

John Paul King

Creature in the Sky

We had a party one night where the cops came and started busting kids who were underage. This was October, I guess, but it wasn't Halloween. Out in the side yard, they busted this girl — I saw the whole thing happen — who kept claiming she was twenty-one. They asked her how old she was and she said she was twenty-one, but then when they asked for her ID she handed them something from somewhere like New Jersey or Pennsylvania that was expired and that claimed she was twenty-five. From there, the conversation went downhill until she was being escorted out to the cop car.

My little brother was a freshman then too and he was at the party that night. I tried not to get too drunk. Anyway, I usually tried not to get too drunk when we had parties because usually the cops came and wanted to talk to one of the residents. My little brother, Jack, got really drunk that night. My housemates had fun getting him drunk just purely for the fact that he was my brother. And one time — this was later in the year at the Christmas party — they got him drunk and had him lick the plunger, I guess because he was my little brother.

At the beginning of the year, I had given Jack my ID which meant I had to go to the DMV and tell them I had lost mine and pay twenty bucks for a new one. So then, on that night I started telling about, I went to find Jack so I could hold the ID while things played out with the cops. By the time I found him, the cops were probably already gone. It took forever to find him. It turned out he was inside, upstairs in Dom's room,

passed out on the futon while some girl sat there, neatly dressed, looking prim and proper with her knees together. She was petting Jack like a dog and crooning at him. Girls liked Jack. I asked her if Jack was alright.

“He’s just really drunk.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s passed out.”

“Maybe he was sleepy.”

“Right before he passed out he was telling me that mermaids are real and then when I tried to correct him he started crying.”

“Do you see his wallet there?”

Only one of his back pockets was accessible because of the position in which he had passed out. She started to check that pocket for his wallet and then stopped. “Hey, who are you anyway?” she said.

“His brother.”

“What do you need with Jack’s wallet?”

“I just want to make sure...wait, who the hell are you even?”

“I’m Jack’s friend.” She seemed to be going out of her way to say his name.

“Listen I’m not trying to steal from him. I just want to make sure he doesn’t have my ID on him. The cops are down there.”

“Oh, are you Jack’s brother?”

“I thought that’s what I had already been saying.”

“Ohhhhh,” she said. “That makes sense then.”

“Listen,” I said. I kept checking out in the hallway. “Can you check his other pocket there for his wallet?”

“That ID is already gone.”

“What?”

“Jack doesn’t have that ID anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Someone took it.”

“Who took it?” I said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jack’s friend.”

“Where’s that ID?”

“Are you mad at Jack?”

“I’d like to find that ID.”

“I know who took it.”

She told me that some kid in Jack’s and her dorm with similar hair to Jack — to me technically, I guess — had stolen the ID. I’m sure she was covering for him. I’m sure he sold it or got himself in a fix some way or another and just offered it up. But it bothered me just then to know that some random kid was benefiting off of my likeness. It made me feel violated or something. I asked her to try to pin down the kid. She said there were actually technically two of them. She’d text them to see where they were. “They’ll text me back for sure. The one is trying to get in my pants.”

“The one that looks like me?”

“Like you?”

“Okay, like Jack then.”

“Oh, he looks nothing like Jack. He just has similar hair. Jack is way cuter than this kid.”

“Who is this kid?”

“This kid is a real d-bag. He has been trying so hard to get in my pants.”

They were at Side, which was a twenty-one and up bar. “I might need you to come with me to point them out.”

“What about Jack?”

“What about him?”

“I don’t want to just leave him here.”

“This is my house. He will be fine.”

“But look at him.”

I looked at him. “You must like him pretty good.”

“He’s just a sweetheart.”

"One time I chucked a cue ball at him. It missed and went through the drywall."

She ran her hand through his hair and looked down at him lovingly. "Poor little Jack," she said. "He looks so peaceful."

"Help me find these two kids, will you?"

My house was only two blocks from Side, which was one of the main reasons it was a great party house. You could come to our house, get fucked-up, head uptown, and by the time you would normally realize you should be slowing down, you'd already have a drink in your hand at Side. She had to go to the bathroom before we left. She came out of the bathroom next to Dom's room saying how disgusting it was, which I thought was funny because most girls had already become desensitized to that stuff. She went back into Dom's room to grab her purse off of the futon where Jack was passed out. It took her several misses to get the strap over her shoulder, which was the first time I could sense that she might have been even slightly drunk. Most people were already hammered by this time of night. Take Jack, for instance. This girl was tall and she had this leather skirt on. She was good-looking. She went down the stairs before me, unsteady in her high shoes, her hand on the wall to guide her. It was a steep, narrow staircase with small steps. The party was cleared out by then, the cops gone. The night was alive, drunk kids who were just slightly less drunk than Jack were hooting and calling from every direction. "So are you Jack's girl?" I asked.

"Am I Jack's *girl*?"

"Sure."

"Who talks like that anymore?"

"What year are you?"

"You're nothing like Jack at all."

"Did you have fun at the party?"

"I'm a freshman," she said sharply. "I live in Jack's dorm remember."

"Oh right."

"If you try to make a move on me I'm going to take off my shoe and stick it in your eye."

"I just want to find my ID."

She stopped to fix something on her shoe and then she re-slung her purse strap over her shoulder.

“What’s your name anyway?” I asked her.

“Jackie.”

“Alright.”

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

“He is a sweetheart, you know? Your brother is.”

“Christ. Yes. I realize.”

We walked on a ways. “I’m just saying,” she muttered.

We had to wait in line at Side. We didn’t really talk, we just looked around. Then I remembered she was a freshman. “This is twenty-one and up, you know?”

“I’ve got an ID.”

“Alright.”

We stood just inside, away from the crowd, while she texted these two kids to track them down. Side was a converted bowling alley. It had the same type of floor as you’ll see at any hardware store. There was not a single decoration in the place except for the neon Bud Light sign behind the bar. This place was proofed so that kids could get extremely drunk and do absolutely no damage except to themselves and to each other. No property damage.

I was a twenty-two year old standing in a twenty-one and up bar with a bunch of eighteen and nineteen year olds. I felt old. My whole senior year I felt old whenever I went to a bar, like I was trying to live a life that was already gone.

When these kids came, the one gave Jackie a huge hug that she wanted no part in. These kids did look like a piece of shit. D-bags, like Jackie said. I guess I was already on edge, probably because I had been around a bunch of drunk kids at my house all night while I had stayed pretty sober. Being sober around a bunch of drunk underclassmen will put anyone one edge. I was just standing there; Jackie had to really usher these

kids toward me. They wanted nothing to do with me. They were all caught up in Jackie. They probably hadn't even noticed me. Jackie said, "This is Jack Lofton's brother. Do you still have Jack's ID?"

"Yo, what up, dude?" said this kid who had given Jackie the big hug. I hated him. He was the one with hair like Jack and me.

"Did you take an ID from Jack?"

"I'm Connor," he said. The other kid just stood back.

"Okay."

"Bro, chill. I'm just being polite."

Jackie stepped in and said: "You guys can figure this out. I'm going to go check on Jack."

"Jack is fine," I said. "Why are you so worried about Jack?"

"I might just go home."

"Do you want a drink or anything?" I felt like I owed her.

"I think I'm just going to head home."

"Okay."

She left. "Bro," this kid Connor said to me as Jackie walked off. He got real close. "You know that girl?"

"She's friends with my little brother."

"Jack, sure. But do *you* know her."

"No."

"Bro," this kid leaned in real close. "You know that girl got raped?"

"What?"

"Yep. First weekend. How about that for shitty luck?"

"How do you even know something like that?"

"It got around, bro. You know the way things get around."

"How'd it happen?"

"She was at some party, passed out in some kid's room. Somewhere off campus. Wrong place wrong time and, boom, raped."

"You probably shouldn't be going around just talking about that shit."

"You were with her. I figured I'd tell you."

"Listen," I said. "Do you have my ID?"

"Nah, man."

"How'd you get in here then?"

"I have my own ID, bro. You think you have the only ID on campus?"

"Let me see it."

"Bro," he said.

"If you call me bro one more time I'll punch your face."

"Chill, dog." He back-hand tapped my chest. I shoved him. He fell into the other kid he was with and they both went into a group of freshmen girls huddled just inside the door. The bouncer looked up right away. He stepped toward me. "I'm fucking leaving," I told the bouncer.

I went and got a piece of pizza and was going to go eat it down by the pond, but as I was walking I ran into Nathan Jenson and his girlfriend. They were heading away from uptown. I acted calm and polite, as if I hadn't just been kicked out of Side. Nathan's girlfriend loved me. She came up and gave me a hug. "Hi, Bud," she said. She rested her head on my chest. She was hammered. "Aw, Nathan, it's Bud," she said.

Nathan said: "Dude, Jack was *fucked up* tonight. I was cracking up."

"Yeah, he's passed out on Dom's futon right about now."

Nathan laughed. His girlfriend — I honestly can't remember her name — said, "Awwwww."

"You guys heading home?" I asked.

"That pizza looks amazing," said Nathan's girlfriend.

"Here you want it?"

"Can I have a bite?"

"Here. Take it. I got it for you."

"Awwwww. Bud."

I gave her the pizza. Nathan said: "You want to come sneak into the baseball field with us?"

"What?"

"We're going to go sneak into the baseball field."

We walked down toward the baseball diamond while Nathan's girlfriend worked on my piece of pizza. She even gave Nathan a bite. "Is this something you guys do? Break into the baseball field."

"You know how many times we've banged in the outfield?" said Nathan's girlfriend, gnawing on the pizza crust. "I like the feel of the cool grass on my back."

"I don't want to intrude on something here."

"Nah," said Nathan. "We raid the dugouts is what we do. They've got these huge jugs of bubble gum and sunflower seeds."

"I like the Ranch," said his girlfriend.

This corner of campus was quiet. We were away from uptown. We got in through a secret door in the outfield wall. It was disguised to look like just another panel in the wall. Once you knew where the door was, it was as easy as pushing it open and walking right in. The moon was up and the air smelled sweet like rotting leaves and then smoky like a bonfire. I never played baseball growing up but as we walked across the outfield that night, I fell in love with the game.

They went to one dugout and I went to the other. I wound up just sitting on the bench, listening to Nathan and his girlfriend. They were excited about something. Nathan, his voice giddy with laughter, called: "Bud! Check this out!" His girlfriend was laughing. Her laughter was small on the night air. Anyway, they must have found something outside of just their normal bubblegum and sunflower seeds. They were good, Nathan and his girlfriend. You could tell just purely based on the fact that they were still laughing at this time of night, not fighting. I didn't go check it out, whatever it was they had found in the other dugout. I sat there listening to Nathan's girlfriend's laughter. It was really lovely to hear just then.

Next I knew, they were gone and all was quiet. I had been a long ways away and, when I came back, it occurred to me that Nathan and his girlfriend might never have been there at all. A long time had passed. It must have been four in the morning by then. I left the dugout and walked across the infield into the outfield grass. I lay down, face to face with a quiet October moon. It was a creature up there. It knew I was watching.

I couldn't believe I had never done this before. I thought of all the nights I had gotten too drunk and done stupid shit instead of coming to this baseball diamond and lying in the outfield grass and watching the moon. I resolved right then to do this every single Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night for the rest of my college life.

I could feel the moonlight soft and cool on my skin as I rushed away from the core of the earth. The moonlight spilled over me. As I lay there, I remember, I was amazed — absolutely profoundly amazed — that this same moon was in the sky before I was ever around and would be there a long time after I'm gone. Think of how many people it had glowed upon, spilled over this way. Every night the moon comes up and every morning that we wake, we get another chance to improve upon whatever we did the day before. But it's false, this whole idea of getting to start anew each day. Days make up our lives, and we don't get another chance at those.

I was twenty-two then. Now I'm twenty-five. After I graduated, I got a job where I now sit at a desk in a cube under fluorescent lighting. You can feel the hum of it on your skin. It feels like little invisible ants crawling on you. I'll sit scribbling these thoughts on a legal pad and then put them in the trashcan at my desk. I just scribble this stuff, as if I'm scratching at something that has meaning for my life but that, the more I scratch at it, the more it shies into a hole. It has something to do with the disparity between the fluorescent lighting and the moonlight. It has something to do with Nathan's girlfriend's laughter from the other dugout. It has something to do with that girl, Jackie. She would be a senior now. Jack is a senior now. He's got a nice girlfriend, a little painter-photographer girl who he met at a concert two summers ago. She wears too-big tee shirts and has a nose ring but is really smart. She's really self-assured. She talks in a low, almost hoarse voice, and I like that about her. She never talks about what a sweetheart Jack is, but I guess she probably thinks he is one. A Sweetheart. They don't even go to the same school. They've been together almost two years.

After I throw my scribbled thoughts into the trashcan at my desk, the janitor, Koburi, comes through at night and picks them out. He flattens out the paper and leaves it on my desk for me to deal with in the morning. I

guess he thinks it's funny. Or else, he sees the meaning where I don't. Either way, he's not supposed to be going through our trash like that.

When I got back that night I went to Dom's room to check on Jack. I flicked on the light. Dom was in his bed, naked, with some girl, naked, sprawled half-across him. Then there was Jack, still on the futon. He had changed positions just slightly. That girl, Jackie, was right. He did look peaceful.