

IT WILL NEVER BE LIGHT

by Brett Yates

I was surprised and delighted when I received a call from Tara. I hadn't heard from her in over a year and a half, and I had effectively crossed her off my mental list of the residents of my life. She had become just another name filling the address book in my cell phone and helping me appear, to anyone who looked in it, to have more friends than I really had. This was a useful function for me, so I never deleted a single person from that book; there were people in there whom I hadn't called once after putting in their numbers. Consequently, when Tara called, my phone's screen flashed with her name, which fortunately gave me warning of the shocking identity of the caller and cautioned me to sit out two rings and take the time to step into the correct persona before picking up.

"Hey," I said. I kept my voice nonchalant in order not to expose the thrill I got from her call, in case she had merely selected the wrong name in her list of contacts and had meant to dial the name above or below mine.

"Hey, Matt -- is that you?" said Tara.

"Tara!" I said, as though just now realizing it was she. "I haven't heard from you in ages." In ages? Did people still say that? I moved swiftly on. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing -- I've just been thinking about how much I've been missing you."

Score. OK, her sentence was, perhaps, worthy of semantic scrutiny. She wasn't missing me, exactly: She was

"thinking about how much" she missed me, which could've been not at all. She could, in fact, have been merely pondering the utter lack of nostalgia she had for me. But I dismissed this idea as pessimism; surely she had meant what it had sounded like she had meant. And why would she have called me if she didn't genuinely miss me? I fought to return to my initial reaction.

"I've missed you too." Wait! Did that suggest too much sentimentality and emotional vulnerability for a male? It was fine for her to say it, but men, we're all business; self-reliant creatures, we let neither the presence nor the absence of anyone get in the way of . . . whatever it is that we men do. Well, what was said was said.

"So what have you been doing since we last talked?" she said.

"Oh, lots of things; I've been really busy," I said, immediately afterwards hoping that she hadn't taken that to mean that I was too busy to talk to her. "I've been traveling a lot. I've met a lot of new people, and of course I'm always reading and studying new things. What about you? How's school?"

I had attempted to adopt a tone that would convey that I had undergone many significant, edifying, and terrific experiences since she had last spoken to me: that I was going places; that I had moved far beyond my previous life of which she was a part but was amiably willing to condescend and rejoin, for a moment at least, my past, for the sake of her, who doubtless missed me. In essence, I wanted to convey to her the opposite of the truth, which was that I had nothing to show for the year and a half in which she and I hadn't communicated. But my inflection only bounced up and down strangely. I hadn't traveled, and I hadn't read, but those at least sounded like things that I could've done. If I had claimed that I had gotten a job or enrolled in college, she would've known I was lying. I was glad to transfer the conversational burden to her.

"School is OK," she said. "I just miss the old gang from home. I really wish I could see you guys."

This initially struck me as false for two reasons. Firstly, if she had really wanted to see me, she could've given me a call over winter break, at which time she surely must've been at home. Secondly, I was quite certain that I had never been part of any "old gang." I had not grown up on a sitcom, and neither had she. But, after a moment's thought, I considered that her yearning was perhaps a recent phenomenon; four months prior, she might have been in an entirely different emotional state and convinced to cut off her ties to her adolescence and move without encumbrance towards her bright, college-degree-equipped adulthood. Maybe the idea of loneliness had only just now occurred to her. In regard to the old gang, memory often translates the past into warmer, friendlier terms.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "But it'll be summer break in a month or so. Right? And then you'll be back here in New Jersey, and we can all hang out." I wasn't sure whom "we all" referred to -- our fictional gang of good old buddies, I guess -- but it sounded appropriate as it came out of my mouth.

"No, I'm doing an internship down here this summer," she said. "It's a really good offer, and I have to take it, but I'll miss home a lot. This whole life has just seemed like too much lately. I'm all alone here."

"You must have some friends at college."

"Not really -- I mean: I do, but they're not like the friends at home. It's not the same. And it's like I don't even feel like talking to them these days. I haven't been going out. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm really sorry to be complaining like this. I haven't called you in such a long time, and now that I have, I'm just complaining instead of really talking with you.'

"It's fine. It really is. I don't mind listening. It's what

friends are for." I neglected to mention that she and I hadn't actually been friends since her senior year in high school.

"I'm just so lonesome," she said. "Christ, I haven't even gotten laid since the fall."

This statement both annoyed and elated me. It annoyed me because Tara was adopting a guy's role, as though she, an attractive girl, had to hope to get lucky, as though she couldn't, if she wanted to, merely announce that she desired sex and watch a hundred frat-boys raise their hands to volunteer. On the other hand, it elated me because it sounded as though she wanted to have sex with me.

"Poor girl," I said.

Tara was one of two girls who'd had sex with me. That wasn't so great for a twenty-year-old, especially when one considers my very low standards, but one must also consider that I generally didn't engage in the socialization that precedes such activities. For instance, I had dropped out of school at the age of sixteen, just as my friends were finding their first serious girlfriends; after that, I wasn't a candidate. I don't think I'm ugly: It's possible that I am, but looking in the mirror, I'm never struck by any particular ugliness, and no one's ever told me that I'm ugly. But leaving school separated me from the girls whom I knew, and eventually it was as though I had never known them at all; meanwhile, I had no knowledge of how to go about starting conversations or friendships with girls whom I didn't know, and from what I understand, girls rarely have sex with anyone without exchanging first at least a couple words. But, according to a few, my status as a loner and a dropout, though I now possessed a GED, lent me some bad-boy mystique. This image didn't fit my demeanor at all; I hadn't dropped out because I was a tough guy but because I was miserable. But somehow Tara believed in the myth about me, and she liked it. To ask her, I wasn't stupid but merely needed to learn about the world in my own independent way. (Indeed, I had truly had a vague notion of finding on my own something more authentic than the politics of teenage popularity, but

mostly I had just found boredom, lonesomeness, and Internet pornography.) That I didn't outwardly show my "bad side" to Tara made it that much more mysterious and enticing for her. I was "different" from all those sheep, to paraphrase what she had once told me. Perhaps the frat-boys were the sheep she'd meant, and that was why she had no interest in them. I wondered if that made her discerning or a snob; either way, I liked her for it, even if her impression of me was way off the mark.

I had been particularly proud of my relationship with her: She had seemed to me an exceedingly pretty girl. The sex itself I hadn't really enjoyed: I spent most of the time wondering why such a pretty girl would subject herself to this. But the boost in pride I felt when reflecting upon this beautiful creature's desire for me was invaluable. Later, she found a real boyfriend, who was not just a novelty. Although it didn't last long, she and I had drifted apart by the time of their breakup. Still, I retained entirely positive memories of her.

As she spoke on the phone, I realized that my self-esteem was currently rather low. It was perhaps in need of augmentation.

"Maybe I should come visit," I said. I made sure my voice was light enough that I could play the suggestion off as a joke, a harmless bit of whimsy, in case she found it forward or excessive.

"Oh! Really! Would you! That'd be so great!" she said. "It'd be so great to see someone from home! Do you have the time? It's really a nice drive, too! Oh, this will be so great!"

I hadn't expected that much enthusiasm. There was no backing out now. And there, I reassured myself, was nothing pathetic about driving seven hundred miles for a girl: After all, she was, I assumed, going to have sex with me, and that would make it worthwhile, particularly since my only other option was continuing my unintentional celibacy.

The next morning, I woke up at five, took a quick shower, put on some cologne whose smell Tara, I recalled, had once praised, and hopped in the car. Of course the New Jersey Turnpike was hell. But once I hit Pennsylvania, everything smoothed out, and as I no longer needed to concentrate more than a small fraction of my mind on the highway, I fell into a sort of scenic trance in which the passing trees and hills made me forget about time. With stops only for gas and once at a Wawa for a sandwich, I drove through the Allegheny Mountains, past Charleston in West Virginia, and made it to the Kentucky border before I knew it.

Tara was a sophomore at the University of Kentucky. The majority of the kids whom I knew and who were my age had chosen to stay home and go to Rutgers, but Tara had chosen UK -- mostly because it had accepted her. Additionally, she wanted some distance between her and her parents, and Kentucky had a top-twenty program in whatever it was that interested her. I couldn't remember what it was. I didn't really believe in my friends' interests anyway -- these passions that they'd never mentioned in all their lives until they were about to enter college. It appeared to me that, at East Branchville High School, each senior received a notice that read, "Attention, [student's name]: You are now interested in [something like architecture or economics or art history or computer science]. Good luck." And all of a sudden, he can't stop talking about art history, and I have to tune him out. Anyway, the University of Kentucky was a perfect fit for Tara, except, apparently, that she hated it.

For me, however, a thrill traveled through my veins as I crossed the border into Kentucky. My mother had, in fact, grown up in Kentucky, and I imagined that, after twenty years of entrapment in a foreign land, I was finally returning to my native soil. The homeland! The dirt from which my family tree had grown! How I loved the lush bluegrass! Was the grass really blue, or was it named the Bluegrass State after the music? The grass looked green enough to me. Of

course, I'd never actually been to Kentucky before this. My mother periodically made trips home, but she hadn't invited me on any because, in my youth, they'd always taken place during the school year and because, now, she disliked me. But I still had relatives here, albeit ones I had never met, and that was some kind of connection. In truth, the fantasy of coming back to my roots hadn't occurred to me until I'd driven through most of Pennsylvania. It had intensified in West Virginia, and now that I'd made it into Kentucky, I was recounting in my head all the stories my mom had told me of her childhood. Suddenly, they seemed as good a reason for this road trip as guilty sex with Tara was, and I felt vaguely ashamed that I hadn't realized this earlier.

They were good stories. I hadn't believed them; the region she had described had been only as real to me as Narnia or Neverland or any other place that could exist solely in fiction because it was too wonderful to be real. Later, I had learned that the profession of her grandparents and other family members -- coal mining -- was about as bleak as they came. But my mom had painted the state for me with a loving brush. It had, according to her, an earthiness that was both soothing and invigorating. All her stories involved exploring the mountains, ravines, cliffs and forests -- and discovering the largest waterfalls, the deepest caves, and the tallest trees that a ten-year-old could climb. An untamed child! A real child!

I had trouble reconciling that image with the one of the girl who had received a scholarship for academic excellence to attend college up north -- and her parents could barely read! -- and who had married a native of New Jersey and had raised her child in the suburbs in a six-bedroom, gaudy home with virtually no backyard. She hadn't, in the time I'd known her, even displayed any visible interest in the outdoors; never would she take the car out of the suburbs to go hiking or birdwatching or kayaking. Yet I'd also never known her to lie. New Jersey must have changed her. How could she have let it happen? How could she have ever left

Kentucky?

My daydreams about belonging to this country were interrupted when I arrived at Lexington, which sort of looked like a real city -- just a slightly countrified Newark. This disappointed me because, although I'd known it wouldn't be the case, I'd wanted the towns in Kentucky to be populated by log cabins. Abe Lincoln had grown up in a log cabin in Kentucky. This Lexington seemed at least to aspire to be urban, and it conflicted with my conception of its state.

With one eye on the road and one eye on my sheet of directions, I made my way to Tara's dorm. When I reached what I believed was the correct building, I gave her a call, found a parking space on the street, and put some change in the meter. I walked back over to Tara's building, where Tara had said she'd meet me outside. It was late afternoon. A moment later, the door opened; Tara appeared, hugged me, and was unattractive.

It shocked me. She wasn't pretty anymore. What a terrible thing college must be, I thought, to ruin a girl like Tara! Her previously taut and efficient body had degenerated into a slack, shapeless mass. One couldn't quite call her a fatty -- not yet -- but she had clearly lost all the precision of form she'd once had. Her skin appeared pallid, and her blue eyes had acquired a dullness. Doing my best to hide my disappointment, I reminded myself that, even in her decline, she probably was still more attractive than I, but that didn't cheer me up any. We went inside the dormitory and upstairs to her room and its unmade beds and empty cans of diet soda. Two other people occupied it.

"This," said Tara, "is my roommate, Vicky, and that's her boyfriend, Kurt."

Vicky turned away from her laptop, looked at me, waved, and was more attractive than Tara. Kurt raised his chin a centimeter to acknowledge my presence with the least amount of deference to me as possible. Both of these people depressed me: Vicky, a cute but unremarkable girl with dyed

blond hair, put into clearer perspective how far my formerly beautiful friend had fallen; meanwhile, Kurt was clearly a tool. He had sharply defined eyebrows that he appeared to have slicked back with hair gel. This, in combination with his undersized T-shirt, aimed for the kind of the style that I had thought was accepted solely in greasy nightclubs in New Jersey. It was as though I hadn't even left home.

I needed to get out of there. My mind started racing: How could I explain having traveled seven hundred miles to see a girl and then leaving after spending two minutes with her? I pondered the question while Tara chatted in the direction of my deaf, nodding head.

"You know," I said, "I have relatives in Kentucky. My grandparents live just about twenty minutes south of here."

"Really?" said Tara.

"Yup," I said. "I haven't seen them in a pretty long time, and I thought I'd combine my visit to you with a visit to them. I called them and said I'd swing by after stopping here, since this is on the way."

"Oh," she said.

"I thought I should spend a little time with them before really hanging out with you because they go to bed early, and then we can hang out tonight."

"Oh. All right."

"I'd better get going," I said. "After all that driving, I really don't feel like getting back into the car, but I said I'd see them, and I know they want to see me. It's been so long, and they're really nice people. Anyway, I'll see you later tonight. OK?"

"OK," said Tara. "Come back soon."

"Bye," I said.

And I left. It comforted me that all of this could have been true, even if it wasn't. My grandparents really did live in Kentucky, although I did not know where, exactly. I had never met them.

I got back into my car. I started it, and I wasn't sure where I was going. I had resolved not to see Tara again. I'd think of an excuse. She wouldn't buy it, but I would give her one. Perhaps my mother had become sick at home; I'd had to return immediately. And I considered going home, but upon reflection it seemed an impossibility.

I found myself heading south on Route 27. Partly, I wanted to assuage the guilt my lie had lent me by making it at least a little closer to the truth: I really was going south, just as I'd said. But, for the most part, I think I just wanted more Kentucky, real Kentucky, away from the university.

The road took me out of Lexington, but my nerves didn't calm until I'd also passed Nicholasville and even tiny towns like Lancaster and Stanford; then the country really took over. I followed the road over rolling plains, past twisting creeks and farmland with the Appalachians in the distance. I forgot about Tara, Vicky, and Kurt.

The sun began to set. I pulled onto the shoulder, beside the river. Two hundred yards ahead of me lay a tiny house and empty space. I got out of the car and listened to the gurgle of the water. Why couldn't I have been born in that house? What future Honest Abe was growing up there now with his parents, brothers, and sisters? They all lived together in that miniature home, such a big family, so close to each other, never lonely. But when they needed some space, some air, how many miles of uncivilized land sat behind their home? Young Abe could run and run without hitting into any other houses or fences, until with his sweat would drip out all but the best and purest in him. This wasn't a fantasy; this was my homecoming. I'd never make the mistake my mom had made. I could bathe in the river. I could go to bed tired and wake up refreshed. No smog to cloud my mind! If I could just knock at that door! Two

hundred yards away! That kind, generous family would let me in, surely. A new place was all I needed!

Darkness began to fall. And reality began to descend upon me. They didn't want my cologne stinking up their house. Cologne! Christ! A physically and emotionally weak twenty-year-old, I could never live in this golden country. I couldn't experience untroubled sleep. I couldn't breathe without anxiety. The family in the tiny house before me would wonder why I would bite my fingernails, why I would shudder when anyone would attempt to hug me, why I would spend three days without leaving my bed for more than three minutes. I had no Abraham Lincoln in me. It was dark now, so I got back into my car, turned around, and headed for home.

- Brett Yates