

Weatherspoon
Before I Go

HE NEVER MEANT FOR THIS TO HAPPEN. He never really meant a thing in his life. Cory had a few friends there who cared enough to caution him not to go fucking with the young girls from his old high school, but none who cared enough to stop him. Buddies he'd met in trade school,

Dice, 25.

Prince, 18 years old.

D-bo, 29.

The lot of them are parked at a poker table in Cory's basement talking about how nice the day was, and how the night was bound to be even better. Each of them turned to look at Prince, who they all knew hadn't lost his virginity yet.

The kids from Mulberry street ain't kids no more. 25 years made bare in Cory: an absent paternal father of two, cable-man, runner, the lifeblood of this *crooked corner*.

"What the fuck? Is this a fucking cult or some shit?" Prince grins.

All of them laugh in earnest

"Chill, my guy--calm down and let's celebrate da lil bit a time we got left." Cory hollers holding in a smile.

"I'm just saying, it's pretty wild that three grown-ass men are so interested in what I do with my dick." Prince shrugs.

Each of them nods as though Prince made an interesting point.

"You grown now too, ain't you?" Cory asks.

"No more than your girl." Prince dares.

In the darkroom, with the 1990s television set, the way the blue-green light massaged Prince's face as he stared at Cory across the table, it looked as though he were underwater. D-bo--who was puffing the back end of a blunt the size of an expo marker--almost forgot to breathe. And Dice... well, he had this way of talking to Cory without talking to Cory, a language they developed back when they were kids.

"Why you lookin' at mans like he got the card you want? This ain't go fish, nigga. You gon' lose all yo money like that. Keep wearing yo emotions like that." Which, in other, better words meant *don't kill him*.

All his life, Cory had been under the impression that all sex is good sex: An ideology that garnered him twins and a 17-year-old girlfriend. Lee-Ann was in love. About as in love as young girls get in the summer-time. She was the type of young girl most people referred to as "mature for her age," partways mental, but especially physical. She was, as her father reminded her, *a growing girl*, who had been *round in all the right places*. If nothing else will, daddy issues will do it; it'll push the younger girl into the older guy. It'll box her life into the margin of what she had to offer the man who made her a woman--helped her grow up--keeper of her inno-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

cence, rapist, if you want to get technical about it. Lee-Ann would tell you it's more complicated than that, but Lee-Ann doesn't talk much anymore.

Oh shit, I think Prince got something to say," D-bo admitted with a concerned grin.

"I had a crush on Lee-Ann in the sixth grade. D-bo told me she's a mom now" Prince shrugged, still blue from the screen light.

Dice looks at D-bo with sharp eyes.

"Yeah, sometimes life forces us to calm down." Dice apologizes, with a sunken head and an assembly of thoughts that might be called a prayer if he knew how.

Everyone knew but ain't nobody talk about it, how Cory became his father: Crummy, Drunken, Foul. No one dared to talk about how Cory became a father: Crummy, Drunken, Foul.

In the basement, Cory smiles a dangerous smile. He looks at Prince the way a dog does a rabbit.

"Yeah, what about it?"

Prince snaps, unafraid and half-grinning

"That's fucked up Cory."

Again, you've got to understand, Cory never meant for this to happen. He'd never meant a thing in his life. He'd never done nothing, he was the kind of guy life just happened to.

"You know what's fucked up, blood? Murder. Watch ya mouth." Cory barks lifting up his T-shirt to reveal the burner at his waist side.

"I'm just sayin' big dawg, didn't your ma run out on you? How you gon' go chasing waterfalls? How you--"

A shot rang.

A life lost in a game in which there are no winners.

Prince was different after it, bloody, splattered with red excess the shapes of constellations across his dark face. Cory never meant for this to happen. He'd never meant a thing in his life, but his death was different, decisive. Prince wiped Cory clean from him. Panicked, and terribly fulfilled--like an unconscious wish came true--Prince runs his fingers through the pockets of a now, dead, Cory. Checking for drugs, a knife, anything besides the gun the news could use to portray him as the face of true crime and *crooked corners*. He found nothing but a crinkled slip in his back pocket. He read it aloud, as D-bo and Dice come rushing down the stairs in a state of restlessness rather than concern. All Dice could think is

.Prince is dead.

.Prince is dead.

.Prince is dead.

On the way down.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

"Before I go, someone should sing about me. Like to tell the youngins to watch out 'cuz life a beat yo ass if you let it. I think I let it. I think I let down when I fucked Lee-Ann, I think I thought I knew I wasn't gon' be here long. Wanted to do more than pray for the kids we made. Wanted to disappear for 'em."

Shit wasn't the same after that. Lee-Ann left Mulberry street, Prince, D-bo, and Dice too. Everyone ignored the street lights, and never made it back home.