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*One Forgets How
Far Away America Is*
Jim Higgins



At the door, Will knocked and Lisa's father shouted, "It's open." Will let himself inside. There was a faint smell of stale, starchy food and baby diapers. His girlfriend's father was sitting in a big rent-to-own recliner. He had the footrest levered-out and the television turned up loud.

"Hello Mr. Simmons," Will said. "Is Lisa home?"

"Lisa," Larry Simmons shouted over the back of the chair. "He's here!" The man turned back to the television without looking at Will.

Lisa's voice came from behind the bathroom door. "Tell him I'll be just a minute."

"She ain't ready," her father said. Will stood there and watched while the man snorted, mashed his nose, and then examined his fingers.

"You mind if I sit?" Will said.

"Nah."

Will took a seat on the couch and looked at the television. He'd only been to Lisa's house a few times. She didn't talk about her parents much and almost never about her father. She had always seemed embarrassed by them and eager to move



away. Will and Lisa were both seventeen and during the two or three years he'd known her, she'd been constantly researching out-of-state colleges. She was always studying for admissions tests and she carried vocabulary and geometry flashcards in her purse. Will spent his afternoons working in his father's print shop. He knew how to set type and run the presses. He was going to take over the business and hadn't given much thought to leaving, for college or anything else.

The television showed a dog in a cape and a voice boomed from the speakers: "No money down! Not one penny down!"

Will looked at Lisa's father. He felt awkward and thought maybe he should try to make conversation. "Had any luck with that car?" he said.

"What?"

"Last time I was here," Will said, "there was something wrong with that Buick."

"Ain't no Buick. That's a Pontiac."

"Well-- "

"That's a Pontiac Bonneville."

"Well, did you get it to crank?"

The man aimed his eyes briefly at Will and then twisted his head back around to shout again.

"Lisa, he ain't gonna wait all night. Come on!"

"Hang on," she said through the bathroom door.

The kitchen door swung open and Lisa's mother stood in the doorway. "What's all the yelling about?"

JR

Will thought she was probably not as old as she looked, even though he didn't know exactly how old she was. There was no mistaking the likeness between Lisa and her mother. They had the same brown hair, delicate eyebrows, and freckles. But her mother's eyes were darker and set deeper and Will thought her face betrayed unspeakable defeat.

"Hello Mrs. Simmons," he said to her.

"Hello William," she said. She looked at her husband. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. I'm trying to watch a show is all."

She stood in the doorway a moment longer and a baby began howling in the kitchen behind her.

"Make that tadpole simmer down," Lisa's father said and turned the television up even louder. The kitchen door closed and the baby's cries were muted.

Lisa came out of the bathroom. "Let's go," she said, snatching her purse from the table. "My God, let's get going."

"Don't use the Lord's name," her father said. "You ain't too old for me to take you across my knee."

Will stood up and walked to where Lisa stood waiting by the door.

"Hey boy," her father said.

"I know," Will said, "midnight."

"If you know what's good for you."

Lisa stood with her hand on the doorknob.

"Lisa?" her father said, holding his arms open. "Are you forgetting something?" She hesitated a moment before crossing the room to stand beside his chair.

She bent over to kiss him on the forehead and he squeezed the back of her thigh with his hand. She walked out slamming the door behind her and leaving Will standing inside uncertain of what had just occurred.

Lisa's father winked at Will. "She's something isn't she?"

Several nights a week, the dog upsets the trash pail and dawn finds the kitchen strewn with filth. On these mornings, Mary Simmons moves slowly and patiently around the kitchen in her nightgown, picking up gnawed milk-cartons and shredded Pampers. She never bothers to scold the dog before letting it out in the back yard to eat grass and retch. After the kitchen is picked up and breakfast is finished, she takes a pan of cool water out to where the dog dozes uneasily in the shadow of a bass-boat. She rubs between the dog's ears as it bubbles its muzzle in the pan of water.

Mary's second child, a baby boy, sits beside her in the grass and splashes his small hands in the water-pan. The drinking dog doesn't seem to mind. Mary loves the way the boy laughs and coos at everything she says. But Lisa, on the other hand, hardly speaks to her anymore. Her grades are perfect and Mary is proud of her but isn't sure she has any right to be.

Her husband, Larry, is a sheet-rock man. He has several wiry young men that work for him. Some days he stays home and the boys come by in the morning to pick up the compressor and get

instructions. He is short-tempered and more than once he's gotten into fist-fights with his workers in the front yard. She dabs iodine on the teeth-marks gouged into his knuckles. "Bucktoothed bastards," he mutters. He refers to the elderly couple across the street as Medicare whores. He has made enemies all over the neighborhood and he forbids Mary or the children to associate with those families. She can remember, years ago, loving him but cannot remember why.

That night, Will and Lisa had dinner at a small Greek restaurant. Afterward, they drove around talking. Always the same conversation. She spoke of college and places far away. He talked about the local junior college and how they could get married and rent a house with what he'd make working at the print shop. She felt small in the big passenger seat of his car and while he spoke she thumbed the plastic door trim nervously.

"You want to swing by the shop?" Will said.

Lisa knew the print shop was closed for the night. She also knew that Will had keys and that he'd want to monkey around on the couch in the front office. She didn't answer. Will drove around some more.

"We could get loans for you to go to school," he said. "And by the time you were done, I'd be making enough to pay them off. We could have a place. Who knows, we might even want kids."

"You could open a print shop in Boston or Vermont," she said, "or out in California."

"What?"

"Why couldn't you find work where I want to go?" she said.

"Lisa, you don't understand. I--"

"No, I do understand," she said. "Your parents are handing you your future. I don't have that."

He didn't reply.

She looked out the window and didn't say anything either until some time later they drove past a cluster of carnival rides set up in the parking lot of a shopping center. She smiled and turned to him. Will had seen it too. He shook his head and said, "Every time you turn around these days, there's a crummy fair set up someplace, seems like."

"Why don't we go!" she said. She had turned around in the seat and was looking back. "Turn the car around."

"But it's almost ten-thirty," he said.

"That gives us an hour and a half. I think I saw a Gravitron."

"But I thought we might-- you know? Let's just swing by the shop."

She hated the print-shop. There was nothing romantic about it. It was dark and smelled like acetone and sweat. The concrete floors and steel machinery made even her faintest whispers echo in a way that made Lisa feel uneasy. Even when the shop was closed, some of the machines clicked and hummed intermittently in the shadows. The last time they'd gone there, Will had accidentally smeared green ink on her skirt and underwear. She told her mother she'd sat on a newly painted bench.

"Let's ride the rides," she said, "and then tonight you can tap on my window and I'll let you in."

"In through the window?" Will said. It was something he'd never considered doing and he was surprised that she'd said it.

"Sure," she said, "you can just step on the spigot and climb through."

Will was quiet for almost a full minute. "Do people climb through your window often?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

He had turned the car around and was driving back toward the shopping center, to the carnival. "I don't know, never mind," he said. "What time?"

"One o'clock," she said. "Just knock on the window."

Mary couldn't sleep. She was on the left side of the bed—her side. Beneath the door seeped blue broadcast light. A voice said, "Let's see that again in slow-motion." A storm of applause. Her husband laughed and then laughed again. His knuckles crack, the upholstery springs flex, ice rattles in a plastic tumbler. Coughing. Her eyes adjusted to the dark bedroom. She could see the white popcorn-plaster ceiling but without her glasses she couldn't tell for sure how far it was above her. She closed her eyes and tried to make herself sleep.

A week before, an invitation to her twentieth highschool reunion had come in the mail. The envelope bore her maiden name. She had opened it and then stuck it on the Frigidaire along with the

finger-paintings, utility bills, and oil-change coupons. Now in bed, she thought about the passage of twenty years. She thought about her daughter, Lisa, and then about herself. She remembered afternoons riding around in somebody's mother's yellow sedan smoking cigarettes and talking about boys.

Creaking bedsprings woke her up. He was climbing in beside her. The light from a street-lamp poured through the mini-blinds in split shafts. Crickets. A propeller plane passed low over the neighborhood, probably on its way to the coast she decided. For just a second she imagined herself aboard, watching the faint nighttime lights pass below. But then he coughed and pulled at the sheets. He won't ever be still. His face close to her neck, he draped an arm across her hip. She rolled away and groaned, feigning a restless sleep. His sour breath flooded her hair and there was a wet rasping deep in his lungs--something spongy dangling in an air-passage. He settled in against her and a lengthy fart escaped him. He laughed to himself and then shortly fell asleep.

Mary found her glasses on the bedside table and eased her feet out of the bed and into a pair of slippers. In the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher in the refrigerator. The clock on the stove showed that it was two or three hours before sun-up. She turned around and listened to the silence of the house. She took her nightgown off and draped it over the ironing board. She couldn't remember the last time she was simply undressed. There's always a child about, bug-eyed and full of



questions. Or him, with his needs. When she is naked, he thinks it's for him. She sat at the table, her fingers tracing the feathered edges of the invitation. The plastic chair was cold beneath her and the linoleum floor felt gritty and cold to her feet. She slid her glasses down her nose a bit and looked closely at the invitation. The paper was fine and textured, almost like fabric, and the printing was thin and elegant. At the bottom corner of the invitation, a telephone number.

After the carnival, Will had taken Lisa home and then returned on foot an hour later. He'd left his car parked several blocks away. He tapped on her bedroom window and climbed through just like she'd said, by stepping up on a hose-spigot. They didn't say a word or turn on the lights. She held the bedcovers up for him and he climbed in beside her. A chill, night wind had come in through the window with him and they shivered under the weight of her blankets. She put her arms around him and he could feel her cool toes touching his. They stayed like this, arm in arm, for quite a while before he realized she'd fallen asleep. She was warm and alive in his arms and her sleeping breath smelled like toothpaste. He was not at all disappointed.

He could hear the television down the hall and then, much later, silence. After a long while, he got out of her bed and slipped into his jeans and shirt. He stood at her bedroom door and listened. Hearing nothing, he went out and made his way toward the front of the house. Before he got there,

he saw something that made him stop and stand still. The swinging kitchen door was shut but the light inside shone brightly through the spaces around it. He couldn't imagine anybody being awake but he didn't want to risk making a noise if her father was in the kitchen. He crept toward the door and put his eye up to the crack of light. He saw Lisa's mother sitting with her back to him. He could see her bare shoulders and hear her crying. She ran both hands through her hair and stood up. When he saw that she was naked he was paralyzed with a strange fear and confusion. For an instant he feared she would come through the door, but she took the telephone off the wall and brought it back to the table.

Mary listened to the phone ring at the other end of the line. It was Dale Miller's phone number, a popular boy she'd not really known well during highschool. It rang and rang and just as she was about to hang up, a woman answered.

"Hello?" the woman said. She sounded sleepy and somewhat afraid.

"Is Dale there?"

"Who is this?"

"I'm calling about the reunion. I-- "

"It's the middle of the night," the woman said.

Mary paused a moment, not knowing what to say. In the silence, Mary could hear her refrigerator humming. The telephone receiver smelled like children and sour food. Words came to her finally but they did not seem like her own. "Do pardon me,"

GR

Mary said, "I'm in London. One forgets how far away America is."

"London?" the woman said.

"Yes, the time-zones," Mary said. "Forgive me, I'll call back."

"No, that's okay," the woman said, clearly intrigued now. "I'm Dale's wife," she said. "He's my husband. I'll wake him up."

But Mary crossed the room and hung the phone back on the wall.

Lisa opened her eyes. The lights were on in her room and she rubbed her eyes. Will was stuffing her clothes into pillowcases. She watched him for nearly a minute before sitting up. "What's going on?" she said.

He looked at her and then continued taking clothes off hangers in her closet. "Sun's almost up," he said.

"Something's happened. What's happened?"

"Nothing," he said. "I mean, I don't know. I'm not sure."

She stretched and stood up. She watched his fingers tremble as he unbuttoned her clothes and slipped them off the hangers. After a minute more, she pulled two suitcases out from under the bed and began putting her things inside. He slid through the window first and she passed the bags out to him. Then he stood outside the window and watched as she smoothed the blankets on her bed and straightened the things on her dresser. For a moment he thought she might change her mind, but

she swung one leg over the window sill and then the other.

They crossed the yard as the sky lightened, the wet grass pulling at their shoes. The streetlights buzzed and winked out. Her bags were heavy and they struggled with them the few blocks to his car. A dog or two barked in the yards they passed but by then it was too late.