

D e n t R e d T r u c k

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Her classroom was always warm. She would write on the chalkboard, her arms naked and slim, nobody in town had brown arms in winter and why these brown arms, he'd wonder, why are they brown even before the icicles crack off the eaves, before the snowplows go back into their garages?

Vincent would be watching her, and sometimes she would glance at him as she walked between the desks, leaning down here, leaning down there, pointing at this paper or that. And their eyes would meet and his would hold too long.

He and Al and Ronnie would talk about her at night, up on Elephant Point, leaning against the yellow Chevy Impala, long and sloping, its hubs silver and gleaming with moon. Up there was the place Vincent liked to go with his two friends, above it all, up the snowy road to a development that didn't yet exist and wouldn't ever.

Up there the lights of Dorisville would wink at him like they knew something he didn't, and the three of them would tilt back beers that weren't that cold. Below, Dorisville would barely move but for cars running the long circle of Main Street: 25 miles an hour; down, then back; down, then back. All year round, summer hot or winter freeze. Otherwise it's just blue TV light flighty against cloth curtains and dark blue sky stuck by the white prick of mountain stars. There's the moon enormous, the color of ice.

They would talk about her, their breath a ghost billow in chill air, and imagine her and how she would be with them, and Ronnie would say his and Al would say his. But

Vincent would talk less because he was going to, he knew he was, and if you were doing, talking was extra and not required.

He was old enough to drive, not old enough to draft, but the war was winding down and talk was the draft would end fairly soon. He was old enough to party just like every other kid in the high school except those who didn't, either dorks like Peter Fahn who wore his hair like a hippy and probably smoked pot in his car by himself, or better-thans like Jenn Dynstra who didn't drink and didn't put out but still walked around school like she might.

Vincent was old enough for a girlfriend. His girl was no Jenn Dystra but she wasn't ugly either; she went to the back seat matter-of-fact, to his surprise. Only three, four times before she stopped it.

And so his eyes were open in class, and he watched the teacher and he thought about the teacher.

He finally had kissed her, after seventh period, some weeks back. He knew she had class at the end of the day, that she would be there after the school poured out onto Main Street in the afternoon. She had been in the back of the class putting on her coat. He had gone up to her too close and asked if she had a minute and then he had just pushed his mouth down to hers, she so small in that moment, and he let his big arm go around her thin shoulders and he felt her mouth start to close and her head start to tilt back and away and then she changed and her mouth opened and her lips soft letting him in, then seizing him. It was she who pressed her middle into his first, such a firm thrust from this little body he felt he would crush if he held her too hard.

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Sooner or later it would get too cold, standing and staring down at the town below. The three of them would get back in the Impala and drive down off Elephant Point, cross the bridge over the Doris River where they swam in summer and then around the bend and out onto The Loop, the long way around the valley out west from Dorisville into the dark where it was mostly farmland and cattle. Out on The Loop it was safe for drinking, although you'd have to keep your eyes open for cops. They would drive east, winding back into town from the other side a half hour later. Al was a little too fast sometimes. That Impala could leap as well as any car he had ever sat in, because Al spent all his time on it, and Al's uncle raced cars out at the fairgrounds all summer and Al knew this shit and would talk about it until he'd bore everyone within earshot into thinking about something else.

The engine would roar proud, the music at high volume,

*I want to hear that funky Dixieland
Pretty mama let me take you by the hand
By the hand hand, by the hand pretty mama
And dance with you all night long,*

and they would shout at each other as conversation. It would be girls, it would be the dance next weekend, it would be hunting deer. It would be going to Chico to party, it would be that time Ronnie talked himself out of getting a drunk driving bust by a cop who must have known but gave Ronnie a break because Ronnie can talk to anybody and Ronnie can make anybody like him and Ronnie got to drive away and was so drunk he proceeded to make a u-turn right in front of the cop but gave him a big wave and was on his way, and how Ronnie got away with that Vincent didn't know, but that was Ronnie, as sure as he was sitting up in the front seat.

The car was so loud, and Al and Ronnie were proceeding to argue about baseball, and Vincent could care less about baseball. So he sat in the back alone, and thought about the teacher.

He had wanted to tell Al and Ronnie about her, it was his way. He had told them about his girlfriend before; he told them everything, even when it ended on her call. They were his friends. But he hadn't told them about the teacher, none of it, not even what had happened today.

With the teacher, it was different. His girlfriend, sex in a car, she went to it like duty but with the teacher it wasn't a backseat just off a dark road. Vincent had gone to her house several times. There it was a big bed with yellow covers and a puffy comforter, it was a shower before and after, she had these soaps he liked the smell of. It was beer, very cold and in a glass. It was lights on sometimes, or lights off. She was a woman, older than him by a lot -- she was what, late-20s?-- but she didn't make him feel too young. She was more like he was, she wanted things. And she gave things he liked. And she liked his body, it showed. Now, it felt like a woman wanted things that belonged to him only, and he liked that feeling.

These were things Vincent felt, not things he could describe; even if he could, he sure as hell couldn't yell it over the engine of the car and the blast of the eight-track tape. So he sat in the back, and watched the black shapes of mountains to the west where the horizon hunched up dark and over, and drank the last can of beer and missed her. And wondered what was next, given what had happened today.

Darryl had forgotten what it was like to drive up the mountains at night with his window open, blowing out the singed air that had baked in the car all afternoon. Forgotten how the day full of problems would lift off of him and float out the window and up, up. Something about how Highway 80 climbs up out of the valley smog and into the treeline, something about the serenity of mountains at night.

The invitation for a 35th reunion-- *Dancing Til Midnight With DHS Class of '70--* had arrived in the mail and he had held it in his hands as if it had weight. He hadn't been to Dorisville in twenty years. His wife thought he should go, and had her idea why he probably wouldn't. But she had urged him to go in that quiet way of hers, bringing it up as a by-the-way, but really it was no suggestion, it was more a decision made. It will be a break for you, she'd say, meaning it would be a break for her, meaning she needed it. Which he hadn't been aware of.

Darryl was a cop, the kind that was straight out of high school into cop, first in Dorisville, then Sacramento. Not ambitious about it, but not unserious about it either. Didn't skip work, watched the details. Highway Patrol now. Running the freeway from Sacramento to Stockton, or Vacaville. Eyes wide open. Ten years with CHP so far.

His work problems came within a tight circumference: a foot to the gas, the twirl of lights, walking up to a car pulled over and who is in that car and what will they do? The sound of the highway gearing by, the torque of car engines, walking up carefully behind a car, watching the passengers for a threatening shift of shoulders.

Across a valley dark green, the Sierras scraggle out a horizon at night. He could see a patch of snow, still holding moon in July.

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He had breakfast very early, as the sun was coming up, in what used to be Cindy's, then Sally's, and now Rhonda's: *honey howrya what kinna getcha*, a big plate of eggs, potatoes seasoned like Italy, bacon in a mound.

Back when, Darryl was a young cop and he would hunch over the counter on his elbows, and drink weak coffee. Today, the coffee was better. He was watching the eyes of the people who come in, wondering if he would see somebody he knows. It's been a long time; what's left to recognize? His own face had grown wider, softer; his stomach sagged now where it was firm before. Hair's going. What's left to recognize? The eyes, he decides. That's the only thing that won't have changed too much.

Rhonda has put pictures up all over the walls. Pictures of hunters and fishermen holding up their dead prizes; other than that, it was mostly kids from the high school. Pictures stretching back to his time here, even before. Football teams, cheerleaders, 4-H, the auto club gathered around a car new then that looked old now. He wondered if he might see himself, or his friends. People he knew. His nervous basketball career might be immortalized on these walls, he smiled to himself, self-conscious even now.

He thought about the teacher and how her picture wouldn't be here.

He had come back here partly to see what had happened to Dorisville, to see how it would feel to him. He had moved here just before high school, his dad worked corrections and wanted out of the Bay Area. Too many coloreds, Dad said, gotta get up in the mountains and away from all this and so they had left the Richmond neighborhood he knew and they had plopped him down in Dorisville. His dad worked at the prison, Mom worked around the house.

But it never was his, the way it belonged to the people who grew up there. Darryl had strapped it on, like it was. High school will make you think that all you see around you belongs to you, and you belong to it.

Watching his youngest grow up, it had never been clearer that this was not so.

Privately, he knew he had come up the mountain, in part, to remember what it was to be that age again. Because if his work problems came circumscribed in small sections, his home problems had more girth. While his two older daughters had been no problem—both married now, one with a daughter of her own—his son was sullen in a way too familiar. He understood it, he thought; he understood it as intrinsically as he understood anything, but couldn't break it apart even now in what felt like his second run at it. He remembered how he'd been a handful in high school and had caused his folks ache. And now, his youngest—he who had come so late in life, surprising his wife and him—his only boy was in high school and he was starting to go down. There had been fighting, he'd been drunk at school in the early morning. If there were drugs, the boy kept them hidden.

High school didn't really stick to the boy. No sports, no clubs. Not many friends. The boy would come home quiet, his mother said, and he would go to his room. He had lived in the same house his whole life. He'd listen to music. Didn't even like computers. His son was alone.

And he recognized that he had been alone too, through most of high school, and he had a dim idea that returning to Dorisville might shake some answers loose, for him and maybe his son. That maybe the sticky stuff that had had meaning then—the things

that had clung to him, the few friendships and the sports and the car and all—maybe they were like being alone in a room with the music up loud.

And then there was the teacher.

These days, he was thinking a lot about the teacher.

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They had already drunk a case of beer, between the three of them. That was a lot, more than normal. He could drink a six-pack fairly easily, wondering why a six-pack of beer was drinkable, while downing a six-pack of Coke was impossible. Other nights, if they didn't have enough money, they'd share a six-pack and get out of the car and run, because if you shake it up enough, you get drunk on less. Tonight he was blur up, stomach full, he wanted more. Tonight they had the money and they were drinking like it.

Ronnie saw Jaime's purple Charger and did a quick u-turn on Main, pulling up along side. Jaime lowered his window, nodded. Al lifted his beer to the window sly, shouted "Couldja?" and Jaime nodded. They followed him to Safeway, gave him money.

The eight-track sang:

*No gotta get away,
Gotta get away, now no no no
Gonna leave you mama
Bye bye eye*

Vincent was in the back seat thinking about what had happened that afternoon, and he still couldn't figure out how the principal knew. He had been called into the office at the end of seventh period. They were waiting for him: the principal Mr. Vikre, the vice-principal Mr. Williams, and the counselor Miss Wandesforth. Normally, he'd have

to sit outside Vikre's office and sweat it, but the secretary had brought him right in and he sat in the chair while the three adults stood around him. They seemed taller than usual, it made him slouch down, didn't even take off his jacket, "What?"

They didn't speak right away. Vikre moved slowly and sat behind the desk. Mr. Williams moved and stood behind him, where he couldn't see him. Miss Wandesforth leaned against the office wall, between the two stupid paintings of dogs.

Vikre blew out a breath, stared down a moment, like he was reading something.

He had never gotten this silent treatment before. Usually Vikre was an asshole, he'd come at him loud and angry— not like the old man, nobody came at him like the old man— but it would be angry. Whatever this was, it wasn't usual.

"We know you and Miss Winston have had sexual relations," said Vikre. His voice was quiet and serious. "We know."

"What?" he said.

"We know," said Miss Wandesforth. The wrinkles on her face seemed grayer, deeper today. "We need to know how many times you slept over at her house."

"Don't got to tell you nothing."

"You have to tell us everything," said Vikre. "You're a minor, Vincent. You're in trouble, and she's in trouble worse. And you not telling us is going to make it harder. On her. On you."

He could see her face. She had glasses, she would take them off. Her eyes, they'd swim blue. She would push her hair back over her ears and raise her blouse over her head slow, almost like she didn't want to, but she would smile at him as she dropped her blouse and he'd know she did want to after all and he'd wonder about that, how she could

lift her blouse so slow and why it made him feel jumpy in his heart and her bra wasn't like the ones his mother had in her drawer, it was almost like nothing at all, like you could rub it between your fingers and it could just disappear "Worse on her?"

"Yes, Vincent. On her."

"But mostly worse on you," said Mr. Williams, leaning forward. He had big glasses with horn rims and his eyes were small and of nothing at all just blackness and Mr. Williams put those nothing eyes right up to his, "We're sick of your crap. Sick of you in this office. Sick of you not figuring out how to straighten up and fly right."

"Matt," said Vikre, reaching over to Mr. Williams, pulling the eyes away from him. The three of them now stood around him, looking down at him. He felt himself lowering still in the chair, his body now almost parallel to the floor. "How many times, Vincent?" Vikre's voice was almost kindly.

"Six times. Maybe seven." Mr. Williams wrote that down.

It was over pretty quickly after that. They suspended him for two weeks, saying he was not to set foot on campus, and he was not to contact the teacher, and they sent him home, even walked him to the edge of the school which pissed him off because he had wanted to go to her, just burst into her classroom so he could see her there before the chalkboard, writing down the things she always does and he'd see her and something in her face would make some sense of this. But no. Mr. Williams had stood and stared at him until he was off the campus and halfway up Main Street by the boarded up restaurant.

At home in his living room, his mom had been on the couch, watching soaps. She had her bathrobe on, which was weird, and those hairy pink slippers and Vincent had

said, “Gotta get out of bed before dinner Ma” as if she always did this, as if it didn’t bother him, and he walked into the kitchen to get something to eat. She hadn’t said a word. The TV yuk yukked an ad. The kitchen was spare, the way his mom likes it, nothing on the counters, dishes still in the sink, the way his mom likes it, no curtains on the window, the way his mom likes it, afternoon sun was cold on the sill. Vincent’s looked in the refrigerator and then there was the plodding of footsteps behind him and a hand reached over his shoulder and pulled him back and his mother slapped him hard, the sting on his cheek faded slow. She’s a big woman and she can do that, even though he’s bigger than she is and she slapped him again. “Can’t fuck the teachers y’ain’t old enough they throw you out of school.” Her mouth curled ugly, “I don’t want a town knowing my youngest can’t even go to school y’ain’t old enough.”

“How old were you?” he spat back. She raised her hand and he raised his. They stared at each other, he’s got her eyes: the small shape, the dank green color and now the raging in them. “Be like your brother,” she said, “Army may do good for you.” He won’t hit her but he won’t be hit again; he saw her eyes were red, wasn’t sure why. “Cause I don’t know anymore,” she said it firm, like it was the one thing she knew.

The old man would come home soon. “You’re gonna stay in this house the whole two weeks, until they let you back into school,” she said, plodding back to the TV. He left out the back door, through the garage. The garage wall was bare white and near empty, with just a shovel, a hoe, a broom and a gun each hanging by single big nail; he could hear her screaming something but the wall muffled it, the shovel lay against the wall still, he couldn’t be sure what she was saying.

He had made Ronnie pull over twice tonight, so he could call the teacher from pay phones. He'd just listen to the phone ring and ring and ring and now, in the backseat, grog drunk and swirling, he wondered where she was tonight and why she didn't answer the phone because usually she would.

He said, "Ronnie, I want us to go drive someplace, over by the mill." Al turned down the music. They could see Jaime coming out of the Safeway with a case of Coors under his arm. "Why?"

"Don't know no girls over by the mill, Vincey," said Al.

"Got something check on," he said.

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Darryl decided on the old neighborhood, and driving there, saw he needed gas. The Chevron was still there, at the corner of Main and Highway 47, which still looked less like a highway to anywhere than a road from nowhere. A dark brown Bronco, old and weathered, pulled up to the pump next to him and a woman got out.

She was a little heavy, and her hair was tied back, blonde and wispy. She had eyes he knew, and there was recognition in them. "Hey, you're up early," he said because he couldn't find her name.

"Hey," she said back, "You here for the reunion tonight?"

He nodded.

She shook her head, "I haven't missed one yet. When was the last one y'ere at?"

He shook his head, "Maybe the ten. How's it been?"

“Well I’m still here. I’m a rare one. Still work for the county.”

“How’s your sister?” He’d had a crush on the sister, every guy did, always on the sister.

“She had a store, had to close when Wal-Mart came. She’s in Reno. Got three kids now.” She smiled, “You still a cop?”

Darryl nodded.

“Kids?”

“Three. Oldest has a daughter, youngest is in high school.”

“Well,” she said, “That’s quite a spread.”

He grinned and she grinned, she was always a grinner in high school, a grinner even in her eyes. He clicks the gas spout into the pump, “Things happen when you’re not looking.”

She shakes her head, “Not around here.” And her grin is a little less, still she nods at him, “See you tonight,” and she pulls out onto Main Street slow.

He waited a beat, and followed her out, driving a few blocks, then turning right onto Mill Road, then down to Fenton Street.

He parked, decided to walk. Because of all the things you see when you walk, the things rendered invisible when you drive. He wanted to see if he could recognize any connective tissue between what had been and what was now. More a mood than a thought.

The streets of Dorisville are a loose grid, they break out of their straight lines to go around a creek, around a grove of trees, down a hill; some places, the roads wind this way and that. You can walk down a street past homes that date back to a time when

houses were built one at a time; the next block will have three similar homes, each new-looking, built as a mini subdivision. The roads are pockmarked all year round, done in by snow. No city budget to keep them up. He remembered how he learned to drive dodging potholes.

No sidewalks for blocks, then a sidewalk for a stretch. The trees are tall, some older than the houses.

He knew the sawmills had closed and that the logging trucks that used to drive Main Street—the loud throatclear of diesel engines downshifting, the roar of them: kids would be in the crosswalks and, hearing the trucks, they would sprint to the other side as if the big trucks wouldn't stop—he knew they were gone now.

Darryl knew the prison had gotten bigger. Maybe the prison was part of what was different now. A bigger prison meant more jobs, and Dorisville needed that work; it was set up for it. His dad had retired from corrections. It paid better than teaching but not as well as the mill in its heyday, but then nobody from the prison ever lost fingers to the job.

He knew the Paiutes had built a casino, on one of the bluffs out on the east side of town, up where he'd never been before.

Everything was still with morning, the birds were just starting up. Dorisville was different now, wasn't it? Bigger prisons meant more prisoners; prisoners' families have to live somewhere. Some of these houses sat in a kind of wreckage from the night before: small frame houses, tattered paint, beer bottles lining the sill of a window left open all night, no screen, overlooking the lawn unmowed for a couple of weeks and a couple of shiny tricycles and the pink dolls and the overturned lawn furniture. As if somebody went

to bed so hard they could barely pull the front door closed and maybe the kids were in bed, or not.

He didn't remember houses like this from when he lived here. Now there was more than one. A house disheveled by cars rusting, a refrigerator sitting in a pile of garbage on the side of the driveway, a big Confederate flag hanging from the roofline, defiant and fuck you and just say something to me.

He imagined he had met these people on the freeway, pulled over. These were the people you were careful with. Older cars driven badly, registration expired. They had come to Dorisville to live and to wait, wait for the old man to get out of prison, to visit as often as they could. Troubled people.

He turned down a dirt alley. He walked past garages and sheds, looking at the back of the homes. Not every house was chaos, not by a long shot. There could be a line of perfectly kept homes, the flowers in pots, the lawn just right, the polite metal fence, and then one home where everything was wrong. Dorisville lived side by side.

A grumble of truck broke the morning still. Big and domestic, a bright white pickup with the mirrors jut out, coming down the alley right at him. There were two people in front and he could see them watching him too careful. A woman was driving and she was not meeting his eye and the man looked nervous, his skin not white, maybe Paiute?

They drove by, a little dust following them. Darryl watched them turn right onto the street.

These little houses used to hold mill workers back in the days when the mills were new, and now they hold prisoner's families. The potholes are the same. These alleys are

the same. Main Street is the same, only now there are no logging trucks. Maybe it's all the same.

Up a couple of streets, the white pickup u-turned and parked facing him, the engine running. The passenger got out and yelled something loud in Spanish, it rang the morning air. He wondered who the passenger's yelling at and turned around to see three men walk out of a small, green house and stand on the porch. They talk to each other, then one yells out something in Spanish back. He can see that the passenger was no man, he's just a boy. The truck starts rolling towards him and the woman glances at him and she doesn't know him and he doesn't recognize her eyes and he thinks he sees a kind of relief but a kind of worry on her face. Her hair, once styled, hangs limp and brown. He knows to avert his eyes.

The boy smiles all white teeth at him as he walks up. Boy's handsome, the age of his son, big brown eyes and head of hair black and strawthick, "Up all *night*?" He pointed at the truck driving off, "she had me *good* time. I *drunk*, man, drunk *a lot*?" and he let out a low husked joy hoot that could wake up the neighborhood and the boy's smiling at him as if he were no stranger but a trusted friend, eyes familiar and happy just to be, and the boy keeps walking past and the three men walk out onto the street and circle the boy, each in old clothes and old, bright baseball hats, talking to him in Spanish quietly. The boy joy hoots again, gets pushed towards the house. His feet stumble, separate of each other, but he doesn't fall. Together, the men perimeter the boy and walk him into the house. He can hear the boy's loud voice, persisting.

The boy reminded him of his son, except his boy was sullen and inward without a girlfriend, his son lived in the same house all his life never to be lifted up and dropped

down lonely in a town in the mountains and that was alright, because you can end up with a crying baby daughter at home and a wife who seemed so sweet but who surprises you one night in a car, drunk and delirious and that will be that.

Maybe his son had learned the only things his father had to impart any more.

The heat of summer is still hours away. The teacher's house is two blocks up from here.

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Ronnie pulls the car up across from the house, just like Vincent told him to.

“Vincey, where are we man?” Ronnie turned down the music and turned around to look at him in the back seat. Ronnie had a big chew of tobacco in his lower lip, it bumped up just above his chin, tumorous. His eyes were sleepy with beer, his brown hair hung bangs on his forehead messy and Ronnie was only messy when he was drinking. “I dunno nobody on Fenton Street, who we lookin’ for?”

The teacher's house was dark and Vincent couldn't tell if she was gone or asleep but where would she go? The bedroom window was dark, and the kitchen light must be off, because when it was on, it lit up the driveway over on the left. And she sometimes puts her Camaro in the garage and she sometimes leaves it out on the driveway and he'd asked her about that because a car in the sunlight loses its paint, especially a dark burgundy like she had on her Camaro it was a sexy car, he had always thought a Camaro is sexy on a girl because they usually had station wagons or whatever the parents would give them, he didn't know a single girl who had bought her own car but the teacher had a

muscle Camaro that she had bought in LA when she was college and it was sexy burgundy, but she seemed to not know about sun and paint how do you come from LA and not know about sun and they had talked about it and she had said she would park it more in the garage, and the last two times it had been in the driveway and he kidded her once then she got mad but right now his heart hurt and his chest was caving in on itself slowly and he knew it was on his face and he didn't care because hiding any of this was impossible anymore and he got out of the car, his legs were rope floppy and he threw one ahead of the other and he was walking as if there were no bones in his legs. Her house was all he saw, and it was a moving thing and he moved towards it as best he could. He would walk the moving sidewalk and climb the moving stairs and ring the moving doorbell and suddenly he's there on her stoop, and he pushes the bell and it rings. And he rings and he rings and he can hear Al yelling something behind him and so he starts to yell at the teacher and the air is filled with yelling and he's yelling at her to come out and he's yelling at her to come out and he's yelling at her and then the light is on him, it's like a big headlight, shining on the whole house, it's like bright Christmas all over him now and he turns and the big white light is direct and almost blinds him but still, just behind it, he can see the twirling red light of a police car.

And he had been stopped by cops before, they all had and they knew what to do and he hoped they had the beer hidden because they knew to do that but everything was drunk now and what if they hadn't? And he could see the policeman standing outside the car now and he's saying something and Vincent scrunched his eyes as if that would help him hear better and it seemed to, "Son, I need you to come over here and get in the car." And Vincent let out a breath and tried to make himself walk normal to the car; he

couldn't be sure what his legs were doing, he tried to look at them casually as if he always walked watching his legs and they seemed to be behaving normal and the cop said, "Vincent, get in the car, son," and he looked at the cop and the cop is calling him *son* but the cop isn't old like a father. He's about the same age as the teacher.

Vincent turned back and looked at the house, and he could swear the kitchen light had just come on. He squinted his eyes, looked for the teacher; he kept looking for her even as he got into the police car.

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Darryl walked up the next two blocks and stood there in the alley, looking at the house where the teacher had lived.

Years ago, he would stand right here, his heart in his throat. Filled up with anticipation: lust and longing and the new of sex not yet explored nor expected. And the guilt of the married and knowing he couldn't be seen walking up the driveway. Discreetly entering through this alley in back.

After, she would talk about growing up in Los Angeles and how its formlessness as a city used to amaze her and now just angers her and how she won't go back for family or a man or the best job ever made. She would talk about being a teacher and how she wanted to touch lives but here in Dorisville she wasn't touching anybody. She didn't think she was a particularly good teacher. She would talk about how only a few of these kids were as eager as she to get out of this town to something better, bigger, newer, other. The rest of them were going to die here and that death was already underway and had been since they were born and there wasn't anything she could do, because we all die at

the end and some of us start on it sooner than we should. But she wasn't going to be one of those and what was unsaid was maybe that's why she was fucking a married man, a cop at that, fucking him because she could and she liked it and so she took it, saying "you like it too and we can agree on that" and she even let him talk about how hard it was at home, she didn't seem to mind hearing about his wife the pregnant woman who cried a lot with the hormones and all and the colicky baby who stayed up all night in that way of baby misery, unexplainable and utterly so.

Still, he remembered that she hadn't seem to care what he thought, where he was going. About his future, or lack thereof. Never asked about dreams or aspirations, and never encouraged him to do anything but come over to her house and stay for as long as he could before going back out to patrol this town that stayed quiet most all night. No, she didn't love him ever, he thought. He had only doubted that for a brief while, the day he learned she had taken up with the teenager. He had thought that had been her kind of revenge, her way of telling him that he should have stayed with her instead of ending it after several months and going back to his crying house where he would keep his eyes down from then on.

Maybe it was the way she had called him, after it had all crashed. Called to say goodbye, called to say she was fired for having sex with a student, a boy named Vincent. She said it must have been that woman across the street, a churchgoer who always bristled at her, she must have known and then called the school, "I figure she just couldn't keep turning away" was how she put it. She said she hoped they wouldn't prosecute her and kidded him that maybe he could pull some strings for her in that regard. He didn't say anything to that. She sighed, and said she came to Dorisville, and

that she guessed she got what she came for, or at least what she deserved, “It doesn’t matter,” she said, “it’s something I did and now it’s on me. Always like that, you know?” And that was the last Darryl heard from her.

Except that he had sat parked in this alley for two hours that night, hoping he could see her again. And then that yellow Impala rolled up to her house, and out stumbled a kid, a big kid, ringing the doorbell and yelling. And he had looked at Vincent, having wondered about him all that strange afternoon; seeing him now, after midnight, near fall down drunk... Vincent was a surprise. He knew the name, as Vincent was one for trouble and kids that way make a name for themselves in the Dorisville police station, but he hadn’t pictured him as a big kid, as a bit of a lug.

Darryl had put him in his police car, stumbling drunk. He had asked Vincent what he was doing, and the answer was undecipherable. He waited to let the silence work on the boy, but it didn’t, really. The boy just sat there, and he couldn’t tell if the boy was sad or if he was sad and he was putting it on the boy. The snow, the winter chill, the twirl of red light on houses, the police radio quiet, the low hum of engine. He couldn’t separate his heartbreak from the boy’s, couldn’t decide who had taken the better path, the boy banging the doorbell or him sitting there in an alley, stealthy and watching. Couldn’t tell who would come out of this better, him at home with a family and things he had to do and knowing this about himself, or this boy with a tale to tell of loving an older woman before he was old enough to draft or vote or drink in his own house.

“Vincent,” he had said to him. “I know what happened with the teacher. And she’s going to have to leave town now.” And the boy just looked at him, as if that was the only thing he could clearly understand. “Howyaknow?” the boy asked. And he had just

shaken his head and said, “Small town, Vincent. Everything’s known around here. Stay here, I’m taking you home.”

And he had gone back to the yellow Impala, gotten the other two boys. One of them—he remembered his name was Ronnie—bent and puked outside the police car, and stared up at him like a hunted deer, pleading “please don’t tell my parents I was drunk, can you do that, my dad will pound me good” and he had said “I won’t call this in if you just go home, go to sleep and forget I gave you a ride home. Swear it?” and both boys swore to it and he put them in the back of his police car next to Vincent who was passed out.

He didn’t do what he was supposed to do which was call the parents so they would be waiting and he didn’t do what he was supposed to do which was report the incident to the station; all he did was drop the boys off at their parents’ houses which lead to everything that would come at him later. He didn’t do what he was supposed to do, not because of Ronnie and his old man, but because he had slept with the teacher and longed for the teacher and so did Vincent and he just couldn’t bring himself to put any more on the head of this sotten boy and so he dropped Vincent off last, leaving him in the driveway with an older pickup, a dent red truck, saying, “Vincent, go in and sleep and all of this will be over tomorrow but the hangover,” and the boy stumbled out and into the house. And then he had driven off into the night to finish his shift, his heart heavy, wondering if the teacher would go back to Los Angeles where the city doesn’t have a Main Street and the roads aren’t potholed, where the neighborhoods don’t blur but more resemble different countries where you can lose yourself and re-create yourself a few miles away from where you started.

But twenty minutes later Darryl saw that red truck with one rear light veering around Main Street, as if there were no yellow line keeping a kind of order to the road, as if the traffic didn't go two ways even at one in the morning. And he saw the big frame of Vincent in the back window of the truck and he knew where Vincent was going and he had to get him off the road because he was dangerous and drunk and young and so he put his red light on, and that was when Vincent put his foot to the floor and the truck picked up speed. It would hit 85 miles an hour on Main Street and, in trying to turn left on Fenton Street, Vincent lost control or maybe just didn't care and banged over the sidewalk and slammed into the concrete wall of Ross Wilson's hardware store three blocks away from the home of the teacher and now, years later, standing there looking at her house, he wondered if the teacher maybe loved Vincent after all, that maybe she had helped him escape this town one night at a time and that that was what Vincent had needed from her, he just hadn't gotten enough so he could pull it off by himself. And maybe she was wrong, he thought. Maybe she was a good teacher therefore.

As for him, he realized that she hadn't given him anything but this; the reunion he had driven hours for, the one to which no invitations are issued and no one goes dancing.