

Buying a House  
Personal Essay

As Chad the Realtor slows his car onto quiet Lockwood Avenue, he says, *This is 626 Lockwood. Tell me what you think.*

Chad and I are searching for my first home to buy. I’ve just gotten a new job as tenure-track professor in western Michigan. I guess I’m ready to settle down. I guess after a life moving town to town, fifteen states in the last twenty years, it’s time to plant roots.

We’re on the fifth house today. The first house we checked had a huge front porch and sat in an upscale neighborhood. *You can make fifty grand off this house*, Chad said. Inside, the house had a gutted kitchen, sagging floors, ruined sheetrock. *A fixer-upper, for sure*, Chad said. I thought of the time needed to put the house back together, how I’d rather write or travel than drywall and spackle. We moved on.

The second and third houses had moldy basements and cracked foundations. Chad just nodded back toward the front door. We left without seeing the upstairs. The fourth house had such a cute kitchen that it felt as if I’d need a trophy wife and a cooing baby before I moved into the house to live happily ever after...

As we stop at this Lockwood house, the first thing (the very first thing) I notice is the front porch. Chad must know what I’m thinking because he says, *Look at that screened-in porch.* I’m a sucker for sitting outside. For watching the world go by.

I walk onto the porch, turn around, listen to the screen door slap shut, and stare back at the quiet street. A basketball net on rollers. A beat-up pickup. A tricycle tipped over on the sidewalk. Chalk drawings in front of a neighbor’s house.

I imagine early autumn, my feet up on a table, a Pabst. Maybe grading student essays in the afternoon sun or reading a book of poetry. (Hugo. No, no, Wright! *Suddenly I realize / that if I stepped out of my body I would break / into blossom.*) I think, *This could be my street. My porch. Mine.*

Then the scene changes and I am no longer reading James Wright. Instead, my next lover (a girl I have yet to meet—but I can see her perfectly—rounded cheeks, face in a grin, thin lips, long brown hair, curly) is standing on this porch. It is our first date (a date we laughed through, at a restaurant, later the long walk home) and it is latest dusk—nearing dark. Lockwood is quiet. The air cold (nearly freezing). The air still. Standing on my porch, I lean toward her.

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Chad unlocks the front door and holds it open. I walk into a tiny foyer as Chad says, *Nineteen hundred square feet. A house to grow into.*

I barely hear Chad. Instead I see my father visiting from three states away. As he walks in the front door, I reach for his leather coat. As I see my dad’s future visit, I think about how most of my adult years, I’ve felt like I wasn’t living up to what my father expected. I felt that I wasn’t being successful (though he’s always been supportive of every one of my harebrained ideas). But I have always felt that, sure, I was skiing and traveling and even earning my terminal degree, but I wasn’t successful in the ways that I thought he’d care about. But now I’m tenure-track. A real job. A real life.

Standing in the foyer, I almost mumble those words, *A real job. A real life.*

I imagine my father talking to his friends over glasses of merlot, saying, *My youngest son, Sean—remember him?—just got a tenure track job in Michigan. Teaching creative writing. He’s buying a house in Michigan. An old Craftsman.*

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As Chad leads me into an older kitchen, he says, *This kitchen needs work, but it’s an easy redo.*

I think about how I’ll never redo the kitchen. No stainless steel appliances. No tile floors. No fresh paint on the walls. I’ll just put a wooden table—old and worn and scratched and found in a house I rented in Idaho—in the corner. I’ll buy two thrift store chairs.

As Chad points out the dishwasher, the gas stove, the cabinets, I find myself in the future—god, this house has a way of transporting me—to nights eating alone, crockpots simmering during long weekends, the smell of stew blanketing the house. I’ll read a magazine while eating a quick meal. The second chair at the table unmoved for weeks (months?)—waiting. Waiting for that next lover (Or has she already left?). I’ll wash the few dishes, leaving the kitchen as clean as I find it today.

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In the master bedroom (whenever I hear *master bedroom* I imagine a canopied bed, pink walls, doilies on the bureaus), Chad pulls up the blinds. The afternoon sun blinds me with its dazzling light, illuminating the dust in the air. I twist from the sun as Chad moves to the living room—giving me time. Time. I need time.

With the bedroom empty of furniture, I turn a slow circle, arms outstretched—touching empty space. Empty space. *Empty space.*

I imagine this bedroom after I move in. A single bed with poorly fitted sheets (They come undone every night I toss and turn.), a nightstand for my book of the week (a mediocre collection of essays, later a novel by Abbey), a dresser full of wrinkled clothes. What else? What else? My cell phone. What else? House keys. What else? Sneakers and dress shirts in the closet. What else? Nothing. What else? Nothing. A room to fill with nothing.

But maybe in a year (or in two, or three), my next lover—the one I kissed on the porch—will move in. In another year, she’ll become my wife. And I question (alone in this bedroom) how is it possible that after twenty years of not getting married (dodging three marriage proposals) that now I can no longer stop thinking about marriage. It’s not that I want to get married. It’s just friends married. Family expecting me married. My mother asking, *Have you met any nice girls in Michigan.*

*Not yet, Mom, not yet.*

I think to my future lover and how once she becomes my wife, the small bed will be replaced with a queen. She will hang new blinds on these windows (though we’ll never shut them—let the sun flood us). The old furniture moved out, donated. And my keys, they’ll end up in a clay dish that my wife will buy at a flea market (just for my keys). When I toss my keys in the dish, the clanging will remind me of something—though I’ll never figure out exactly what.

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In the living room, I run my hands along hardwood floors. Chad says, *Oak. I have the same wood in my house.*

In five years (Or ten, fifteen?) if I buy this house (this very house) will these floors only feel the slow steps of my feet quietly moving room to room? The lonely steps of me coming home day after day from work at the university? Or will—some distant year—there be the patter of a child (A daughter? A little girl in pigtails?) running over these slick floors (her giggles bouncing off the walls)?

I’ve never wanted kids (or a wife, or even in these last few years a serious girlfriend). But now I’m studying the creaking of these floors (like an Indian in a 1960s Western with his ear pressed to the tracks listening for the sound of a coming train) for the pattering of a child’s steps.

I don't want 4 a.m. wakeups. I don't want to change diapers. I don't want to have her burp on my shoulder. I don't want to teach her to throw (Okay, okay, maybe I want to teach her to throw—first an awkward sidearm throw, later a laser. *Good job, girl!*).

But in this living room—warm with its yellow walls—it feels that if I buy this house (this very house, this Lockwood house), I'll need a child. Not just because I'll own the house, but because if I own the house, this house will need a child (Is this just me telling lies? Trying to pretend it's not my wants?)—her voice bouncing off walls, her cries from her bedroom calling to me—to me (only me) during middle of her nights (she has such cute nightmares). *Monsters in the closet. A dream where she couldn't find me.*

As I envision all of this, I cannot find her mother. I cannot find her at all. I grow desperate. Where is she? The yellow walls blind me, it seems.

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Chad asks, *Do you need more time?*

I want to say, *Just a minute. One minute* (though I mean a lifetime or two).

I want to say, *I can see all the world.*

I want to say, *Hold me. Someone. Please?*

I want to say, *Every story is true and every story is a lie.*

Instead I nod. Chad moves to the front porch. I hear the clicking of the door.

In the living room, I stare at the ceiling until it is forty years into the future (the mortgage paid off, the water heater and furnace twice replaced). I am seventy-seven with a beard of gray. I lie in the queen bed as a chest-rattling cough runs through my body. Then another. In a hallucination, I call to that future wife, wanting her by my side (holding my hand through this)—never realizing (this is for the best, the best) that she's been gone years and years (maybe exactly

a thousand years). The divorce papers in a filing cabinet in the basement (mildewed, brittle). Or did she die young, cancer? *Such a sad story*, the neighbors will whisper as they watch my daughter play on the sidewalk.

When the coughing subsides, a live-in nurse (or is it my daughter, home for her father) feeds me ice chips, takes my pulse. When the days (now the minutes) are done and it is latest dusk (the same time of day as when I first kissed that girl), I use my last energy to lift my arm. The nurse, the girl?, hurriedly stands from her seat. She rests her hand on my forehead, but she struggles to understand this final moment. Am I calling to her? Am I pointing to a western sun?

This house echoes, *Stay down, champion, stay down.*

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As Chad locks the front door tight—

—as the sun sets over 626 Lockwood, as the trees stand bare (still earliest spring), as the grass lays down (from long winter), as a grandfather wheels in his grandson’s basketball net, as three children play army (*Bang, bang, bang, you’re dead.*)—

—I stand on the front porch and think, *I can own this house. I can own it all.*

Just Like This

Personal Essay

And this is how tonight should have gone:

Bones and I walk from my grandmother’s cabin to the Belvidere Bridge. Once there, we rest our arms on the metal railing and watch shad swim upriver in the almost-moonlight—on their way to spawn and die. Bones (swaying from splitting three bottles of wine with me) points out the shad.

There, she says.

Yes, I say.

There.

Yes.

Then we’re walking again and talking about these last three weeks (my vacation home from Idaho) and this being my last night in Pennsylvania. As we walk, our fingers dance the bridge railing, breaking spider webs, pulling leaves from sycamore trees, tapping storefront windows of Belvidere’s almost empty downtown. Then we are outside Riverview Bar, but, really, has anyone ever called Riverview anything except George’s (after the owner)? So that’s what we’ll call it from now on—George’s.

Inside, like usual, there is only George the Owner, Bones, and me. Bones and I drink Yuengling beers at the bar, one after the other because, beside Pabst, Yuengling has always been our beer. And because we need alcohol to make it through this final night.

After drinking three beers each and then doing a shot of bourbon with George the Owner, Bones and I retreat to the back of the bar to play quoits, a horseshoes like game. Bones is drunk but all her throws hit the slate board time and again because she lives in the slow (sad) hills of eastern Pennsylvania, where this game was created.

I throw my quoits all over the bar because I'm that bottle and a half of wine into the night, and now three Yuenglings and that shot of bourbon. Or maybe my throws are all over the bar because I now live in Idaho and haven't played quoits in years. Or maybe because I can only concentrate on Bones, how much thinner she is now than she was in high school (those seventeen years ago), how she now looks like a woman (is a woman)—with short dyed-blond hair replacing hairsprayed brown bangs, crow's feet in the corners of her steel-blue eyes.

And she is so much more beautiful then when she was prom queen.

After I lose two games in a row, Bones (with thin nicotine fingers) orders two more Yuenglings and slides quarters into the jukebox. She chooses, let's say, Cash and Jennings and maybe Strait. While she's picking up the beers, I add Skynyrd and Bad Company.

Bones's songs play while George the Owner watches the Jersey news with the volume low. He is wondering why he opened a bar in Belvidere and thinking how there are never good nights anymore. If I knew his thoughts, I'd sidle up to the bar and tell George the Owner (nearly yelling at him, how can he not see) that he is so, so wrong, how all we have are these nights of perfection (which is an absolute lie since I'm writing an entire essay about the way love should have gone).

Bones's songs end and “Tuesday's Gone” begins (*Train roll on, on down the line*). Sad southern rock fills every corner of this dive bar—the humming refrigerators, the unmopped bathrooms, the long wooden bar, the empty back booths, the framed photos of '50s actors and



actresses. *Means I'm leaving my woman at home.* The song makes me think about how I've been asking Bones (these past weeks) to move to Idaho, to try our hand at love one more time. (*One more time*, I say, then I say it again.)

But tonight neither of us dares to mention Bones moving to Idaho. Rather, we talk about me teaching at the University of Idaho and Idaho's Snake River, which in any telling is never as beautiful as the slack-watered Delaware that flows in front of my grandmother's cabin. We even talk about the six day canoe trip Bones and I just took.

Bones joined me for a hundred miles as I canoed from the Delaware's headwaters in New York to the brackish waters of Trenton. A trip where some nights Bones and I slept in separate tents (as if after seventeen years of dating and breaking that everything broken was broken and everything dead was dead). Other nights, one tent remained empty as we wrapped ourselves around the other like river flowing around a rock (only the smallest eddies between us). We'd wake at dawn and swim moon-white and naked in the warm Delaware.

Bones and I can talk about my university, the Snake, and this canoe trip, but we can never say a word (not a word) about Bones moving to Idaho because we're afraid that if she decides against it tonight, then tonight will be ruined. And we need tonight. God, we need this tonight.

Or maybe we don't talk about Bones moving to Idaho because our history runs so deep that it seeps even into these altered memories of how tonight should have gone. After seventeen years, maybe we realize we can't make this love work for more than a few weeks.

Or maybe I realize that Bones drinks so much that I feel like the sober one.

Or maybe she remembers those Colorado nights (my anger).

Or maybe we remember high school and college (our fights, those years of silence).

Or maybe (just maybe) we don't talk about her moving because it's easier just to dream.

Skynyrd ends with *She had to be free, and somehow I have to carry on*. A long pause lingers with the stale smoke, the stained ceiling tiles, the 60 watt bulbs that cast an ethereal light throughout the bar. In the real telling, come tomorrow I don't know which one of us will be free or which one will need to carry on (or if life can ever be as simple as a Skynyrd song). But in this telling (this one right here), “Tuesday's Gone” is no longer for or about us. The next song is.

Bad Company's “Feel Like Making Love” begins with that aluminum strum of guitar. I know the song is cheesy. So does Bones. Still, she hears the intro, cocks her head, says, Did you put this song on?

Yes, I reply (I try to be nonchalant).

Bones pauses, pulls a Marlboro Light to her lips, lights it. It's all so slow. Her movements. The beginning of the song. The cigarette turning to flame. The slowness gives me time to think about how I hate cigarettes, how I hate the smell of them. How I hate what they do to her lungs. Always have. Always will. But I have also always loved the taste of ash in Bones' mouth. Always loved her taste of ash.

Bones smiles thinly (maybe sadly), as if she's weighed down by memories, and asks, Do you remember that this was our high school song?

And all of this (all of it) is true.

Yes, I say (thinking about seventeen long years ago). I think about Bones and me passing notes at school (hers folded into tight little shapes), me giving her my wrestling jacket, her buying two jigsaw puzzle necklaces that when put together say *True Love*. My half sits in my mother's attic in a small box. Bones' half, maybe she threw it away. But in this telling, Bones keeps her necklace in her top dresser drawer besides her socks. The random days when she notices it, she runs her fingers over the cheap gold coating, untangles the knotted chain.

Bones ashes her cigarette and takes my hand softly in hers.. We are drunk and smiling and Bad Company is singing our song, *When I think about you, I think about love*.

I start to think about all the times that Bones and I have broken up—the first where I broke up with her in high school (she dry heaved from sadness), the second when she broke up with me (I moved to Colorado), the times I watched her drive from my grandmother’s cabin (her taillights not the only things disappearing), the angry fights, the slow last kisses—until we are here and we are now at George’s and we might be dating or we might not be dating but I’ve invited Bones to Idaho and she hasn’t said no so we must be doing something. *Feel like making love*.

What’s funny is that in high school when we dated, Bones and I were both virgins. And I’ve never thought about this, but I can’t remember when we first made love. If I’m going to create this night the way it should have been, then I need to be at George’s thinking about our first love-making together: Thirteen years ago, I am twenty-one. Bones nineteen. We’ve already broken up twice. Had sex with others (though we both wish we had waited for the other). We are so young and haven’t talked in a year, but I call her and we (of course) meet to canoe the Delaware. I am amazed with how beautiful she looks. Brown hair in a ponytail. Her face thinner. For the first time ever she smokes a cigarette in front of me. We paddle, float, talk for an hour—it is night and a thin fog hovers just off the river. Then we return to my grandmother’s cabin where we drink Pabsts until one of us, her, yes, her, says, There are some things even the river cannot change. I ask, Yes? She says, Yes. I repeat, Yes? She says, Shut up, says, Kiss me.

Yes, that’s the way our first love-making should have gone.

Back in this tonight, Bad Company sings, *Darling, if I live without you, I live without love* so gently as Bones runs her fingers over my calluses, feeling every one. She wraps her hand

around my ring finger and pulls into her mouth—I don’t mind. She closes her mouth as if she’s going to suck on my finger. I feel her tongue, rough and tickling. This is just what I want; this is just how it went. Bones presses down her teeth and begins to bite. It hurts (just like we have hurt each other for all our years together). Like those years, I close my eyes, try not to jerk.

And I want to change this biting to a soft kiss, a long, sensual sucking. But I cannot. I cannot. Whether or not I like the biting, it is Bones. It is me. It is us.

And thank god I’m drunk because Bones is biting as hard as Bad Company’s pounding guitar (her teeth digging into my flesh). Bad Company almost screaming, *Feel like making love*. My eyes shut. Pounding guitar. Bones still biting.

And we cannot change a thing. Not one goddamn thing.

Bad Company almost screaming, *Feel like making love*. Bones biting. Me squeezing the table with my other hand. Stiffening my legs. Gritting my teeth.

Then the guitar quiets. The singer hushes. Bones slows her biting, begins running her tongue over my finger. She pulls my finger from her mouth.

And Bones, she is golden (golden) with barlight and beer.

I pull a slug from my Yuengling and look at my finger; it’s bleeding. In one week (and in two), I’ll rub the scab to remember what love felt like. Within a month, I’ll try to remember which finger it was (This one? That one?). When I return to the cabin a year from now, I’ll wonder so many things.

I smile and show Bones the blood. Her face drops, and she looks lost. She begins to bite her finger. And me, I love the pain Bones gives me; it reminds me that we’re (maybe tonight and all those seventeen years before) in something that someone (maybe me) would call love. But the pain Bones causes herself—that abortion, those drugs—or the pain I cause her—the break ups,

those drunk fights—that I cannot handle. I grab her wrist gently, say softly, Bones, say Please, say, Stop.

And why, if I am re-creating this night, don't I just make everything beautiful? No drunkenness. No biting. No silences about her moving to Idaho or staying in Pennsylvania. Just she and me on the Delaware in a canoe (or maybe again skinny dipping) talking about love and how it lasts forever (for goddamn ever). About how she needs to pack up this and give away that. Say goodbye to him and get a last drink with her. How she'll join me within the month. Even before autumn. Before the leaves are on the ground. I can wait that long. I can wait.

But I can't re-create this night in a way that is all full of perfection because some clothes fit and others don't. In this story (our story), biting and drunkenness and silence (and even a long, slow destruction) are old jeans worn every day by the two of us.

As our song ends, Bones pulls her finger from her mouth. And since our Yuenglings are shot (and scattered across the table), my finger's bleeding, and we're staggering drunk, we do the only thing we know to do—we buy a sixer of Pabst. In the real night, it was actually Busch Light, but fuck Busch. I only bought Busch because George the Owner was out of Pabst.

With our sixer, Bones and I sway into our night and cross the Belvidere Bridge. Tonight, this world is perfectly still. Perfectly. Still. The shad no longer run. The midnight bullfrogs—even they are quiet.

Once back at the cabin, Bones and I sit at the top of the shale riverbank. Below, the river runs wide and black. Bones brushes hair from her face and pulls my finger to her mouth. I grit my teeth, ready. But she kisses my cut once, twice. She then leans into my chest, and I think she's going to snuggle (and cannot think of one more beautiful thing) but she begins biting

(again). This time through the collar of the Hot Dog Johnnies tee shirt that my mother bought me today. Once through, Bones rips the shirt, top to bottom. Pull-tear, pull-tear, pull-tear.

And all of this, it is true, true—true.

It’s, what, maybe 3 a.m. and I’m trashed, so who knows what I say, probably, What the fuck? Or maybe I sing lyrics from my new favorite song—I’m gonna to walk around and drink some more. I’m gonna to walk around and drink some more—as I walk along the river’s edge. But in this telling (in this singular telling), I look at the river and say, Yes.

Bones stares at the water (glass-like and perfect) and she says, Yes.

After seventeen years, that is all we need. Bones removes her cutoffs, underwear, flannel, black tee shirt. She hasn’t worn a bra in years. Her shoulders wide, waist thin, small bone-white breasts.

I remove my pants and boxers. Bones (so gently) removes my torn tee, folds it, and places it on a flat rock. She (so gently) rubs my beard (speckled with a gray that she’s never seen until this trip home).

Then Bones and I descend the steep bank past honeysuckle and milkweed (and untended and hungry weeds) to the river for the last time before I leave for Idaho in six hours.

The beach is rough with shale; the beach is smooth with soft sand.

The Delaware (warm still, not yet autumn) laps at our toes.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows our ankles.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows our knees.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows our hips.

(We, so gently, begin to disappear.)

Once the water is to our chests, we swim. And as we swim, Bones is a drunken angel (a fucking angel) and she leans tight against my chest as she and I swim into the river (into the night), above silent riverstones staring up at us.

All of this is true, all true—

Even the lies and the mis-remembered parts. Even the drunk ramblings and the myths.  
Even the dreams and all our desperate hopes.

—Even these are true.

And when it’s some middle of the night hour and I’m this drunk and swimming, I always dream of sinking (so gently) to the muddy bottom where I love the black quiet. I imagine never coming up (surrounded forever by a calmness I’ve never felt above water).

But when I surface, Bones is there (always treading water).

And, this, this is how our tonight should have gone. Just like this.

Just like this—Bones and I scissor-kick,

and hold one another as a swan-white moon breaks

the leaves of an elm.

I whisper, Yes?

With the river stock-still, Bones knows what I mean.

(Just what I mean.)

Yes, she whispers. Just like this.

Even tomorrow, when you’re sober?

Though we’re swimming, the river is unbroken.

Yes. A whisper.

Like this.

Our kicks, not a ripple.

This.

Yes.

Bones and I stop treading water, stop scissor-kicking, and still holding

each other, we begin

to sink (so gently). Shoulders. Necks. Chins.

Before our lips break the waterline I say, I want

to kiss you.

Bones whispers, How do you read my mind?

In this telling, Yes.

The river stops

its flow to the Atlantic.

The elms, maples, sycamores—

bend around us in a sweet embrace. The night geese offer not a single honk.

The moon, full and fat, crests

the Kittatinny hills and showers us

in a bone-white light

as Bones and I sink—

our lips, noses, foreheads—into the warmth

of the Delaware, to that dark, silty riverbottom.

Just like this.

Yes.

Just like this.



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And this is how love goes.

Idaho winters long and lonely. Rain for days then a midnight snow that melts come morning. Through this slop and wetness, I bike to the university for another day of teaching.

And Bones, she's in Pennsylvania, pounding nails for a living. She sleeps in a new apartment in a new bed that I've never slept in but other lovers have. And she refuses my phone calls. Only returning them when she's drunk and can tell me heart stories that make me think of water (about how all of this should have gone). Her sober days, I don't hear from her for months, though I leave messages, sometimes my own drunken ramblings (I say, Please move to Idaho. Then I say it again.). She never even visits.

I write this as if all of this failure is a shock. As if I expected something else. But in every telling (every fucking telling) I knew this is how it had to end. After seventeen years, I'm still not sure why (it always has to end this way or how I know it will end this way).

But then one morning (maybe this very morning, today, just at dawn, after another night I could not sleep), I realize our night skinny dipping in the Delaware was seven months ago (or thirteen months ago or now nineteen). Still, every bitter dawn, I think of how she's not here. And when I date other women—and that never works—I think of Bones. When I drink a Pabst or hear someone talk of Yuenglings, I think of Bones.

I think of Bones. Bones. I think of Bones.

And this morning and yesterday and last month and five months ago, I realize that I need to put this all away. I need to quit thinking of what should have been (or how it could have gone). And with a wipe of the hands, I do. And just like that (just like that), I'm over her. She's

gone, and I am absolutely fucking fine and absolutely fucking free and my smile is as wide as the sun (or so I tell myself time and again).

Still, this morning I bike to campus (bone chilled) past the bar I drank at last night—John’s Alley—and think how it’s never had any other name. And as I peddle, I think of how I want to drink a beer and not wish it were a Yuengling. How I want to look at these fingers and not summon scars. How I want to swim and not sink alone to the quiet darkness of a riverbed at midnight. And when I break the surface of these thoughts, Bones is not there (she’s never treading water). It’s just me (just me) and I’m still pedaling my way to school. And love, you know—god, sometimes you just need to dream. Sometimes you just need to forget. Sometimes you just need to dream.

And this is how love goes.

Just like this.

The Last Good Kiss

Personal Essay

The girl’s fifteen dollar fishing rod drags a line through the Delaware River, which runs placid but where her tippet drags through river-water.

The girl (twenty-one years old and beautiful) and the boy (just twenty-three) sit in an old aluminum canoe (dented and welded from an old wreck in the rapids).

The boy and girl ring around a hundred foot long eddy—Cool Eddy.

The dented canoe spirals up and down the edge of the river, moving them in lazy circles.

With the girl’s rod against the bow, the girl stares downriver—past McElany Island, the Belvidere Bridge, Oliver’s Beach—at Foul Rift (where whitecaps cascade over whitecaps).

Slowly, the river’s current grabs (gently, as if with soft fingers) the girl’s line, and then the bow of the canoe, pulling the canoe from Cool Eddy.

With a stroke of his paddle, the boy (weed thin and still putting on weight) turns the canoe back into Cool Eddy, and they eddy again (circling loose-skinned sycamores, the steep shale bank, a broken lawn chair where summer fisherman sometimes sit).

The girl (thin hipped, wide shouldered) runs her fingers along the gunwales, turns her head (her hair brown and wavy) until she stares upriver (at a slow-sloping hill, faraway cornfields, those herons’ rooks).

She squints her eyes from that thin sun breaking a sky filled with diffuse cirrus clouds.

The girl stares off as an April breeze turns the canoe sideways.

Then the girl starts speaking.

The girl asks, *If I owned that cabin upriver, would you marry me?*

The question is not asked quietly, still, somehow, this question almost floats away.

The girl’s reed-like fingers trace the rough welds that seal a dozen leaks (from when the boy and his cousin rolled this canoe in Foul Rift so many years ago—god, almost ten).

The boy is completely unprepared for this question.

*If I owned that cabin.*

This is what it is like when the world stops.

From the shore, leafless, skeletal elms cast long shadows across the bow of the canoe.

Last winter’s flood-trash clings to the banks (a bald tire, a bloated muskee, a dock torn in half).

The boy (stunned—and still stunned twelve years later) say nothing, not a word.

It’s as if he lets the breeze carry the question away.

But so simply, he could say, *Yes*—he could.

All he needs to do is open his mouth and let the words (like birds) flutter out.

If the boy did say *Yes*, then at night, the girl would smoke her Marlboro Lights on the cabin porch before coming inside to a house warmed by their own trees.

The boy would bring in hardwood (birch, elm, maple) to feed the woodstove.

Sunday mornings (those beautiful Sunday mornings) the girl would oil paint the Delaware while the boy sits on the deck and writes poems about being stuck in eddies.

They could do this; they could.

Before the boy answers (or even understands how to answer) the girl, the current again tugs the canoe, the boy, the girl (everything, everything) from the eddy toward that downriver rift.

The boy pulls the paddle from the water and rests it on his thighs.

Though the boy does not say a single word, he thinks, *Let the current take us.*

Droplets of river-water fall from the paddle onto the boy's legs.

Droplets fall into the river (breaking the boy's view of smooth rocks staring up from the riverbed).

*Let the current take us.*

It's all so simple—just open up your mouth and say, *Yes.*

Say it, please—please.

The boy runs his hands across the grains of the wooden paddle (so smooth) and stares at the light wood glued to dark wood.

The girl brushes sand from her thin ankles as the canoe leaves Cool Eddy.

The boy and the girl in the damaged canoe float toward the center of the Delaware, pulled downriver—heading toward the Atlantic a hundred and fifty miles away.

The girl silently reels in her line as they near McElany Island and the Belvidere Bridge.

A hundred or two hundred yards away, the rapids of Foul Rift break.

The boy and the girl hear the waves (a sound of almost violent sadness).

The boy remembers when he wrapped this canoe around a rock, god, over a decade ago.

But now the boy imagines that instead of being with his cousin, he was with the girl.

The boy imagines he and the girl flipping the canoe then swimming for their lives—  
clinging to moss-covered rocks.

Fingertips slipping, river-water on her lips, a half mile of rapids ahead.

Upriver, a lone heron jumps from the shore (its wings breaking the water) as it flies toward a sun  
that bleeds through thin spring clouds.

The heron, it moves on its way (like water).

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It is the dark hours of winter where you now live (twenty-five hundred miles from that girl you  
call Bones).

Though you speak to Bones (at most) once a year, you know that she’s been laid off from  
the candy factory, living with a new lover in that little town you once called home.

As for you—you are thirty-five and single, teaching at some western university.

You are unsure about so much.

Where you live, the sun has set so many hours ago, so you put down the western poet you’ve  
been reading and prepare for bed.

In the emptiness of this apartment (with its worn out white walls), you circle back and back to one of the lines read tonight: *The last good kiss you had was years ago.*

The math is easy: 1996 to 2008. Twelve years.

God, to be twenty-three years old again.

To be twenty-three forever.

Walking through empty rooms (the empty, empty rooms of your apartment), you shut off the lights one by one (by one by one).

The darkness chases you from room to empty room.

This house is sad like you are sad.

Brushing your teeth, you think about the powerful (and haunting) nature of memories.

Then you turn the heat down to 55 and wonder how to create some meaning from that river day so that the last twelve years haven't been a waste.

You hold the line in your hand (it sits in your palm)—*the last good kiss you had was years ago*, while lying to yourself, *It's better this way—it never could have worked.*

As you lock your front door, you remember another quote from tonight's book.

The author, a long dead western poet, wrote, *Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

Who would you say those words to (The girl? The river? The boy?)?

You drop the blinds (separating darkness from darkness) and tell yourself that there were better fits (though tonight you cannot think of a single girl better).

Tonight (just like last night and tomorrow night) there are no other girls, no other lovers that compare.

But you tell yourself that Bones was just some childhood love and that memories always (always, always) ache more than the moment, especially when it is a winter with cold nights and long days of darkness and you’ve got all the time in the winter to remember and remember.

You (by now and after all these years) understand all about the inner workings of lies.

With nothing left to do (no lights to turn off, your teeth brushed, the door locked) you crawl into bed (the sheets so February chilled).

As you lay in bed (awake), you speak to yourself (just to hear a noise in your apartment), *Listen, Prentiss ...* before you trail off.

Your words, these words, they should not be spoken out loud (and never alone at night).



Tonight (the Big Dipper, You Leaving)

Personal Essay

Tonight, the steps leading from the cabin’s porch to the driveway groan one at a time.

One at a time, these eleven steps make such mournful sounds.

The bottom step sings the saddest—then quiet footsteps on a gravel path.

Tonight, the river runs slow (and black)—a rowboat sighs against the shore.

Creaking oars in rusted oarlocks.

Tonight, a car (say a Toyota) sits cool-engined on the shoulder of River Road.

The car door yawns open (a forever pause)—a metallic ring as it slams.

This world now quieter (far emptier).

Tonight, cicadas, crickets, and bullfrogs fill whatever silence would exist without them.

Intermittent music to this nighttime leaving song.

Tonight in the heavens, the Big Dipper—without the hint of sound—tips over the cabin.

It ladles out a million stars (constellations exposing all the myths of love).

Tonight, the car (say a 1988 Corolla) turns over—sputtering, (finally) catching.

This November, the car will throw a rod, be pushed against a farmer’s stonerow.

That wouldn’t happen until later—after everything has changed (everything, everything).

Tonight (closer than the heavens), a mother calls her child to bed.

Danielle pleads—*Another ten minutes* (the innocence of youth).

Tonight, the car (say with rusted quarter panels) grinds into first.

Tires crunch gravel, the slow hum of rubber on backroad asphalt.

Tonight (farther than the mother but closer than the heavens), a dog barks at the passing car.

A low and woeful bark.

Tonight, like all other nights (as the car shifts into second), another dog replies.

Quieter—much less sure.

The dog hushes, cocks his head at now empty River Road.

Tonight, the car’s taillights (and the car’s clicking and knocking, the very car itself) disappear.

You just rounded the curve.

And, tonight (at this very moment), I close the cabin door, hearing the click of its latch.

Inside the cabin, it is quieter than before—the hum of the fridge, groaning floorboards.

Later tonight, I will toss and turn the big bed, searching for the ghost of your body.