

This Is Not That Story

BY SUSAN PERABO • MARCH 2006

The boy fell from the dormitory balcony sometime between two o'clock and four o'clock in the morning. It had already been snowing for several hours, and it continued to snow after he lay on the ground, so that by the time the dirty white truck rumbled up to the residential quad at 6:15 and three men — the university groundskeepers — climbed wearily from the back, armed with shovels, the snow was nearly six inches deep. The oldest groundskeeper, who was also the newest member of the crew, set to work clearing the path that led from the north end of the dorm to the student union, where in just over an hour the dining hall would begin serving breakfast. The old groundskeeper was in a foul mood; he didn't like his job very much. Leave it to him to pick the worst winter in forty years to become a groundskeeper. His fingers and palms were swollen from shoveling, and his feet were always cold, no matter how many pairs of socks he wore. Every night he sat on the edge of the bathtub and soaked his feet while he read the help-wanted ads, looking for a job that paid better, that wasn't too noisy, that was — God help him — warm.

The old groundskeeper probably wouldn't even have seen the boy's body behind a bush had he not stepped to the side, off the path and out of the wind, to light a cigarette. It was the red tail of a shirt that he saw first, clotted with snow but bright as a bird. He took a step forward and with the corner of his snow shovel pushed back the bush and discovered that the shirt belonged

to a boy and that the boy was dead. For a minute he didn't do anything. No, not a full minute. But he did take a drag on his cigarette — that much he remembered for sure, and he felt guilty afterward. He let the bush fall back into place and then took the drag and let it out slow before he reached for his walkie-talkie.

That night his wife made blackberry cobbler. She brought some to him while he sat on the edge of the tub; then she slid off her shoes and sat down beside him. She was angry that it was he who had found the boy, and not one of the younger men, who surely had much less to lose. She feared that seeing the boy would remind her husband of all the other things he had seen and worked so hard to forget, all the other things they'd been running from for so many years.

There's a story there. But this is not that story.

The night before, around eight o'clock, a young man had signed his name on a form at Big Red's Beer Distributor, promising to return the keg that he was picking up for a party in his apartment that night. The man was twenty-two, and the students he'd invited to his party had all been his friends since freshman dorm. Now they were seniors, but it was still early in their last semester of college, and so they had not yet reached the cold-panic stage that would blossom with spring. They were in the wonderful stage

immediately preceding panic, when life after graduation is far enough off that it seems any number of breathtaking opportunities might arise before then. The young man had applications being reviewed at several graduate schools — he had just sent the applications off the week before, so it would be another few weeks at least before he started checking the mail obsessively. This was the time between possibilities and choices, when he could relax. It was also the last time he would secretly believe that anything was possible.

The party was small at first, just twelve or fifteen people. The girl who was kind of his girlfriend arrived around midnight, and the two of them went out back and sat on the stone wall, smoking cigarettes in the falling snow. They could have smoked inside, but outside they could use the cold as an excuse to huddle together. It was goddamn pathetic, he thought, that after a year of being “kind of” a couple they still needed this sort of excuse. He’d gone back and forth on the whole serious-relationship thing; they both had. He was in the process of promising himself that by spring there would be no more “kind of” about it.

He went into the house to pee. He was drunk by this point and, glancing around on his way to the bathroom, he saw a few people he did not know. The inevitable tag-alongs, and tag-alongs of tag-alongs. People he didn’t know drinking the beer he’d paid for. Well, he’d been a tag-along once too. Everyone had. You could get pissed about it and spoil your own good time, or you could accept the fact that every social structure in the world allowed for the tag-along.

After he'd peed, he went back to the girl. She sat alone on the stone wall, legs drawn to her chest, chin on her knees, a cigarette snug in her interlaced fingers. Snow in her hair glistened in the light from the bare bulb over the back door. Later, when he'd look back on this night, this would be the moment he would remember most clearly: the moment when he should have said something meaningful, should have said, *What about next summer?* or *What about next year?* or at least told her how beautiful she looked, sitting there on that wall. Instead he said: "Beer?"

One of the tag-alongs in the living room was the boy who would fall from the balcony. While investigating his death, authorities would discover he had spent a portion of his evening drinking at the house of the young man. Stymied regarding the best way to portray its grief, the college would suspend the young man for providing alcohol to a minor. His plans for graduate school would be put on hold. The girl who was kind of his girlfriend would never become his girlfriend — not because of what happened that night; not directly, anyway.

But this is not that story.

The university chaplain was pretending. Pretending was the only way he could keep from hyperventilating, which he absolutely could not do, because there were so many important people around — the university

president, for one, and the dean of students — and, frankly, how bad would it look if the college chaplain, faced with his first actual on-the-job tragedy, started gasping like a hooked fish? He wasn't pretending that the tragedy hadn't happened; that part of it, the death part, he could handle. No, he was simply pretending that the worst was over. He was pretending he had already broken the news to the parents, that he had handled the call with grace and compassion, had been professional yet comforting, and now he was on the other side of that phone call. It was the only way he could breathe: to pretend.

The college had been trying to reach the parents for seven hours and twenty minutes. No one could find either of them. The father, apparently, was out of town at a conference in Chicago, but what hotel he was staying in and what conference exactly he was attending, no one was sure. The mother, as best as could be figured from a number of phone calls to friends and family, had been running errands all day. No messages had been left at the family home. What would such a message say? How would one keep from giving away the news by tone alone?

A command center of sorts had been set up in the office of the dean of students. Everyone else was milling about, but the chaplain sat at a desk — not even his own, so there was no opportunity to pretend to do other work — hitting the REDIAL button every five minutes.

It wasn't the anticipation of actually delivering the news that was suffocating the chaplain. He just wanted the wait to be over. He did not like

knowing what the boy's parents didn't know. It was as if he had a secret, and once the secret was told, nothing would ever be the same for the people to whom he was going to tell it. The father was at a meeting, the chaplain imagined. At this very moment he was at a meeting and was not thinking of his son. His son was nestled in the back of his brain, as surely as he had once been nestled in bed when the father came home late from work and peeked in to see that he was sleeping soundly, to whisper good night. The son was tucked away in the bed of the father's brain.

The mother was a different story. The mother was running errands, and this opened up in the chaplain's mind a variety of terrible possibilities. Perhaps the mother was buying birthday presents for the boy, was at this very moment trying to decide which of two sweaters he would prefer. The boy's file, right in front of the chaplain, revealed that the boy would have turned nineteen next month. The mother didn't know that her son was not going to turn nineteen. But he, the chaplain, who had never spoken to the dead boy — he knew. He, a stranger, knew the most important thing that had ever been known about the boy: that he was no more. And the mother and father who had raised the boy knew nothing. If only he could tell them, then they would know too, and he wouldn't have to carry the weight of this knowledge any longer. The rest he could deal with: Tending to grieving students. Speaking to the media. Leading a service, likely outside, during which a tree would be planted, perhaps a plaque dedicated. Talking with the parents, meeting them when they came to campus to take the boy's things home. All of this he could handle, could, in fact, excel at. If only he could reach them.

He hit REDIAL again. The machine would pick up after four rings, and he would set the receiver down and —

“Hello?”

His hands turned cold. Wait — just wait a minute. Never mind everything he’d just thought. He was happy to keep the secret. Of course he was. He would keep it forever. What had he been thinking? He would —

“Hello?”

But this is not — could not be — that story.

A little before two that morning, the boy came outside looking for a cigarette. The dorm’s resident assistant, a young woman who faced the world with a desperate, self-effacing cynicism, was standing in the cold, shivering and sucking on a Marlboro Light. She shook another from the pack and extended it to the boy. She had known him for four months. He was among the twenty-four freshmen who were her responsibility, and she had gotten to know him better than the others because he was very social and not afraid to make friends with upperclassmen. He was drunk, but not unusually so. (She had seen much worse.) And thus nothing seemed out of the ordinary until she dropped her cigarette butt onto the fresh snow and, looking down, saw that the boy wore no shoes.

“Nice. Little cold there?” She nodded to his feet.

The boy shrugged, took another drag off the cigarette.

“Long night?” she asked.

Another shrug. “Hanging out. You know. Whatever.”

“Anywhere fun?”

“Not really.”

She was cold, ready to go in and curl up in her afghan. She gave him another cigarette, for the road, and went to bed.

She was the last person to see him alive. Because of this, she was forced to recount that meaningless, last conversation at least a hundred times. On several occasions she was tempted to make something up, because the conversation (if you could even call it that) had been so utterly dull. She wished that one of them had said something poignant, so that a little solace might be found in his last moments. She was a writer — trying to become one, anyway — and she wanted something writerly to have happened there at the end. She wanted to have seen it coming. She wanted to have had a premonition, a foreshadowing. But all she’d had was a cigarette. At least she had given him one. At least there was that.

She was not the type to let these moments go. This image would stay with her forever: his bare feet on the snowy steps outside the dormitory. She would revisit it, seize it with something resembling passion, anytime her life veered off course. She would blame herself, exaggerate her role in things, create for herself hundreds of opportunities to have saved him, opportunities she would certainly have taken advantage of if she'd only been smarter, kinder, a better resident assistant, a better friend, a better person. Returning to campus for her ten-year reunion, she would step onto the balcony and feel a grief more acute than she'd felt after her own mother's death.

But this is not that story either.

Why no shoes? Perhaps the boy had returned from the party, gone into his room, kicked off his battered sneakers, emptied his pockets, and checked his answering machine. Then possibly he had stepped into the hallway, bound for the bathroom, and inadvertently allowed the door to close and lock behind him, his roommate asleep inside. *Shit*. It's likely he paused for a moment, considering. There were a dozen rooms he could crash in, friends up and down the hall who would still be awake. But right now he wanted a cigarette. If the evening wasn't yet over, then a cigarette was in order. He'd find someone to bum one from out front, and then figure out where to sleep.

He wasn't in a bad mood, just weary and sobering up and not inclined to chat. He was glad when the resident assistant gave him an extra smoke and went off to bed, because he wanted to smoke alone. Something nice, really, about smoking alone, because you weren't doing it just to be social. But why not just smoke it there, on the steps out front? Maybe he wanted a view of the campus, looking brilliant and new in the snow. Maybe that was the image of himself he was picturing as the elevator carried him to the fourth floor: a still night, snow falling on his bare feet and head, him standing alone and above it all.

How did he fall? Everyone has a theory. The railing was as high as his stomach, so a mere slip on the slick balcony would not have sent him over. Here is what I think: He saw something, or thought he saw something, or someone. Maybe he was hoping to see a girl he liked coming home to the dorm. Maybe he heard voices, friends' voices, from around the corner of the building. Or maybe it wasn't a person at all. Maybe it was a rabbit, or one of the campus stray cats trotting down the walk, snow puffing lightly under its feet. I think he leaned over the rail to get a better look.

But what do I know? This story is mostly made up. Some readers might believe it to be thinly veiled fact, when, in truth, it is thinly veiled fiction, a fabrication gently draped with the netting of what actually occurred.

Half the characters are no more than letters stumbling across my computer screen; the other half have been lovingly adorned with lies and conjecture. “The truth escapes me,” people say, though surely we are willing accomplices to its flight. We loosen its chains, leave its cell door slightly ajar, allow ourselves to become distracted as it lumbers off into the waning light. It’s easier that way, for then everything and everyone is fair game. Yes, this story’s possibilities for a fiction workshop are vast: an exercise in character, in plot, in beginnings, in endings. A study in point of view. A story about a college, about a generation, about a culture of excess. A tale about the splintering of friendships, about priorities, about the weight of the past, the weight of the future, the weight of the single moment and how it resonates through dorm rooms and classrooms, into bedrooms and waiting rooms, days and months and years away. This story could be all those things, yet it is none of them. So what, then, is the story? Only this:

A boy died.