

Perhaps if I had said yes, we might have talked about that terrible day he put a gun to his head and I could have told him what I had since grown to realize—that I loved him. That I had always loved him, though behind his back, without letting him know it. And, in a way, behind *my* back, too. But I didn't say yes, and in the seven years that remained of his life, we never came as close to ending the winter that was always, for us, an unspoken but living part of our present.

That night, though, unable to sleep, I got up and went into my son's room. Standing there in the wan glow of his night light, I listened to him breathe for a while, then quietly took down the railing we'd put on his bed to keep him from rolling off and hurting himself. Then I sat on the edge of the bed and began to stroke his soft, reddish blond hair. At first he didn't wake, but his forehead wrinkled and he mumbled a little dream-sound.

I am not a religious man. I believe, as my father must have, the day he asked me to save him, that our children are our only salvation, their love our only redemption. And that night, when my son woke, frightened by the dark figure leaning over him, and started to cry, I picked him up and rocked him in my arms, comforting him as I would after a nightmare. "Don't worry," I told him over and over, until the words sounded as incomprehensible to me as they must have to him, "it's only a dream. Everything's going to be all right. Don't worry."

## Cadence

by Erica Plouffe Lazure

Something ate a hole through the oil tank, so we called **S**Joey in from the pumps to fix it. The tank had been drained, mostly, but mostly never helped no one. Joey didn't have gloves, just some rubber goggles, and this one time nobody told him to go and get the good mask. He could've found the cat litter in the closet, could've poured it in first to absorb what we'd left in there, but he didn't do that either. It probably wouldn't have helped. Even with those goggles on, he would've seen the ember that strayed through the hole, the welding rod still pinched between his fingers, the little spark that built the flame that rocked us all to the back of the bay.

The body looks strange on fire. It's just everywhere at once, liquid and growing, Joey tearing out toward the nasty patch of grass on Highway Eleven with flames eating through his skin. And we just stood there stupid, like disciples struck, helpless except for a woman waiting for an oil change who called 9-1-1 from our pay phone. But what were we supposed to do? He was gone, and we all knew it,

except maybe for Mr. Andy Arlen, moving too late from behind his desk, belly-heavy in work boots, extinguisher in hand. The fire was out already. Joey was blind and smoldering with snuffed heat on that small strip of highway lawn, me kneeling nearby telling him the things he'd want to hear in his last few moments, cars still pulling in to the station. And Mr. Goddamn Fucking Hero Arlen pushing through with his cherry-red tank, the pin pulled—it made me wish, as the foam hit and Joey screamed his last, that Mr. Arlen had stayed behind his goddamned desk. He stood over Joey holding the tank like he'd just taken the world's biggest pressurized piss. That's when I threw up.

In all the years I knew him, Joey was never one to just let a subject be. And for the past month he'd been nonstop about his girl Becky in Basic. When she left for the Army he went on and on about the mix tape he'd made for her, the magazines he'd bought her, the fudge his mother made, the jumbo pack of Skittles he'd found at Sam's Club, the troll doll with camouflage hair and pants to match. He liked to tell me all about her "particular brand of fucking," as he'd called it, specialty moves of hers that I knew only too well. So well that I knew when he started to make stuff up. He didn't write many letters; he was more of a candy-and-flowers man. He'd sit at the station between pump calls and write a few I-miss-you's on yellow lined paper. And just last week he told me how the Skittles and the fudge and the mix tape and the rest of it was banned anyway.

"What she got," he said, "was one good look at all the things I'd sent her. Then her sergeant took it away. Worse than me not sending it at all."

Becky has good features but bad skin that she tries to hide with beige makeup. She keeps at least three bottles of that stuff in her bathroom. I've seen it. Contour, she calls it. It works better at night, or in the dark, at bars a few towns over. Becky's barroom eyeliner makes you forget about those bottles of pancake in her bathroom, makes you forget how a close hug from her will more than likely leave a tan rash on your T-shirt. A few years back Becky Barker was co-captain superstar forward of the Lady Tigers, came close to a scoring record. Barker's been a big name in high school field hockey since her older sisters played.

But the first time she took me home she was already over all that. She had a thread of green dental floss strung across her left breast, stuck to the mubs of her sweater, clinging like tinsel to the pillared part below her shoulder, and she gave me one of those hidden, rim-of-the-eye smiles when I asked about her hygiene technique. "Gotta keep the girls plaque-free somehow," she said. She told me she'd started young in the bars, nabbing one of her big sisters' IDs when she was seventeen. No one ever called her on it, even though her picture was in all the papers that season. Ask me, that four-year jumpstart on bar life kept with her and there she was at twenty-four at the same bar looking at least thirty under all that makeup.

Becky's been writing to me since her first week at Basic, saying from the start how she wished she'd wrapped it up with Joey before she left. How she wants me instead of him. How the one thing Basic fails to train you for is what to do with the life you leave back in Mewborn. Last week she said Joey had one more letter coming, and then she'd be free for me, for real. She told me to watch for it, made me promise

to talk to him if he brought it up. She said, "My sergeant says, 'The more you carry, the more you carry.' I don't have room for a troll doll, anyway."

And so I wasted the whole morning looking for clues in his face. At Burger King I waited for him to say something about her, because that was my cue, my lead-in to let him know his personal business with Becky was mine, too. I could see the folded note in the pocket of his T-shirt, the telltale border on the envelope. But he just ate his burger with fries and talked about Friday's game at the high school like nothing had changed, like Becky was still scoring points in her plaid skirt and mouth guard. I waited for it all day and he said not a word, not a word until the spark hit that puddle of oil. Not until he was down on the ground with no face, me kneeling next to him—that's when he talked, right before Arlen came barreling through with his goddamn superman extinguisher. I heard him.

Becky's got a month left of Basic, and then it's off to Aberdeen for ordnance training. Between the training is two weeks at home. She's thinking about going Airborne so she can nab a Fort Bragg assignment, so there'd be but an hour between us. She picked ordnance, she said, because she loves dogs, even the bomb-sniffing ones. She's hinted more than once I should think about a move to Fayetteville. Even though she's in South Carolina and on her way to Maryland. Even though it's the Bragg soldiers they're shipping daily overseas. Even though I wasn't sure I wanted Becky in-the-Daylight. Becky out-of-bars. Becky out-of-bed. I wrote her as much using nicer words, said I wasn't sure I was worth jumping out of a plane for. But I said I'd talk to Joey if she talked to him first.

But then Joey died. I saw him tear across our lot with the welder still on. The oil tank scattered across the bay in white-hot pieces. Bits of it kicked into his skin, turned him to blue fire in seconds. He cooked the palms of his hands trying to pry the goggles from his face.

The rules change after a fuel tank explodes and eyelids burn away and tear ducts are gone and you're kneeling beside your best friend and his face and body have no skin. Becky would understand. In Basic they tell each other stories that end like this, best friends and fire and all. Knowing her, she'll listen to every track on that tape Joey made. She'll make me come pick her up at Fort Jackson and I'll have to hear it all the way home. And at some point, she'll loosen my grip from the stick shift and hold my hand in her lap and won't say a thing about what happened. She'll collar me with her silence and grief and guilt as "Tumbling Dice" moves through us, and that's when I'll know that I'm hers now, that this is the way she'll pull us into public. At Joey's funeral they'll play "I'll Be There for You" straight from the tape and she'll appear in her dress uniform and claim her place as Grieving Girlfriend, and I'll be the Grieving Best Friend and his parents will be real nice to both of us and won't it make sense to everyone for us to find comfort together in our loss? It's just what he would have wanted, she'll tell me, me finishing with her what Joey could not. And how cheap would it be to tell her what a farce that mix tape really is, how Joey borrowed more than half my tape collection and then used my boom box to make it? It's not worth upstaging someone after they're dead.

Which is why she won't ask what we talked about. Which is why I won't tell her that when I knelt by Joey and

told him about Becky in her boots, marching across a swamp in South Carolina, clutching a map, finding a coordinate, on her way back to him, Arlen almost there with the extinguisher, I swear I heard him say it. "I know," he said. "I know."

And what do I know? It was nobody's fault. Even when I thought about what might happen down the line, to her out there and Joey here and me in between, I saw it all working itself out. I didn't see myself looking at what's left of Joey. I didn't see me losing him and her getting me. I still don't see it.

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## Blue of the World

by Douglas W. Milliken

May 24th, 1965

Walked the orchard line with the boy today after the service, from the house to the north end of the property. All the blooms had blown off the limbs so just a foamy wash of white or dried-up yellow petals were left here and there on the ground. Very many small green apples have started, few much bigger than the head of a nail. The trees looked good. I do not much fear a late frost ruining everything that's begun. But in this, I've been wrong before.

The land very slightly inclines to the north here so it was harder going up than coming back. We collected blow-downs as we followed the single straight file of trees, stacking them on a sledge the boy pulled. I brought a saw in case we needed to clear a split limb from a live tree. We needed the saw twice. Mules grazed nearby with the jack donkey in the pasture east of us and after a spell, were joined by the quarter horses. We'd been discovered. Just post and board fence between us and them, they following as we worked the orchard line. We must have been good fun to watch. I

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