

FOR A TIME

Dyanne Stempel

I had known you my entire life, had lived next door to you for smatterings of it, but it wasn't until high school, yearning for my driver's license, for that first smack of freedom, that I recall talking to you. My parents were consumed then with their failing marriage. Affairs and money woes had eroded whatever was left of an already incompatible pairing. So entrenched they were in that loop of contempt and blame and late night yelling that there was little room left for affection, let alone attention. Suffocated in our little house, I longed for anything to take me out.

It was 1980. I was fifteen. You were thirty-three.

Stuck to old stamps in the well of my parents' desk, I'd happened upon photos of you taken before I was born—a July 4th barbecue your parents had hosted. Tan, blond, a sweet teenager holding a sparkler and smiling diffidently

at the camera. You surfed Zuma; you had girlfriends, my mother said. You and your brother were The Beach Boys, lovely and innocent and beautiful.

By the time I was threading popcorn in preschool, you'd arrived home from Vietnam shot up with heroin, knocked down by acid. Dulled and dysfunctional. Doomed. I'm not sure if you ever had a real job, but I remember you walking dogs, replacing sinks, painting houses: solitary jobs for people in the neighborhood. By that time you'd quit the drugs, occasionally disappearing with a case of Bud and a bottle of cherry brandy, or so the neighbors said, appearing days later washed out but freshly showered. You did the odd job for us too. Peering over the hood of our Mercury Cougar (so sickeningly green we called it "The Avocado") you'd chuckle to yourself about what a piece of shit it was, a lit cigarette moments from incinerating your blond beard. My parents came to you first before hiring actual repairmen, not just because you were cheaper but because my father hated the war, took it personally that you'd been sacrificed for bad policy, and believed he had an obligation. Helping you mitigated his guilt.

Which is why in the fall of tenth grade when my parents were short of cash and working overtime, my mother hired you to collect me from school and deliver me to ballet class four times each week. I begged her to reconsider,

pleaded with her to hire someone else. I'd take a bus, I said, even though I'd never seen a bus anywhere near our house.

"A bus? Are you out of your mind, Becca? Who takes a bus?" As if I'd suggested astral travel.

You lived with your mother then, in the basement of her house; your father had died of lung cancer the year before. And your brother, Tom, also back from Vietnam, stayed with you when he wasn't cruising the Mojave Desert in his white van, the van my sister associated with the Hillside Strangler and later the Night Stalker, serial killers who captivated and terrorized us. Ridiculous I knew, but that didn't stop me from sprinting past the van, acting casual only when I was safely out of range, a good distance from your brother's reach just in case he was there, behind the van's rear windows scrubbing blood or plucking fingernails from the upholstery.

You were the more normal one. You spoke. That first day you picked me up you spoke about my energy sphere. Cluttered and frantic, you called it.

"Don't use appliances—blenders, toasters," you said. "Your aura is too yellow and unsafe. You need to purge your force field, just wipe that crap away." You windshield-wiped the air with your hand. I had no idea what you were talking about.

“Always breaking.” You pointed to the silver Seiko on my wrist.

“No,” I said even though it wasn’t a question. Months later, after that Seiko had stopped working for the second or third time, I’d lay it to rest in a shoe box alongside the red Mickey Mouse watches, one from each year of elementary school, all of which had broken within months of my first wearing.

You lifted your chin to expel a tiny ha. “Your magnetic field, it’s...” and then you just shook your head. The news was too dire to deliver.

You also told me you could read minds with no hint of play on your face, serious but simultaneously provocative—so I worked hard to banish all thoughts of how attractive I found you, immediately trying to banish the banishing thoughts when it hit me you could read those too. My energy was cluttered.

I was too self-conscious to allow you to pick me up from my girl-school parking lot, a runway of glamorous mothers and uniformed housekeepers who arrived early each day to collect their little girls, paraded out in two straight lines like French schoolgirls in a Madeline book. Instead, I met you at the bottom of a short hill, a five-minute walk from school. I’d chosen this spot specifically, repeatedly instructed my mother to remind you not to, never to drive up the hill. How would I have explained you? I almost never invited girls

home, embarrassed by the bunk beds I still shared with my sister, the peel-and-stick wallpaper, peeled at the seams and stuck with fruit flies. I preferred to be dropped off and picked up at their large lovely homes. There may have been other girls like me on scholarship, but I never knew one. Getting into your beat-to-shit VW while other girls herded into Mercedes leather only picked at my otherness.

And so that first day. Three feet and a stick shift separated us for the twenty-minute ride. I had not expected to find you appealing in the least, and it disturbed me. I'd had a few crushes by then but never someone like you. The way you raked your fingers through your sun bleached hair like I don't give a fuck. It thrilled me.

"Look in the glove compartment," you said moments into our ride. And when I didn't open it, you did, your arm skimming my shoulder.

"Ding-Dong?" And you pulled two foil-wrapped pucks from the glove box dropping one cake in my lap and peeling foil off the other with your teeth. You laughed when I hesitated.

"Too fattening," you said mocking something I hadn't said. You were right, of course; everything was fattening then, but I would never have admitted that to you. I was in armed battle with my body, the only girl in ballet class

to wear two bras, two sizes too small, one atop the other, to beat back any hint of roundness, of unwieldy unnecessary flesh.

This became our weekly routine: You'd offer me the Ding Dong, and I'd refuse. It amused you, this game. What began as a simple gesture, became a test of sorts, a match you must have been certain you'd win. One day I'd succumb to the Ding Dong.

You wore your uniform—white T-shirt, Levis, work boots—and I wore mine—white button down, blue blazer, ankle socks. We both had blond ponytails. And my plaid skirt, already too short, inched up my thigh whenever I moved. So I worked hard to keep still. Only the fingers of my right hand knotting and re-knotting the toe-shoe ribbons in my ballet bag—prayer ropes marking the minutes until I could escape you while simultaneously summoning something interesting to say. At a time when Marlboro Reds and red lipstick, when deconstructing Adrienne Rich made me a sophisticate, with you I was young, silly, girly. Also mute. But you spoke enough for both of us, for the entire ride mostly, pausing only to gather your thoughts, change the subject. If I spoke at all it was to let you know that I did have my driver's permit but my parents were slow to let me practice.

“My mom takes me out,” I told you once. “She covers her eyes and grabs the dash, maniacally brakes the passenger mat and throws herself back against the seat.” I wished to convey the very grave situation I was dealing with. But more than that I wanted you to know I’d be getting my license soon. Soon I wouldn’t need you anymore.

Of your father you spoke often. A builder who owned houses on the street, including ours, I remembered him collecting rent and coffee from my mother. Or listening silently as my mother explained why the coffee was forthcoming but the rent was not. Your father always allowed her to pay in full the following month, even the month after that.

“A pig,” you called him, “a sick, selfish shit.” And then you’d caw; a pitched laugh, menacing and discomfiting that lasted a few seconds too long. I wasn’t sure what was funny and whether I was supposed to laugh with you or not. But I could tell you liked having an audience, and I was a good one; mute, captive. Your fury, leavened as it always was with your energy-speak, never scared me. Maybe because you were so passive. As if venting alone was enough for you.

In the months we spent together in the front seat of your car you railed against everyone, from the cashier at the local grocery to the two old lesbians

living up the street. They were stupid, oblivious, self-centered, confused. School was a waste of time, a way to control you, take your power away, you said. "Your mother is black energy, toxic emanations." This I didn't understand but completely agreed with. You clumped everyone together: everyone was an idiot. Everyone except you. You liked to hear yourself talk but you never spoke about yourself.

Vietnam then was an amorphous montage of news footage on my dad's old Zenith. Jungles and helicopters, Vietcong and Saigon, words that propelled my father up off the couch to lecture Walter Cronkite face to face. You were the closest I'd come to death then. I didn't know if you'd killed anyone; I just assumed you had. And I wanted to know what it was to kill. I wanted to know more about you, about your brother, your mother. I had so many questions. But I was too afraid to ask.

There were rumors. Rumors that your father had slept with the housekeeper. That the young, dark-skinned girl who showed up at your house from time to time was your half-sister coming for money. And then there were facts. Your parents were Christian Scientists, a cruel religion I assumed, cruel enough to allow your baby sister to die years before because Christian Scientists didn't believe in doctors. We were Jews. We reveled in ailment and then

married doctors. We were also Jews who divided the world into two groups: Us and the Jesus-y people. You were the Jesus-y people. Otherness times ten.

You told me once that sickness was a mindset, that you had the power to self-heal. “The energy field surrounding my body is alive; I brought it out of dormancy,” you said. “My physical body is resistant to disease.” Only later would I understand this as the most hopeful thing you ever said. And maybe the most fearful. At the time, I didn’t believe you. I wanted to, though. You said it with such authority, such confidence. You dismissed my skepticism, made me believe that doubting you relegated me to the everyone-else pile. I’m not sure why, but I wanted you to see me as an exception, as special, to acknowledge my secret attraction without exposing it.

Your motorcycle was the one thing, maybe the only thing you liked. From our backyard, through a break in the fence, I could see you kneeling next to it, lying beside it gently turning this, replacing that. You worked methodically, lovingly. Entire days, sometimes well into the night, a floodlight showering your work, you’d attend to the tiniest hose or leak. Your focus calmed you, rubbed out the smirk on your face, the furrows on your forehead. You looked beautiful. Exactly the way you looked in those long hours when I lay on my bed and imagined you hovering above, kissing me, your white t-shirt taut at

your shoulders. I never considered anything beyond that. Kissing was enough for me then.

I'd assumed the bike was unrideable until the day you came to pick me up on it. I'd been waiting at the bottom of my hill for longer than usual. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen went by before you rolled up.

"Get on," you smiled.

"Where's your car?"

"Didn't start."

I stood paralyzed.

"So you gonna get on or what? I'm not waiting."

I stooped to untie and tie my saddle shoes, to buy time, to avoid being seen by carloads of girls, their faces suspended like balloons in the back seat. Why didn't I realize that being picked up on the back of a motorcycle by a guy, any guy, was a one-way ticket into the girl-school militia, the sleek governors of high school cool? I could have refused, could have hiked back up to school to phone my mother. But that would only have confirmed for you my inadequacy. So instead, I negotiated straddling the bike with my heavy book bag and my skirt, mortified that you would see the tops of my thighs. You couldn't have cared less. You stared straight ahead, re-banded your ponytail, and

chuckled. It was the first time I'd been on a motorcycle and I knew I would die.

"Grab my waist," you said.

It was like I couldn't hear you. And because I hesitated for too long you took my arms and placed them on either side of your waist then pulled me forward into you. Your back pushed against my chest as we started to move and your smell—acrid and smoky, ripe with earth and motor oil—stuck in my nostrils. Your body warmed me at the same time it repelled me. Touching you now was nauseating. I had felt the bodies of few boys but you were the first man I had touched like this. Even micro-movements were sexualized. I tensed as we sped up, convinced I was falling off but only slamming harder into you. Intuiting my fear, you taunted me. You slowed down and just when you felt my body unclench and pull away from you, you sped up. You did some kind of wheelie where the front tire lifted up inches from the ground, and I screamed. You cawed. You leaned your body so far over to one side that the street raced directly below my shoulder, or at least that's what I saw. You did the same thing on the other side. I wanted to vomit, and I begged you to stop. But you only laughed again, delighting in my terror. And so I held my breath, closed my eyes and waited for the ride to end. When you stopped the bike, I

stumbled off. Didn't look at you, didn't say goodbye. For years after I refused all motorcycle rides. I hated you. You and my mother.

"Hey," you called after me. But I kept walking. I didn't turn, didn't want to give you that. "You want driving lessons?"

Now I turned.

"Because you keep talking about it. Your license, a car, all that shit." Your face, the way you looked, like a small kid on a big bike. I wanted to believe you were apologizing or telling me in your warped way that you needed a friend. Because I could have put an end to our afternoons, gone home that night and reported the motorcycle to my parents, underlining, circling and starring for them their spectacular lack of judgment.

"Yes," I said. And you rode off.

"I thought you didn't like him," said my mother that night after I'd told her about your offer.

"I don't."

And so on a chilly Saturday afternoon I furtively applied mascara, pulled on my favorite mustard turtleneck with my Chemin de Fer jeans and slipped into my clogs. I looked like Nancy Drew. You didn't dress up for the occasion.

This time I drove. You sat in the passenger seat tuning and retuning the radio. Joe Walsh, Foreigner, The Police—only choruses. You never had the patience to listen to one song in its entirety.

“You can’t smoke in my Dad’s car.” We were stopped at a light as you lit the first smoke of the half-pack you’d plow through that afternoon

“Why not?” You laughed, stared at me until I looked away. You took a long drag, the cigarette pinched between your thumb and index finger, taking a few minutes to perfect three huge smoke rings that you nudged at me with your lips. You flicked the lit butt out the window before lighting up again.

We drove to Mulholland Drive, a two-lane sequence of hairpin turns—your choice.

“Faster,” you said. “Slow drivers are assholes.” Your only instruction. And so twenty-five miles per hour became thirty-five became forty became fifty. You laughed, dared me to go faster. We may have reached sixty or seventy before you sat back, appeased. My focus on the road—a focus that shut out every noise, every movement—was the only thing that staved off terror. You never looked at the road, just out your window, the wind smacking hair against your cheek.

I slowed finally and glanced at you. And in that microsecond during which I wondered what it would be like to kiss you, you looked filthy again. You caught me looking at you, stared at me a beat longer than you should have until I looked away. And then you laughed. You'd probably read my mind.

I drove us home and stopped outside your house.

"Why is my energy cluttered?" I asked.

"You tell me."

"I have no idea."

A smoke ring and then two more. "Sure you do," you said between rings.

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

"You figure it out."

I twirled some strands of hair around my index finger. "What happens if I can't?"

You lit another cigarette. You shrugged. "I guess it's unfixable." You got out of the car. And without closing the car door you walked to your cave.

As always, nothing you'd said made sense, but that didn't stop me from going home, locking myself in our little bathroom to blow and swat at the air, checking to see how ridiculous that looked in the mirror. I sliced into space with the side of my hands, pushed imaginary vines and branches away as if

clearing a path through bush. Like a ballet of sorts, I was purging my force field, my yellow aura, invisible to everyone but you. Maybe you knew something no one else did.

The day I got my driver's license, my sixteenth birthday, you arrived at our door with Twinkies. Not a box, not a case. A crate. A massive blue box with Twinkie Man riding an oblong cake, cream filling oozing out. And as we sat outside on the steps of my house digging the cream filling out of the little yellow cakes and sucking it off our fingers, you told me that you'd saved over a hundred and fifty Hostess box tops before sending away for the grand prize—600 individually wrapped Twinkies divided into cartons of six. For me.

I took the first one.

You'd finally won.

We sat in silence after that, comfortably, as friends do, the back of your hand grazing the back of mine on their dive for Twinkies. My stomach clenched each time, pleased by your touch but also gutted. Nothing you would have noticed but something you must have known: That you had this power.

Soon after that, the freedom I'd longed for came in the form of another birthday present: the Avocado. I drove myself everywhere, places I didn't

need to go, taking the most roundabout route, the most congested streets just because I could, just to prolong time spent alone in the car, windows down, radio loud, a lit cigarette not so much smoked as burning down between my fingers.

Sometimes, after school or on weekends, I'd hear your laugh, smell your cigarette. Swiftly, in case you disappeared, I'd change my shirt, brush my hair, and find you lingering near our front steps talking to a neighbor, petting a dog. I'd sit on the top step and you'd join me several steps below. You had become interested in natal charts then, ascendant signs, numerology.

"Your sun is in Virgo," you told me one afternoon, "but you're a Capricorn ascendant."

"Whatever that means."

"That you want to be flamboyant but you're too unassuming and self-abnegating to know how."

I rolled my eyes and laughed.

"You know what I'm saying. I know you do."

You were right but I wouldn't know that for many years. I watched you light another cigarette and tried to decipher what you were saying. Were you telling me to be flamboyant? How did I do that? How did you know the word

self-abnegate? And what the hell did it mean anyhow? I watched your mouth as the words flew out. Did you believe what you said?

Some months later, yet another afternoon, you lectured on metaphysical and time-space levels. Something about dream states and perception—ambient noise punctuated occasionally by flat, muscular words: Sin and Fear and Guilt.

“Shit, I forgot something,” I said standing suddenly. I rushed inside. You were mid-sentence. I’d been mentally tabulating homework assignments and remembered a notebook accidentally left in my locker. When I came back outside moments later to drive to school, you were gone, a fact that didn’t hit me until I was rotating the dial on the locker padlock. I didn’t need you anymore. And after a time you no longer came. But I didn’t care. I was already thinking of college, planning my escape, fantasizing about the boys I would meet late at night beneath stained glass windows in the stacks of gothic libraries.

It was in college, across the country two years later that I came into my own power, crossing the border from girl into some place just shy of woman. I had given up ballet, given into the rounding, and given over, at first tentatively but then freely, to vending machine candy, boys, and beer.

The first time I came home from college was the winter break of my freshman year. You appeared one afternoon, as if out of nowhere, when I walked out the front door.

“So you’re back,” you said. You must have been in your late thirties by then, fatter than before. So puffy, so swollen and pink, in fact, that I couldn’t recognize your real face, couldn’t locate what I’d once, not that long before, found so desirable. You still wore your uniform but mine had changed: some debacle involving leggings, elf-boots, and one long earring resembling a machete. You embarrassed me, not because you looked so ghastly but because you were a reminder of the me I wanted to forget. So foolish and disgusting, I thought, to have been so taken with you.

“How’s college?” You flicked your cigarette butt into the street and lit another.

“Good.” I didn’t meet your eyes, staring instead at the gravel on the driveway, carefully affecting indifference and hoping you’d notice.

“You have a major yet?” You chuckled. Majors were for assholes.

“Nope.”

“So what are your plans?”

“For what? ”

“For while you’re here.”

I shrugged—nothing.

“You don’t even remember how to drive,” you said.

“I do too.”

“So take me for a drive tomorrow.” You laughed. Every gesture was a taunt.

No, I thought. “Okay,” I said, impatient to get away from you.

“He waited almost an hour for you,” my mother said that next day. “He wouldn’t even come inside. Did you tell him you were going to be here?”

“I forgot.”

“Really? You forgot?” She looked at me sharply. “All those times he picked you up? He didn’t forget.” I looked at her flatly, indignantly.

“He left this on the doorstep,” she pointed at a Twinkie.

“You can have it,” I said before walking into my bedroom and closing the door.

I’d been out that day trying and failing to impress some new crush. I didn’t give it another thought and you never mentioned it again. For the rest of the break you’d just wave when you saw me and laugh. The day before I left to go

back to school I heard you from my bedroom window talking to a neighbor, a woman who'd been recently divorced. You were on her balcony talking at her.

“Your energy sphere has been pulled apart, away from its primary storage centers,” you told her. And I could imagine you pointing at your solar plexus, your heart, your stomach, as you had done so many times with me. “Increase your energy flow,” you said to her. “You’ll reach a higher spiritual power, become more active and engaged in your life.” You were healing her. Something, I knew later, you could never do for yourself.

§

Several weeks before college graduation, my mother called on the pay-phone outside my dorm room.

“Remember Chris next door?” she said just before we hung up. I hadn’t thought of you in months. “He died of stomach cancer.” No one had known you were sick. “He didn’t even know,” she added. But I knew this wasn’t true. You’d known all along; and, naturally, you’d never gone to a doctor. You were able to cure every disease. You died in your bed, discovered a day or two later by your mother or your brother. You weren’t even forty. Age was irrelevant you’d once told me. You were no age; you’d stopped aging. Now you were right.

“Who was that?” My roommate asked after I returned to our room.

“Just my mom.”

And as I lay on my twin bed, I talked about my family’s plans for graduation week but I thought of you. How your death made perfect sense. How inevitable it was. It couldn’t have been any other way. Life and death, death and life, it didn’t matter to you. You would have been delighted in the reactions to your sudden death—a neighborhood ripple. All those people for whom you had such contempt, they were surprised, jerked from their daily routine. But only for a moment. No one really cared. You were so easily forgotten.

“Can I borrow your car?” I asked my roommate.

The highway crossed train tracks then narrowed as it curved back and forth, climbing quickly to its highest point in the ridges between the Hudson Valley and the mountains along the eastern New York State border. I looked over and saw you, your face out the window, cigarette ash blowing back into your beard, your ponytail wagging in the hot wind.

“Faster,” I heard you say.

You were the worst driving teacher anyone could have had. How fast we drove on the thin lips of curvy roads—the windows open, the radio loud, silence between us. I’d never been so terrified. Never so exhilarated.

You turned to stare at me. And this time I didn't look away. I just pressed down on the accelerator.

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