

Echo

1750 words

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Trey rang Eddie's bell on the way to school, like normal, but today Eddie said come in for a second and you could hear the TV in the family room and Eddie's mom was watching and she looked like she'd been crying.

The morning news was on, and at the moment the anchor was handing it off to the weather reporter, which looked harmless enough.

Eddie's mom was half sitting, half lying back on the couch and Trey noticed her robe was open. Not a lot, but still.

Eddie kissed his mom and they got out of there and went to school, and Eddie told him there was a political candidate she had worked for, and there was an accident overnight.

Trey was thinking about the robe, that he'd seen everything on a real woman for the first time--boom,

just like that, there it was--and he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

There was the secret pleasure in experiencing her intimacy without her knowing it--at least he was pretty *sure* she wasn't aware of her display--but there was also a disconcerting amount of flesh around her belly, beautiful white softness admittedly, but Jeez, rolls of it.

Trey knew Eddie's mom as a petite lady. Stylish, typically wearing tight jeans, and sometimes high boots with them.

He dreamed about her that night, they were on a beach and a raccoon came out of the sand dunes and grabbed their lunch, and she was in a jeweled turquoise bikini and got up and chased after the raccoon, and it was surprising how fast she moved, and also how mad she got.

The next year Trey and Eddie were in high school and Trey played sports and they hung out with different crowds, and a week after graduation Trey headed to the Texas Gulf to work on a charter fishing boat.

He bounced around different jobs, different states for a bunch of years.

He drove a Fed X truck for a while in north Florida, not delivering the actual packages but picking up and redistributing from the central hub in Ocala. It was all at night, traffic was light, it wasn't a bad gig.

He worked as a lighting tech at a movie studio in California, and that was kind of fun and you met a few people, though there were a lot of delays, you tended to stand around.

He worked at a resort in Sun Valley, a sardine processing plant in Fairbanks, an Italian restaurant in Philadelphia and a bicycle company in Waterford, Wisconsin.

One thing he tried to avoid doing was coming back to Cincinnati, but there was a high school alumni basketball game and a couple old teammates called and they sounded so dang hurt if he and everyone else *didn't* show up . . . so here you were.

Trey had played guard, he was okay, not great, but he had one shining game where the basket looked as wide as a pond and he hit 8 three-pointers, which tied a school record, though another kid smashed it two years later with 11.

The alumni game was on a Friday night and they'd facelifted the gym but it felt exactly the same, and Trey got out there, feeling overweight and out of shape, and he ran up and down the floor against the current varsity, and he didn't score any points and didn't touch the ball much but when it ended he was pretty sure he at least didn't tweak anything, so you had *that*.

He showered and someone said they were all required in the wrestling room . . . and Trey started thinking, ooh boy, what did I get into here. The plan for the weekend was to look in on his folks, visit the zoo, where they'd rescued a baby rhino that he'd seen on YouTube--and if he had the nerve, get in touch with his old high school girlfriend Marie, see what was up *there*.

But now the wrestling room . . . Some music was playing, a jazz trio, and they had a wine and cheese deal going on and there was a stand where you could buy raffle tickets for whatever.

So they were using the room for a get-together--as opposed to actually making you watch some kind of wrestling exhibition--and Trey figured this was standard enough, these alumni gigs, and Jeez, give 'em a break.

He recognized the guy on keyboard, kid named Stack, who'd been in his class but didn't play basketball, and there was a female vocalist who wasn't bad, and by their interactions--mainly Stack sliding his hand around and down her right hip a few times--Trey figured they were an item.

A few of the old coaches and PE teachers were milling around on the perimeter, but Trey didn't see a reason to go up to any of them and remind them who he was, and they didn't look too excited about being here, frankly.

He circulated through his teammates, shook hands with all of them, patted a few on the back--8 guys had shown up out of the original 12, which seemed pretty decent--and concluded with some small talk and moved on.

The jazz people took a break and Trey was leaning against the wall near the little makeshift stage, checking his phone, when someone handed him a glass of red wine, and it was Eddie's mom.

And he looked at her carefully and confirmed it, and he gave her a big hug, what could you do.

It was stupid but he asked it anyway, “What are *you* doing here?”

“I’m still on the PTA,” she said. “Not a lot has changed.” She was smiling, she looked great.

Trey was doing some quick arithmetic placement in his head. If she was, say, around 35 when that one incident occurred . . . and then you tack on high school, and the real world after that . . . she’d be pushing mid-40’s right now, at least.

Trey said, “Well how’s Eddie? What’s he doing?”

“Ed lives in Omaha,” she said. “He’s an attorney. He’s been married and divorced but I think he has it right this time, at least I hope.”

“*I* see,” he said. “Welp . . . how did you enjoy the game, or did you bother?”

“I didn’t watch it,” she said. “I did see you play part of a real game once though.”

“Gee, really? Only fair, right? I should have weight-trained. I was a lazy athlete. It might have helped my quickness.”

She had a glass of wine of her own, and took a swallow. “Well how have you been Trey?” she said. “It’s good to see you.”

And *that*, he wasn’t sure how to interpret . . . but he figured you only go around once, and given his limited reappearances in this somewhat hick town . . . So he said, “When you wrap it up here, I’m thinking we can have dinner.”

She didn’t respond right away, and someone tapped her on the shoulder and asked her a question, but when she was done with that she said it would be all right.

She drove, and they went to East Walnut Hills, kind of a tired neighborhood when Trey was growing up but now renovated and trendy. There were a couple of themed cocktail lounges on the main drag and she had her mind on the second one, and you could eat in back.

“Good pick,” he said. “Not boisterously loud. That stops me, a lot of the cutting edge places, I can’t understand the other person.”

“I’m glad,” she said.

“The worst thing, those situations, you hear part of what someone said, but not all of it. Maybe just a word

at the end you didn't catch. You let them know, and they repeat the whole paragraph on you."

"So, maybe you try to figure *out* what you didn't hear, as opposed to asking." She was smiling.

They went with what the waiter recommended, and for a second Trey panicked about his credit card balance since this was obviously an upscale place, but then he remembered he'd made a payment and he was okay.

They talked about some mutual friends he and Eddie had back then, she weighed in on the Cincinnati Reds, and she said she was planning to hike part of the Appalachian Trail in the fall, which had always been on the bucket-list.

"You mean, like, solo?" Trey said.

"No. With my boyfriend."

"Oh. Did you ever get married again? If you don't mind my asking."

"I did not. I felt it was best for Eddie not to have a step parent in the mix."

"Well I admire you there. The current guy, you live together?"

"Not at the moment."

They were into dessert and coffee and Trey steadied himself a bit and said, “If you throw me out of here--or slap me--it’s no problem.” He cleared his throat.

“Unh-huh?” she said.

“I dreamed about you sometimes,” he said. “It’s embarrassing to admit. But there you have it.”

“Nothing wrong with it,” she said.

“Wow. Just like that then, no big deal?”

“What did you dream?”

Trey lowered his voice. “Well . . . I believe I undressed you a few times. Sorry to bring that out.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I even talked to a therapist about it once. That wasn’t the *whole* thing, but it was part of it.”

“I see,” she said. “And how did the therapist frame it?”

“He said . . . or you know how they are, they don’t actually *say* anything . . . but the takeaway had something to do with my own mother. A stand-in figure.”

“Ah.”

“Which to me was total bullshit. Does one behavior always need to be rooted in another one?”

“I would agree.”

“With me? Or the guy?”

“You,” she said, and she reached over and stroked his cheek.

“Hmm.”

“Do you want to make love to me tonight?” she said.

“Is that it?”

Trey took his time.

“I do, in the worst way. But I’m not going to.”

She said that was fine, she was trying for a little levity and didn’t mean for him to take it seriously . . . and they finished up, and outside the restaurant she asked if an Uber worked okay and he said sure, he could do that, and she hopped in her car and was gone.