

## Even in Kyoto

I went to live with Uncle Tate when they took my father to Westgate. I was glad to go. Uncle Tate treated me like an adult. He let me smoke in the house and drink beer, and he didn't give a shit about poetry. Some nights, when there wasn't anything good on the television, Uncle Tate would even make fun of it. He'd walk around the trailer, point to things like the muddy doormat or the pile of dishes on the counter, then, just like my father used to do, Uncle Tate would bite his knuckles and pretend to cry. After a few beers, it was hilarious. I'm not saying poetry's crap or nothing like that, it's just that when you grow up with a poet for a father, you sort of get sick of everything being so damn important, of everything having some kind of meaning.

The first time Uncle Tate made fun of my father, I kind of wet myself from laughing so hard. I mean it didn't really gush out or nothing, but enough got out to form a wet spot on my pants about the size of a hamburger. Uncle Tate didn't think that was too cool and got real serious when he noticed. He slapped me in the back of the head and said, "Watch it, boy, or you'll be just like him." Uncle Tate seemed to worry about that, about me being like my father, but I didn't see what the problem was, I mean there was no way I was going to be a poet, and besides my father wasn't all that messed up. I knew a bunch of kids with more messed up fathers than mine, but Uncle Tate grew up sharing a room with my dad, and I guess that means something.

When I was a senior, my English textbook had a poem in it by my father. No one knew it was my father though because me and Uncle Tate lived in Mississippi then, far away from him. We studied the poem and my teacher said a bunch of stuff about it that sounded a lot like the same type of stuff my father used to say when he'd try to tell me about poetry. We were supposed to write an essay then, but I didn't do it, which nobody noticed because I hardly ever did anything in high school. Looking back

on it, I probably could have written a killer essay being so familiar with my father and all, but I guess I was afraid. I mean it's not easy when you're a kid and somebody tells you to do something. And add to that, having someone tell you to do something when they don't know anything about what you know about it, and I guess it's pretty natural for a kid not to do it.

That night, when me and Uncle Tate were eating fast food and watching television, I told him how my father's poem was in the English textbook at school. He got real mad, like when I pissed my pants, and for a second I thought maybe he was going to try and whip me, but I guess he figured I was too big for that shit, and instead he just yelled a bunch about how my father leeches off the system and gets famous while he's got to pick up trash all the time and live in a shitty trailer with me. It wasn't my fault, I told him, and then I left. I could hear him breaking crap before I even made it down the steps. Uncle Tate got like that every once in a while. It's like his shitty life would just build up over a couple of months and then something little would push him over the edge. I can't blame him really. I mean picking up other people's trash for a living ain't my idea of a life either. But, anyway, I knew that he'd settle down in a day or so, he always did, and I'd usually just go hang out with some guys I knew until things settled, but that night, I guess because of the poem in my English textbook and all, I started to think about my father and to wonder how they were treating him. I'd recently watched *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* for a book report I had to do at school, and I started wondering if that was the way things were at Westgate.

Uncle Tate had a couple hundred dollars in the bank, and I still had his cash card from the night he sent me to get cigarettes. I hit *\$50.00 Fast Cash* until the machine wouldn't give me any more. Instead of blowing the money on beer and shit with my friends like I would normally do, I stuffed the bills in my pocket and decided to hitch to Texas and see my father. Like I said, I was kind of curious about Westgate,

plus I figured he'd probably like to know my English teacher was making kids write essays about his poem.

The first guy who gave me a ride was driving an Oldsmobile sedan. It was a real nerd car, but when you hitch, you take what you can get. The guy had on dress pants and a button shirt and his hair was all neatly combed. I figured he was some business guy or something like that. He told me his name was Parker and that he was a salesman on his way to Houston. I told him I was headed to Austin to get a job in a band. He looked at me when I said that like he knew I was lying, but he let it go and we drove on in silence for a couple of hours. Parker smoked a big cigar while he drove. Smoke doesn't bother me, I mean I smoke cigarettes when I have money to buy them, but Parker didn't open his window while he smoked. He just left the air conditioner on and even though it was blowing in some fresh air, by the time Parker was done with his cigar, I could hardly see the windshield. I don't know how Parker kept the car out of the ditch with all the smoke and all, but I guess he was used to it.

Eventually the smoke thinned out a bit, and Parker asked me if I liked girly magazines. He motioned to four or five *Hustlers* on the back seat. I looked at one for a while while Parker started telling me about all the girls in the magazine like he had it memorized or something. I mean even before I'd turn the page, he'd say shit like, "Wait till you see her on the next page," or, "That there's Candy's best pose in the magazine." When I got done looking through the magazine, Parker touched my thigh and asked me if I wanted to get off. He said he didn't mind just watching, that he knew how those magazines could get a guy going and all. I just said I wasn't really into that shit and moved a little closer to my door. When Parker stopped to get gas, I told him I was going to hang out for a while and that he should go on without me. He kind of seemed disappointed in a way. I guess he was pretty lonely driving by himself to Houston. I wasn't all that freaked out by him though. I mean if you hang in the malls for long enough, you eventually meet perverts like Parker. The weird thing is that you never

can spot them. You'd think the freaks would be the crazy guys with smelly clothes and missing teeth, but the truth is, it's the normal looking guys who screw with kids, the ones who wear ordinary clothes and look like they live in some nice house with a happy family. I guess these guys just got nothing else to do. I mean take Uncle Tate, he works all the time just to get by, he doesn't have the time to go screwing with kids.

After I got out of the car, I walked for awhile until I got out of town and then decided to crash in this unworked field beside the road. The tall grasses were moist enough to give under me and make a pretty nice bed, nicer than my bed at Uncle Tate's anyway. Lying on my back in that grassy field with four hundred dollars in my pocket felt good. It was kind of like what I think Heaven must be, having plenty of money, and no one hassling you about anything. I looked at the sky and watched the last of the daylight slip away and the stars begin to shine. After a while the moon came over my head and I began thinking about how my father and me would look for faces in the moon when I was little. I remembered how, when I was little, my father would wake me up in the middle of night, and we'd sneak out to the yard, lie on our backs, and talk to the moon faces. Mom was alive then, and if she caught us, she'd give my father and me a bunch of crap about school nights and all. As I looked up at that full moon that night, I recognized many of the faces that I had first seen back then with my father and just for fun I talked to a few of them. I kind of felt silly talking to them, but there wasn't anybody around and I was sort of cold. Then I started thinking how weird it was that with so much time passed, with so many people dead, that the same faces were still in the moon, and it was there in that field, with the back of my t-shirt growing damp from the tall grass, with all those thoughts and faces coming back into my head, that I understood the poem in my English textbook by my father; it was there that I knew my father didn't belong in Westgate, that he belonged out here with me, looking at the faces in the moon. I lay there for most of the night and just looked at the moon and tried to remember everything I ever did with my father. I couldn't

remember it all, but it was good anyway, and right before I fell asleep I saw my father's face in the moon: he was smiling.

When I woke, the moon was long gone, and my back hurt from sleeping on the ground. The day was overcast and rainy, and I was shivering. Rain was dripping from my forehead when this old guy stopped his rusty Ford pick-up and asked me if I needed a lift. I ran my fingers through my hair like a squeegee and climbed in. I figured this guy was too weird looking to be dangerous, and it turned out I was right.

His name was Silas, he had really thin gray hairs and a few patches of whiskers that he must have missed while he was shaving. He wore old work pants and a flannel shirt. His truck was a mess, littered with empty cigarette packs, used Styrofoam cups and old yellowish papers all over the place. There were also all sorts of small hand tools like screwdrivers and sockets that made a bunch of noise as they rattled around the floor. He had a gun rack mounted over the back window, but he wasn't carrying a gun on it. There was a pack of generic cigarettes on the dash.

“Mind?”

“Go ahead.” He pushed in the lighter, and I waited for it to pop before I reached for the pack. The nicotine hit me hard, the way it does when you haven't smoked in a few days, and if I wasn't already sitting down, I would've needed to while I got used to smoking again.

“Where ya headed?”

“I'm going to Texas, Austin, Texas.”

“That right? I ain't been to Texas in thirty years. Used to know a girl lived in Texas. Day was when I'd drive clear all the way there just for a night with her. Yes sir, you betcha. Funny thing is I don't even remember her name now, which just goes to show you what's important, don't it? I can't remember her name, but I can remember why I went.” Silas started laughing and wheezing at the same time and for a second I

figured he'd run right off the road. "Well, today ain't your lucky day. I'm just going into town. I ain't going to Texas."

When he pulled up to a beat, old bar, I followed him in and sat with him while we each drank three bottles of beer. I had never had beer that early in the morning before, and it seemed a little weird, but after the first one, and a few more cigarettes, it was all right. I offered to pay for the beers, and Silas let me. When we left the joint, I told him that he'd better let me drive on account of him drinking and being old and everything. He laughed and climbed into the passenger seat. I drove around the town a bit and listened to Silas trying to figure out why he'd come to town in the first place. After about an hour of just circling around, I stopped at this gas station, filled up the tank, and asked the clerk how to get on to the highway. It wasn't hard, and before Silas really figured out where I was going, I was doing eighty on the interstate, five hundred miles from Austin in a rusty Ford pick-up.

Silas was really yanked when he came around and realized where we were and all. "You good-for-nothing little f-er. I got things to do today." He pushed in the lighter and grabbed his smokes from the dash. "You'd best turn this truck 'round right now or your ass is going to jail, and don't think I won't do it. I know a guy who's brother is a County Sheriff and maybe you don't know about this, but County Sheriffs is the meanest sons-of-bitches around."

I told him I was sorry and all, but that I needed to get to Austin and that that was that. I told him that if I was going to get arrested later, I'd deal with it when it happened. I did feel kind of bad, I mean taking his truck and forcing him to go where he didn't want to go, but I didn't really see too many other ways to do it. He kind of just gave in then, like an old dog that's used to getting beat or something. I mean it barks real mean at first, and then when it sees you're going to land your boot square into its belly, it stops barking and kind of cowers back. Silas was like that. He was real mad with all those threats, but then I guess he figured he wasn't going to get nothing

his way so he just sort of sat there and took it. He did cheer up a little though when he remembered the six pack I'd bought at the gas station. He popped one. "So what's so damn important about Austin that you're willing to fuck up an old guy's day for?"

"I'm going to visit my old man."

"Shit, you must really be a dumb ass to risk all this trouble over your old man. Here I was thinking you had some big ol' important thing to do in Austin, something so important that you was willing to get yourself in a shitload of trouble over, and you go and say something stupid like that. I mean I ain't never knowed an old man who was worth his weight in salt. As far as I'm concerned they're all a bunch of no good lousy assholes." Silas got real serious then, like the truck and all wasn't no longer important, but what he was going to tell me was. He kind of turned on the seat so he was looking at me. "Look kid, whoever your old man is, he ain't worth the trouble. You know how many people there are around here who are fucked up because of their fathers. Take this guy I know named Karl. Karl's got a big ol' scar right down the center of his face from where his old man whipped him with a steel wire when he was just a little kid. He still don't know what he did to get that wire across his face, his old man never would tell'm." Silas took a drag from his cigarette. "Then there was this kid I used to mess around with named Paul, his old man beat him so many times that he ended up going nuts and moving to a home somewheres in West Virginia. Fuck, nearly everyone I ever knew was somehow screwed up because of their fathers. And we got it easy, I mean at least we ain't their daughters. So take it from me, if'n you already got this far away from your old man, you're damn lucky. Ain't nothing to go back for 'cept a bunch more crap." Silas was trembling. I started feeling sorry for him after that. I mean it sounded like he was pretty messed up and here was me, this little punk, stealing his truck and blowing down the highway.

"Listen, I know you probably don't give a shit about what some old drunk gets to say, but I ain't stupid. I went to school for a while, and although I don't look like

much now, I had a good honest job driving a lift for almost thirty years till they canned me on account of being too old. And I had a lot of women in those thirty years. But boy, I ain't never had no children by any of those women, and that's a fact. But don't think I ain't thought about having no kids. I thought about it all the time, but then I'd think about fathers and that was that." He hit his cigarette and tossed the butt out the window. "I'll tell you something. When I was fourteen I left home to live with my aunt and uncle. For the next twenty years I never seen or heard from my old man. My mother'd write me sometimes, but she'd not even say nothing about him. And all that time, in my mind, I was forgetting' what a piece of shit he was. I was pretending he was this all right guy who took a wrong turn, that deep down he really cared about me. And after a while, I started believing that. It was easy 'cause I hadn't seen nothing of him in so long. He could be whatever I wanted him to be. So when my mom wrote me that he was in the hospital and that I should come see him because he probably was going to pass, I told the foreman I had to go, and I went. But you know what I found when I got there? I found a dirty old drunk who didn't even know my name. The last thing I did with my father before he died was to help him hold a bottle of booze to his mouth."

As much as I hated to admit it, Silas was starting to make sense. My father, the great crazy poet, Joseph Rathbone, what if he didn't want me to visit him at Westgate? Then what? Then it really would be over. The whole faces in the moon, the whole way I remembered him, would be over. I mean look at Silas. He was probably doing all right for a while and then he went to see his dad and it ruined everything. I started thinking maybe memories are better. I mean why risk it. Sure my father wasn't exactly going to win no Father-of-the-Year award, but like I said before, all in all he wasn't that bad, just a little weird. Hell, maybe now he just lays in bed like the lobotomy guys in the movie. Or maybe he's like the Big Chief, faking like he's deaf and dumb in which case

he wouldn't even be able to let me know what was going on on account of maybe blowing his game.

I pulled off at the next exit and me and Silas found a little beat country bar off the highway a couple miles and sat there drinking beer until the place closed. We were the only people in the joint for most of the time, and the bartender told us he didn't care if we kept the Ford parked there overnight. We slept in the bed of the truck, and I tried to show some of the moon faces to Silas before he fell asleep, but he couldn't see them.

In the morning we drove back, and Silas agreed to take me all the way to Uncle Tate's trailer providing I paid for the gas which I did and I even bought him a few twelve packs of beer for the return trip. When we got to the trailer, I told Silas how I was sorry about messing up whatever plans he had had and all. "It's all right boy," Silas said, "I used to mess things up too." I climbed out of the truck and waved to Silas. He smiled, opened a beer can, dropped the shifter into drive and pulled away.