

Drip

The bead of sweat jumped off his brow, and defiled the lined paper it landed on. His eye twitched as the tiny fraction of paper crinkled and yellowed and he nervously scraped plaque of his teeth with his thumbnail. He doodled a Kirby in the margins, and sighed looking at the empty page.

I, too, am full of hot air. Why did creativity only strike when there was something else that needed doing? He thought of busy classrooms and sleepy nights, when his muses couldn't *just shut the fuck up.* And now here I am, *writing dick-all.* He peered out the window at the vast swaths of Latrobe farmland, blankets of verdant grass and golden wheat, spotted with heifers and shadows of clouds, bowled in with tall sentinel mountains. He saw a small cathedral drinking in sunlight through stained glass windows, the colors seen through the petals of a cherry blossom tree- he leaned his head against the window and he knew he would never again see something so beautiful. *I wonder what fingernails are made out of.*

He looked at his youngest brother, who was snoring in the ugliest fashion possible. The O'Neills were ugly sleepers, he thought- like bears with a genetic predisposition to strokes. His father used to look like your typical "disco white person", with a curly jew-fro and a highly unnecessary moustache, only now he had added a few jowls into the mixture and was snoring like a reciprocating saw out of Hell. Michael scratched his shitty Irish beard.

Maybe I could do something with science fiction? That story about the alien planet with the giants who discover art and then kill themselves as an art project. I could call the aliens Duchampoids, saying that life is a toilet that we call a fountain... oh, would you look at that! I've disappeared into my own ass. Nobody takes science fiction seriously, anyway- they would reject you on principle at the writing competition. C'mon, you bastard, that 250 dollars would be a windfall, beer-wise. I need a conflict.

The middle brother was driving like the pavement had touched him as a child. The "Beige Bucket" he piloted flew down a winding road in the mountains of Pennsylvania, headed

to their Uncle's cabin. Since Michael was the only other person awake, he felt obligated to say something.

"Hey Pat, slow the fuck down, will ya? You tryin' to pull a murder-suicide?"

Patrick O'Neill was sensitive about his driving ability. His ears turned red, and he sullenly looked in the rear-view mirror.

"I'm driving fine, Mike. Shut up." Michael was about to shrug but instead found the crown of his head bouncing off the roof as the ample car reeled away from a pothole. He grit his teeth and rubbed his head.

"You're doing *great*, Patty. Next time, I'm driving, you dingus." He leaned back, folded his arms behind his head and waited for retaliation. Pat's ears were like slices of salami.

"Yeah, let's let the souse drive the car. You're a credit to Irish-Americans everywhere." Michael stopped and thought how insufferably self-referential Irish-Americans must be to people of un-cloved descent. *I'm such a good poet- it's because of my Irish ancestry. A country of artists and lovers.* He imagined that Ireland must actually be a boring, rain-soaked bog, filled with sweater-wearing alcoholic sheep-fuckers, although he had never been there to check. *The Emerald Oyle, blarney and kelarney.* He was brought back to the conversation by the agonizing jazziness of the showtunes bleating through the car speakers.

"If I have to listen to one more fucking song featuring Nathan Lane, I'm going to fucking lose it."

Patrick's ears were the color of a dog's erection.

"Could you just leave me alone, please? You're so mean sometimes. I'm trying to focus on the road." Their father loudly farted with annoyance, and both brothers were sufficiently humbled. Michael felt moderately shitty for a while, and looked down at the bare page. His self-loathing was doubled, and another drip of sweat hit the paper. He ran his fingers through his hair, and blinked with exaggeration. The tiny yellowed splatter of sweat landed square on Kirby's forehead. Kirby looked up at Michael with inflated cheeks and furrowed brow.

The four O'Neill men fell out of the LeSabre and their feet felt swimming as they made contact with solid ground. Mike looked over at Pat's sad, frowning face and felt a dreary rush of guilt. Michael only teased his younger brother so relentlessly because his reaction fed some sort of sadist urge within. Simply put, Patrick's reactions, the whining wails and frustration, were a cruel joy to witness. *I really am just the worst.*

Michael made an awkward attempt at recompense and clapped his brother on the shoulder with a smile that curved like a frown. The gesture was taken as ironic and was shrugged off with a grumbled "*gettoffame*". Michael breathed out slowly and scraped his teeth with his pinky-nail.

Sunlight shifted throughout the dense leaves and colored its subjects with an impressionist bent. *Everything looks like a Monet painting.* Michael filled his lungs with the bright, green air and ambled across the bouncing grass, around the Lincoln Log cabin and into the heart of the chirping O'Neill clan.

Jimmy, the youngest and quietest brother, made a beeline for the badminton net. He was bananas for badminton. Patrick sniffed and walked over to their Uncle Hector, who was making pizza in a homemade outdoor brick oven. The uncle-by-marriage tried to flip a pizza like a pancake with his giant spatula, but fumbled the landing and ended up scraping cheese off the hardwood patio.

Michael overheard him saying "Not sure why I tried that."- this uncle lived to impress, perhaps because he looked like an olive-colored bowling ball. Michael was going to look for a silent place to bullshit a story, but was instead confronted by his intense Uncle Richard.

"Hey, Mikey, it's so good to see ya," He said this through his teeth, behind shining glasses, with a handshake designed to instill respect and crush fingers. He looked like James Joyce, sans the piratical eyepatch.

"T-thanks." *Oh shit, did you say 'You too'? Well, now it's fucking awkward isn't it?*

Richard grabbed Michael's face with a firm hand. "I'm so proud of you, Mike." Richard said this often to his nephews, and it was always intensely embarrassing. *Proud of being flip cup champion five years in a row at my college? It was a long road to the top, I admit.*

"Um, How's it going?" Michael O'Neill did not really care how it was going. He saw his relatives just often enough for interaction with them to be awkward.

"Same as always, I suppose. Bubbeh isn't doing so well. She's been in the hospital for a few weeks now." Michael noted the bags under his uncle's eyes. Bubbeh was Richard's endearing, ancient Slovak mother-in-law. She had always seemed to possess a consistent level of decrepitude to Michael, for as long as long as he knew her, so her declining health came as a shock. *I guess I thought she would remain an adorable relic forever. She was a Russian nesting doll, losing layers.* "It's a damn shame, she's been living in the house longer even longer than your cousin Maggie has."

Michael sniffed and detected the odor of bong water and wet jeans, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He nervously glanced from side to side before jumping at the voice that came from behind him.

"My ears are burning." Maggie, circling, said this like she tasted sour mist drifting out of her mouth. Michael felt a drop of sweat hanging off his nose as he looked at his cousin, and started to thoroughly examine the pattern on his Uncle's woven sandals.

"Well, I think it's time for me to be hittin' the ol' dusty trail," *What am I, John Wayne?* Maggie and her father gave him a weird look. He could hear his brain audibly scream at his choice of words.

"Wait, don't you want to hear about Bubbeh?"

"Sorry, things to be doing- tell her I say *ahoj!*" He was certain his voice cracked, as he galloped away. He found a chair by the *crick* that trickled in the back yard, tossed it in the water, and plopped into it like a sack of Irish potatoes.

He sat in the bubbling creek with cold water washing around his hairy feet and ankles.

He sat in the creek with his head in his hands and his blank notebook in his lap. Twin beads of sweat decided to jump in tandem off his forehead and on to the page. There was delicate wind blowing through sharp blades of grass and pushing up tiny waves on the surface of the water, but Michael was stewing. His brain was a square wheel that he needed to push up a hill.

He looked up Hector's hill and saw a tangle of hair and fur. His cousin Maggie was wrestling with Richard's massive black lab, the two alternately growling with bared teeth and slobbering with their tongues hanging out of their mouths. Michael bit his knuckle as he thought back to a day thirteen years ago when he and Maggie had batted at each other's genitalia like cats with yarn. When Michael fully comprehended the implication their actions, he felt as if a stone had dropped into his stomach, and cringed into a self-hating ball.

He looked back at her and she was standing, sans dog, staring at him as the hawk stares at a field mouse. Michael suddenly found a terribly interesting leaf floating down the stream to study. *People wouldn't be interested in reading about 10 year old cousins, fucking around.* He sneezed and further defiled the page.

The O'Neills sat around a campfire that blazed with brazen light, voraciously eating wood and giving off the delicate fragrance of excessive amounts of lighter fluid. The stunning light distorted the circle of O'Neill faces; flickering masks of pride, of sorrow, fatigue, hunger, and hope. *What the fuck is that? I'm not writing The fucking Grapes of Wrath. I need something real.*

There was a long period of silence in which the circle of relatives shot their inconsequential thoughts into the flame, eyes burning. Patrick looked particularly intense, and even in the strobing bonfire light, Michael could see that Pat's ears were a shade of maroon that reminded Michael of the blood-elevator in *The Shining*.

"Hey, um," Patrick stuttered, "I'm gay. Yep." He nodded. "Gay." He drummed a little beat on his legs. His ears faded back to a more earlike color.

The campfire was silent. Michael took a giant breath in and grabbed his notebook. He didn't notice that he was bouncing slightly in his wicker chair. His pen was pressed eagerly onto the page. *Sexuality conflict- now that I can sell. All aboard the Yuengling train motherfuckers.*

Choo choo!

Their father smiled with pride and put his hand on Patrick's shoulder. "That's great, Pat. I love you, son."

The family voiced their shrugging agreement.

"I'm so proud of you, Patty. I'm proud of all of you" Richard's glasses flashed and he clapped Pat on the back. Patrick's ears flushed once more.

"I wish we brought the dog here to hear this news," Hector joked. "You know, your aunt was gay. Until I got my hands on her. Magic *italiano* fingers." The brothers O'Neill retched. The mood was jovial.

"God-damnit." Michael threw his notebook in the fire and scraped his teeth with his thumb.

James, the youngest, said, "You're a fucking asshole, Mike."

Michael sat at his keyboard back at his dorm, and he was making good progress.

Timothy, the middle, put-upon brother, looked up with quivering eyes. "I'm gay," he whispered to his family. A ripple went through the bonfire-circle. Our father looked away with shame.

"How could you do this to us?!"