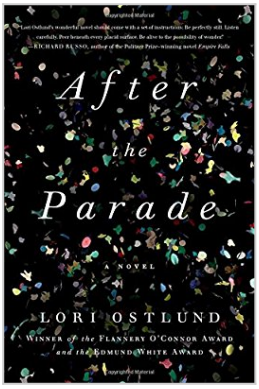

After the Parade: A Novel

By Lori Ostlund

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From Flannery O'Connor and Rona Jaffe Award winner Lori Ostlund, a deeply moving and beautiful debut novel about a man who leaves his longtime partner in New Mexico for a new life in San Francisco, launching him on a tragicomic road trip and into the mysteries of his own Midwestern childhood.

Sensitive, big-hearted, and achingly self-conscious, forty-year-old Aaron Englund long ago escaped the confines of his Midwestern hometown, but he still feels like an outcast. After twenty years under the Pygmalion-like direction of his older partner Walter, Aaron at last decides it is time to stop letting life happen to him and to take control of his own fate. But soon after establishing himself in San Francisco—where he alternates between a shoddy garage apartment and the absurdly ramshackle ESL school where he teaches—Aaron sees that real freedom will not come until he has made peace with his memories of Morton, Minnesota: a cramped town whose four hundred souls form a constellation of Aaron's childhood heartbreaks and hopes.

After Aaron's father died in the town parade, it was the larger-than-life misfits of his childhood—sardonic, wheel-chair bound dwarf named Clarence, a generous, obese baker named Bernice, a kindly aunt preoccupied with dreams of The Rapture—who helped Aaron find his place in a provincial world hostile to difference. But Aaron's sense of rejection runs deep: when Aaron was seventeen, Dolores—Aaron's loving, selfish, and enigmatic mother—vanished one night with the town pastor. Aaron hasn't heard from Dolores in more than twenty years, but when a shambolic PI named Bill offers a key to closure, Aaron must confront his own role in his troubled past and rethink his place in a world of unpredictable, life-changing forces.

Lori Ostlund's debut novel is an openhearted contemplation of how we grow up and move on, how we can turn our deepest wounds into our greatest strengths. Written with homespun charm and unceasing vitality, *After the Parade* is a glorious new anthem for the outsider.

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After the Parade: A Novel By Lori Ostlund Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
"Lori Ostlund's wonderful novel *After the Parade* should come with a set of instructions: Be perfectly still. Listen carefully. Peer beneath every placid surface. Be alive to the possibility of wonder." (Richard Russo, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of Empire Falls)

"A beautiful, elegant, honest, and compassionate book about trauma--and the difficult process through which we come to make sense of our lives." (Hanya Yanighara, bestselling author of A Little Life)

“[A] powerful debut novel…*After the Parade* provides considerable pleasure and emotional power. The teaching scenes, in which Aaron’s adult students ponder the mysteries of American English expressions and American customs, are warm, lively and engrossing. Ostlund richly evokes the rural Minnesota of Aaron’s childhood, where fine distinctions are made between Norwegians, Swedes and Finns; and, through Aaron, she casts a sharp eye on the generation of closeted gay men Walter and his friends belong to, men whose campiness both disguises and expresses their shame. Indeed, while we may be tempted to forget their struggles now that the Supreme Court has affirmed the right of gay men and lesbians to live with the same dignity as anybody else, *After the Parade* is a moving testament to those adults who contend with the damaging legacy of shame, and the nonconforming children who live in hostile families, trying to stay afloat and save their own lives.”
(*New York Times Book Review*)

“*After the Parade* is a sprawling, hefty narrative — deeply sad and profoundly moving — and its prose is like a second protagonist: Vibrant, living and practically lifting off the page." (*NPR (Best Books of 2015)*)

“*After the Parade* is remarkable both for the clarity and precision of Lori Ostlund's writing and her seemingly clairvoyant empathy for the misfits of the world: the different, the foreign, the gay, the bullied, the lonely. Aaron Englund is one of the most lovable, quietly heroic protagonists in recent memory, and Ostlund is a gem of a writer.”
(Kate Christensen, author of The Great Man)

“Everything here aches, from the lucid prose to the sensitively treated characters to their beautiful and heartbreaking stories…An example of realism in its most potent iteration: not a nearly arranged plot orchestrated by an authorial god but an authentic, empathetic representation of life as it truly is.”
(*Kirkus Reviews (STARRED)*)

“Achingly tender and wise, *After the Parade* is a heartfelt rumination on reconciling with the past and finding one’s place in the world that will resonate with anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.”
(*Buzzfeed*)

“*After the Parade* is about leave-taking and homecoming, two instrumental actions that shape the life of every one of us. So rare does one see a wise writer like Lori Ostlund. Her insight comes from understanding her characters yet not dissecting them with a mental scalpel, and portraying life with its most complex and wondrous dynamics in time and space rather than inventing a static canvas. A new talent to celebrate!”
(Yiyun Li, author of The Vagrants and Kinder Than Solitude)

“Luminous…Among the many fine fiction releases crowding the market this fall, Lori Ostlund's new novel stands out from the crowd…Plotted with originality and insight…Ostlund is a keen observer of humanity, and her characters come alive on the page…It’s Aaron, her quirky and surprisingly resilient protagonist, who makes this richly comic, quietly affecting novel engaging to the end.” (*San Jose Mercury News*)

“Ostlund's *After the Parade* is a generous and full-bodied novel, insightful and quietly provocative. Ostlund gives us characters we believe in and ache for, and she renders them with generosity and sparkling complexity. A confident, moving meditation on home and the construction, and reconstruction, of adult lives.”
(Megan Mayhew Bergman, author of Birds of a Lesser Paradise and Almost Famous Women)

“As full-bodied and full-blooded a novelas I’ve read in a long time. The prose sparkles, and the author is so smart andso kind to her characters: a rare combination and so refreshing to read.” (Daniel Wallace, author of Big Fish and The Kings and Queens of Roam)

“In her appealing debut, prizewinning short story writer Ostlund writes with acuity and refreshing honesty about the messy complexity of being a social animal in today’s world…Touching and often hilarious…Ostlund captures a child’s viewpoint impeccably: the awkwardness, the amusing misunderstandings of adults’ actions and conversations, and his unusual friendships with fellow misfits. Forming connections isn’t necessarily easier when you’re grown up, as the novel compassionately illustrates, but it’s worth getting up the courage to try.”
(*Booklist, STARRED REVIEW*)

“On a sentence-by-sentence level, Ostlund’s prose is unmatched—smart, resonant, and imbued with beauty." (*Publishers Weekly*)

About the Author
Lori Ostlund’s first collection of stories, *The Bigness of the World*, received the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction, the California Book Award for First Fiction, and the Edmund White Debut Fiction Award. It was shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing, was a Lambda finalist, and was named a Notable Book by The Short Story Prize. Her stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories* and *The PEN/O. Henry Prize* Stories, among other publications. In 2009, Lori received a Rona Jaffe Foundation Award. She is the author of the novel, *After the Parade* and lives in San Francisco.

After the Parade

1

Aaron had gotten a late start—some mix-up at the U-Haul office that nobody seemed qualified to fix—so it was early afternoon when he finally began loading the truck, nearly eight when he finished. He wanted to drive away right then but could not imagine setting out so late. It was enough that the truck sat in the driveway packed, declaring his intention. Instead, he took a walk around the neighborhood, as was his nightly habit, had been his nightly habit since he and Walter moved here nine years earlier. He always followed the same route, designed with the neighborhood cats in mind. He knew where they all lived, had made up names for each of them—Falstaff and Serial Mom, Puffin and Owen Meany—and when he called to them using these names, they stood up from wherever they were hiding and ran down to the sidewalk to greet him.

He passed the house of the old woman who, on many nights, though not this one, watched for him from her kitchen window and then hurried out with a jar that she could not open. She called him by his first name and he called her Mrs. Trujillo, since she was surely twice his age, and as he twisted the lid off a jar of honey or instant coffee, they engaged in pleasantries, establishing that they were both fine, that they had enjoyed peaceful, ordinary days, saying the sorts of things that Aaron had grown up in his mother's café hearing people say to one another. As a boy, he had dreaded such talk, for he had been shy and no good at it, but as he grew older, he had come to appreciate these small nods at civility.

Of course, Mrs. Trujillo was not always fine. Sometimes, her back was acting up or her hands were numb. She would hold them out toward him, as though the numbness were something that could be seen, and when he put the jar back into them, he said, "Be careful now, Mrs. Trujillo. Think what a mess you'd have with broken glass and honey." Maybe he made a joke that wasn't really funny, something about all those ants with bleeding tongues, and she would laugh the way that people who are very lonely laugh, paying you the only way they know how. She always seemed sheepish about mentioning her ailments, sheepish again when he inquired the next time whether she was feeling better, yet for years they had engaged in this ritual, and as he passed her house that last night, he felt relief at her absence. Still, when he let his mind stray to the future, to the next night and the one after, the thought of Mrs. Trujillo looking out the window with a stubborn jar of spaghetti sauce in her hands made his heart ache.

Aaron picked up his pace, almost ran to Falstaff's house, where he crouched on the sidewalk and called softly to the portly fellow, waiting for him to waddle off the porch that was his stage. At nine, he returned from his walk and circled the truck, double-checking the padlock because he knew there would come a moment during the night when he would lie there thinking about it, and this way he would have an image that he could pull up in his mind: the padlock, secured.

A week earlier, Aaron had gone into Walter's study with a list of the household items that he planned to take with him. He found Walter at his desk, a large teak desk that Walter's father had purchased in Denmark in the 1950s and shipped home. He had used the desk throughout his academic career, writing articles that added up to books about minor Polish poets, most of them long dead, and then it had become Walter's. Aaron loved the desk, which represented everything for which he had been longing all those years ago when Walter took him in and they began their life together: a profession that required a sturdy, beautiful desk; a father who cared enough about aesthetics to ship a desk across an ocean; a life, in every way, different from his own.

Though it was just four in the afternoon, Walter was drinking cognac—Spanish cognac, which he preferred to French—and later Aaron would realize that Walter had already known that something was wrong. Aaron stood in the office doorway, reading the list aloud—a set of bed linens, a towel, a cooking pot, a plate, a knife, cutlery. "Is there anything on the list that you prefer I not take?" he asked.

Walter looked out the window for what seemed a very long time. "I saved you, Aaron," he said at last. His head sank onto his desk, heavy with the memories it contained.

"Yes," Aaron agreed. "Yes, you did. Thank you." He could hear the stiffness in his voice and regretted—though could not change—it. This was how he had let Walter know that he was leaving.

* * *

Walter had already tended to his "nightly ablutions," as he termed the process of washing one's face and brushing one's teeth, elevating the mundane by renaming it. He was in bed, so there seemed nothing for

Aaron to do but retire as well, except he had nowhere to sleep. He had packed the guest bed, a futon with a fold-up base, and they had never owned a typical couch, only an antique Javanese daybed from Winnie's store in Minneapolis. Winnie was Walter's sister, though from the very beginning she had felt more like his own. Sleeping on the daybed would only make him think of her, which he did not want. He had not even told Winnie that he was leaving. Of course, he could sleep with Walter, in the space that he had occupied for nearly twenty years, but it seemed to him improper—that was the word that came to mind—to share a bed with the man he was leaving. His dilemma reminded him of a story that Winnie had told him just a few weeks earlier, during one of their weekly phone conversations. Winnie had lots of stories, the pleasure—and the burden—of owning a small business.

"I'm a captive audience," she had explained to him and Walter once. "I can't just lock up and leave. People know that on some level, but it suits their needs to act as though we're two willing participants. Sometimes they talk for hours."

"They are being presumptuous, presumptuous and self-involved," Walter had said. Walter hated to waste time, hated to have his wasted. "Just walk away."

Aaron knew that she would not, for he and Winnie were alike: they understood that the world was filled with lonely people, whom they did not begrudge these small moments of companionship.

The story that Winnie had called to tell him was about a customer of hers, Sally Forth. ("Yes, that's really her name," Winnie had added before he could ask.) Sally Forth and her husband had just returned from a ten-day vacation in Turkey, about which she had said to Winnie, pretrip: "It's a Muslim country, you know. Lots of taboos in the air, and those are always good for sex." Sally Forth was a woman impressed with her own naughtiness, a woman endlessly amused by the things that came out of her mouth. The first morning, as she and her husband sat eating breakfast in their hotel restaurant and discussing the day's itinerary, her husband turned to her and requested a divorce. Winnie said that Sally Forth was the type of person who responded to news—good or bad—loudly and demonstratively, without considering her surroundings. Thus, Sally Forth, who was engaged in spreading jam on a piece of bread, reached across the table and ground the bread against her husband's chest, the jam making a red blotch directly over his heart. "Why would you bring me all the way to Turkey to tell me you want a divorce?" Sally Forth screamed, and her husband replied, "I thought you'd appreciate the gesture."

Winnie and Aaron had laughed together on the phone, not at Sally Forth or even at her husband but at this strange notion that proposing divorce required etiquette similar to that of proposing marriage—a carefully chosen moment, a grand gesture.

Sally Forth and her husband stayed in Turkey the whole ten days, during which her husband did not mention divorce again. By the time the vacation was over, she thought of his request as something specific to Turkey, but after they had collected their luggage at the airport back home in Minneapolis, Sally Forth's husband hugged her awkwardly and said that he would be in touch about "the details."

"I feel like such an idiot," she told Winnie. "But we kept sleeping in the same bed. If you're really leaving someone, you don't just get into bed with them, do you?"

And then, Sally Forth had begun to sob.

"I didn't know what to do," Winnie told Aaron sadly. "I wanted to hug her, but you know how I am about that, especially at work. I actually tried. I stepped toward her, but I couldn't do it. It seemed

disingenuous—because we're not friends. I don't even like her. So I just let her stand there and cry."

As Aaron finished brushing his teeth, he tried to remember whether he and Winnie had reached any useful conclusions about the propriety of sharing a bed with the person one was about to leave, but he knew that they had not. Winnie had been focused solely on what she regarded as her failure to offer comfort.

"Sometimes," he had told her, "the hardest thing to give people is the thing we know they need the most." When he said this, he was trying to work up the courage to tell her that he was leaving Walter, but he had stopped there so that his comment seemed to refer to Winnie's treatment of Sally Forth, which meant that he had failed Winnie also.

He went into the bedroom and turned on the corner lamp. The room looked strange without his belongings. Gone were the rows of books and the gifts from his students, as well as the Indonesian night table that Winnie had given him when he and Walter moved from Minnesota to New Mexico. It was made from recycled wood, old teak that had come from a barn or railroad tracks or a chest for storing rice—Winnie was not sure what exactly. For Aaron, just knowing that the table had had another life was enough. When he sat down on his side of the bed, Walter did not seem to notice. That was the thing about a king-size bed: its occupants could lead entirely separate lives, never touching, oblivious to the other's presence or absence.

"Walter," he said, but there was no reply. He crawled across the vast middle ground of the bed and shook Walter's shoulder.

"Enh," said Walter, a sound that he often made when he was sleeping, so Aaron considered the possibility that he was not faking sleep.

"Is it okay if I sleep here?" he asked, but Walter, treating the question as a prelude to an argument, said, "I'm too tired for this right now. Let's talk in the morning." And so Aaron spent his last night with Walter in their bed, trying to sleep, trying because he could not stop thinking about the fact that everything he owned was sitting in the driveway—on wheels nonetheless—which meant that every noise became the sound of his possessions being driven away into the night. He was reminded of something that one of his Vietnamese students, Vu, had said in class during a routine speaking exercise. Vu declared that if a person discovered an unlocked store while walking down the street at night, he had the right to take what he wanted from inside. Until then, Vu had struck him as honest and reliable, so the nonchalance with which Vu stated this opinion had shocked Aaron.

"That's stealing," Aaron blurted out, so astonished that he forgot about the purpose of the exercise, which was to get the quieter students talking.

"No," Vu said, seemingly puzzled by Aaron's vehemence as well as his logic. "Not stealing. If I destroy lock or break window, this is stealing. If you do not lock door, you are not careful person. You must be responsibility person to own business." Vu constantly mixed up parts of speech and left off articles, but Aaron did not knock on the desk as he normally did to remind Vu to pay attention to his grammar.

"But you did not pay for these things," Aaron cried. "I did. We are not required to lock up our belongings. We do so only because there are dishonest people in the world, but locking them up is not what makes them ours. They are ours because we own them."

Vu regarded him calmly. "When the policeman comes, he will ask, 'Did you lock this door?' If you say no, he will not look very well for your things. He will think, 'This man is careless, and now he makes work for

me.’?”

“I’m not saying it’s a good idea to leave your door unlocked, Vu. I’m only saying that the things inside are mine, whether I remember to lock the door or not.” Belatedly, he had addressed the rest of the class. “What do you guys think?”

They had stared back at him, frightened by his tone. Later, when he tried to understand what had made him so angry, he had come up with nothing more precise than that Vu had challenged the soundness of a code that seemed obvious, inviolable.

Aaron got out of bed to peek at the truck parked in the driveway. He did this several more times. Around three, having risen for the sixth time, he stood in the dark bedroom listening to Walter’s familiar wheezing. Then he put on his clothes and left. As he backed the truck out of the driveway with the headlights off because he did not want them shining in and illuminating the house, the thought came to him that he was like his mother: sneaking away without saying good-bye, disappearing into the night.

All along their street, the houses were lit up with holiday lights. That afternoon, as Aaron carried the first box out to the truck, Walter had blocked the door to ask, “Whatever is going on here?,” adding, “It’s nearly Christmas.” In the past, Aaron would have made a joke along the lines of “What, are you a Jew for Jesus now?” They would have laughed, not because it was funny exactly but because of the level of trust it implied. Instead, Aaron had continued loading the truck without answering, and Walter had retreated to his study.

It was quiet at this hour. Driving home from the symphony one night several years earlier, he and Walter had seen a teenage boy being beaten by five other boys in the park just blocks from their house. Though Albuquerque had plenty of crime, their neighborhood was considered safe, a place where people walked their dogs at midnight, so the sight of this—a petty drug deal going bad—startled them. Walter slammed on the brakes and leaped from the car, yelling, “Stop that,” as he and Aaron, dressed in suits and ties, rushed toward the fight. The five boys in hairnets turned and ran, as did the sixth boy, who jumped up and sprinted toward his car, a BMW, and drove off.

Later, in bed, Walter joked, “Nothing more terrifying than two middle-aged fags in suits,” though Aaron was just thirty-five at the time. They laughed, made giddy by the moment and by the more sobering realization that the night could have turned out much different. Walter got up and went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of port, which they sat in bed—the king-size bed—drinking, and though Walter insisted on a lighthearted tone, Aaron took his hand and held it tightly, reminded yet again that Walter was a good man who cared about others.

When Aaron got to the park, he pulled the truck to the curb and turned off the engine, which seemed very loud in the middle of the night. He sat in the dark and cried, thinking about Walter asleep in their bed down the street.

* * *

Aaron was in Gallup buying coffee when the sun rose, approaching Needles, California, when he fell asleep at the wheel, awakening within seconds to the disorienting sight of the grassy median before him. He swerved right, the truck shifting its weight behind him, and found himself on the road again, cars honking all around him, a man in a pickup truck jabbing his middle finger at him and screaming something that he took to be “Asshole!” He was not the sort who came away from close calls energized, nor did he believe in

endangering the lives of others. He took the next exit, checked into a motel in Needles, and was soon asleep, the heavy drapes closed tightly against the California sun.

But as he slept, a series of thuds worked their way into his dreams. He awoke suddenly, the room dark and still, and he thought maybe the thudding was nothing more than his own heart. It came again, loud and heavy, something hitting the wall directly behind him. A body, he thought, and then, Not a body. A human being.

He reached out and felt a lamp on the table beside the bed, then fumbled along its base for the switch. From the next room, he heard a keening sound followed by the unmistakable thump of a fist meeting flesh. He slipped on his sneakers. Outside, it was dusk. He ran down a flight of steps and turned left, into the motel lobby. The woman at the desk was the one who had checked him in. He remembered the distrustful way she looked at him when he burst in and declared that he needed a room, so exhausted he could not recall his zip code for the paperwork.

“Call the police,” he said.

She stared at him.

“You need to call the police. A man in the room next to me is beating someone up—a woman, I think, his wife or girlfriend. Someone.” He could see now that beneath her heavy makeup, she was young, maybe twenty, the situation beyond anything for which either her receptionist training or meager years of living had prepared her. “Nine-one-one,” he said slowly, like he was explaining grammar to a student. He reached across the counter, picked up the receiver, and held it out to her. She looked left and right, as if crossing the street. He knew that she was looking for someone besides him.

At last, a switch seemed to flip on inside her. She took a breath and said, “Sir, you’re in room two-fifty-two, correct?” He shrugged to indicate that he didn’t know, but she continued on, his uncertainty fueling her confidence. “It must be two-fifty-three, that couple from Montana. But they had a child with them? Is there a child?” she asked.

“Just call,” he said, and he ran back outside. When he got to room 253, he hesitated, the full weight of his good-fences-make-good-neighbors upbringing bearing down on him. He raised his hand and knocked hard at the door. The room went silent, and he knew that something was very wrong.

“Hello?” he called, making his voice louder because he had learned early on in teaching that volume was the best way to conceal a quaver.

The receptionist came up the steps and stood watching, afraid, he knew, of the responsibility they shared, of the haste with which she had wedded her life to his. “Key?” he mouthed, but she shook her head. He stepped back until he felt the walkway railing behind him and then rushed at the door, doing this again and again until the chain ripped away and he was in.

* * *

The receptionist’s name was Britta. He had heard her spelling it for the policeman who took down their stories as they stood outside the door that Aaron had broken through minutes earlier.

That night she knocked at his room door. “It’s me, Britta,” she called, without adding qualifiers—“the

receptionist" or "we saved a boy's life together this afternoon."

When he opened the door, she said, "I came to give you an update on Jacob," but she was carrying a six-pack of beer, which confused him. Still, he invited her in because he could not sleep, could not stop picturing the boy—Jacob—lying on the floor as though he simply preferred it to the bed, as though he had lain down there and gone to sleep. There'd been blood, and the boy's arm was flung upward and out at an angle that only a broken bone would allow. The mother sat to the side, sobbing about her son from a distance, from the comfort of a chair. She was not smoking but Aaron later thought of her that way, as a woman who sat in a chair and smoked while her husband threw her son against the wall. It was the husband who surprised him most: a small, jovial-looking man with crow's-feet (duck feet a student had once called them, mistaking the bird) and a face that seemed suited for laughing.

He and Britta did not drink the beer she had brought, though he could see that she wanted to. "It's still cold," she said hopefully as she set it down. She would not go further, would not slip a can from the plastic noose without his prompting. She was an employee after all, used to entering these rooms deferentially. Aaron was relieved. He had left behind everything that was familiar, but at least he recognized himself in this person who would not drink beer with a teenager in a cheap motel room in Needles, California.

The beer sat sweating on the desk between the television and the Gideon Bible. "Were you reading the Bible?" Britta asked, for of course she would know that it was generally kept tucked away in the bottom drawer of the desk. He felt embarrassed by the question, though he could see that she considered Bible-reading a normal activity, one to be expected given what had happened earlier.

"Not really," he said, which was true. He had spent the last three hours not really doing anything. He had tried, and failed at, a succession of activities: sleeping, reading (both the Gideon Bible and Death Comes for the Archbishop, his least favorite Willa Cather book, though he periodically felt obligated to give it another chance), studying the map of California in an attempt to memorize the final leg of his trip, mending a small tear that had appeared in his shirtsleeve, and watching television. When Britta knocked, he had been sitting on the bed listening, the way he had as a child just after his father died and he lay in bed each night straining to hear whether his mother was crying in her room at the other end of the house. Some nights he heard her (gasping sobs that he would be reminded of as an adult when he overheard people having sex) while other nights there was silence.

"Where are you going?" Britta asked him.

"San Francisco," he said.

She nodded in a way that meant she had no interest in such things: San Francisco specifically, but really the world outside Needles. He tried to imagine himself as Britta, spending his days interacting with people who were on the move, coming from or going to places that he had never seen, maybe never even heard of. Was it possible that she had not once felt the urge to pack up and follow, to solve the mystery of who Britta would be—would become—in Columbus, Ohio, or Roanoke, Virginia? It seemed inconceivable to him, to have no curiosity about one's parallel lives, those lives that different places would demand that you live.

They sat in silence, he at the foot of the bed and she in the chair beside the desk. He did not know what to say next. "Do you like working at the motel?" he asked finally.

"It's okay," she said. "It's kind of boring most of the time, but sometimes it's interesting."

“Give me an example of something interesting,” he said, his teacher’s voice never far away. “Other than today, of course.”

“Today wasn’t interesting,” she said. “It was scary. I threw up afterward. Weren’t you scared at all?”

“Yes,” he said. “Actually, I was terrified.”

She smiled, and then she began to cry. “Do you think we did the right thing?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “My boyfriend—Lex—he said that it was none of our business. And my boss is this Indian guy—he’s all in a bad mood now because he said it’s bad for business for people to see the cops here.”

Aaron’s first impulse was to ask what her boss’s ethnicity had to do with the rest of her statement, but he did not. He sensed no malice, and the question would only confuse her. “Listen,” he said sternly. “We definitely did the right thing. Okay? We saved a boy’s life.”

His voice broke on the word saved. It seemed he had been waiting his whole life to save this boy, though he did not believe in fate, did not believe that everything in his forty-one years had happened in order to bring him here, to a run-down motel in Needles, California, so that he might save Jacob. No. They were two separate facts: he had saved a life, and he was alone. He had never felt so tired.

“I need to go to bed,” he said, and he stood up.

Britta stood also and picked up her beer, leaving behind six wet circles on the desktop. “He’s in a coma,” she announced as she paused in the doorway. “Jacob. So you see, we might not have saved him. He might die anyway.”

Aaron leaned against the door frame, steadying himself. “At least we gave him a chance,” he said. Then, because he did not have it in him to offer more, he offered this: “You’re a good person, Britta, and that’s important.”

They were standing so close that he could smell alcohol and ketchup on her breath. He imagined her sitting in a car in an empty parking lot somewhere in Needles with her boyfriend, Lex, the two of them eating French fries and drinking beer as she tried to tell Lex about Jacob while Lex rubbed his greasy lips across her breasts.

“Good night,” Aaron said, gently now. He shut the door and pressed his ear to it, waiting to slide the chain into place because he worried she might take the sound of it personally, though later he realized that she would not have thought the chain had anything to do with her. It was a feature of the room, something to be used, like the ice bucket or the small bars of soap in the bathroom.

* * *

When the telephone rang, he sat up fast in the dark and reached for it. “Hello,” he said.

“Front desk,” said the man on the other end. He sounded bored, which reassured Aaron. “You have the U-

Haul in the parking lot."

"Yes," said Aaron, though the man had not inflected it as a question. "Is something wrong? What time is it?"

"You'll need to come down to the parking lot. Sir." The "sir" was an afterthought, and later Aaron knew he should have considered that, should have weighed the man's reassuring boredom against that pause.

"Now?" said Aaron. "Is something wrong?" But the line had already gone dead.

He looked at the bedside clock. It seemed so long ago that he had been lying beside Walter, worrying about the truck, yet it had been only twenty-four hours. He dressed and ran down the steps to the parking lot, where a man stood beside the truck. Aaron had parked under a light—not intentionally, for he had been too tired for such foresight—and as he got closer, he could see that the man was young, still a boy, with hair that held the shape of a work cap.

"What's wrong?" Aaron asked. The boy lifted his right hand in a fist and slammed it into Aaron's stomach.

As a child, Aaron had been bullied—punched, taunted, bitten so hard that his arm swelled—but he had always managed to deflect fights as an adult. It was not easy. He was tall, four inches over six feet, and his height was often seen as a challenge, turning innocent encounters—accidentally jostling someone, for example—into potential altercations. He did not know how to reconcile what other men saw when they looked at him with the image preserved in his mind, that of a small boy wetting himself as his father's casket was lowered into the ground.

The boy hit him again, and Aaron dropped backward onto his buttocks. "What do you want?" he asked, looking up at the boy.

"I'm Lex," said the boy.

"Ah, yes, Britta's friend."

"Boyfriend," said the boy.

"Yes, of course," said Aaron, but something about the way he articulated this angered the boy even more. He jerked back his foot and kicked Aaron hard in the hip. Aaron whimpered. He had learned early on that bullies liked to know they were having an effect.

"What was she doing in there?" asked the boy.

"Where?" said Aaron. "In my room, you mean? We were talking. She was telling me about Jacob, the child we saved this afternoon."

"So why was she crying then?"

"Crying?" said Aaron.

"She was crying when she came out. I saw her. I was right here the whole time, and I saw her come out of your room. She was crying, and she wouldn't talk to me."

“Well,” Aaron said, trying to think of words, which was not easy because he was frightened. He could see the fury in the boy, the fury at being in love with someone he did not understand. “You do realize that people cry. Sometimes we know why they are crying, and sometimes we do not. Britta had an extremely hard day. She saw a child who had been beaten almost to death.”

The boy looked down at him. “She was in your room. You can talk how you like, mister, but she was in your room.”

Aaron realized only then what it was the boy imagined. “I don’t have sex with women,” he said quietly. He thought of his words as a gift to the boy, who did not have it in him to add up the details differently, to alter his calculations. Behind him, Aaron could hear the interstate, the sound of trucks floating past Needles at night.

“What?” said Lex. “What are you saying? That you’re some kind of fag?” His voice was filled with wonder.

Later, when he was in the U-Haul driving away, Aaron would consider Lex’s phrasing: some kind of fag, as if fags came in kinds. He supposed they did. He did not like the word fag, but he knew where he stood with people who used it, knew what they thought and what to expect from them. He had nodded, agreeing that he was some kind of fag because the question was not really about him. Lex’s fist somersaulted helplessly in the air, his version of being left speechless, and he turned and walked away.

Aaron’s wallet was in his back pocket, the truck keys in the front. He could simply rise from the pavement, get into the truck, and drive away. He wished that he were that type of person, one who lived spontaneously and without regrets, but he was not. He was the type who would berate himself endlessly for leaving behind a much-needed map and everything else that had been in the overnight bag. He went back up to his room, checked beneath the bed and in the shower, though he had not used the latter, and when he left, he had everything with which he had arrived. He drove slowly away from Needles, waiting for the sun to catch up with him.

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