

Twilight at Gem Lake
By Bryan Kocurek

I was 16 on the day of the accident, and I turned 20 recently. Three and a half years after the accident I have a heightened sense of pain, more so than before the accident. I am not weak, just more aware of my body's limits, which is why my hands turned a bright red when I touched the cold bathroom sink. I was about to take a shower, and was mostly naked other than my boxer shorts. My red palms touched my face. The cold stung my cheek. My head was suddenly entangled in knots of hair, pimples, and dead skin. The shock manifests the inner tension inside my head, and beneath my skull. Severe head trauma was the main diagnosis after the accident; the tension, then, would never leave.

I took off my glasses and pressed my nose against the mirror. I looked into my blue eyes, through my blue eyes; to try and remember the day of the accident- tufts of memory were pulled out into small strings and coiled with other tangled things, and as I tried to pull them apart and straighten them, they knotted together even more. September 15th, 2005 had never come out chronologically before; it was useless to try. The only way to try and recall that day is in bits and pieces out of order like I had always remembered it.

The other issue I had was that my new friend Jessica, who I thought was cute, that's it, was falling for me. We were in her crappy Ford Taurus and talked about school, about what teachers I had, and which ones she did not like. Jessica was a senior in high school, and loved singing. We were both in choir together, and she would always try to talk to me from across the class. I realized one day in class while her mouth was open and I was looking at her face and lips, that I was too young for her. I was just a junior in high school and never had a legitimate relationship. She had lived in Amarillo all her life, I had only been in Amarillo a few months; we met when she invited me to lunch one afternoon. I liked hanging out with her, but I told myself freshman year I would not be involved in any high school relationships.

It was a Thursday around six in the evening, five weeks into the school year. It was also the day of the Homecoming game, and I had nothing to do. But Jessica had invited me over with a few of her friends to eat and make t-shirts for the game. The issue I had was that I hated football games. I agreed, though, much to the encouragement of my parents, and would try to have fun. I lived in Amarillo, and had thought at the time that I would live there for the rest of my teenage life, so I had to get used to it. I asked Jessica again what we were doing before the game and she nodded at me.

"My best friend, Grace, and my other friend, Taylor, are already at my house making T-shirts. My mother ordered pizza right before I left, so we'll eat, put on the shirts, and go to the game. It is my last homecoming game, so I want to have fun," she replied.

"Are you excited?"

"I guess. I like football and all, but I can't watch a lot of it, you know?" I lied. "Who is going to be at the game tonight that I know?"

"Everyone," she smiled. She looked up ahead of her and stopped at the stop sign. We were turning left onto Gem Lake and Tascosa Road. Jessica turned her blinker on and looked over at me. She squeezed my arm with her hand, and laughed.

I had started swearing and only listened to punk, like the Ramones and the New York Dolls and the Violent Femmes, especially during the summer, because, although I made new friends in Amarillo and hung out with them a few times a week, I had felt alone and the only thing constructive I could do was buy CDs and play them constantly, and most were already scratched but I thought that was cool, which is what I had been going for in the first place.

Okay, so that day I wore a Violent Femmes shirt and my new black Chuck Taylor's. I was going to morning choir practice for a competition only two days away. It was Thursday, and the competition was on Saturday. I wanted to turn and walk away from the competition, but I was too involved to quit.

Outside, it had been bright that morning. There was sunrise, and it was also quiet. I covered my eyes to let them adjust to the sun, which was just above the school. It was around seven thirty. The school parking lot was pretty much empty, a weird sight from seeing it so congested during the lunch hour, with kids sitting on cars and talking on cell phones, running in the middle of the street. Across from the parking lot, some kids walked into the band hall to get to the choir room for practice. One had been wearing a white t-shirt, the other a choir t-shirt. There were exactly two reasons why I did not belong to this school or this town: one, I listened to punk music and wished for total anarchy, contrary to the country singing majority of conservatives, and two, I did not know how to carry on a decent conversation with most Amarillo natives, who believed in delightfully ignorant conversations, not sarcasm or a good joke. The rebel mascot of the high school beside the band hall doors made me regret feeling this way that I could survive in a town like this. But I did not want to. I looked left at the front entrance and saw the new guidance counselor walking up the steps. Her expression seemed to say, Yes, I am lonely here, too. I waved to her but she did not notice.

I walked up the field and passed the empty parking lot. I did my best strut across the field, and combed over my bangs with my right hand. I was close to the band hall doors and two minutes later was in the choir room shuffling my sheet music. My choir director, a tall man with abnormally large ears, sat on the piano and began warm-ups. Then, the double doors at the back of the choir room had flown open and two girls walked in laughing. They were Jessica and Grace, two girls I met two weeks ago over lunch. They looked happy while getting on the risers, hands over mouths to cover the laughter, eyes widened to confess excitement. After a few minutes they joined in the warm-ups and we started on the pieces for competition. The first bell had rung; chatter began from the halls, two kids started to make out behind the double doors, and the band, beside the choir room, started to warm up, doors started to open rapidly, and cars honked outside in the parking lot. The day had started.

Okay, so the seventh day- exactly a week after the accident- I was released from the hospital. A guy named Brady from church, the one with a cool yet old red car and smoked secretly for over four years, had helped me down the elevator and into my mother's car. He shut the car door and started to talk to my parents. Behind me were sounds of appreciation and laughter, but in front of me, passed the windows, hospital, and strip mall was a sunset. There were layers of yellow, orange, black, purple, blue, red, more colors than I could have imagined draped over me. I had never seen something so amazing. A car honked, and the wind whistled, but they blended in to the other colors of the sunset. The clouds streaked across the sunset and it made me realize something important. Life had gone on without Jessica and I, the world did not crumble, and it was beautiful.

That night I woke up at two o'clock in the morning, and started to pace around my house. I was sweating, and delusions lay in my bedroom: Green Day, deer, and the Violent Femmes were all in my room, and I had to leave. I could not cope with my thoughts, with myself. I walked through the hall into the bathroom. I turned on the light and looked in the mirror. My legs were shook, my arms were cold, and my head had dripped of sweat. I knew later that these were just drugs leaving my system, but that night I felt as if I rejected my own body. The body felt new, and it craved perverse things. I remembered the sunset vividly, how life always went on, and how I could heal in time because life granted me that pleasure. All I could do at that point was sit on the bathroom tile, and struggle with the cold surface.

At the hospital, I was rebellious and had a reputation for hitting the nurses. I did not remember that I had hit them, but I never regained full consciousness until five days after the accident. It was why I had fragments of delusion and darkness for so long. I never considered what happened to me until I

regained consciousness and the drugs were not as strong. That was three years ago, and then I had a lot of people concerned for me, so I had visitors four or five times a day- maybe that's why I never felt alone even in the darkness- because there were people there to help me through it. All the kids who were in choir or church came with cookies, cards, and games as if they popped out of my knotted memory and in to the hospital room. Other kids made enormous posters and cards that told me how they wished I were back in class and how they were praying for me. That is when I asked my mother what happened. I did not remember who Jessica was at the time. She said that Jessica and I were in a car accident five days before, a bad one; Jessica forgot to yield at the stop sign and we were hit on the driver's side by a truck. My mother told me how fast the car was going, but I forgot, because I only wanted to remember Jessica. Shit! I assumed that Jessica was worse off than I was. I got upset and wanted to see Jessica as soon as I could. She had been in a coma for a while for the extent of her injuries, and had to have rods of metal put in her arm and leg because the bones crunched together and shattered. It was what made me go into a wheelchair a day later and look at all the wires and tubes that were supposed to be Jessica. But the things that were helping her fight, including her mother, consumed her; so I never truly saw her until after she was out of the coma; a week later.

The head editor of the school newspaper was deaf. Beside her were the two co-editors: one a gentle pothead with curly hair and an ear for Bright Eyes, the other short with a little smile of dry humor and who always wore a Smiths t-shirt. All three had been sitting next to each other as I watched them through the window. The deadline for our papers was today, September 15th, so the newspaper room was in a frenzy of flying paper and shouts of possible headlines. It really was not that dramatic, though, on most days. I had been sitting in the other room full of computers putting the last finishing touches on my news story, and could not help but see the three editors in a row. All of them were cool people, at least at my young age of 16, and I had befriended two of them. The head editor did not pay attention to other people in the class, she mostly kept to herself. She had a hearing aid, so the nature of her alienation had been a part of her personality. The other two were possible candidates for falling in love with, but that would end soon. They would both drop out of school a few months after that day, and I would never see them again. But that did not matter. I just looked at them and wondered about the possibilities of teenage love. The bell rang five minutes later and everyone hurried to lunch. I was new to this school, new to the people, so I did not have anywhere to rush off to.

I had been caught up with the girl who listened to Bright Eyes for a few days, but she had left right after the bell to meet up with a few of the other Bob Marley-types of the school, and smoke pot while eating fast food. I looked at the absence of her chair as I picked up my backpack and headed for the door. The Smiths T-shirt girl, Arianna, waited at the door for me. We had three classes in a row together, and she was always great to talk to when it came to modern underground music, and I would have liked her more if the stories about cocaine and drinking were not true, but also because- I hated to admit it- she was too short for me. I had to have a girl that was at least twelve inches shorter than me, and Arianna was right at the middle of my chest. It freaked me out.

“What are you doing for lunch?” I asked her down the stairs.

“Get something out of the vending machine, and find a spot in the hallway to, uh, knit,” Arianna replied to that wall and not me.

“Is it okay if I tag along? I don't have any lunch plans that I know of. And plus you have to talk to me about that band you're writing about, Arcade Fire,” I smiled. I was naïve, and it sucked. Despite Arianna's height issue, she was very smart and experienced; at least more so than I had been. She punched me in the elbow.

“I don't know. I have to get some knitting done,” she laughed. She shoved past a few freshmen running through the hall, and picked her earphones out of her backpack.

I looked down the other hall and saw Jessica. She was talking to someone. I assumed they were about to go to lunch. Arianna had not seemed to like the idea of hanging out with me, so she was a no for lunch. I told Arianna I remembered that I had lunch plans after all, and I ran down the other hall quickly to Jessica. She looked at me and smiled through the crowd.

“The homecoming game is tonight, and I was wondering if you wanted to go,” Jessica said in her car on the way to get some food. Her friend Kelsey sat in the passenger’s seat, and I had been in the back. They both smiled. “My friend Grace, the girl you met a couple of weeks ago, is coming along with Taylor. We are going to my house, have some pizza, make t-shirts, and then go to the game... I can drive.”

We went to Sonic down the street. The warm sun bathed the entire lunch, Jessica and Kelsey having a glow that converted them to a holy status of laughs and grins.

Here’s what the accident must have looked like: Jessica drove through the stop sign On Gem Lake. A car turned into our street, and Jessica saw no other cars on the road. We both glanced at the stop sign as it passed by us, and looked forward at the blank blue sky and red canyon. A truck swerved passed the turned car and seconds afterward a sound like thunder must have rung through the air. Hot red blood poured down, down, down my and Jessica’s lips and noses, and slid down my Violent Femmes T-shirt. The enamel of our teeth crunched out of place, and like balloons losing air, our stomachs and lungs folded into our chests. Painful sounds protruded from our open mouths like backward coughs. I fell forward into the glove compartment, Jessica into her steering wheel. Legs, arms, and ribs snapped and slid into new shapes. Blue jeans were ripped by the torn X of the seatbelts. Our eyes closed. Jessica’s car horn honked and it sucked the rest of the noise back under the hood. The man, the old guy that hit us with his truck, held onto the steering wheel his back arched through his car seat. His eyes were wide open. He pushed against the steering wheel farther into the seat to get a better look at the damage. Jessica had been three feet from him. He honked his horn by accident. Some people, mainly a woman and her daughter, watched at the tail end of the street and dialed their cell phones. The old guy walked over to the passenger’s side to look at both Jessica and I. A glob of my spit slid down my neck. My head rested on Jessica’s bloody shoulder. Her arm rested on my leg, and it would have been pointing at the old guy inadvertently. He stared at Jessica and me, two kids, who must have friends, and shook his head. His ears had to have been ringing from the noise. Another woman walked passed to the old guy and knelt down beside the passenger door. She had parked on the other side of the road. Through the shattered windows the woman looked at the injured bodies, and the beginning notes of the ambulance carried into her ears.

I lifted up my arms and looked at how much hair I had in my armpits. There was enough to show that I was a growing man. Small hairs began to grow on my back, and I had no real muscle in my arms. My legs were pale and hairy. I was on a record: no shorts since 2005, strictly jeans. Zits were scattered across my shoulders, all of them dying stars. I put on weight; my stomach pushed out farther than it did yesterday. A diet would be the preferred choice, but that was never going to happen. It is like telling yourself in the eighth grade that you will not jack off tomorrow, but knew it would happen, anyway.

The vanity light displayed an extreme version of myself. On most days I would not look at all of these flaws on my body, but on this day it was important. Three wounds were skewed across my chest. The vertical scar on the middle of my chest looked like a tied shoelace and another one below my armpit a knot of pink skin. The first scar I received was only an indentation, like a small pair of scissors cut my chest carelessly. Jessica and I were both cut open and examined like extraterrestrials after the car accident three years ago. That is how the entire four days of slipping in and out of a coma were for me: I was a traveler from a distant planet and was captured by humans only to be ripped open and organs inspected. I looked at the scars closely and it felt good, significant; it was my way of celebrating the anniversary of the accident. I looked down at the large scar and took off my glasses.

I lost my virginity that day, September 15th, but not the type of virginity you are thinking of. Not the kind of lost virginity that was talked about in back of church vans on the way home from a mission trip with hands in pants, or at church camp, on a school bus, or at a party where everyone is drunk except you. The virginity of youth was lost in the car accident, popped by the embrace of the car door, the kiss of sharp glass across the lips, the intrusion inside the puckered passenger seat. I looked at my three scars with confidence, arms lifted high. It would be nice to call my story a coming of age, an entrance into adulthood because of the accident. But it was not so much coming into adulthood; it was entering into a different body entirely.

Jessica lived in Amarillo, and was an experienced waitress. She dropped out of college, and moved into an apartment with a friend. She was never good at relationships, and stayed single most of the time. Yet she always yearned for another body, though, since I have known her. I graduated high school and moved back to Arlington with my parents to go to college. I started my first job at a comic book store, and soon after got my first car. The scars and the fears vanished into our bodies, the experience a part of us, and it no longer defines us. Jessica still has the same car that she bought after the accident. Jessica and I do not talk on a regular basis, but we still have a connection because of the accident, and we will always be able to cross roads.