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Nighttime over the Desert

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NIGHTTIME OVER THE DESERT

(There is a world I see, a world full of dreams. And if I can find my way there, I won't cry at night anymore. I'll dream, and maybe not of her. I'll dream of goodness. I'll sleep ...)

"A bucket full of starfish, warm rain, the long sleep
Deep dream, dream of now, now and forever good"
-Steve Kilbey

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Dr. Paulsen had resigned himself to calls like this--little updates with the parent. He hated them, but he knew they were necessary. "Well, Mrs. Blake," he said to the phone's receiver. "I know that. I think instead that the problem is that Richard has just never faced his sister's death."

"Why do you say that?" she asked into a phone receiver across town. "How sure are you?"

"Very sure. Well ... for example, just look at his relationship with the driver."

"They go back quite a way--"

"Yes, I know. But--"

"He believes in forgiveness, Dr. Paulsen. You see, he's been through enough--it would destroy him to lose Ben's friendship."

"Carol, what your son believes in is avoiding his feelings. One day he's going to have to face them."

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The Lord forgiveth. That was the greatest lesson Rich thought he would ever learn.
Everyone has someone to lean on when they’re young. Rich grew up with two great friends. One was his blood brother, whose name was Ben. The other was more BEN’S blood brother than Rich’s--his name was Alex. They were so close, people mistook them for siamese triplets. His mother, the super-matron, said quite frequently: "Rich is going over to Ben’s house AGAIN? But he just went YESTERDAY."

He always went over to Ben’s house--they never came to his. His big sister would give them a hard time, calling them "little putzes" back when they didn’t know what she meant.

"Yeah," he tells people. "My sister was a pain in the ass, but at the moment she happens to be dead. It was kind of tragic, I guess." She got hit by a drunk driver one chilly night (see dick drink, see dick drive, see dick hit jane.) He forgave the driver.

His sister believed in an eye for an eye, but he didn’t. The Lord forgave--why couldn’t he?

Actually, all he wanted to do those days was sleep. He dreamt of a better world, but he didn’t think it really existed.

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"I’ve been stricken with certain atavistic impulses."
"Huh?"
"He means he wants to boof her."
"Oh."

Rich turned back to Alex. "So. You’re nuts about her."
"It would appear so."

He could hear Ben off in his corner going, "It would appear so." He paused for a second, staring meaninglessly at a pipe going along the wall. Ben’s basement wasn’t the most finished in the world. He said to Alex. "What do you mean, 'It would appear so'? You mean she’s willing to ... ?"
"To ... ?"
"To ... to. You know."
"Sex?"

Ben snorted to show he didn’t believe a word of it.
"Yeah,"--and at the same time from Alex--"The word isn’t going to kill you."

"So is she?"
From Ben: "Of course not."
From Alex: "What makes you think she isn’t?"
"I don’t know. It just seems unreal, you know?"
"I know," said Alex, and crossed his legs under him. "But it’s true. I’m the luckiest geek around."
"Yeah," he said. Ben was silent now. Rich picked up a dart and sailed it at the dartboard; it missed and stuck in the wall. "Wanna go to a movie tonight?"
"I don’t know."

Rich hadn’t come over to talk to Alex all night. He leaned over to look at Ben, who was sitting a bit out of his eyeshot. "Well, YOU’RE the strong, silent type tonight. At least silent."

Being at a weird angle, he couldn’t be sure, but he thought Ben just looked away. At any rate, he didn’t say anything, or even snort. Rich said: "What, is there something wrong?"

Ben sighed. Kind of a, 'You’re pissing the hell out of me' sigh. He said: "Rich?"

It didn’t occur to him that what Ben was going to say could be that earth-shattering. He said, in a hillbilly drawl: "Yay-us."

Ben didn’t say anything at first. Rich was bored and his mind started to drift. The moon was visible behind the makeshift curtain Ben had up in the windows. It was full--one huge chalkmark dusted onto our sky. He almost said, "Look at the moon; reminds me of the Mojave," which would have referred to this time the year before, back when their friendship could’ve gone either way. The moon was full, when they drove outside California a few hours after their junior prom. (Ben’s sister came as the "chaperone." That meant she got the most beer.) They drove to the Mojave desert, carrying quite a bit of liquid refreshment, set on the intention of becoming gravely inebriated.

They drove out into the middle of nowhere, and then spent hours just talking and drinking and laughing and drinking and walking around and drinking and... well, you can get the picture.

They were happy; it was such a wonderful thing being out there in the chill frosted desert with the wind blowing (and actually making that whistling sound you only hear in movies) and the grasses swaying in their little bunches. Rich remembered staggering around and being so incredibly happy that he couldn’t walk a straight line. He remembered he stumbled over to Ben--who panicked at first; Rich probably looked like he was going to blow--and Rich said to him, "I love you."

Ben, who can hold beer much better than Rich, looked up with moonlight
deifying his face, with calm and wisdom beyond his years, and said in a knowing voice, "I know."

"Never forget it," he yelled drunkenly. He had just said a very serious thing, but he wasn’t taking it seriously. Ben knew he meant it though. (That’s strange, Rich thought in Ben’s basement, I’d forgotten about that.)

Later that chilly night in the desert, Ben’s sister met God.

"I AM THE WALRUS!" she sang, and passed out on the desert floor. Rich remembered staring at her while he was in a drunken haze--she was slurping the ground like a baby. He had smiled in a paternal way, propped up on his sandstone boulder.

Ben decided at that point to try his driving--it was because of a joke Alex had made. He’d told Ben that his driving couldn’t get any worse than it was when he was sober.

... When the car started, Annie looked up at it circling about in a dust cloud. Before she passed out again under the moon, she thought: "They’re leaving me. Those bastards are leaving me the fuck behind."

*That night in the desert, Ben’s sister met God* ...

The curtain over the window rested a bit over, obscuring the view of the full moon. He sighed heavily and shifted in his chair.

Ben exhaled heavily. "Rich?" he said, and left it hanging in the air for a second.

Yeah? Rich repeated sarcastically in his head. "Rich, I ... well, you know, I just can’t handle you being in my house anymore."

"What?"

"Rich, you heard what I said. I’m sorry--this is just too strange for me."

"You’ve got to be kidding. I mean--what, you’ve GOT to be kidding." Tell him about the desert, he told himself. He’s forgotten about the desert.

"I’m not kidding, Rich. I just can’t handle you acting like nothing’s wrong. If you’re trying to make me feel like shit for what I did, well you’re doing a really great job of it."

It hadn’t sunk in yet. Rich was still arguing pretty rationally. "I’m not trying to make ANYONE feel bad."

"Maybe not, but you’re doing it anyway."

It was kind of sinking in. "Well GodDAMMIT, what do you exPEXT from me? I’m trying to stay your friend!"

"And that’s the PROBLEM, my FRIEND."
Rich pushed himself up out of the chair. "GodDAMMIT!" He felt sick.

Something strange was happening to him; all of a sudden it felt like a hundred thousand feelings were forcing their way up through his throat like a choking scream or suffocation. Bile was boiling into bubbles, bursting or rising up, he could taste it, like chalk, like battery acid, like a chalky moon. There was no blood in his head yet, and he was seeing flashing cubes in front of his eyes. Dizziness like a cold heat burning and spreading bloated with brain fluid up along the back of his neck.

"Rich ..." said Ben, who didn’t see how dizzy he was.

Memories and thoughts, feelings charged upon him, pictures of dear Annie his big sister eating apples and crossing her legs as she talked to him, pictures of his dear sister yelling at his mom and threatening to leave forever and never come back and he buried the feeling and he never even dealt with it, I NEVER DEALT WITH ANY OF IT, GODDAMMIT, AND JUST SO YOU WOULDN’T WORRY, JUST BECAUSE I DIDN’T WANT TO BE YOUR LITTLE BROTHER, I WANTED TO BE YOUR FRIEND--

"Rich?" Alex sat bolt upright in his chair, thus showing his concern. "Rich, sit down. I think you’re really flipping out or something--"

"Rich? Sit down."

--AND WHAT DID HE DO? HE BROKE YOUR LEGS AND HE CRUSHED YOU--I SAW YOU THAT MORNING--HE CRUSHED YOU, ALL YOUR NECK INTO ITS MINERALS--

Ben did get up--he touched him on the shoulder. Rich whirled around off of Ben’s touch and staggered backwards. It was a cool night, but he remembered the sun, the sun beating them as they saw them zip the black bag up, coming through Ben’s window past the curtain baking him, roasting him, suffocating him.

"Rich, sit down."

He couldn’t control his legs. They seemed to go up the steps a few feet in front of him.

He burned. Because of running up, the heat was in his biggest veins, piercing hot. He could feel it--the heaviness--razor shards of metal slicing through him, shooting up into his chest.

He smashed past the door, tried to avoid that feeling.

("......Rich, sit down! .....") He had no thought.

The trip out there took a century.

".....Rich!.....RICH!"

He was out on Ben’s lawn. The night was stifling hot.
Night?
"LEAVE ME ALONE."
"Rich ... Rich ... Just ... Look ... Look, just open your eyes."
He stayed shut, in a crouching fetal position on the lawn. The night air made embryonic fluid around him.
"... LISTEN TO ME." Ben planted a foot on the fetus and pushed Rich over with it. Rich's eyes snapped open, sunlight stabbed through blue. He screeched at the top of his lungs and punched into Ben.
Ben didn't move, but pushed him back down on the ground.
He still couldn't see, so he shut his eyes. (He could see with them closed anyway.)
"You guys okay out here--"
"Go back inside," Ben said to Alex.
"Shut up," Rich said under his breath. "Shut up."
Ben said something, but Rich couldn't hear it behind the thunder of his blood pumping. (Why am I doing this?--Don't think about it.) He tried to act unreachable.

Just thought. Chaotically. He imagined that next day in the Mojave. He could feel the policemen walking up to him, through the crowd at the police line. The hot shadow of burning gasoline. (Untranslatable thoughts.)
"Rich, snap out of it."
What a dumb thing to say.
But he cared.
"Why did you do it?" he asked him softly.
"Why did I, WHY DID I DO IT?!? WHAT DO YOU MEAN FUCKING WHY DID I DO IT?!? YOU THINK I MEANT TO?!?"
"No ... No, look, I--"
"JUST SHUT UP! God, why don't you think of something BETTER to say?"

Rich opened his eyes and just stared at him, realized he hated him. He knew it sounded bad--Ben was in a CAR CRASH for God's sake (and he caused it), but Rich hated him anyway. And thinking it made the heat start to leave. It left in certain spots, and he could feel it lifting off.
He left his eyes open.
Thinking back, Rich was sure Ben had a really stupid expression on his face, looking at Rich right then, but Rich was staring away.
"What..." he said. "...You're acting kinda strange."

"Bet those beers tasted good," he said, even though it sounded dumb. "At least you won't do it again."

Ben must've been holding back his anger, like he was an adult talking to a child or something, because he said softly, "Well, we were gonna--" but stopped. Rich looked up then, and he DID have a really stupid expression on his face.

"Just get the fuck away from me," he said, and waited, and then closed his eyes again.

A breeze was on his right cheek. He remembered that. At that moment, though, he couldn't remember what he was thinking.

A sigh.

He heard the screen door slam behind him.

He got up from where he was sitting and opened his eyes. Something in him waxed incongruent when he saw that it was the middle of the night, not the middle of the day.

The house felt like a hot shadow behind him, and for a second it reminded him of something. He thought of the two of them in there, making sure to exclude him from their thoughts so one day he would feel bad.

He knelt down to the street and whispered to his dead sister, "The Lord left us here on Earth to rot. That's the greatest lesson I'll ever learn."

And he started walking.

Civilization is the desert, he thought with his unconscious brain. Sister, you left us here to rot.

He walked out of the suburbs, and eventually reached the city streets. Streetlights passed above him. They looked like a tunnel, or like the stars over a barren plain. (What do you do when you reach the end of the desert?) he thought. (You come back to find that the world's given you up for dead.)

In front of him was an overgrown lawn covering a ruined lot. The dark was blurred and empty, so he lay down on the earth and went to sleep. The nerves in his body had melted into one calm entity, waiting for the day his body would die.

The night was cold--like the shimmering chill of the desert at night.

Deep dream, dream of now, now and forever good.

_Ian Rastall_