.

No better way to make sure your food is hot than a little flirting. Every woman likes to feel young, even if her neck does look as weathered as sandpaper in a carpenter's shop.

“Hey there, Johnnie. I heard your woman kicked you out.”

Leave it to Ben, world-class prick. He's always more than willing to say what no one else will. He thinks he's being funny. I want to go back 14 years and change my decision to stick up for him.

Back then we used to spend all of our time along the creek or in the woods. This was before we noticed that sometimes girls wore skirts, and trying to catch a bit of leg became more interesting than sticks and dirt. That day, Joe's older brother Larry, and some of his buds, were driving out to the creek to drink a few beers. To keep Joe from telling their parents, he pretended not to notice when Ben, Joe, and I jumped into the truck bed as they were leaving the drive. Larry had learned before that threatening Joe with his fists got him nowhere – but it did get him the occasional black eye.

The entire drive there, Larry took corners on two wheels, and we hung on for all we were worth as we were flung from side to side, along with the tools and roofing supplies, laughing through our fear. We reached the pull off point, bruised but without having wet ourselves, and the three of us were hanging out near the creek tossing toads at each other and threatening warts, while Larry and his friends were farther down the bank talking about the local girls between swigs.

It didn't take long for this to get old and we went back to the truck, looking for something to do. Grabbing a rigging rope, we decided to throw an old burlap bag filled

with brush over a tree branch and hit it to pass the time. We blindfolded Ben, the first up to bat, then Larry and his friends snuck up from behind, making shushing sounds.

“Hey guys, what’s going on?” Ben asked.

“Nothing dude, keep your blindfold on,” Joe said.

They had found a bees’ nest a few trees into the woods and thought it’d be cool to lower it instead of the bag. I stayed behind with one of Larry’s friends while the rest took the real bag to cut down the nest. We pretended to lower the bag for Ben to swing at, and made exaggerated comments when he caught nothing but air and swung around. He didn’t know just how close to the truth we were when we said he was off by about a mile.

We had gotten just about all of the laughs we could out of the situation when the rest of the guys came back successful; nest sealed in burlap, and tossed it over the branch. Larry had out his Swiss Army knife and was about to slit the bottom and run when I stopped him.

I didn’t let them set Ben up, so instead, we both ended up hog-tied and tossed down into the mud at the creek’s edge. As soon as they had rolled us down the bank, they threw the bees’ nest after us and ran. Let me tell ya. If they hadn’t went running, I would have come after them and gave just as good as I got. Just as soon as I managed to get untied. I never was a boy scout.

It only takes a minute for me to replay all this in my mind, then remember all the ways he’s repaid me over the years, especially recently, and I’m stewing for a fight.

“Hey there, Ben. I hear they’re having a Mexican festival in the next town over. Cinco de Mayo or some shit. Wanna go play with a piñata?” Jared asks.

All the regulars offer low laughs as Ben walks out and Norma Jean arrives with our food.

“That was mighty nice of you boys not to start a fight in here. Lunch is on us.” She pats my shoulder. The pity gestures have begun. I’d much rather have had her flash me.

“Hey, Johnnie. Did you get the part I needed for my sink in yet?” Carnes says.

“Yeah man. It’s under the front seat. Door’s unlocked, help yourself.”

“What’s that all about?” Jared asks.

“He heard my cousin is into plumbing and thought I might be able to get my hands on some new titanium garbage disposal blades for him. Why the hell he thinks he needs them is beyond me. Whatever makes him happy.”

Carnes returns with more than just the disposal blades.

“Why looky here. Seems like you and the missus are a little more feisty then you let on. We might just have to hold a town meeting. There has to be laws against this. Woeeee!”

Without looking up I know exactly what he has found. Those damn boxers. The last thing I wanted to do was to go airing my dirty laundry before these guys.

The whole diner fills with laughter as chairs scrape back and everyone tries to get a closer look.

“Come on now, guys. It’s not what it looks like. Lil Ed just likes to use them as a chew toy. I gave up a long time ago trying to keep them from him. If I hadn’t I wouldn’t have any boxers left at all.”

“Uh-huh. We believe you honey,” Norma Jean tells me as she brushes by with a hot look.

Maybe I’ll be getting that flashing after all.

“Ain’t no dog that did this. Must be some kind of wild animal. So just what is it you were trying to be? A lion tamer?”

“Ha Ha. If you don’t believe me, just toss them to the dog. He’ll start tearing ‘em to shreds.”

“OK. Let’s put this to the test.” Carnes throws the boxers to Lil Ed, but the dog doesn’t lift his head from his paws.

“You damn dog. What are you good for anyway. You ruin a perfectly good pair of boxers and then when you’re allowed to play with them, what do you do? Nothing.”

“Maybe he’s just in a mood. Misses Teri. The dog I mean,” says Jared.

I glare. He takes a step back.

“Come on boy,” I say to Lil Ed as I snatch my boxers from the floor. “It’s time to go.”

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“What the fuck did you think you were doing!” I yell at Jared as soon as we are in the truck.

“I’m sorry man. I didn’t mean it like it sounded.”

“Yeah, well, now they all know it’s the truth and not just rumor. They’re gonna have to think up ten new rumors about the situation just to keep themselves occupied. Just like that damn lion tamer story.”

“Don’t worry about it man, it’ll blow over. Just give it some time.”

I don’t tell him that what I’m worried about is that they might come up with the one rumor that turns out to be true.

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That night I decide to leave Jared’s for a while and go for a ride.

“Hey man. On your way back will you grab some more beer? We’re running low,” Jared calls from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ll bring some back.”

Taking Lil Ed with me, I leave town and head out to the back roads with a six-pack on the seat next to me, and two more in the back. Popping the cap off the first one, I offer a sip to the dog.

“Here ya go boy.”

I keep going until we reach Captain’s Pulloff, so named because it’s where all the high school captains used to go to get off after the game.

Lil Ed and I get out to take a piss, each marking separate trees, and I let him go off to wander while I sit down with a fresh bottle.

Before the bottle is drained, I’m ready to go and whistle for the dog.

“Come ‘ere boy. Time to go.”

He doesn't come running so I figure he must have found a scent worth following and step into the edge of the woods, calling out again.

"Lil Ed!" I whistle again, then hear him running towards me.

"Atta boy, let's go"

I turn to head back to the truck, expecting him to follow, when I hear the first gun report and see it strike a tree in front of Lil Ed's path.

"Hey!" I call out. "It's not a deer, jackass, it's a dog!"

Lil Ed is crouched low to the ground, head cocked while he listens, searching for where the threat is coming from.

I step further into the woods calling out to Lil Ed again, more frantically this time.

"Come on dog, get out of there."

This time I hear the report, but don't see where the shot goes until I feel the impact in my chest.

I collapse and feel Lil Ed's head nudging my side while I hear his whimper and the sound of feet running away.

"Atta boy, Good dog."

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The next morning, Teri wakes to the sound of scratching at her door. She sits up in bed and pulls the covers back, then a hand reaches out to stop her.

"Come on babe, stay in bed. There's no need to get up. Stay with me for a few more hours," he says with a smile.

“Shh, go back to sleep. I’ll be back in a minute, I think I hear Lil Ed.”

“What do you care about Johnnie’s dog anyway? He’ll find his way back to wherever he’s staying.”

“He’s been my dog too, for years. Hush, I’ll be right back Ben.”

She walks downstairs and greets Lil Ed at the door, letting him in.

“Hey boy, there you are. Ready to come home now, aren’t ya? Yeah, there’s a good boy.”

She notices a streak of blood along his neck.

“What’s this, boy? Did Johnnie let you run off in the woods and get all scratched up? Come on, let’s get you clean.”