

Binghamton, July 1964

It's July, 1964, the summer after John F. Kennedy was killed, and in the countryside along the hilly border New York shares with Pennsylvania, it's as sunny and warm and green as ever.

Proof: no matter what terrible things happen, as Annie sings, the sun'll come out tomorrow.

We're Americans, known everywhere for our optimism. Shabby, shambling, fat Jack Ruby, a mystery man who kept company with mobsters and strippers, has already been convicted of killing Oswald. The quickened sands of time and political necessity are fast eroding the hard, historical facts. For years to come, I'll find it difficult to believe in my heart that ugly old Lyndon, about to toss a few hundred thousand lives into the cauldron of hell in Viet Nam, wasn't involved. The idea has such simple, poetic symmetry.

The Beatles, fresh and new out of Liverpool, England, still a foreign country, not yet our first European province, are everywhere. A Hard Day's Night, thrown together in a hurry to reap fast profits from the Beatles explosion before it evaporates, packs theaters full of screaming girls, and the secret of how insurrectionist these guys really were, gliding into a stunning darkness, will take most of four years to be exposed. Roy Orbison's Pretty Woman, the fastest selling record ever, croons across the hot months. Sixteen years old, I find it easy to *imagine* cruising some sidewalk beauty like that, growling, summoning her back with wolf-like intensity. Ranger races through dark matter toward a moon Leonard Cohen believes we will never know. Twenty-one thousand U.S. advisers start a death march, soon to be a nightmare stampede, into the jungles of Southeast Asia...

School's out. Danny and I, both sixteen, have spent one of the longest days of the

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year and late into the evening with our girlfriends.

Sandi and I have been a couple since meeting at a Dick Clark traveling show at Johnson Field. The man who would become *The World's Oldest Teenager* introduced Gene Pitney and other stars, most now remaindered to the heap of one hit wonders. Normally, the Triplets, a Yankee farm team—in pinstripes—played here, but on that soft June night, a wooden stage was erected over the infield. The stands were packed with teenagers in blue jeans and T-shirts. Sandi and I stood along the top row, parking lots below us. Separating the performers and us, the field nearly glowed, an effect on the carefully tended grass that intensified as the lights for night baseball came up. The sky was drawn down and lost in the bubble of light. Beyond the outfield fences, painted dark blue, Johnson City climbed in pearl-like strands of streetlights up its hills.

Sandi had light brown hair, what we then called “dirty blonde,” and an energetic, teasing style. She was aggressive, which was just the encouragement I needed.

Before the show ended, she stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss me. At that moment, kissing in public, we became a couple.

She'd come to the show with prettier and softer Ronnie, her best friend and, for the time being, Danny's girl. After Gene Pitney sang *Only Love Can Break A Heart* and released us into the night, Danny and I rambled the city streets with them until we found a hiding place in a little park near the Endicott-Johnson shoe factories. There, we lay down on the cool, damp grass behind shrubs and necked until there was nowhere else the girls would let us go, except home. I couldn't wait to see Sandi again and keep the adventure going.

A couple of weeks later, Danny and I walked along a country road near the top of Bunn Hill in Vestal. The night was moonless, the dark so rich our feet were invisible to us as we headed back down the road we'd marched up the morning before.

Bunn Hill Road followed a ridge over pitches and valleys cut roughly a million years before from a less differentiated land-mass, one textured by centuries by wind and rain. Soft spots on the rises had been thrown or washed into the valleys. A dome of the sky arched high over us from a distant hilltop, in a vapor of deep blue-black interrupted by stars and clusters of whitish dust, before collapsing, dimming, condensing, into the valley floor. Humid quiet compacted the air. Low, yellow lights burned behind occasional, curtained windows in some of the scattered homes. Then, there was the eternal hum, the background chorus of the universe that, anchored in time, no one really heard.

Danny and I sat down in the middle of the road, cross-legged, and lit cigarettes.

This was the first time out all night for both of us, and it seemed immense, unmarked and unending. It seemed disconnected, too, now that we'd unhitched from the girls and set off into the darkness. There was little risk of being surprised by traffic out here along the silent ridges. You heard almost anything approaching from miles away.

“What time do you think it is?” Danny wondered aloud, unaccustomed to being without an anchor.

The only watch between us had been shoved into my hand at the last minute by Sandi, my thrilling, noisy, first ever girlfriend, knowing Danny and I would be spending the night outside on our own. The watch's features were indiscernible in the dark. I could

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easily have lit a match, but I didn't want to see another glowing halo unsettle the night. The dark was so rich and undefined—or rich *because* it was undefined.

“After midnight, I'll bet,” I speculated and smiled invisibly to myself.

“What're we going to do all night?” Danny asked, raising the question introduced when we decided to abandon the plan Sandi had devised. “I'm getting tired.”

See what it's like, I thought. See what it's like to have golden sunrise slowly eat up the night sky over this hill. See what it's like to be out on these serpentine roads at 4:00 AM as the day destroyed mysteries. Then, when it was light enough and after we'd circled around, we'd climb another curving road back up the hill to Sandi's, scrounge some breakfast and spend another day with her and Ronnie.

Those were the basics of what was left of our plan.

As day had broken down into evening, dusk thickened into night, we'd left the house to walk with Ronnie and Sandi and kiss them in the sheltering dark. I was just getting used to sustaining a kiss at the time, a big ambition that summer, to stretch out in the luxury of holding a girl firmly against my chest, and it was starting to seem dangerously less deliberate. Without outsiders watching, judging, forbidding, protecting the female anatomy, you sort of floated. You grooved. When things got too hot, a condition reached at approximately the moment when Sandi finally tired of pushing my hand away from her shirt, the girls pulled back. They created some distance, walking slowly ahead of us and engaging in mysterious, conspiratorial dialog.

Their white, button-up blouses floated like suggestions in the dark ahead us.

Every few minutes, Sandi inexplicably blurted out, “Hind end!” and laughed into the dense night, while Danny and I followed, smoking cigarettes, acting relatively cool.

Girls seemed so much more with it than we were, entrenched behind their fortifications. They knew more and were wiser. Sandi laughed tauntingly as if she'd blurted out the punch line to a secret joke only she and Ronnie and, maybe, a few other girls knew. It was a conspiracy we'd see again and again. Girls stuck together and outsmarted us.

Danny and I had taken turns calling our families to tell them we were staying overnight at each other's homes, a ruse intended to increase our hours of freedom and time to investigate the mystery of girls. For their point of view, the girls thought it was a great and flattering idea that we'd risk parent trouble just to hang out nearby while they slept, and we weren't yet fully aware of what idiots we could be under the influence of the opposite sex. The details of our plan called for us to settle into this funny little house parked in a field next to Sandi's, sleep and wait for daylight.

The funny little house belonged to a neighbor. The father had set it up for his daughter as a sort of girl's tree fort, a place to practice live homemaking, its two small rooms dry and suitably, if sparsely, outfitted with domestic items. No one ever lived there or locked the doors.

After kissing the girls goodnight, Danny and I found our way along a rutted drive, popped open the door to the funny little house and stretched out on furniture we identified from the light of a match. The space was more cramped and hot than anticipated, and after a sleepless hour or two, much of it spent talking idly, we reemerged and started down the hill toward civilization. The amount of time we had to kill before dawn, the

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hours normally lost in sleep, seemed very long.

Brought together only by a coincidental interest in girls who were friends, Danny and I had never actually been buddies. We knew each other from weekend dances, and because of what happened later that night and the next morning, our friendship never went further.

For now, we sat in the road, smoking Winstons and practicing teenage boy talk from the middle 60's, rummaging through the mistakes we'd previously made with girls—there really weren't many—what our parents let us do and not do and how we got around restrictions. Danny seemed like a good guy and in awe, as I was, about all the years to come. Even Kennedy's death hadn't slackened the thrill of an American future.

The horseshoe of the hill above us was parked against the night sky like an enormous black shoulder, the depth of the universe falling off far beyond.

It was probably after one o'clock, closing time for bars in Broome County, when a car, boisterously overloaded with guys, sped by us, racing up the hill. Drinking age was still eighteen, and even then frequently most honored in the breach.

We identified the passengers as much as possible by how loudly they cut up after pulling into a driveway a hundred feet beyond us. We jumped back from the little bank we'd scrambled up for safety when their car approached. Now, the guys laughed and joked as they evicted a friend from the car, the interior light cutting into the blackness and making incomplete silhouettes.

"Don't let your meat loaf!" someone advised through an open window as they backed into the road.

"If anything comes up, I'll beat it!" he yelled back.

Then, the car raced passed us again, back down the hill toward the lights, as Danny and I again scrambled to the safety of the soft, low bank rising up from an open gutter on the side of the road.

We took them for what they probably were, older guys wrapping up a night out drinking, wishing hopelessly for girls and heading home still wound up enough to pull apart with some noise. Danny was an only child, but I had older brothers and knew what that combustible moment sounded like.

Danny's and my main concern had been how to avoid being hit by their car, and we said nothing more about them until they became suspects. We started walking again, heading toward Vestal Parkway, a visible ribbon of artificial light, appearing between sloping shoulders of the hill, down on the valley floor, our illusions of being alone on this quiet planet temporarily withered.

It wasn't until we'd walked a few more minutes and stopped again to smoke and sit in the middle of the road that Danny and I, in turn, thought we heard footsteps in the pitch-black distance behind us. In the daytime, you'd turn and look up the hill to settle your curiosity, but now, we saw only darkness sprinkled sparsely with lights from homes scattered among the surrounding slopes. In the daytime, there were enough other sounds that we might not have heard them, but these were footsteps, rhythmically scraping pavement somewhere in the dark, not far behind us.

An odd thing we noticed was that the footsteps stopped whenever we stopped, and

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as we debated over who in hell was back there, following us, inadvertently or deliberately, down this unexceptional hill, that coincidence led us to conclude the obvious—that we were hearing our own echoes coming back to us in the humid silence.

A mile or so below and to the north, a string of lights marked Vestal Parkway. An umbrella of brightness swelled out from the university near where Bunn Hill Road ended. Farther still, the geometric grids of city streets, defining the outskirts of Binghamton and Johnson City, climbed the next set of foothills. But here, it was all darkness and silence, except for those echoes higher up and behind us.

“Aw, they’re probably nothing,” Danny finally concluded.

“How can something be nothing?”

I was intrigued, just as I was intrigued to tune in Alfred Hitchcock or Rod Serling, every time their shows came on. I thought it was stupid to embrace ignorance. Even then, I had no idea how very many things we didn’t know.

I also had this inclination to believe it was better to try to know for sure than to ever not know enough about anything. Ignorance and protective magic, cornerstones for religion, were not lures for me. I’d grown up addicted to the mysterious and the unknown, what existed behind and invisibly between, pasting things together, the necessary webs and patches we never saw.

Although on the verge of boring Danny to death, I kept my speculation going until chance took control. Another car came up the road, its high beams blowing the darkness wide open in front of it.

It was easy enough to search in the sudden slice of penetrating light to see what, if anything, trailed us as the car passed and continued up the hill. We’d just walked a long straightaway, and the wide sweep of headlights exposed the road as completely empty, gutter to gutter, the white center line reflecting so brightly it blurred.

My relief was mixed with dejection as mystery evaporated into disappointing discovery, the wedge of bright light proceeding, narrowing up the hill, turning slightly as it met the next grade. Then, almost immediately, a second car came up the hill, and for some half-conscious reason, this time, something mixed with reluctance, I kept my eyes trained on its overlapping double halos as they shrank away, leaving a ruder, less mysterious dark in their wake.

Suddenly, my skin lit up, well before any facts flew into my conscious brain. In the last seconds of light, I’d picked out a silhouetted figure climbing over a fence beside the road only fifty feet behind us. Someone emerged from a hiding place after the car had passed. Like a ghost, he’d had been trailing us, invisible for a reason, one I wasn’t sticking around to explore.

First, you run. I screamed something, archaic sounds leaping out of my limbic brain as I spun and began sprinting down the hill toward the lights.

Danny ran right with me in the direction of the parkway. I felt the cool, night air sweep past my face and through my hair, and I couldn’t go fast enough. The dark was so encompassing it was only by dumb luck that we didn’t smash into anything as we escaped. Until we ran into a well-lit air near a side road for the university, neither of us paused to look back. Then, we stopped and bent over, gasping for air and watching for

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whatever was coming out of the night behind us.

Black silhouettes of trees hovering over the road described the path we'd taken. Now, after several minutes at an Olympic pace, we backpedaled, imagining we were safe—as if nothing disclosed by light could hurt us—in the brighter proximity of the parkway and the university. We stood side by side, hands on our hips, scanning the point where the road disappeared again into darkness, brave now, ready to defend ourselves.

I don't think I'd run more than ninety feet in a straight line before, and twenty-five years passed before I ran a mile again.

"You saw the guy, right?"

"I saw him," Danny agreed, his voice shaking between deep breaths.

"What the fuck was he hiding from?"

"You see anything now?" Danny gasped.

"I don't see anything. Whoever it was, he decided not to chase us. Why was he hiding?"

Nothing. Stillness in the short stretch of lighted road that lead slightly uphill into emptiness.

Danny and I lingered for a half-hour or more, pacing, speculating, sitting on some guardrails to smoke. We had nowhere else to go, no safer harbor nearby. At first, we simply took it for granted that the spook must emerge into the light, just as we had. This was where the road led. Our imaginings grew stranger as we understood that anyone with innocent intent had no choice but to walk out after us, continuing on his way, nothing to hide, puzzled, maybe amused, at our fears.

"Hey, I was just getting off the road, in case that last driver was drunk or couldn't see me in the dark," he'd explain, gesturing at this clothing. "No offense, guys."

The fact that he never showed, that we'd first seen him climbing out from roadside cover, proved for us that he wasn't innocent. The spook had something to conceal, and it was probably something bad.

"Why would anybody be stalking *us*?" Danny wondered out loud.

"I can think of reasons," I told him. "None of them make any sense. Who knows? Maybe it didn't have anything to do with us," I speculated, then felt disappointed that it took away some of the spice. "He could've been hiding from anybody or everybody."

Through the long night that followed, we wandered the parkway. We spent the last coins we had at a twenty-four hour Dunkin' Donuts, doping up on caffeine, then crouching behind a wall to hide from a patrol car. The town cops would've grabbed a pair of vagrant sixteen year olds out on the street at 2:00 AM without second thoughts.

We watched for clues and tried to imagine who might have a motive for trailing us. We'd started from the top and passed no one. So, where did he come from? Was he one of the noisy guys from the car? The boyfriend Sandi tossed away in my favor? Maybe he'd been lurking around her house, watching us through the windows. The beginning of any mystery owns a million possibilities, but we never figured anything out then or, for me, in the years that followed. Unless I miss my guess with Danny, he probably stopped wondering. Ignorance becomes security in some circles.

As the sky began to brighten over the eastern hilltops, melting the distant sea of

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stars, we resumed our circuit, leaving Dunkin' Donuts and cutting across the empty lot of the Family Bargain Center to start back up Bunn Hill from its other, more populated side along Jensen Road.

When dawn had barely broken the silence, but before much of the rest of world had risen to meet this Saturday morning, bleary from lack of sleep, Danny and I were nabbed not far from Sandi's by a town cop investigating complaints about a couple of scary guys loitering near the crown of Bunn Hill. Apparently, even then, in the quiet and still conformist 60's, people were easily frightened. Maybe false security provided a perfect backdrop for worry over phantoms and demons that, in reality, posed no threat.

We first saw the cop when we approached Sandi's in search of an early breakfast. Danny and I were famished and dizzy from lack of sleep. In full uniform, he stood beside his patrol car in their driveway, the funny little house behind him, questioning Sandi's mother who'd poked her head out a second floor window. The sun was bright, everything lit up and nowhere to hide. We ran into the woods but were too stupid and tired to wait him out. He coasted down the road before rolling to a stop on the shoulder and signaling us over to his cruiser. He'd seen us stumbling around behind the first curtain of green leaves.

"Look, Danny, we didn't do anything," I argued while we still had a chance to run. "We just stayed out all night. Big deal. Let's just get it the fuck over with. He saw us, anyway."

Exhausted, Danny's face had taken on a hard, remote look.

The friendly young officer, who'd been cruising all night, waited beside his car for Danny and me, our biological clocks crippled, to come out of the shallow maple and birch woods in which we'd hidden. Then, he transported us to the Town Hall. Once we arrived and he felt satisfied we'd committed no crimes, he summoned our parents to come out into the wealthier suburbs and collect us.

"Sorry, boys," he apologized while we waited and daytime routines started up around us. "I know you were just out having some adventure, a little pussy hunting. I know you didn't do anything bad, but I've got to do this. It's my job."

No charges were filed, of course. The cop who picked us up took pains to explain to each of our parents in turn that we'd done nothing wrong. It was just that wandering around country neighborhoods in the middle of the night was likely to raise concerns, especially with boys our age. The simple hijinks of teenagers feeling around for boundaries, fortunately, had not yet emerged as a symptom. This was a case of "boys being boys" that needed to be recognized and restricted, nothing more.

Danny's mother and father came first, miffed as all hell over being wrenched out of bed on a weekend morning, and instantly determined that I was bad news and destined to ruin their son, if given another opportunity. They were both, like Danny, on the small side and kind of good-looking, like childhood sweethearts who'd stuck together. They also shared a skin-tingling self-righteous streak that hadn't yet blossomed in Danny. Without troubling themselves with introductions, on the spot, they banned me permanently from their son's company before it was too late, while I, smart-ass in development, refused to squirm under their fire. I sat there, arms crossed, and just barely avoided giving

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them the finger. Smirking with disdain, a gesture out of James Dean, was about the worst I committed.

In a queer little twist, maybe just to prove they were morons, Danny's parents also banned Ronnie after hearing the edited story he blurted out. That made me laugh inside. Ronnie was as sweet and harmless as anyone who'd ever walked the earth.

My own Dad was predictably pissed, nothing radical there. He stormed into the lockup to fetch me, making a show of being the aggrieved and disadvantaged parent of a miserable child.

My Dad was one of the most courageous, tough and virtuous men I'll ever know, but at that time, he also happened to be a major pain in the ass and an obstruction for me. I resented him for being cold and for driving my mother away and for anything else he withheld from me.

He'd been crippled by polio in his early teens, and his limp seemed impossibly more pronounced now, the thud of his heavier shoe, shored up with extra sole to compensate for a shortened, withered leg, even more accusing.

His instructions, fumed as an aside while paying half as much attention to the road as was reasonable in driving me home—should the police pick me up again, “Tell them to just keep you—” sounded seasoned and thought through.

Maybe he'd rehearsed it on his drive out the parkway. Although I'd do plenty of things worse and more violent than loiter along country roads through a summer night, I made sure he was never again summoned to come and get me.

I'd just turned sixteen, but by then, Dad and I were only a year or so from giving up on each other. After berating me in detail for the entire half-hour it took to get across the awakening city and out to the scruffy countryside, he grounded me for a period that I eventually wore down to a single day, the first and last grounding I'd ever sit through, a fact I never guessed, assuming that adolescence still had lots of runway ahead, it's twists, turns, bumps and abrasions not too far off the margins.

In the days that followed, I simply resumed my role as pain in the ass for my entire family, albeit with increasingly less involvement with any of them. My great and essentially permanent falling out was on the cusp.

Sandi, my first steady girlfriend, wasn't forgettable. We stayed together until one day at the end of summer when she abruptly broke my heart to take up with another guy, someone whose main advantages seemed to be that he owned a car and had been blessed with an abundance of romantic bullshit he could spill at will. Both were valued boyfriend upticks I'd lack, regarding the motor vehicle for another seven years and the bullshit, forever.

School resumed after Labor Day, and Sandi and I started getting accustomed to seeing each other only on weekends. Then, just like that, it was over.

In a coincidence we'd once thought exciting, my school, Binghamton North, faced hers, Vestal Central, on the opening night of football season. My team was a perennial sad sack, hers a champion featuring the great Bobby Campbell who'd later star at Penn State in the Orange Bowl and hang around the pros for a few years. On a cooling September night, as the game was played under artificial lights, I wandered the sidelines,

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trying to pick out her dirty blonde hair, teased into a puff, in the energetic stands, wondering where she was and why she didn't march boisterously out to meet me. The crowds were dense, happy and playful, dressed in school colors, and I felt like the only person without a connection. I'd never been dumped before and didn't immediately recognize the symptoms.

As long as summer lasted, though, I'd continued walk up the hill to her house and palled up with the next boyfriend Ronnie attracted. Her recovery from Danny was instantaneous, and it's possible Tony was in the wings all along. Tony was a mild, handsome, sincere and popular guy, the kind of friend a part of me wished my public self better able to emulate. Tony was smooth and nice like Ronnie, and I was more like Sandi, always trying to cover the rough edges and ignorance with noise and humor.

There wasn't a way not to like Tony. He lived in the city and hung out with a gang of friends much more exposed and experienced than me. I remember them joking about going to a movie theater one afternoon and jerking off as a group, like it was a team sport, filling my imagination mostly with goofy confusion over this undiscovered indulgence.

Although I never quite felt that I belonged, I accepted his invitation to hang out with his friends in the free time between pursuing girls. Hector, a wiry Spanish boy, brought over the first Rolling Stones album, and we listened in Tony's basement. Hector was excited over the blues inflected rock, *Can I Get A Witness?*, Jagger swaggering through the repetitions, "...witness, witness..." And, he was a bumblebee, "...buzzin' around your house." To say I didn't get it understates the point, but I was exposed, jostled a little bit out of my provincial corner.

Over the next few years, while still living around Binghamton, I ran into Sandi sometimes. I'd forgiven her, accepting her dumping me as a part of the game.

You never really disappear into the masses in a small town. The degrees of separation are a lot fewer than six. Your past, as others see it, and your predicted future are persistently there, evolving, being evaluated. Seeing her again was, at first, poignant; then later, a little nostalgic. Some usually ignored guy inside me still wished to be with her every day, to start his mornings climbing her hill to do nothing more than hang out.

Never beautiful, Sandi still managed to be attached to a string of possessive boys, and always, she'd take the time to flatter me long enough and with sufficient affection to make whoever he was at the time jealous. She'd introduce me as "my old boyfriend," in case there was any doubt about the threat, but in spite of or, maybe, because of her mother's infatuation with me and lobbying in my behalf, Sandi and I never got together again. I doubt that she ever gave it much thought, although I did, a lot. Decades passed before I gave up on do-overs and trying to circle back. I came to see her as having been perfect for me in that unique time and place where we found ourselves as boyfriend and girlfriend. She was just the aggressor I needed to pull me out of childhood but not a good fit anywhere else, an insight she grasped more quickly than I did.

We fit perfectly, then.

The last time I saw Sandi, I was writing poetry seriously and consciously taking on the looser, more cynical pose of a hippie. My hair, which had taken on a whole new

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role after the arrival of the Beatles, had grown longer and more fly away and encroached on the once forbidden territory over the tops of my ears. My clothes were, more or less, clean, but my appearance verged on the periphery of what was then considered somewhat less than casual. I hitchhiked and walked up the hill to her house one ambitious morning, like the old days when I'd been so fueled by emotion, sex and discovery, and she drove me home in her car late in the afternoon. We talked all day, taking each other's measure from a sustained distance. It wasn't really about anything. So much had changed, everything changed. She was the same rough, smoking, confident teased up blonde at nineteen that she'd been when we learned to make out together three summers before, now progressed through experience. We had next to nothing in common, except our ages and memories of those weeks of shared exploration. After all, I was the first guy ever whose hand she'd allowed to linger for even a few minutes inside her shirt, the strange softness on my fingers sweeter than anything I'd imagined. In the time since, I'd gotten more experience at having my exposed heart broken and in ways far less gentle than the pop song trampling I'd absorbed from her. The world was racked and changing on this dazzling stage before us. The culture gap exposed and electrified by our brainless trampling of Viet Nam and infused with the drive for civil rights grew to a wound never to be forgotten with healing. I was poised to throw away all I had and jump off into the revolutionary world ahead, and she was old days, a girl who, under the right circumstances, might still wander out into the dark and shout, "Hind end!" laughing at whatever surreal fling at self-assertion it was. It wasn't lost on me that hers was a road I could just as easily have taken, many options for it having already been declined and more still to come. When we shared a friendly goodbye kiss in my driveway, a place she'd never before visited, I knew we were going different places, that the pace was accelerating and that we'd probably never see each other again, at least not like this.

I don't know what became of Danny, his parents' banishment of me having stuck, but Tony died without growing old. I saw him last at a discothèque in 1967. He'd realized his dream of getting a band started and was standing on stage, mic in hand, the lead singer. We talked for the last time when he climbed down to the dance floor during a break. I was with Franny, a blonde, slightly older girl who owned a car and, for a month or two, shared my conviction that dancing to loud, rhythmic music was part of how a life ought to be spent.

I spotted Tony wandering the crowd between sets, cruising, and flagged him down. Just a few weeks ahead of a plan to go active in the Army, he'd prematurely shortened his hair. He still smiled almost absently, happy inside, as an ingrained part of his manner. We talked quickly through the break, Franny listening in. He was going to Viet Nam soon, and I was keeping my mouth shut. We wished each other luck, and then, I left with my date to drive away and make out in a lovers' lane off a nearby country road.

A year or so after that, a short article in the local newspaper accompanied a photo of Tony's convertible flipped over in a ditch along a highway in Virginia. I was, by then, living with Cindi and actively resisting the war, especially my own participation in it. It was a sunny summer morning, and I held the paper up by the window in our one room apartment on Hawley Street.

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“Look at this,” I said, drawing Cindi over. “My first best friend got killed.”

“Wow, that’s sad,” she said, looking intently at the picture.

Even in black and white, his useless wheels seemed to spin ridiculously, without meaningful resistance, in the humid night air, his body crushed to death on the ground nearby. He’d been speeding home to see his mother, according to the paper, before embarking for the war zone.

Tony was an only child and had been, maybe, a little overprotected.

“His father was always warning us, ‘No tumming!’ whenever he saw us heading out the door,” I remembered out loud.

Cindi cocked her head.

“‘Tumming’ meant hitchhiking. He thought we’d get in trouble, if we hitchhiked anywhere. We could get in plenty of trouble without hitchhiking, but we never did. We were too girl crazy to waste time fucking around with anything else.”

From the overstuffed living room chair where he sat with a newspaper after work, as all Dads then did, he issued this edict whenever he suspected Tony and I might be going off somewhere that wasn’t close enough to walk.

We thumbed anyway, of course, randy sixteen year olds, Tony and me—girls were almost always our destination—without ever suffering any of the hazards his father feared or even discerning what they were. How else were we going to get where we wanted to go in the middle 60’s?

Things go bump in the night, always have, always will, and almost none of them ever hurt you. The dangers are so random and so often incomprehensible that Tony and I doubted then, as I continue to doubt now, that extra caution ever really benefited anyone.