

Patrick Young
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CRT Fiction

Dad

He sits in the car. The miles tick away: 125, 126, 127. He continues from the high country of North Carolina to a home on the coast. Cam once called this home his home. Now, it's a vacation spot. The family is always welcoming, but he never stays for more than a few days. Cam wishes he had brought his cats with him on this trip. The seven-hour ride down I-421 East is no place for them, so they stay home, keeping his spouse company for the weekend.

Cam remembers being small and running through long halls. Nothing can compare to the immense runner that carpets the hallway from one side of his parents' house to another. Each time he passed through, Cam stared at the picture frames, one every two feet or so, a time capsule, a reminder of when he had blond hair, when he was fat, when he and Jane had braces and crisp, ocean blue eyes, not dimmed from too many days laid out on the beach, not caring much for sun protection.

Traffic.

His audiobook keeps him awake, but he has barely paid attention to a word of it since Chapter 27.

"The nature of things is impermanence. Your pencil will write words on a page, the lead will chip and score symbols; thoughts and symbols will be the legacy of that pencil, and when

the lead is gone, one will sharpen it. Graphite lines lead to the pencil becoming smaller and smaller. Do not be sad when you need to throw away this item. Its existence is, and the impermanence is what makes it as real. But remember the world shaped through the time spent with it." The book said this, droning through the car's speaker. His mom suggested it. She said something about how Tec Nhat Hanh helped her through tough times. Right now, sitting in traffic outside of Raleigh, he doesn't care for it much, and preferably, he would be smoking a pipe on his back porch. Green turning to black. The mind wanders, and the story becomes background noise, of loving speech, and an approach to opening-up about feeling buzzes in the background of his mind as.

He runs down the hall. He sees his dad's face. In the pictures, he looks so young, with thin brown hair cropped short atop his head. He's skinny, short, and intense. Cam's grandma once said that his father was all legs and chest. He was something like a long-distance runner from the waist down with a barrel supplanted under his ribs. In the picture, they stand barefoot on the beach. The grass was tickling the pink and blue sky of the sunset behind them. We hold big smiles for what has been twenty years now.

Shaking his cock in some bathroom in some gas station in some hick town outside of, Suffolk, Virginia, just over the border of NC. It smells like piss and shit, but standing feels good. The walls are covered in the most colorful racism and bigotry he had ever seen. Cam doesn't linger long and gets a coke for the road. His button-down found its way to the back seat what had to be hours ago, but the cashier doesn't share a second glance at the sweaty wifebeater.

"You got somewhere to be, hun?" she says.

"Home for the weekend."

"Anyone excited to see you."

"Not this time."

"Come on, no one looks sharp like that for nothing," she says over a pop of her gum. She would have been pretty once. Her eyeliner looks like it's been plastered on so thick for so long that the marks have become permanent like a tattoo. Maybe they are tattoos.

"It's just what was clean." Grabbing the can, he walks out the door.

Just an hour and a half left in the book. There should be twenty minutes to listen to tonight while he tries to sleep.

"I'm sleeping," mumbled through dry lips at 5 a.m.

"Camron, it's time to wake up. Jacob is waiting for us."

"Ten more minutes."

"Coffee and toast will be ready in three. We leave in ten."

Dad and Cam work out for the next hour without words. Just groans are exulted from our racked bodies. Jacob stands over us like a demand with a perfect six-pack. We are all short men, and Cam's the fattest.

"You can have more fun with a keg than a six-pack, Jake."

"It's easier to hold a six-pack in a plank, though. Keep that back down now," Jacob pushes on the small of his back until he drop a knee to the floor.

The car rides were the best part of the day. Ten minutes of the beautiful morning. We saw the sunrise over the east coast. Endorphins run through our blood, and we shoot the shit about what it all means.

Cam rolls his old red truck down Atlantic Avenue. The coastline seems the same. There is a new hotel here and there. But the ocean never changes, and he remembers the days of high school and what a blessing those mornings were. It took him years after college to become regimented like that again. If only his dad could have woken him up all those mornings Cam felt like skipping class in college. He would have made Cam start the day with exercise.

"It will make you live longer, Cam," he would have said.

Once, Cam met his parents for cocktails late August before going back to school. They had already been out at a cancer ball, and his mom had been over-served at a self-serve party. She barely made it through dinner, falling asleep between bites of overpriced french fries. Together, they got her home and into bed and proceeded to put a sizable dent in the bottle of Makers' Mark. They sat and talked until two in the morning.

"I'm fifty now, Camron. Half, I think. I'm halfway through my life."

A shot and a grimace. "I'm not sure what I have left, and I'm not sure if I've made all of the right choices. I know I fucked up plenty, and I'm sure you have, but know that most of the time, you will never think of those cock-ups again."

They were both a little drunk and talked the night away about life, regret, what has made his unique, and why he was proud of Camron.

Cam leaves for school, then gets a job, moves to a big city, and forgets to call.
His hand is on the doorknob.

He stopped up the street and put the shirt back on.

Tied his tie.

Dug out the blazer from the backseat of the old red truck.

And started walking.

My hand is on the doorknob, and I open it to see the room of black standing across the runner of red and white. I see, in front of the floor to ceiling windows, a wooden box, and dads face.
It is not as young as the ones in the photos, much less hair, but it's him.

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