

Everything's Cool

Sometimes on Friday evenings we used to drive out to the dump to look at the bears. The dump, just a few miles outside town, was a pit bulldozed out of the wilderness on the other side of the Exploits.

In the spring, not long after they'd emerged from their dens, the bears would come out of the woods to forage on the garbage that had accumulated over the winter and was now beginning to ripen as the weather got warmer. We'd be out cruising around, and after we'd gotten bored enough with just driving up and down First Street, we'd go out the River Road and over the cantilever bridge behind the paper mill to the dump on the edge of the river. The moon had to be out and at least half-full for us to see anything. Otherwise, it was no good, unless you wanted to leave your headlights on and risk letting your battery run low. On a good night, though, with the moon a wavering smudge of silver on the river, there wasn't anything much better than driving out to the dump to look at the bears.

Except for this one time, when things got a bit ticklish. Especially for Ted.

The night this particular incident happened was a night we almost never went. Arnie had pestered his old man into letting him borrow the car for the evening, so wheels weren't a problem. The plan was to get a dozen beer and just do a bit of cruising before going to Christine's party, loosening up, like you would, before the bash. Going out to look at the bears hadn't even crossed our minds, because early in the evening the sky was cloudy. In any case, Arnie had the hots for Christine, so we were happy enough just driving around drinking our beer and razzing him about his love life, which was mostly imaginary.

So we did that for an hour or so, the usual four of us: Arnie, Ted, Philip and me. Arnie drove slowly, both hands welded to the wheel, paranoid about cops, taking long desperate

glutches from his bottle before jamming it down into his crotch. We teased him, telling him the bottle, one of those new narrow ones, looked like a hard-on. Then we piled on him for fantasizing about Christine instead of concentrating on the road.

“I’m not fantasizing. I’m not even thinking about her.”

“Like fuck you’re not,” said Philip.

“I’m not.”

“You’re thinking about someone, then,” I said.

“I told you, I’m not.”

“He’s thinking about getting his skin,” said Philip.

“Can’t get his dirty mind off her,” I added.

“Aw, Jesus, will you guys just lay off?”

Arnie had this streak of false purity we loved to expose and ridicule. The best way was to tease him about his latest love interest. Since he was the only virgin among us, we couldn’t help needling him and mocking his timidity when it came to sex and stuff like that.

As I was saying, we drove up and down First Street, drinking our beer and slowing down to ogle the gaggles of sweet young honeys who promenaded up and down the sidewalks. Arnie would toot the horn and sometimes they’d stop, wave and smile at us. But they seldom accepted our invitations to go for a drive. They knew who we were, and weren’t fooled by Arnie’s conscientiousness, Ted’s quietness, or my own duplicitous charm. They didn’t mind talking to us in public or at large gatherings, but some of them looked at us in the same way my mother would regard a package of tainted meat. By our final year of high school we had acquired a reputation, founded on a little mischief and a lot of big talk, so the pickier girls had started to avoid us. Some of the more adventurous junior high girls were available, of course, but you had to watch it with

them because they were a bit too young. So Christine's party looked pretty good. We hadn't been officially invited, but that was okay because we routinely crashed each other's parties and nothing much was said about it, especially if you brought booze.

It was eight o'clock when we finished the first dozen.

"Let's pick up a couple of cases and head over to Christine's," I said.

"Too early," said Philip. Philip had one of those disposable BIC lighters, even though he didn't smoke. It was a toy he used mainly to annoy us. He'd jerk his hand forward with a sudden thrust each time he flicked it on, let the flame burn for a few seconds before flicking it off. Then he'd withdraw his hand to repeat the gesture. He'd been doing this for the past ten minutes, getting on everybody's nerves and making Arnie glance even more frequently than usual in his rear-view mirror. Poor Arnie. He'd already had to explain to his old man about the burn marks on the backs of the front seats.

"Why don't we just get another dozen and head over to the dump?" suggested Ted.

"Looks like it's clearing up."

The wind had picked up, driving the clouds eastwards and leaving a few streaks of cirrus lit red by the last light of the sinking sun. From the big mill smokestack a coil of smoke unravelled as the breeze teased it into wisps that disappeared in the darkening sky.

"I don't know," said Arnie.

"Oh come on, man," I said.

"He thinks Christine will be *with* someone," said Philip.

"I told you, I don't care about Christine."

"Bullshit," I said.

"It's the car, assholes. I've got to have it back by one."

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I said.

“Come on, Terry. You know what Dad’s like.”

The rest of us had run the gauntlet of parental opposition and established a tenuous independence within the boundaries of our families. Of all our fathers, Arnie’s was the only one who could be said to still rule the roost. Even though we all agreed that parental tyranny was an unmerited affliction, this was another matter that we occasionally teased Arnie about. Now I did something that was provocative and unfair.

““Come on, Terry,”” I mocked in the whining falsetto I had developed especially for prodding Arnie on occasions like this one.

“Fuck you, man,” said Arnie.

I met his glance in the rearview mirror with a sardonic twitch of my right eyebrow, a trick I had spent hours practising using a hand-held mirror.

“Hey, you guys, just cool it,” said Ted.

“No, tell fuck-face to cool it,” said Arnie.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’m sorry. Jesus, talk about sensitive.”

“I’m not sensitive.”

“Slow down, for Jesus’ sake,” interrupted Philip.

“I am driving slow.”

“Look, forget it,” I said. “Tell you what.”

“What?”

“Let’s go out to the dump for half an hour, tops. Then we can check out the party. I’ll buy the beer. My treat.”

Arnie had slowed to about thirty. He bit his lower lip and retreated within himself to

deliberate and make us wait. “Spirit in the Sky” played on the radio. He turned it up, and the bass made the car throb. We felt it in our bones and blood as we swayed and nodded and howled, *“It’s where I’m gonna go when I die.”*

He turned down the radio, started tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

“All right,” he said. “Half an hour.”

“Tops.” I winked at him in the mirror.

We drove to Casey’s Cash-n-Carry on Beaumont Street and parked next to a red pickup with a dent in the left front fender and a tarp rolled up in the back. I remember these details because they were what I noticed while we decided who should get the beer. In the end I was nominated, partly because I looked more grown-up than the others – I had started to shave the summer before – but mostly because I had developed a smooth way with doubtful cashiers. My technique involved combining a practised oily suavity with a cocksure boldness when it came to going to the cooler for the beer, lugging the cases with their chilled, clinking treasure to the front counter, and snapping the greasy, bedraggled bills – mostly ones and twos, occasionally a five – into the cashier’s hand.

Only once in the past six months had this pose failed me. That was when a cashier at Allison’s Take-Out and Grocery down in Bishop’s Falls had stood stonefaced behind the counter and demanded to see my ID. I’d concocted a story about leaving it in one of the jacket pockets of my best suit, which I’d dropped off at the dry cleaner’s a couple of days ago to be cleaned in time for my sister’s wedding, which was coming up that weekend. But the guy had just stood there, the suspicious son of a bitch, arms folded, skewering me with a look as cold as the icicles pictured on the cases of beer. And I’d stood there too, looking as brave as I could, but a chill had grabbed my neck and begun to nudge its way down my spine. So I’d backed out, told the fellow

I'd try somewhere else and that I was sorry for any trouble. But I'd vowed to myself to extract payment from Allison's for the bother they'd caused me, which is what we did, later on, by heaving a rock the size of a softball through their side window.

At Casey's, though, I got our beer without any trouble and we drove out the River Road. It was almost dark. The breeze had strengthened, shredding the smoke from the big stack into a grey stain against the violet sky. Silhouetted against the twilight were huge rectangular buildings that vented ghostly plumes of steam into the cool evening air. The rolls of newsprint that came out of them were shipped to Botwood and loaded onto boats that sailed everywhere. I imagined people in some South American country reading about revolutions and coups on newsprint that came from our mill. Did they ever wonder where the paper was made?

To get to the dump we had to cross the bridge behind the mill. During the day you'd be filled with a giddy rapture as the spans of the bridge slipped by. Beneath the *clunk-clunk-clunk* of the tires on the expansion joints you could feel the head-spinning plummet of three hundred and fifty feet of air between the bottom of the bridge and the surface of the river. But at night you felt this plunge as a dropping sensation in your guts, and you couldn't help wondering what would happen if the bottom of the bridge gave way, or just dissolved while you were halfway across it. Not only that, but into your imagination there bubbled a residual horror of the suicides that had taken place there over the years. We were silent as we crossed, thinking of that plunge, that free-fall through the misty air, the black river water whose surface, my father had told me once, would be as hard as concrete for a body falling from that height.

The road to the dump undulated for a few miles down the dips and over the low hills of the woods on the far side of the river. The moon was more than half full, so visibility was good. From the top of the last crest before the entry to the dump we saw patchy fires burning at the

bottom of the pit, smouldering orange lesions marring the darkness with their eerie glow. Once in a while an exploding container shot nets of sparks into the air, swirling and twisting upwards before dispersing and fading. I always jumped or shivered when that happened, partly because I was startled by the eruption, but also because such an outburst of energy and light in that dark concentration of waste and decay produced a little frisson of satisfaction and pleasure.

We parked in our usual spot at the edge of the pit, where the newest garbage had been dumped before being bulldozed down towards the middle where the older stuff was. This was where the bears gathered, as many as three or four at a time, lured from the woods by the odour of freshly discarded food and other offal. By now the bears, if there were any, would have been prowling around and pawing at the garbage. To avoid disturbing them Arnie had shifted into neutral, and we'd coasted from the turn-off on the highway down to the dump. He'd also turned off the lights and radio. He steered by moonlight, avoiding the potholes and the lumpy masses of garbage bags that had fallen from the garbage truck and ruptured, their contents spread over the gravel like the innards of nocturnal road kill.

We had stopped talking. The only noises were the clinking of the remaining beer bottles in their case and the creak of vinyl as we settled into our seats. We sat in a cage of darkness, our breaths long probing sighs into the silence. From my spot in the rear I could see Arnie's profile against the purple of the sky, the glistening crescent of his right eye as he turned to look upriver.

We got out to take a leak. I had to suppress the urge to cough induced by the miasma rising from the burning garbage. Through the haze a bright point glowed in the southwestern quarter of the sky.

“Venus,” I said, “Roman goddess of love.”

“Penis,” said Philip, “roaming god of love.”

We snickered as we zipped up and got back into the car.

“Anybody want another beer?” I asked.

“Not me,” said Arnie. “I’ve had enough. You guys go ahead.”

Philip, Ted and I sat back with fresh beers and the four of us sank into the hush of concentrated observation, immersing ourselves in our thoughts and imaginings. There was the occasional soft slosh of beer and if you listened really hard you could hear the *tick-tick-tick* of the cooling engine. We descended without effort or calculation into a thick submarine silence, our blood slowing as the cool, dense hush of night seeped into our hearts and slowed them with its chill. Our eyes were focussed on a cone of darkness extending from the front bumper to a distance of about a hundred feet. So total was our absorption that not one of us noticed the figure who approached from the rear and with a single sharp rap on Arnie’s window shattered our bubble and set our hearts hammering.

“Who the fuck could that be?” asked Arnie. He rolled the window about a third of the way down.

A man was standing close to the door.

“Yeah?” said Arnie.

No answer. The man was still. Through the open window I could hear the murmur of the river and the hollow sough of a passenger jet far above in the night sky, a sound that often made my imagination ache with longing to visit distant cities that were far away.

I lowered my head to peer upwards. Whoever it was had on a baseball cap. The shadow cast by the curved brim concealed all of his face except for a slit of mouth and a stubbly jut of chin.

I think it was then that we noticed the rifle, a .303 slanting down from the crook of his

right arm, its barrel glinting dully in the flickering light from the dump fires.

We looked at each other, irritation yielding to a prickly discomfort. Then, before we could say anything, he spoke.

“Get out.”

It was as much a declaration as a command.

We exchanged looks again. None of us recognized the voice.

“I said get out.”

There was the same flat self-assurance in his voice, but this time he spoke more slowly, his words now incised with the crispness of irritation.

The door handles clicked as we got out. For a moment we stood uncertainly by the open doors, then swung them shut, four gentle thuds fusing in the resolution of a single chunky sound.

I turned and walked to the rear and around to the other side. Ted walked around the front. I leaned back against the car and through the fabric of my jeans felt the ridge of the gas-cap handle against my left thigh.

“What the...” began Arnie.

“Shut up.”

“Now just a ...”

“I said shut up.”

I started to curl and uncurl my fingers, my fingertips digging into my moist palms and indenting them with my fingernails.

“You,” he said.

I did not know he meant me until I saw the flicker of the rifle barrel as he swung it up and pointed it at me.

“Me?”

“Yes, you, asshole. What do you think you’re doing?”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the others turn their heads just enough to look at me.

“Doing?” I asked.

The only thing I was aware of doing was fighting to keep from choking on my heart. Other than that, I did not know what I was doing.

“The hands,” he said.

“Hands?”

“Stop that with your hands.”

I uncurled my fingers and pressed them against the side of the car. I pressed until I felt the tips flatten into spatulate pads of flesh and the sweaty concavity of my palms was filled with the cool solidity of sheet metal.

He studied me for a few seconds and then turned to resume his survey of the four of us, swinging the rifle back to its position of casual potency across his hips, the barrel dipping towards the ground again.

Then he twitched his head to the right, emitting a sharp whistle as he did so. From out of the darkness came the crunch of heavy boots on gravel. Another man appeared. He was shorter and stockier than the first, his face shaded by a Red Sox baseball cap whose rim had also been bent into a slicing curve. He too carried a rifle, swinging it in his left hand. The dipping shadow of its barrel intersected the shadows of his legs in a rhythm that distracted me and almost made me lose the concentration I had mustered for the effort of keeping my sweating hands still.

The second man came up and stood a couple of feet to the left of his partner. Several

seconds passed, I think, before anyone spoke. In the interval between speech and silence the whispering river conspired with the distant thrumming of the mill to cocoon us in a spell of hypnotic night-sounds, a charm in which we were all frozen and protected for as long as no one spoke.

“What we got here?” the new man asked.

“Not sure.”

“What’re you fellows doing here?” asked the second man.

We looked at each other.

“Well, either one of you got a tongue, or what?” prodded the short one.

Finally Arnie spoke.

“We just came out to look at the bears.”

“Bears?” said Shorty.

“Yeah, the bears, you know,” I said.

“Don’t get lippy, asshole,” said the first guy.

“I didn’t mean...”

“Shut the fuck up. I heard you the first time.”

“Take it easy, Kev,” said Shorty.

There was another lull while Shorty took an audible deep breath and kicked at a loose stone. Kev continued to stare at us. None of us knew anyone named Kev.

“Bears,” said Shorty. “What you want with bears? You got nothin’ better to do on a Friday night than come out to this hell-hole to go lookin’ at bears?”

And then it clicked, clicked inside my brain with the precise, metallic chink of a slug sliding into its chamber. I remembered a remark my father had made while he was reading the

paper one evening, about poachers and bear gall bladders, how they were worth a lot of dough when you sold them to people in China.

“We’ve been doing this for a few years, now,” said Ted. “You know. Sort of just to pass away the time.”

“To pass away the time,” said Kev.

Again no one spoke. Shorty continued to scuff the gravel. By now my heart had slowed to almost normal. Some detached, untouchable part of my mind began to assess our predicament: the four of us, the car, the dump, two strangers with guns, the river, the deepening night.

“Seems like a strange way for a bunch of young fellows to pass away a Friday night,” said Shorty. “You got girlfriends, or what?”

“Maybe they’re faggots,” said Kev.

Fear surged through my bowels and I felt my stomach contract. I thought of the rape scene in *Deliverance*, before Burt Reynolds comes along with his bow and arrow and rescues his buddies. Sweat began to seep down the soft flesh at the backs of my knees.

“Just a minute, now,” said Ted.

“A minute what, faggot?”

“Look...” began Ted, but he faltered into silence. The strain in his voice reminded me of the bad note in the upper register of my mother’s piano.

“You speaking to me?” Kev stepped closer until he was just a few inches from Ted.

“Answer me, faggot. Are you speaking to me?”

“I was just...” Ted’s voice dried up again.

“Just what, faggot?”

Tendons stood out at the side of Ted’s neck. They looked like guy wires embedded

beneath the skin, connecting his head to his shoulders. At the base of his throat his Adam's apple fluttered like some live creature trying to escape from his flesh.

“Okay, Kev,” said Shorty.

Kev continued to stare at Ted, so absorbed in his scrutiny that he appeared not to have heard Shorty.

And then Ted did something foolish, even though it was unpremeditated and inspired by the tension of restrained desperation: He looked the Kev guy straight in the eye.

He opened his mouth to say something, but Kev cut him off.

“Are you looking at me?” His manner before this had been menacing, but diluting the menace had been an undercurrent of play, a suggestion that the scene was nasty but contrived. It was a tableau that would resolve itself in a peaceful separation, with tension and crisis dissipating into the redemptive silence of the night air as we went our way and they theirs.

“I...” began Ted, but Kev swung the butt of his rifle up and jammed it into Ted’s stomach, forcing the wind out of him and pushing him back against the car.

“Listen, you little fucker, do you want to live?” asked Kev.

Shorty took a step towards his partner and paused.

“These suckers are just kids, Kev,” he said.

“He looked at me. Right at me. Didn’t you see him look at me?”

“I swear to God,” said Ted.

“You swear to God what?”

“I didn’t see anything, I...”

“Like fuck you didn’t.”

“I swear to God.”

“Okay, Kev,” said Shorty. “Let’s get out of here. Let him go.”

Kev stepped back and withdrew the butt from Ted’s gut. Ted remained pressed back against the car. He exhaled a long, soft shuddering breath.

“You fellows from town?” Kev asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Who asked you? Was I speaking to you? Well, shut up.”

He looked at Ted again.

“Well?”

“Yes,” said Ted. “We’re from town.”

“Okay,” said Kev. “You go back to town and you stay there. And keep your fuckin’ mouths shut, too. Got it?”

For a few seconds no one spoke.

“Hey, wise guy,” Kev said.

“Me?” I said.

“No, asshole, I mean the man in the moon. Who do you think I mean?”

“Sorry.”

“Shut up. You understand what I just said?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You skeets get back in this shitbox and go right back where you came from. Bears. We’ll look out for the bears.”

Then he turned and walked past Shorty and into the shadows. No one spoke for what seemed like minutes. I listened to Kev’s retreating steps, the separate, deliberate crunch of each heel on the gravel fading to a scratchy whisper, a hiss, then silence.

Shorty stepped back. He glanced over his shoulder.

“You better leave.” He glanced back again. “You came at the wrong time. Kev’s a bit excitable, that’s all.”

He turned and walked off. A minute or so later we heard the roar of a truck engine – a meaty V-8 it sounded like – then the whine of acceleration diminishing into distance. In the ensuing quietness the purling of the river among the reeds along the shore seemed amplified in the vacuum created by the suddenness of their departure and the intensity of our relief. I stretched my neck and gave my limbs a shake. My shirt was sticking to my back. I glanced skywards. I thought I could hear the stars ticking as they emerged one by one.

“Ted?” It was Arnie who spoke first. “You okay?”

For a few seconds Ted said nothing.

“Jesus,” he finally said. “I pissed myself.”

We looked at the front of his jeans. A dark stain meandered down his right pants leg.

“That’s okay,” said Arnie. “Too much beer.”

“Yeah,” said Philip. “Too much beer.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We got into the car.

“Boys,” said Ted.

No one said anything.

“This doesn’t get around, right?”

“They had guns,” said Philip.

“That’s right,” I said. “He jammed that thing right into your guts.”

“Son of a bitch,” said Philip.

“Goddamn bastard,” said Arnie.

“He was psycho,” I offered.

Ted sat back. He was still trying to get his breathing under control, slow deep inhalations followed by long deliberate exhalations that made me think of someone who’d stayed underwater for too long.

“No one says anything, right?” he said.

“What’s there to say?” I asked.

“”Nothing,” said Arnie, “there’s nothing to say.”

“Right on,” said Philip.

“Everything’s cool, man,” I said.

We drove back through the night across the bridge suspended above the invisible river, back to town with its lights and sidewalks and neat streets laid out in a monotonous grid.

No one spoke. Arnie turned the radio on. The Doors were singing “Riders on the Storm.” I started to sing along, but the others looked at me, so I shut up.

Arnie dropped us off one by one. No one mentioned the party.

“Hey, Terry,” called Arnie as I got out at my place.

“Right,” I said.

“Everything okay?”

“Everything’s cool,” I said.

“You want the rest of your beer?”

“You keep ‘em.”

“All right,” he replied. “Call you tomorrow, okay?”

I didn’t say anything. I shut the car door and walked slowly up the driveway to the front

door.

On the concrete step beneath the light over the front door a few powdery moths that had been singed by the bulb inside the fixture twitched and skittered in a kind of frenzy. One landed near my foot and I hesitated for a moment, deciding whether to crush it or to let it continue its frantic gyrations. But before I could decide its fate it arced up and spun into a parabolic loop and dived onto the lawn.

Inside the living room my mother was knitting a pair of socks and my father was dozing in his recliner. There was a book in his lap, something about the Russian Revolution. On the TV in the corner a man was being interviewed about an explosion in Jerusalem; behind the man, the wall of some burning building collapsed in a swirl of sparks and flame.

When my mother looked up she stopped her knitting.

“That shirt,” she said.

“What about it?” I asked.

“It’s soaked. Put it in the hamper before you go to bed. I’ll wash it tomorrow. What were you doing, anyway? It’s not that warm out.”

“Mom. Please. Don’t start in.”

“I’m only asking.”

“I’m going to bed,” I said.

“By the way, there was a call for you. Something about a get-together at Christine’s.”

“Good-night,” I said.

I went to my bedroom and closed my door. I balled up my sweaty tee-shirt and tossed it onto the floor. I turned off the lights and slid beneath the cool sheets. Through a chink in the curtains a sliver of moonlight slipped into the room and illuminated fragments of objects: a

segment of beige lampshade, a plastic figurine of Bobby Orr, the frayed edge of the mat on the floor beside my bed.

I shivered a bit, lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling. To control the shivering I curled myself up into a tight ball, legs almost touching my chest. Then I tucked my head beneath the covers and tried to get to sleep.