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Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon

Dean Bakopoulos

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Please don't come back from the moon

When I was sixteen, my father went to the moon.

He was not the first man from Maple Rock to go there; he only followed the others on what seemed to be an inevitable trail. My uncle John was the first to leave.

The last time we saw John, we were in the parking lot of the Black Lantern, the bar on Warren Avenue where my father and his friends did their drinking. I was there with John's wife, my aunt Maria, and their son, Nick. It was the first day of June, just before midnight. I suppose I should remember if the moon was in the sky that night, but I honestly can't recall. The moon was not yet important. The bar owner, a big Greek named Spiros, had simply called my aunt and said she should come and take John home. Nick and I had been hanging around watching a movie, and she made us come with her.

When we got there, a half circle of men stood in the parking lot, all of them wearing grease-stained work shirts or rumpled dress shirts and loose ties. In the middle of the circle was John, standing with his shirt off in a weary boxer's stance. He was soaked in sweat and his face seemed to be darkened with bruises or dirt. He had not been home for a few nights.

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My father, too, was there. Across the crowded lot, I saw him under a streetlamp, still wearing his tie, two or three pens in his pocket. He looked green in the weak and forced light, as if he might be sick.

Across from John was an enormous man, redhaired and fat-faced. He was wearing coveralls and his skin was dark with grime. He had a crescent wrench in his hand.

My uncle reached into his pocket, and then I must have turned to look at my father again, because the next thing I knew the crowd was screaming and laughing and John had on a pair of brass knuckles. The red-haired guy was on the pavement. He had wet himself. People started to scatter.

My uncle, in the chaos, disappeared. By the time the police came, he and his truck were gone.

'Does anybody know who the assailant was?' an officer yelled at the crowd, which was jeering at him.

Just as my aunt was reaching out to the officer, about to wave her hand and say something - I don't know what - a woman wearing a red halter top and black cutoffs came forward. She was barefoot, and some men whistled at her as she walked in front of the mob. She turned to the crowd and flipped them off, then turned back to the officer and said, 'I know him. He's my boyfriend.'

My aunt Maria walked away. We followed, because we had been waiting for a way to retreat without cowardice. We were too young to join in the fight but too old to flee from it.

For a few weeks that summer, Nick and I positioned ourselves around the city and waited to run into my uncle. We went to the Black Lantern for lunch and sat for three hours, picking at a plate of nachos, looking at the face of every man who came into the bar. We sat outside the mall and drank frozen orange drinks most of the evening, watching girls and waiting for John to walk by eating an ice-cream cone, a shiner darkening each eye. We rode our bikes around the parking lots of motels, strip bars, and movie theaters, looking for his rusted Ford truck, the one with 'Kozak's Sun & Snow: Quality

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Pool Maintenance, Lawn Care, and Snow Removal' hand lettered on each door.

Uncle John didn't come home. The speculation was that he'd gone off to hide somewhere, maybe Canada, perhaps because he thought he had killed the fat red-haired man in the parking lot. But he hadn't. That man simply got a row of stitches and went on his way.

It was a few weeks later that Walker Van Dyke's father left for a fishing trip, muttering something about killing the President, and didn't come back. J. J. Dempsey's dad, who had worked at the nightlight factory, tried to rob the Ukrainian Credit Union the week after the factory went down. He left town directly afterward. Michael Pappas' father, Gus, owner of the recently bankrupted Gus's Coney Island Restaurant, left too.

Our neighbor and my father's best friend, a pipe fitter named Norm Nelson, whose son Jimmy was about my age, also vanished. His Corvette, which his wife had been trying to get him to sell since he'd been laid off, was found wrapped around a tree in Hines Park. Norm was nowhere to be found. There was no blood in the car - it was as if he'd vaporized out of the driver's seat and floated away just as the car wrecked. My father went over and showed Mrs Nelson how to start the lawn mower, change a fuse, set the thermostat. I went with him, and Mrs Nelson kept looking at me and laughing, saying, 'Isn't it silly, Michael, that a grown woman like me doesn't know how to do a goddamn thing?'

By August, as Detroit stewed in a steamy layer of ash and grit so toxic that breathing made you feel stoned or delirious, many of my friends' fathers had disappeared, and as we played baseball or hung out at the bike racks near Wonderland Mall, all of a sudden, some kid would blurt out, 'My dad's gone.'

Some men left in the traditional fashion, slipping out at night, a note left behind. Sonya Stecko, my sometime girlfriend, said her father wrote a rambling sixteen-page letter before he left, in which he affirmed that he loved her, her mother, and her siblings, and in which he offered advice about marriage, money, and other subjects. It was as if he planned to miss the next thirty years of her life.

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