

What Almost Could Have Been  
Recollections of High School  
by  
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Spring: The Baptism of a Country Boy

Freshly plowed fields swept past my windshield as I drove down the poorly paved road. The rusty shocks of my '90 Chevy Corsica amplified every pothole and rock. I had risen from bed to discover another dreary morning of steady rain, but just after lunch the sun had emerged for the first time since Easter. By late afternoon the sky was a bright blue canvas playfully dotted with fluffy clouds. A warm breeze had started blowing in from the southwest. I had showered, shaved and carefully selected my wardrobe for the evening. There was still a hint of winter as it hit my face through the open window.

I was driving into town to pick up Jen for a night in the country. Nicole had called around and invited a group of us out to her place for the evening. Her new boyfriend and Tom had spent the early afternoon setting up a dance floor on the half acre of land between the house and the pond. They were preparing for a night of outdoor swing dancing under some old Christmas lights. When our legs grew tired from dancing we would sit by the pond in some broken lawn chairs until the chilly midnight winds forced us inside.

I really enjoyed our friends; they loved us unconditionally, and we returned their love. Affection honestly and freely given rather than clumsily stolen through trickery or drunkenness.

I looked oddly out of place as I stepped out of my Corsica. My well fitting jacket, hat, and tie, brought to mind the image

of a 1930's hepcat. I looked anachronistically foolish when I stood next to the brand new Ford F-150 sitting in Jen's driveway. That truck was her father's pride and joy; his new third child. It proved to him that he was still a country boy from Wisconsin and not the suburban father he had become. Jen's father and I did not get along. There were only two topics on which we could hold a civil conversation: the weather and football; and sometimes even the weather was a little too controversial.

As I walked in the front door he glanced up from his computer. "How are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Pretty good. I'm glad the weather broke so we could get out tonight."

Her father briefly looked out the window as he stood and took several long strides toward me.

"It's gonna rain again in a couple hours," he warned.

"Oh yeah?" I said and then without thinking added "When I checked a little while ago it was supposed to be dry through Monday morning."

"Where did you hear that?" he asked sharply.

"The Weather Channel." I answered.

"Oh, they don't know anything; those New Yorkers. They don't understand the weather like we do. They don't see the sky and smell the air. Locked up in their skyscrapers all day, hunched over their computers. You need to actually look at the clouds to know the weather. I have half a mind to start my own TV station to give people the real weather reports."

He kept talking but I stopped listening. Jen had just come down the hall in a thin red sundress. I was amazed at how delightfully it clung to her. She quietly twirled for me as her father, whose back was to her, kept talking. I attentively watched the way the dress flared up and revealed her knees and a hint of thigh.

Jen's father turned and noticed that I was admiring his daughter's legs.

"I think it's a bit chilly for that dress," her father coldly charged.

"Oh, I've got a jacket," Jen countered as she pulled a sheer bolero over her shoulders.

Jen's mom chimed in from the kitchen, "They'll be fine."

I took Jen's hand and started for the door. "She'll be home before midnight," I announced.

"Bye," Jen called from the doorway. She waved to her parents over her shoulder.

"You kids have fun." I could faintly hear Jen's mom call as the screen door slammed shut and we hurried to the car. Her father grumbled something indiscernible.

I opened the passenger side door for Jen and hurried around the car. I slid into my seat and was buckling my seatbelt when Jen asked "So...how was my dad?"

"Good, mostly. We only talked about the weather. I'm saving the NFL draft for tomorrow at lunch."

"You'd hate to run out of material," she said.

"It gets really quiet and uncomfortable when I do," I responded.

She rolled her eyes, "That's okay."

"I know," I said as I gently placed my hand on her upper thigh. I could feel the smooth silkiness of her dress rub against her perfect skin.

"I love you." I said as I pulled out of her father's driveway.

The trees stretching out over our heads were just beginning to bud with spring foliage as we drove out of town. The patchwork of fields on the horizon was slowly being filled in with the spring planting. The hog lots were full of newly born piglets greedily suckling. I remember those images but not our words. It does not really matter much what we talked about; it did not matter then and it does not matter now. What mattered was that we were together.

Twelve miles out of town I turned off of Highway 1 onto a gravel road. We quickly came to an intersection with a dirt road and I turned again.

"I'm going to take a shortcut but it's been raining a lot so let me know if you see anything that says the road's closed," I said as I gained speed going down the road.

"The road is closed."

"Yes. Let me know if you see anything that says the road's closed."

"No. The road IS closed." She said louder as she pointed out the windshield. I gasped.

Ahead of us stretched a bog of mud and ruts. It was obvious that many people had tried to pass this way in the last few days, and it was equally obvious that most of them had failed.

There was an instant in which I had to make a decision. I knew my Corsica could never stop in time. I gunned the engine thinking that if I could make it the forty yards to the crest of the hill surely I could get down the other side. We hit the mud and started swerving wildly across the road; the car slid in and out of ruts. We were losing traction and quickly slowing. We reached the crest of the hill and my heart sank; I hit the breaks. Ahead of us was another hundred yards of mud with a small trickling stream flowing across in the middle. We would not be getting to the other side.

"Why didn't you stop when I said the road was closed?" Jen asked.

"I didn't think you were serious," I responded. "I thought you were just repeating what I said."

Jen was still for a moment.

"No," she said quietly. "There was a sign that said the road was closed."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked accusingly.

"I DID! Then I just figured you knew what you were doing."

Feelings of anger and frustration washed over me.



"Ok," I sighed with exasperation. "Let's try to get out of this."

I slammed my hand against the steering wheel to try and release some of my frustration. I opened the door and looked at the brown sticky mud inches below the frame of my Corsica. I stood up, took my jacket off and laid it in the back seat. I unknotted my tie and handed it to Jen.

"You steer and I'll try to push us backward." I said in a less than kind voice.

Twenty minutes of revving engines and spinning tires ended with me covered in mud, and the car unmoved.

I leaned against the open driver side window. "Well, my house is about a mile and a half back that way. We should probably go there so I can change. We can borrow my parents' car." I took my dress shirt off, turned it inside out and tied it around my waste. "Let me carry you through the mud and then we can walk."

I was silent as I carried Jen over the mud. When we reached solid ground I put her down. It annoyed me when she reached out and held my hand as we started to walk back along the gravel road. I did not want to be holding her hand. I was angry and embarrassed; I couldn't even drive her to our party. I was mad that my clothes were filthy and splattered with mud. A dark cloud hung over me and I grumbled occasionally under my breath. Jen walked in silence.

When we reached my house she explained our situation to my

parents who chuckled quietly. I gave Jen the phone so she could call Nicole to say we would be late. I excused myself and went to my room to change. I was just pulling a clean pair of pants on when there was knock on the door and Jen came in.

"I brought your tie and jacket from the car."

I had been so embarrassed at getting us stuck and having to walk back that I never noticed she had thought to carry my stuff. I am such a jerk.

I stood there as she carefully tied my tie around my neck.

"Nicole's dad is going to go around with his tractor and pull your car out," she said. "They told me you weren't the first person to be stuck there today. I expect they should be dropping your car off here in about twenty minutes. Then we can go to the party." She finished my tie and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

She tilted her head as she examined the knot and then patted my shoulder. She turned toward the door. As she walked back out to the living room she turned to me and silently mouthed the words, "I love you."

When we arrived at the party there were already a half dozen couples there. Tom jumped down from the wagon he had been sitting on.

"Did you think you were going to get all the way through?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," I replied with mock confidence. Tom just shook his head.

"The music is playing and the Mt Dew is in the cooler."

We found a hay bale table and Jen laid her jacket on one of the chairs. Immediately she pulled me out onto the dance floor. She loved swing music. We were the first couple on the floor but by the end of the song Nicole and her new boyfriend had joined us.

In no time a dozen songs had been played and everyone was dancing. Couples danced solos and everyone watched and clapped and then returned to their own dancing. Soon partners were being traded to pair up the best dancers. Jen and Nicole's boyfriend were the best of the group and they flung each other around the floor in the twilight. Nicole and I danced for a while but then broke apart.

Eventually, I took a seat at our table made of hay. I watched Jen, drank my Mt Dew, and listened to the music. A cat poked his head out of the barn. He looked around for a moment and decided nothing of interest was going on. He wandered into an unplowed field still littered with the stubble of last year's corn.

Jen breathlessly ran over and held out her hand.

"Come with me," she said.

"No. I don't think I can dance anymore."

"Come on," she said more insistently.

"I don't want to dance." I said a little annoyed.

"We're not going to dance," she said through a smile.

"What..."

"Don't ask."

I took her hand. She pulled a blanket off of one of the bales of hay and we ran hand in hand down the hill and toward the pond. We ran onto short wooden pier. Jen dropped the blanket and in one motion pulled her dress off over her head. She looked back at me.

"We're going swimming."

"It's going to be cold," I said. She kicked off her underwear.

"Then you better hurry in and warm me up."

With those words she jumped naked into the pond. She disappeared under the water; the waves cresting on the surface the only evidence of where she had gone. Then her head burst back up over the water. Her eyes were closed and her hands instinctively reached up to push her hair out of her face. She looked radiant.

She gasped. "It is cold...come on!"

I took my clothes off with a bit more care than she had taken. I stopped and stood at the side of the pier for a moment.

"I'm sorry I wasn't listening to you earlier at the road."

I said quietly. "I'm sorry about the way I acted afterward too."

"That's okay. I understand."

I stepped down the wooden ladder into the water. I was surprised at how cold it really was. When I reached the bottom I

felt Jen's arms wrap around me as she pressed herself against my back.

She whispered in my ear, "I bet you can't catch me."

In an instant she pushed me under the water and began frantically swimming away. I chased her around the pond pretending I could not catch her. Each time I got close my hand would slide off of her calf or her thigh or the small of her back. Finally she swam back to the dock and stopped. I reached her in seconds, wrapped my arms around her, pulled her to me and kissed her. We stayed in the freezing water warmed by our embrace until interrupted by the sound of crashing thunder.

"We should probably get out."

We pulled ourselves onto the dock and I wrapped the blanket around us as the first drops of rain began to fall.

Tom called down from the dance floor. "Hey, you two...we're going to go inside and watch a movie so we don't get wet."

"Okay. We'll be right there," Jen called.

We huddled close together under the blanket. We watched the reflection of the lightening in the water as it was broken by a thousand droplets of water. The rain started to fall harder.

"You're perfect," I whispered.

"You're wonderful," she said.

"I love you."

We were two naked people clinging to one another in the cold, driving rain.