

Coming Home

By Nic Howe

It was a year since I had gotten back home. I had been sitting there watching television for some time. It was easy, watching TV. Easy to not think, to just walk outside your mind and be empty for a time. I prefer programming that enables the emptiness, stuff like the news. It really is great for that, it's on all the time, and pretty much none of it is of any consequence to you or me. Mom thinks that it should be hard for me—hearing the distressing stories in the news. I honestly don't even think about it. I don't think I have empathy—not anymore anyway.

I wasn't even aware of what was on at the time; it all became white noise at some point. The drawl of the news anchor provided the perfect foundation for the absence of meaningful thought that I craved constantly. The hum of the TV set we had only made it better. I loved when someone turned on the TV—that high pitched whine gave me a sense of security. TV helped for all those years. I could withdraw for a time, I never really knew a home, but I guess that was the closest I got.

“Kevin?” My mom was calling from the kitchen.

“Living room, ma!” I called back. She walked in with her nose inches from a piece of paper. The news anchor was talking about the Halloween parade and all the wonderful people that were there.

“Kevin, this is a note from Mr. Falen.” Mom said, still reading. I didn't say anything. “He knows about your situation,” I saw her lift her head and lower the note out of the corner of my eye. “He says that this year you've been coming into class smelling like...” she paused as if to gauge my reaction. I didn't have one. “...vodka and cigarettes. He just wanted you to know you can go to him if you need to, and of course the guidance counselor.” I snorted. I assumed that the

guidance counselor put Falen onto this. I was her project, she wanted to fix me. I wasn't playing ball.

"Don't snort, Kevin he's genuinely concerned about you."

"I bet he is." All of them say they are.

"Don't you want help, Kevin?"

"Dad doesn't seem to think I need it." She pouted.

"Your father thinks you're over it, you only did the therapy for a few months and—"

"—and dad stopped paying for it because I didn't need it anymore."

"Because he thought you didn't need it anymore. But these things take time Kevin." I turned my head from the TV and looked at her in the eye for the first time in a while.

"He was right. I'm fine. It's been a year. I don't need help, I'm over it." I got up and looked down at my mother. I was much taller than her now, she still wasn't used to that. She folded her arms and looked down, as if she were scolding a small child; except she had this blank look on her face, not frustration or anger just flat, expressionless.

"I just think that it would be helpful to talk about it some more, don't you agree?"

"I have talked about *it* mom; more than I ever wanted to. I'm sick of talking about *it*." She looked back up at me, now with tears in her eyes. I hated when we caught each other's eyes. It was as if she didn't recognize me. I looked away. "It's all anyone ever wants to talk about." She sniffled. I wanted some air.

I turned for the door and grabbed my jacket.

“Where are you going?” She sounded concerned.

“Cigarette.”

“Kevin, no.” I put on my jacket. “You can’t smoke anymore. You smoke, and you drink, you’re still a child!” I turned around. Tears were streaming down her face.

“If I were still a child I’d still be there. I grew up, mom.” I grabbed the pack out of my jacket pocket. “It ain’t your fault.” She walked over to me and grabbed the pack out of my hand.

“You’re not allowed this anymore. It’s not normal”

“None of my life has been fucking normal mom.”

“Watch your mouth!” She tossed the pack into the wastebasket. “*He* let you drink and smoke and swear, but you’re home now. You can’t do those things anymore.” I walked over to the bin and pulled them out.

“It was a consolation, and some things stick with you.” She was still crying.

“You’re smoking because you’re stressed! We need to find a healthier way for you to destress. You should... go for a jog—maybe join your school’s track team! I read in the paper the other day that workouts are the best de-stressors.”

“I’m not stressed, ma. I just like smoking.”

“What about that toy that just came out, the Nintendo? It has a bunch of different games you can play, and a little robot! Everyone is talking about it.”

“He had an Atari he let me play.” It got uncomfortably still.

“F-forget that then, um—”

“Yes ma, forget it.”

“No, don’t forget it you need a hobby! You just sit around all day because you don’t have anything here you like to do. Your father has a guitar he used to play all the time—but you’d want a new one, wouldn’t you? We could go down to the Sam Ash and see what they have, or maybe a drum set? We should have space in the attic for one you and your father could play music together and—”

“Mom!” She quieted immediately. “I don’t want... any of that crap. These,” I held up my pack “have been working for me just fine. Don’t waste money on a Nintendo or instrument or anything for me. I don’t need it. I’m fine.”

“Kevin... I’m so sorry.” I didn’t want to hear that. I barged through the front door leaving my mother speechless and sobbing.

I felt angry for some reason—she was just trying to help me. I hated that I couldn’t just calm the hell down for her. I lit my cigarette and let the wind embrace me. I took in a long drag and held the smoke in my lungs, almost feeling the tar clogging them up. I thought about the first time I smoked. It was a couple weeks after I left. I was seven. He had gone to work and left me alone. I guess he forgot his smokes or something and left them on the table. I remembered my dad smoking after dinner and wanted to feel some kind of connection to him.

When he got home he realized I had taken one and confronted me about it.

“So you wanna smoke huh, Michael?” He had already renamed me.

“Yes sir.” He opened the pack and grabbed 6 of them. He crouched down to my level. I still remember his smell. Oily hair and sweat. He brandished the cigarettes at me.

“You know this shit is bad for you right?”

“Yes sir, I know.” He put the cigarettes in my hand.

“Not while I’m home yeah? I don’t wanna smell it on you. Now go to your room, I’ll be there soon.”

I cut the memory off there and took a long drag. I looked back up at the house. Sally was in her room watching me. She was only six. A year younger than I was when I disappeared. My replacement. I waved. She didn’t wave back. I turned away from her. I wanted a drink. I finished my cigarette.

I went into the garage through the side door. The garage was my haven. No one ever went in there. It was less a garage more than it was a storage room. Dad preferred to park outside and why would mom or Sally ever come in. I stashed my liquor there. Vodka was my favorite. It was always what he had, and it was easy to hide in a water bottle at school. Back then getting drunk made it all easier.

He was the one who turned me on to drinking. Like I said, it made it easier, I cried less. God willing, I would pass out. I don’t think he liked it when I passed out but fuck him. Eventually it took more and more drinks for me to get drunk. I think that’s when he realized I was too old. That’s when he had me help him find someone else. He would go over plans with me. Plans that reminded me of the one that worked on me. I would do my best to sabotage these plans. I’d mess up my lines, or purposely scare the kid, do whatever I could do to tip off the mark that something was up. Every time we failed he’d beat me, and the beatings would get worse. I wanted him to kill me. God how I wanted him to kill me.

Then there was the last time. About a year ago, a new kid showed up. He hadn't told me about this plan. Got someone else, or did it himself, I don't know.

"You got a new brother. Name's Dennis for now. His parents didn't want him either. You two will get along, yeah?" I nodded. The look that kid had on his face. Terrified, sad. I remembered the feeling. "Work needs me tonight. Don't get him too fucked up, Michael." I glowered at him as he put on his security jacket and walked out. He didn't notice. Dennis was looking at me with wide eyes.

"Your mom and dad didn't want you either?"

"Don't think so, no."

"Is Mr. Putnam nice, Michael?" I remembered his voice. The hope. There was hope. There was a child in there. I remember the anger that flooded over me. I remember two words that flashed through my head then and there: *No More*.

"Call me Kevin. Your name's Dennis?" He nodded. "You have an older brother Dennis?" He was thinking hard. "Other than me."

"Oh, uh... no. Mommy and daddy said I was all they needed!" There had been pride in his voice, in his eyes. Pride that disappeared as soon as he said it. He looked down and sobbed.

"Where did you live before this Dennis?" He looked up at me with tears in his eyes.

"M-Massapequa." He struggled saying the name. Massapequa was far.

"Let's go see your parents, okay? Mr. Putnam told me before you got here that he wanted me to take you there, so you could say goodbye."

"B-but Mr. Putnam said they don't want to see me ever again."

“Well still, he thinks you should see them one more time. Brothers go on adventures together Dennis, it’ll be an adventure yeah?”

“Y-yeah! Let’s go bro!” He had sounded kind of excited. He probably had always wanted a brother.

We hitched our way down to Massapequa and I tried to get him to give me directions to his parents’ house. He was so young, he barely knew the layout of the town. We couldn’t even find his neighborhood. I decided to do the next best thing and took him to the police station. I told him to go inside and tell the police where he lived and who he was. Then they spotted us and brought us in. I don’t know why but I didn’t want to go. I wanted to go back to him. I wanted to spit in his face and tell him as long as I was there that shit wasn’t going to happen to anyone else. I wanted him to shoot me or stab me or beat me until I stopped breathing. Instead it all came out there. Who I was, where I was from, what happened to me. The officers tried to comfort me.

“You’ve been missing for some time haven’t you son? Ready to go home?”

“Don’t worry kid, that bastard is gonna go away for a long time.” He got seven years. The amount of time I was stuck with him. I had to finger him on a line. When I did he smiled. I knew he couldn’t see me through the mirror but he knew I was there.

I was already a couple drinks deep. Not drunk enough. I put my glasses away and started drinking from the bottle. Gulp after gulp. I wanted to forget it all. I tried to lie back and hit my head on a metal shelf. I hit my head hard, but the alcohol numbed the pain. I turned my head to the shelf and noticed a stack of papers I had never seen before. I picked up the stack and saw seven-year-old me staring back with a wide smile.

Kevin Gaynor, 7 Years Old

Last seen walking home from school November 4th, 1978

Blonde hair, brown eyes, 4'0" and 50 lbs

Please call if you have seen him!

There were hundreds of these flyers. I rifled through the stack. My age changed one year at a time up to eleven years old. The past tense was added to my description. The picture remained the same.

He told me they didn't want me anymore. Obviously when I got home I realized he had been lying but... he told me they didn't want me anymore. For years he left me alone in that house and I could have run but I didn't because I had nowhere to go. I could have come home all that time, but I stayed and let him... just let him. I tried to picture my mom and dad driving around putting these flyers up. What if I had seen one? He had brought me far enough away that I wouldn't have seen anything like this but what if I had? I could have run earlier. I could have done what I did with Dennis. All that time. My lost childhood. I started to cry.

I heard a car outside. Must have been dad. I hoped he would not come in the garage. I didn't want him to see me like this. Then I heard the door open.

"Kevin, you in here?" I didn't look at him. I couldn't. "Jesus, Kevin. Why are you looking at those?" He grabbed them out of my hands. I tried to say "Sorry," but I couldn't. He picked up the half empty vodka bottle. "Oh for fuck's sake Kevin, where did you even get this?" Again, I tried to say "Sorry."

He crouched down to my level. I smelled his smell; pomade and cologne.

"Kevin, what's wrong?"

“It was all my fault dad.” I blurted out between sobs.

“All your fault? The hell you talking about?” He stood up. He sounded frustrated. “Of course it isn’t your fault it’s,” he took a brief pause, “that bastard’s fault Kevin.” I continued sobbing. He knelt back down, and I felt his hand graze my shoulder. I don’t know why it happened, but I swung my body around with my arm out and struck him in the chest. He swore and stood up. He was rubbing his chest and staring down at me with a light in his eyes that I had never seen before—he seemed furious. I backed myself against the wall, I wanted to escape, to run away.

“The hell do you want from us Kevin?” I was leaning back against the wall staring up at him, tears streaming down my face. “Your mother and I, we try so hard for you. We want to give you a normal life, the life you had before all of this happened. But you do crap like this and—” he turned around and ran one hand through his hair, his other hand resting on his hip. He turned back around with that light in his eyes dimmed, his expression softer, but not comfortably so, it was almost strained.

“No one blames you Kevin. No one. Don’t be ridiculous.” *I do*. I wanted to say, but the words got caught in my throat and all that came out were gasps for air. “We thought this town was safe; it had always been safe. Good people all around. The neighbors looked out for each other, we all knew each other’s names...” He crouched down next to me again. “If we knew that a bastard like that was roaming around... we never would have let you go out alone... but we didn’t.” He sat down, waiting for me to respond, but I didn’t think I could. I managed to let him hug me and we sat there together for some time.

I wanted him to beat me. Beat the sadness out of me. Beat me for being such a piece of shit since I came home. Maybe then I could forget and be the happy kid they wanted me to be. Things could be normal again. But that would never happen.