Your Blue-eyed Boy

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Extract

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Prologue

There are things you should know about blackmail, in case it comes tapping at your door. There's what it does to you, and then there's what it makes you do. I used to think I knew what I could be made to do.

Blackmail doesn't work the way I always thought it would, if I ever gave it a thought. It doesn't smash through the clean pane of a life like a stone through a window. It's always an inside job, the most intimate of crimes. Somebody in the house has left that little window open, just a snick. The person who leaves the window open doesn't know why. Or else doesn't want to know. From outside a hand reaches up into the gap, and the window creaks wide. Cold air comes rushing in. I see that hand now, each time I shut my eyes to sleep. Sometimes it's heavy and alien, the hand of a stranger. I can count the hairs on the knuckles. But on other nights I feel the fingers move and I know they are my own.

You have to search for the person who left the window open, down all the alleys of yourself. In the end you'll get there. You'll learn how you betrayed yourself in the moment that seemed like any other moment.

When blackmail comes into your house you can learn to live with it, feeding it as little as you dare, trying to guess what it will take to make it go away before it gets too big. Then you begin to realize that it will never go away. The more you feed it, the stronger it grows. *Why should you feel guilty, unless you've got something to hide? Why should you be afraid? Watch me shake out your life in front of you. You know what's in there, don't you? See what comes.*

Some blackmailers just want money. That's frightening, but

at least you know where you are, and that a wad of used money is what you are talking about. I haven't got money.

The others put on pressure without letting you know what they want. They steer you where you don't want to go, but in a way that's so intimate you have to give in. They know more about you than you know about yourself. The pressure comes from what they don't say. They wait and wait until you can't wait any more, and you'll do anything to know why they've come. It begins to seem like freedom.

When blackmail comes tapping at the door, get up and open it. There'll be no one there. Just the yawn of a black night, with wind in it but no stars. Already there's wind hurrying through the house, licking the back of your knees as you stare out. Where's it coming from? That window at the back. Someone's round there already and through the slender gap like an eel. Already the curtains are whipping up, the doors are buckling, and the floorboards pitch and toss like the planks of a boat.

The wind blows harder and your house begins to move on a sea that was always there, beneath the crust of the land. And you're afraid, but you are beginning to move with it.

One

It's the end of the season now, and the summer visitors are gone, shaping up to their city lives. Some of them come to Annassett each year, and believe they're part of the place, but that's not so. As soon as they slam their car doors and drive away, they're forgotten. The sea closes over the splash they've made.

Now the most perfect days begin, so few that you can weigh each one of them in your hand like a new-laid egg. The nights are cool and the mornings misty, because the sea is warmer than the land. The mist carries a tang of autumn, until the sun strengthens and burns it away. The evenings are bluer now, the sun ripe and yellow as a pear. At the store there are no queues, and there's conversation again, lazy and convalescent. The days smell of dried seaweed and tar and anti-fouling paint and new sweet wood planed away in long shavings. There's the whine of a drill, the steady rasp of the plane. Simone sits back on her heels on the dock and watches Michael as he applies paint in long, supple strokes. He's repainting the cabin exterior on the Boesaks' cabin cruiser. The Boesaks are back in New York. Michael sweeps the brush, and Simone listens to the sound it makes, like the lick of a rough tongue. She shivers, though it is warm in the pool of sun where she sits. The boat, the heat, the smell of paint: it all belongs to them now. She squints and watches the muscles in Michael's forearm. He is precise. A fine workman; he has that reputation. He turns to look at her. Sunlight is getting onto the water now, making it dance. He shades his eyes with the hand that doesn't hold the brush. Does he smile? Maybe he smiles. He turns back to

his work. She watches him. His hair has slipped forward round his face. If she was nearer she would smell the sun on him, his sweat and the T-shirt she brought in from the porch rail that morning, damp, but he put it on anyway. It smelled of night air.

Michael's got plenty of work lined up for the winter. People from the city ask him why he stays here in Annassett. It's beautiful and they love it, but a little place like this must be dead in winter. And most of the young people move away. Kids go to college and they don't come back. Michael looks up at them from whatever he's doing, though his hands don't stop their work.

'I already went away. That's why I'm back,' he says, and then usually they don't ask any more, because they know a bit of the story. It's their story too. They watch the way his hands move and they want Michael working on their boat, not anyone else.

The season's nearly over. There's time for the jobs that can't be done when the boats are out every day. The privately owned boats, and the fishing boats and tourist boats that have to be out all day long during the summer months, making the money to last the winter. In the mornings Simone's bare legs are cold as she runs down to the boathouse.

Everybody's going home, but not Simone. She'll stay on through the apple season and the pumpkin season, waiting until the rowing-boats are hauled up on shore and the boathouse is padlocked. She tucks her feet under her. She sighs. There is the dock with its pale, washed-out wood, the sea that scarcely moves but glistens like a great creature that has risen up to breathe. If she looks close she will see its flanks moving. It is full of fish, and whales that pass without stopping, far out to sea, going south. Is that true? She doesn't know what's true any more, only what Michael has told her.

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The work is over. It's night, and they are in the boathouse, stretched out on the faded orange canvas cushions Michael's shoved together to make their bed. They couldn't walk as far as the cabin. He's stretched beside her, his long hair sliding down his face as he sleeps. His body jerks. One hand thumps on the cushion, and then goes still. A shudder runs through his flesh. It's like this every night. His face clenches and he cries out to people who aren't here or anywhere any more. She won't tell him about it in the morning, because he doesn't want to know. Sometimes he calls out names, but to Simone they are just words.

Simone leans over Michael. She sees the sheen on his face, caught by the thin moonlight that comes through the boathouse door. She catches the sharp, animal stink of his night sweat. She listens to the waves cluck against the stones outside in the dark. Tide's up. It'll be dawn soon. The wind is gathering, as it often does just before dawn. It pushes at the water, rocks the boats, sets up ringing in the masts, and a nervous slapping of water against the hulls.

She lies back. They stumbled in here last night. They knew they wouldn't get as far as the cabin. Her legs were shaking and she could barely stand. They'd drunk a jug of white wine but it wasn't that. They'd been standing down on the shore, on the edge of the water, watching the blackness of it before the moon came up. She felt the land prickling at her back, and thought that if she turned round there wouldn't be anything left that she knew. No dock, no boathouse, no clumps of light where the town was, no straggle of lights along the bay and around to the point. There would be nothing. The land would be furred by forest, and in the forest the ancient Indian towns would sleep with their crops around them, alive and breathing. The hugeness of the land crept up on her like grandmother's footsteps. She was cold, though they stood close together by the edge of the water, like one body.

*

Simone is cold now. She thinks of the heat of the night, the wet, slippery channels of their flesh, his cries. But sometimes in the morning he acts as if none of it ever happens. She sighs but doesn't move, because she'll do anything rather than wake him.

By noon it's warm. Michael has his hand on her thigh.

'C'mon, Simone,' he says. 'Don't be this way.'

The boathouse door is open, looking out onto a white square of sea and sky. Pasted across the square of light is the outline of a man's body, long lean legs, skinny torso, hands fondling a small black box. Calvin. He was meant to be in Boston the whole week, but he came back at ten o'clock that morning. He can't leave them alone. Like Michael, Calvin is ten years older than Simone. They graduated from high school together the same year. Bright boys, could have been college boys. They had everything it takes. But they went to Vietnam, and now they stay here through the summers and the dead winters, hiring themselves out to the city people and their boats.

Eight-year-old Simone watched them on TV. Or if not them, close enough to make no matter. She watched them run. Every night she saw the map that told the world where they were. She watched rows of kids surge at the camera on college campuses as they protested the draft. She always turned the TV up as loud as she dared. TV was a blanket, and she wrapped herself up in it while her mother's quick tread snapped the air in the background. Her mother walked fast from room to room, checking, switching the lights on then letting back the dark. She had to see the things in the rooms in order to believe they were still there. The TV blared and Simone crouched with her sister, colouring in homework maps of Britain in Roman times, not really watching.

Now Simone believes it is wrong to see so much and under-

stand so little. But it's the way things are, since Vietnam. The world is scabbed with TV wars. Dimly she recalls kids with flowers, offering them to the barrels of guns. She does not like to say anything. It is Michael's war, and Calvin's, not hers. They went to war in front of the cameras. They could not make history in the dark. When they brought their story home people looked at them and said, *We already know.* And they didn't want to know any more.

'We didn't protest the war,' says Michael.

'No sir,' says Calvin. 'We registered for the draft.'

They look at Simone and smile.

'Why didn't we?' asks Calvin.

'There ain't no time to wonder why,' says Michael.

Often she thinks he's telling her something, but then she finds out he is only quoting a song she doesn't know. The thing about being ten years younger is that for her all the music is different. And them being Americans makes a difference too. She'll do anything to hide that difference. She's learned to listen, to smile and say nothing. She's their girl. They like it when she says in her English voice, 'Would you like some coffee?' then makes it and curls up quiet as a cat on the plank boathouse floor. They talk about music and grass and who Calvin would like to fuck. Once Simone saw them watching a girl walk across the beach. She wore a blue bikini and she had a sheet of shining black hair that caught the wind and flew straight out behind her. Simone cleared her throat and said, 'Hasn't she got lovely hair?'

'Oh yeah,' mimicked Calvin. '*Lovely hair.* Just what I was looking at. Ain't that just what you were looking at too, man?' And Michael laughed. He was always doing this to her when Calvin was around. As if the bond with Calvin was too tight to make room for Simone. He would look at Simone as if she was one of the visitors too and he was waiting for her to go away, leaving things here the way they'd always been. But it

didn't matter, because when it was just the two of them together, Michael and Simone, he was back to himself.

He could have done anything he wanted. So could Calvin. But they stay here and they don't go to college, though they could run a fucking ring round most of those Ivy League kids. They say they're too old to leave Annassett now. They're twenty-eight years old.

'Why don't you go?' asks Simone, maternal. Calvin looks out at the sea and the bobbing boats and says, 'I like it here. It's pretty.' And he grins, but it is Michael he's looking at, not Simone.

Michael doesn't say he likes it here. When an owl cries, out of the wood, he tells Simone it's a barn owl. He shows her the tracery of Indian walls buried in milkweed and poison ivy. Once when they were fishing he pointed through the slumberous depths of the pond. She saw nothing.

'Come here. You're not getting it, that's the way the light bends.'

Suddenly she saw a great fish peel away from shadow and coast through the water.

'Trout. They grow big here.'

His hand was warm and tight on her shoulder, burning through the thin cotton of her T-shirt as she leant out to watch the fish slide back into its hole.

'Have you ever caught one that big?' she asked.

'Yeah.'

They watched the fish until it turned back into a shadow and disappeared. Michael began to talk, his voice light in her ear.

'I had a dream last night. I dreamed about this little kid.'

'Who?' she asked quickly, wanting him not to tell her. She was afraid of his dreams.

'There was this little kid used to hang around us while we played basketball. He was always there. Big eyes staring at

everyone, never said anything. All the kids hated him. We passed the ball and it would always be way up over his head. He'd jump as high as he could but he'd never get to touch it. Somebody'd laugh, then we'd all be laughing at him, tipping the ball down low so he'd nearly get a touch then whipping it up in the air again. You should have seen that ball move. We never got ball control like that any other time, only when the kid was there. He never cried, just kept on jumping up.

'One day this big guy, Jimmie Walsh, finally got tired of it. He came to the game with a packing-case. None of us knew what it was for. After we'd been playing a while and the kid kept on jumping, Jimmie took the packing-case over to the basketball hoop. Then he grabbed the kid and swung him up in the air and climbed onto the packing-case, holding him. He stuffed the kid through the basketball hoop. He just about fit. You'd think his weight would tear the ring off the wall, but it didn't. "Come on, you guys," Jimmie said, and we all followed him. I looked back and the kid still wasn't crying. Just hanging there with those black eyes like bubbles staring after us. Jimmie didn't say a thing and none of the rest of us opened our mouths.'

'How old was he?'

'We were all about twelve, I guess.'

'I mean the little boy.'

I think he isn't going to answer, then he moistens his lips and says, 'Six. About six.'

'But it wasn't you who did it. It was Jimmie Walsh.'

'But I liked it. When Jimmie did those things, it gave me a warm feeling. A sexy feeling. That's why I hung around with him, because I knew he would do those things and give me those feelings. You don't work it out like that when you're a kid, but that was the way it was.'

They were both quiet. Sun splashed through thick leaves, onto the surface of the pond, making patterns that hid what was there in the water.

'Did you go back?' she asked suddenly.

He stooped, picked up a stone, let it fall in the deep water. The ripples rocked then seemed to swallow themselves, to make the pond still again.

'Yeah,' he said. 'He's still in the basketball hoop, right? Slipping down with his own weight and it's getting tight. And he's scared now, but I think he's trying not to make a noise in case we come back. Those big bug eyes staring at me. Even more scared now I'd come back. And I got up on the packing-case and I tried to lift him out of there but I couldn't. He was too heavy. And I wasn't as tall as Jimmie Walsh. I'd haul him up and he'd slip down and each time it would be harder to pull him up again, out of the hoop. Then he started making this little noise like he couldn't hold it in any more. I looked at his face and it was twisted up and there was stuff bubbling out of his nose. He didn't know why I was lifting him up. It was like he believed I wanted to – '

Michael paused.

'You were trying to help him, but he didn't know it,' said Simone.

'Yeah, well,' said Michael. 'I guess he saw it another way. Fuck it. Why would I think of it after all this time?'

The camera. Calvin lifts the camera.

'Hey, man, lemme get my jeans on,' protests Michael. There is a thin grey blanket over Michael and Simone. It has slipped down over Simone's breasts but she is too embarrassed to pull it up again. Besides, she's used to Calvin coming in like this.

'Good picture,' says Calvin, squinting at the viewfinder. '*Go-ood* picture.'

Simone sneaks a glance at Michael. He's smiling, enjoying this.

'You got flash on that thing, man?' he asks.

'Sure. You want me to take some pictures?'

'What do you think?' Michael asks, turning to Simone with that look of false, teasing solicitude that only comes on his face when Calvin is here. 'You'll be going back home to England soon, won't you? How about some pictures to take back with you?'

Simone opens her mouth. Just in time, she stops herself from bleating out, 'I'm not going back' in front of Calvin. Calvin mustn't see what Simone hopes for. She pictures the winter wind flailing round the cabin in town, a fire lit and Michael striding in. He shakes the snow off his shoulders, his face softening as he sees Simone stitching his shirt-buttons on, the lamp-light a pool of melting gold on her hair. His voice is charged, husky.

'Simone –'

The two of them, the closed door. Nightmare relaxing into dream.

Calvin knows nothing. He doesn't hear Michael at night, roused from nightmare, clutching at her hair, her breasts.

Simone says nothing. She pleats the edge of the blanket and waits for Michael.

'Yeah,' he says, 'yeah.' He reaches over Simone, and takes the edge of the blanket. Slowly, looking her straight in the eye, he peels back the blanket.

'Michael!' she protests, snapping her legs together. But he pulls the blanket right away to the other side of their bed.

'Cool,' says Calvin. 'That's cool.' His spidery outline dances over them. The snout of the camera protrudes this way and that. 'You look beautiful, man.'

A little stringent part of Simone comes to life, wonders if this is singular or plural, then dies down again to the dormancy where it's spent the whole summer. The camera probes the white triangle that Michael's swimming shorts don't cover. The stir of his genitals. Their flesh touching, thigh to thigh. Simone rolls a little sideways to present the safe hairless curve of the

classic nude. Calvin is much too close now, on top of them. The camera flashes, blue and white. She flinches, expecting a sound, a crackle like thunder.

'Relax, baby. Relax,' says Michael. He rolls her back. The camera shoots again and again. Suddenly Michael coils and gets up, stands beside Calvin. 'Lemme see, man.' Calvin passes him the camera, and Michael peers at the viewfinder. Simone flinches. Calvin is making Michael see what he sees.

'You need to get closer,' says Calvin.

'No closer,' says Simone.

'Please baby. Listen. It's OK if it's me taking the pictures, hunh?' wheedles Michael.

Calvin folds his arms, watching, as Michael takes the camera and kneels down in front of Simone.

'What do I do, Cal? Do I press here?'

'You gotta change the focus first.'

The two men kneel, intent on the gadget.

'I got it. Hey, relax. It's me, remember? Come on. You're so beautiful,' he croons. 'You're a beautiful chick, Simone. Give me a good shot now.'

She hates the language, the language of Michael and Calvin. But his voice melts her. She's yielding, giving way, spreading her legs for him like she always does. Calvin's nothing now but a shape in the background, out of focus. The camera flares but this time she doesn't flinch.

'That's it,' says Michael. 'That's the reel finished.'