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## 1974

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1974

Jeffery Berg

On this night in 1974,  
my Dad smokes cigarettes with his cousin Curt  
outside the White Castle  
in Chicago—sidewalk still wet  
from yesterday's rain. Dad  
will graduate high school  
this May and will marry Mom  
next year, but for now,  
guessing it's a cop, he sees  
a black Oldsmobile looming  
in the gated lot. The driver  
is John Wayne Gacy, a man Dad will remember  
on the evening news in 1978,  
my two older sisters reenacting  
*Little House on the Prairie*, running around  
the four-room Lake Forest apartment  
in bonnets and Snoopy nightgowns.  
TV cameras will record men  
in coats, thick-knotted ties,  
exhuming the bodies of boys  
from a crawlspace.

On this night in 1974, the man in the black  
Oldsmobile offers Curt and Dad  
a joint. Curt, standing in the rain-sheen,  
hands in his pockets—corduroy pants,  
a red-checked shirt, refuses.

It is a simple "No thanks."  
Curt and Dad walk away from the black  
Olds and back into the White Castle.

Or maybe that's not how it goes tonight.  
Maybe Dad takes the joint  
from Gacy's fingers—smokes it,  
stares at a bug skimming the surface  
of a rain puddle.

I know that Dad never gets in the back of the car—  
isn't driven to a ranch house in Des Plaines  
with its underground, unbreathable smell.

I know Curt only for his name,  
printed in blue ink on the white flesh  
inside of the green Apple logo  
on his *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* LP  
that will eventually find its way  
to my record player in 1987  
in a ranch house in South Carolina  
on the eve of a Little League Championship Game,  
I'll listen, sitting on my legs, staring at cream carpet.

I'll find out that Curt will kill himself  
in 1977. Hanging himself in my great aunt's basement.

I will mop the basement with bleach as a 15-year-old  
in 1995 and find his stack of *National Geographic*—  
flipped-through rainforests, ads for Colt 45 and lime-green  
Fords.

My great aunt—hair tied-up in bobby pins,  
strapped sandals, denim skirt, white blouse,  
standing against the washing machine,  
staring at the stairwell, still remembering,  
will ask in a low whisper,  
“Have I ever told you about Curt?”

It's on the day of the Little League Championship Game,  
in a brown station wagon that I'll ask my Dad

about Curt. Why did he circle Dad's name,  
 Dave, in blue ink in the printed lyrics  
 of "When I'm 64"?  
 and he'll tell me Curt was his cousin,  
 his best friend who died in a car wreck.

In 1997, the year of my first kiss  
 with a pockmarked boy from gym class,  
 hands behind our backs in the locker room,  
 deodorant caked in his armpit hair,  
 I'll be in the den, watching a cable TV show  
 on serial killers—John Wayne Gacy:  
 childhood swing set accident, blood clot in the brain,  
 Kentucky Fried Chicken, clown,  
 boys (mostly 15-year-olds) in his ranch,  
 bludgeoning them, killing them,  
 covering their bodies in lime, bodies to rot  
 in the crawlspace. Eighteen-minute execution  
 in 1994. Dad will come into the room,  
 stand in the doorway, sweaty from mowing the lawn,  
 and will tell me about Gacy in the black Olds,  
 the offered joint  
 on this rain-sheen night in 1974.

I'll stay up late one night in 1988  
 with a Ouija board in the dining room  
 lit with Mom's Thanksgiving candles,  
 wax dribbling on tablecloth, my sisters in their  
 punk-rock hairdos and purple eyeshadow,  
 their Lee Press-On Nails pressing on the pointer  
 that will tell me I will die  
 when I'm 63 years old.

There's a strange luck,  
 standing at the plate in '87,  
 scared to swing or swinging, flinching,

missing the ball, knowing  
Dad will be there in his tea-tinted sunglasses  
even as the sun goes down, seated in bleachers,  
spitting Redman Chew in the dirt,  
forever easygoing, missing a friend.

On this night, though, in 1974,  
they are together, alive at White Castle,  
sitting across each other in a booth,  
salting their fries, listening to Stevie Wonder's  
"Superstition" on a mahogany radio in the hot kitchen  
where the mustached prep-cook waits  
for fries in oil. Curt, the boy  
in the photograph in my aunt's  
top dresser drawer, with his  
smile, his sideburns, tortoise-rimmed glasses,  
the red checked shirt.  
Dad scribbles a love poem  
for Mom with Curt's blue  
ink pen on a paper napkin.

Tonight, by the Illinois river,  
Gacy lounges in his black Olds—  
seats musty from rain,  
radio dial burning orange.  
He smokes a joint,  
waiting for the boys.