

Your Eyes First

By Melissa Sillitoe

He didn't remember the drive, but he remembered counting the miles. Like always, when he drove from Salt Lake to Portland and then on to the Coast, he measured the hours in miles. This time, he didn't stop to eat lunch. He still wore the sports shirt but his tie was on the back seat.

He barely remembered finding an apartment. An apartment at the end of the city, 122nd Avenue and Holgate, for god's sake, because he drove down through Gresham and turned off the road onto Schiller Circle when he saw the "for rent" sign. The landlady didn't hassle him with a security check when he wrote out a check for two months' rent. Cats, squirrels, free-range chickens in the neighbor's yard. Wasn't there a river somewhere? He threw his backpack on the floor and stared at the just-painted white white walls. Goddamn, he made it. He sat on the perko wood floor gripping his knees, remembering. Something felt off, so he found the McDonalds sack in his backpack and ate the cold hamburger and fries and felt better. After, he staggered into his new bedroom and fell crash into unsettling sleep on the shag carpet. His bedroom shag carpet in his new home as of now.

Later, he woke from relentless driving dreams into his present one. He walked out his front door and came to 122nd Avenue. Looked for landmarks—the Plaid Pantry, a strip mall with a laundromat. He stood there while colors deepened. What else? A 99 cent store sign, a black Volvo. Two guys smoking. He couldn't see their eyes, and he knew he was back to that place, that old numb lost god knows what now and it was the same street, same street not knowing how to get back. The roundabout that just keeps going, that endless sleepwalking until you see the scenery finally, people take longer, eyes come last. Not knowing how this derailed, how he could be in Oregon without Ian, how he could have said I will never see you again.

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He took his turned-off cell phone out of his backpack and stuck it in one of the empty kitchen cupboards. He'd text messaged everyone when he stopped for gas in Idaho, and then turned the phone off, knowing they'd call. Moira, of course, and her parents...his parents, whatever, if they still saw themselves as his parents. Well, of course they did, so Mary would call. And Dave would call. Maybe in a few days he'd check the messages, not now. Would Ian call? It didn't matter, but he guessed that just hearing Ian's voice would make it impossible for him to do anything, like walk to Safeways for groceries, stroll blankly down clean fluorescent aisles, past people who smiled or didn't, without thinking much about it. People who knew where they worked, lived, and who they loved.

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He had to make Ian's voice stop now that he wouldn't hear it over the telephone. So he took a very long bus ride to Powells Bookstore that morning, passing over the gray river that divided the city's heart, sure that a city-block-sized bookstore would shake him awake. He walked from room to room, picking up books at random, staring at book spines, willing himself to pay attention. What did he like to read? He couldn't remember. Should he practice seeing people?

On the other hand, no one else was making eye contact. He discretely admired the boys and girls in cute fleecy jackets and knit hats, all in sky colors, gray, charcoal, black. He made a mental note to tell Moira about dresses with leggings, how he would say, hey, for once I have something to tell you about what's hip. Moira. Yeah, that was it, he was waiting to meet his sister, standing here, calmly, while she looked at the fashion books, while their brother looked at art books. Yes, Ian was in the Pearl Room, his kid brother, Ian, still his brother, and here he was in the Rose Room, not alone, not alone in this new city. So what if he couldn't remember how the hell to have a conversation. By the time it mattered, he would. Meanwhile, he looked calm, and that mattered. Maybe Jess and Dave were in the Rose Room, and they'd run into each other and be surprised and go get coffee.

Coffee. He wandered to World Cup and stared at a book like everyone else. So what if he didn't talk. He didn't need to do anything at all. Each hour here, each hour he did nothing, took him that much farther away from the last words he said in Salt Lake. Just forget me.

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Back in his apartment with his new used copy of *Burr*, he tried to remember again all he knew about forgetting. He had been here before, after all. But not like this, not to this place before--because before there was Ian while he forgot everything else.

He tried to remember a time without Ian and remembered Ian's brother instead.

Colin. That dream, a week before he left for Portland, not knowing he would. There they were, he and Colin, age 13 again, skateboarding by the paddle boats at Liberty Park. And he knew that Colin was dead and said so, but Colin only smiled in that shy-eyelashed way. And said nothing.

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Dave wasn't really surprised that Jeff freaked out and left without saying goodbye except a text message from the road: am not coming back for a long while, think of me as gone. yr my apt ref. Jeff stopped surprising him in junior high when Dave found him making out with his best friend. He stopped surprising him when he yelled at the school bullies hell yeah I'm gay and spit on one and got the shit kicked out of him but landed a good punch. Jeff was absolutely insane in those days. And good with teachers.

And he was so relieved when the phone rang and it was a 503 phone number.

"It's me," Jeff said. "It's a good thing I know your phone number. I can't call Mary, I'd have to turn on the cell phone, so call her for me. Please."

"Yeah, I know for a fact she called you. Are you OK?"

"Um, yeah, sure," Jeff lied.

"Goddamn you. Did you listen to my messages at least or just turn off the phone like--"

Jeff felt himself settle down as he heard Dave's voice. Did he always talk that fast? When they first met at Bryant, Dave's Mexican inflection still stood out a little, even though he'd been living in Salt Lake City since fourth grade. By high school, he'd inexplicably trained himself to get rid of any trace of an accent. Dave was so good at that...problem solved, Dave told him, just clang the door shut, clang it shut, that's how you quit anybody anything. And now, his voice, words, *los palabras*, or is it *las*? something about his job, no, Jeff's job, *mi trabajo*. Except Dave was speaking English, but it might as well have been Spanish.

"Hey, *tonto*—"

Dave stopped. "Hey, dumbass?"

"Remember how I signed up for Spanish just so I could spy on you and Colin?"

"Yeah, but you never made it to class, gringo, so too bad for you," Dave laughed.

"Colin was a gringo." Jeff wondered why someone would write a phone number on the booth. Did he write it as he was dialing? Did he come back to the phone every week?

Dave laughed. "Yeah, well, you should have played peewee soccer *tambien*. That's when we spoke Spanish. Look, what the fuck? Do you want me to ask Steve to save your job?"

"No, you spoke Spanish when you were telling secrets, but that's OK. I'm glad you speak it again, espanol. Hey, everyone's white here. Even I notice that everyone's white...."

"Jeff--hey. Have you called Steve about your job? He called me, of course, when you didn't show up this morning. Turns out Todd already told him, after he got your text message, so I just said--"

"Hey, um..." it was weird, being on a pay phone, not being able to walk around while he talked, when was the last time he used a pay phone? He watched a pigeon land on a shiny white corolla. "Hey, remember what you told me about the door clanging shut? When you need to not think about someone? How did you do that? Remember, with Lisa?"

Dave inhaled deeply. "OK, look. Just—are you sure you're OK?"

It had started raining, that drizzle inevitable gray-sky rain. "Well. I'm not dead, obviously," Jeff laughed.

“That’s really not funny.”

“Who’s being funny? Look Dave, it’s like you’re right here but you’re not, and I’m going to hang up and you’ll be one more person that’s just gone. You know? That bullshit about starting your day over? How long is a day anyway?”

“Jeff—just answer the phone, OK? When I call? You’re weirding me out. Where are you, where are you calling from?”

“Portland. I can’t talk. I’m still sober. I can’t talk to you right now. You’re too close to him. I don’t want to know what’s going on. That’s why I left.”

“Look, if you mean Ian, I’m not going to--” Dave lied

“You might. I can’t handle it. It can’t even be like Colin. He can’t have existed. I can’t get over him, I’ve got to unremember him.”

“Hey, enough of this bullshit. You’re not making sense.” Jeff hated how much better it made him feel just to hear Dave get irritated.

“I can’t make sense,” Jeff managed. “Obviously. How am I supposed to make sense, huh? It’s like I’m back on the bus and going round. But worse...”

“How can it be worse? Ian isn’t dead! You’re the one who left—”

Jeff needed a cigarette. Pay attention, he thought. He watched the clerk smoking a cigarette while he pushed shopping carts out of puddles. A woman in tight jeans and a black pullover led an elderly man into the store. A pigtailed girl wandered outside wearing only a diaper. It was starting to drizzle faster. “Hey, I’ll call later, OK? I’m fine, OK?” he said, quickly hanging up.

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The eyes.

Ian said, you’re the first one I look for. In any room. Always.

And Jeff left. No. He ruined it, and then he left. He drove 13 hours without stopping. He had looked into Ian’s eyes, said about a dozen words, he had ruined it he had left.

Ian had Colin’s eyes. He always had. It had always bothered him.

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He meant to edit his resume, but then he spent almost an hour writing a letter to Colin, his one hour of library computer time, writing a letter to someone dead. Well, email was too dangerous anyway, that was the land of the living and booby traps and god help him if Ian had emailed and god help him if he hadn’t.

He got into Word instead of gmail and typed:

Colin, remember the time in the tree house when Dave caught us? Well, that's a stupid question, of course you do. But I almost forgot, and then today, talking to Dave all pissed off, it came back. Anyway, at least this time he didn't sprain his ankle. Heh. Funny how I almost hitched to Astoria and then met your family and stayed in Salt Lake after all, even after. And I'm almost there again. Astoria. I ran away again. What if I'd run away before, lived with that teacher who liked me, never got to know you and now Ian. So what I wanted to say is this: I know that I can't live in Salt Lake without Ian. Period. That's the part that makes sense. I don't know how I managed without you. I'm damned if I'll go through it again. That city is haunted, you have no idea.

How could you. Well. I'm over that.

And guess what--I did the right thing. I left. I miss your mom. And Moira. A lot. I miss everyone. So I was thinking, maybe you could show up again and we could talk. I don't care if it's real or not. But I was just thinking of how that first year you'd come around sometimes. I don't know how to get back there without drinking. So just show up.

Love,

Jeff

He printed the letter and stuck it in his backpack. He had 10 minutes left to use up. The temptation to log onto Live Journal was indescribable. He decided to skip reading his friends pages and posted:

Hey. Sorry for the dramatic goodbye. What can I say but you know. No, actually maybe you don't. But I can't talk to any of you about it right now. I love you guys. I'm in Portland. I hope one day it's beautiful. I just want you to know I'm OK. Dave probably told you anyway. I can't read your pages yet. Just be cool with it. You know I love you. I don't know how long I'll be here but I can't come back to Salt Lake.

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Dave was relieved and annoyed. For so long, it was always Jeff bursting out of the room and Dave trying to figure out how to calm everyone down or distract the teacher with a joke or tell Ramon to give up the faggot crap.

It had been years since Jeff's real freakout and this was all coming back again. Here Dave was, married, finally doing all right for himself, a dad for God's sake, and Jeff could still just shred him. He went back into the living room and turned on the TV. Thank God for football and for Jessica.

She looked up a little from the recipes she was pasting onto index cards. She was always collecting recipes and then making bacon and eggs for dinner or mac and cheese, which was fine with

him. He had stopped being scared of her tofu magazine a while back when he realized if he kept his mouth shut, she'd get over it.

"Was that him?"

"Yeah." He didn't really want to get into this. "I think the Jets might kick some ass tonight. Hey, it could happen. Did Ian call? Are they coming over?"

Jess carefully pasted a recipe for Mahi Mahi with Polenta and Sun-Dried Tomatoes onto a pink card since it was a summer recipe.

"I don't know. Why don't you call him? Why don't you guys ever just make normal plans? So starting next week—"

"What do you mean, make plans?" Fuck yeah, first down. "I make plans."

"I don't know, you and Ian and Jeff have always been a little random. And now he's left. Speaking of random. Anyway, hey so starting next week...." He wasn't listening.

"Mmmm."

"Starting next week, I want to try two new recipes. Healthy ones."

"Great, OK. Hey, maybe I'll make my famous meatloaf," he grinned. She pushed the shoebox and scissors under the end table and leaned against the couch. He messed up her hair. "It's healthy."

"Hmmm. Hey, so, where's Jeff?"

"Jeff who? Shit don't pass—"

"Why are you being secretive?"

"Jess, I'm not being secretive. He's in Portland, OK? Where else? There aren't any jobs in Astoria unless you fix cars or something."

"Well, what did he have to say for himself?" Jess was feeling protective of him.

Dave sighed. "Oh, you know. He's sorry. He drove straight through to Portland."

"When did he go?"

"I think he just got in the car and drove. Right after."

"Oh my god." They were both quiet.

"It's very romantic when you think about it," she said. "But it's also just so completely unnecessary for him to run away like that."

"Who says he's running away?"

“Well, what would you call it? Obviously it’s Ian. Has he even talked to you yet?”

“Look, you don’t know that. I don’t know that.” He stared at the football game. “Could we watch the game, please?”

“Well, this isn’t your problem,” Jess sulked.

“I know that. Look, I just want to watch the game.” Shit. He kissed her. “OK, sweetie? I just don’t want to get into this whole thing right now.”

“Fine. Whatever,” she said, irritated. “And why aren’t you on the couch with me, huh?” he asked, moving back so she could squeeze in front of him. He handed her the library book they were both reading since she hated football.

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Jeff found a desk sitting on the curb of Schiller Street. A white child-size desk and a matching chair with a sherbet lime seat. He scooped it up and hauled it back to his apartment. He put it under the window. The chair didn’t really go with the desk and it hurt his arm to write, but it was easier than writing sprawled on shag carpet.

The desk. The window. Here he was in Paradise, completely crazy. In Oregon, where he always wanted to be. He made himself see it: the enormous gray sky and the slick-damp green trees just outside. And these extravagant yellow flowery bushes, too. All these colors filled his window, and there was birdsong, kids’ voices, just like home.

He couldn’t write. He would give anything to write, maybe his soul if he had one. Obviously, God wants me to be crazy. He smiled and retrieved his cell phone from the kitchen drawer and turned it on. Four voice mails. That’s all? Three text messages. He put the phone inside his desk drawer but kept it on. He was wide awake. So, tomorrow he would start building this life. Maybe one that didn’t include any time to think, why the hell not. Tomorrow, he’d go to Midland library and get on Craigslist and apply for jobs. That would be healthy, as Moira would say. Healthy. Or he could just read the missing connections between people he’d never met, like he did yesterday. Jobs. He couldn’t write, he doubted he could answer reference questions, but he could put books away. Hell, he could deliver pizzas.

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The phone rang around 1 a.m., waking him from his carpeted sleep. He stared at the name, waited. Considered. Grabbed the phone like the rope swing over the river at camp.

“Jeff?”

He was quiet. If he didn’t talk soon Ian might as well be dead, he might as well be dead, it was that kind of now or not, and he couldn’t talk, literally couldn’t talk.

“Jeff. I’m just going to stay on the phone, OK? Just don’t hang up. Please. If this is as close as I get to get to you, so be it.”

And the phone face glowed green in the dark bedroom, and Ian's voice could be in the next room or in Utah and Jeff could be anywhere and there were frog sounds, crickets, that gray-drizzle on window.

Ian sighed. “Jeff? You’re being dramatic.” Nothing.

“OK, fine, so I’ll tell you a story? How’s that? Remember when you told me stories from the top bunkbed? I guess that IS a story.” He laughed. “OK, here’s a better story. Remember the day we met on Emerson Avenue and you carried my bike home? Well, do you know what I thought?”

Jeff gave up, answered. “You thought you were grounded because you ran off.”

Ian tried not to let his relief show. “Right! Yeah, I did. But I meant what I thought about you? When I was nine years old, and I crashed on my bike and you picked me up. Before you and Colin became friends, before—“

“—Don’t”

“No, listen, I mean I remember when I first saw you! All of that day, isn’t that creepy? Because most days you don't remember, you know. Like I don't really remember what I did—what. Last Wednesday. What I ate, if it was a good day. I don't know.”

Jeff smiled. It always took Ian a while to tell any story.

Ian laughed, maybe thinking the same thing. “Anyway. You know what I mean. I had no idea that day. Do you think about that ever? That this was the last time that brick church would ever look the same? For any of us? Or whatever, I mean, that tree that I ran into, the sidewalk around Liberty Park...Everything was different, because after that, you were there. And I would wonder what you would think of it. I mean, I worshiped you.”

There was more, but Jeff missed most of what Ian said. The frogs were chirping in the darkness somewhere close, maybe in the boggy area behind the building. He got up, walked into the kitchen, stared into the empty fridge.

“Jeff? You know?” Ian sounded almost carefully neutral, but not quite.

“Look, I’m sorry. You know I’m not going to fuck up things for your family again.”

“What do you mean by again? Why do you always say that?”

Jeff was quiet. “Maybe if I hadn’t met you that day, Colin wouldn’t have died. I wouldn’t have said hi to him, just walked past him in the halls. He wasn’t a skater before. I mean, that’s really what we didn’t know that day. That’s the story. You know?”

"I'm going to ignore that," Ian said. "I'm not going to remind you that you promised to shut up about all that a long time ago. Anyway, I guess when YOU think of that day, it's Colin you remember. Obviously."

"Well come on, he was my age! We had three classes together! I just hadn't talked to him before. Why are we having this conversation?"

"Good question. Why are you in Portland? Let's talk about that."

"God, Ian," Jeff said, and then stopped. And Ian laughed. "OK, come on, after he died, that day, that day at Lagoon waiting in the Wild Mouse line, I know you saw him, not me, you looked right at me and it wasn't—"

"No! I saw you. For the first time, I really saw you. That's why I looked like that."

"Come on, I'm not an idiot, I mean, when he was alive, it was all about, oh, you must be Colin's brother, you look just like he did in fourth grade, whatever. My whole life, OK? Even before he died. I remember when one of his teachers saw me and nearly had a heart attack, like she saw a ghost. Yeah, my aunt was the worst. Every year after I turned 14, I swear, she'd remind me that Colin would have looked just like I did now. So don't you patronize me, I know you--"

"Ian. That day we met. When you were nine. You had on cutoffs and a Space Invaders t-shirt that was too big for you because it was Colin's shirt. You were like a kid out of Happy Days or some old TV show. When you stopped blubbing, you talked nonstop the whole way back about how your best friend was grounded for calling the coach a bad word, and how you'd be grounded but maybe not if your brother was in a good mood and didn't fink on you, and how it was Moira's turn to make dinner, something called bang and mashers, and I should come over."

Ian exhaled. "And then you did, and that was it. Then you were over all the time, and that was it. You were in love. When did he--"

"And then you became the little brother I'd always wanted," Jeff finished. "And you still are. And that's why I'm not going to fuck up your marriage for you just because you have some fucked up idea that you should experience life or whatever, whatever you think you could do with me and a six-pack."

"Gee, thanks. No wonder you're single."

"I mean, you are EXPERIENCING life. I don't even know what this is about," Jeff realized he was jabbing his pen into his hand over and over. And continued jabbing. And also decided he had nothing else to lose. "OK, you know, do you remember that Thanksgiving when you and Moira and I went to the park and you found that pile of leaves and jumped in and looked up at me? Because I do. You were seventeen!"

Jeff could hear Ian grinning. "Ha. Yeah, I could tell you were checking me out."

"I didn't want to check you out! I finally found a family! I like your parents, I like that they don't get drunk and yell at each other, OK? I liked being your older brother. I still do. You are not some crazy thing I want to try."

Then they were both quiet.

"So how's Portland?" Ian asked.

"I don't know," said Jeff. "It's dark by 5:00. I can't tell if everyone here is pissed off or if it's just me. Lots of pizza and beer places. I wanted to keep going to Astoria, but I was too tired."

"Are you staying in a hotel?"

"No, I rented an apartment." Jeff started laughing. "I'm sitting on my kitchen floor. Oh my god, what am I doing?"

"Um...yeah. God, Jeff, you don't ever just say, hey, I think I might go home now and call you in a few days, huh? Stop laughing, it's true. Everyone thinks we slept together."

Jeff stopped laughing. "What does Amy think?"

"The truth. That nothing happened. That—well, some of the truth. The important truth. That we didn't sleep together. That you told me some stuff that doesn't matter and left."

Back in his bedroom, Jeff heard the frogs again. "Did you know that frogs actually ribbit? I mean, that really is the sound that they make."

After a while, Ian asked, "So, were you planning to come get your stuff or something before you decorate your apartment?"

"I don't have a plan. My head is starting to hurt. I wasn't going to talk to you."

"I know." Ian could hear Amy pulling into the driveway, her hospital night shift over, the door closed, the baby started to cry a little.

"I always notice you in any room, Jeff. First. You know."

Jeff sighed. "You know I'm not going to sleep now. Stop smiling."

"I'll smile if I want to. I have to go soon."

"Ian? I'm glad. I want you to get over it and I want to forget this whole conversation, and thanks for telling me. When I call in a few days, we'll talk about something boring, OK?"

"You'll call in a few days?"

"You know you could be in the next room. It doesn't sound like you're in Salt Lake."

“I have to go. Call me.”

Jeff stared at the phone, stared at the walls, stared at his notebook, wrote Ian’s name until he no longer recognized it.

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After they put the baby back to sleep, Ian did what he did when he was lost. He walked out to the garage, and he picked up his paintbrush and stared at the four half-finished paintings, letting the colors come back to him, dipping the paintbrush in black and making a line, a curve. Stopped, stared, seeing only the green swirls and black bugs—he thought they were bugs, headed for the eye-blue flower—until he knew where to put the next line, where to carve with the palette knife. He yawned, picked up his paints, and mixed the color of imagined frogs. .