



The Eventual Return of All Lost Things

REMY BARNES

I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE and I was fat. I was smoking a mentholated cigarette behind the gymnasium, sweating in the thick miasma of Florida humidity. In the general hierarchy of boys in the play yard, you will often find the fat kids at the bottom and can witness the true beauty of togetherness when two kids of differing cultural backgrounds come together to make fun of a fat kid. But this isn't about that. Well, it is, in a way, because Jimmy Moulton was also fat, and I'd found out that morning Jimmy Moulton had been molested by his own father, which is why he wasn't with me then, behind the gymnasium, smoking mentholated cigarettes.

I dropped my cigarette on the ground. The ember burned orange against the cement sidewalk. I'd hardly smoked any. I stole them from my mother who couldn't smoke anymore anyway.

I went to the restroom and washed my hands under the lukewarm

water. I wiped down with a dryer sheet to mask the smell. I went to homeroom but had trouble concentrating.

“I don’t think I’d mind being molested very much if it meant I didn’t have to come back to school no more,” whispered a boy next to me.

The teacher was saying, “And it’s okay to get a hug from a family member or your parents, but it’s not okay, or you shouldn’t feel obligated, to ever give a hug to a stranger or even a teacher if you don’t want to.” Obviously, no one in any position of authority had confirmed these details of Jimmy’s molestation but there weren’t many dark corners where gossip could hide.

I kept looking over at Jimmy’s empty desk. I kept thinking about his father who I’d met on several occasions when, before my mother got sick, he would come around the house and grill out now and again. He had a hard handshake and he’d give you all of it when he greeted you. I remember his bushy hair and his mustache and these pleated shorts he wore. Once, before it all came out, he’d sent me a message over America OnLine and it was a picture of him when he was younger, but wearing the same kind of shorts, in front of a blue car the family didn’t have anymore. The subject line was *well what do you think?*

THE RAIN CAME about the time we were getting out of school. I’d been banned from the buses because someone told a dirty joke and then pinned it on me. The bus driver said, “Okay, fat boy, there ain’t no more room for you on this bus,” and made me get off.

My house was only a couple miles from school, so I started walking. My father said being kicked off the bus and having to walk would probably help me shed some weight, but I hadn’t noticed any difference. I walked for a while until the sidewalk ended and then walked in the ditch to stay out of the road, my shoes, socks, and the bottoms of my jeans becoming instantly soaked. I saw a fat toad and thought about squashing him, but I wasn’t that way, not even then. I saw a kindred spirit in the fat toad. I

thought about Jimmy Moulton. He’d squash a fat toad because he deeply hated himself. I didn’t think about that then. I was ten. But when I think about it now, that’s what I think. It probably had to do with his father.

The car pulled up beside me and I didn’t notice it at first. The rain was coming in sheets and I was shivering, soaking wet. The driver was leaning over the passenger’s seat and saying, “Christian. Hey, Christian,” and even though my family wasn’t necessarily religious anymore, in the South as in most parts of America, we were all considered Christians. So I climbed up the little hill and out of the ditch. His car was an old piece of shit and sputtered black smoke out the tailpipe. The man kept telling me to get in the car. It was raining and I was cold and miles from home.

He turned the dial to red and heat blew hot from the vents, but my teeth kept chattering. The man pulled at the backseat, came back with a towel, and wrapped it around my shoulders. He was older than my dad, older than most dads, his face pocked and lined with crags and wrinkles. The interior of the car smelled like mildew and dirt weed.

“What’d I tell you about walking in the rain?” he said.

I hadn’t been told anything explicitly by anyone about walking in the rain. I shrugged under the coarse fabric. “That I shouldn’t?”

“That’s right,” he said. “That’s how people catch bad colds and die.” And he repeated, looking out the windshield greased with gray fog, “That is how they die.”

The radio was playing religious music and he patted the steering wheel along with the beat. We drove toward my neighborhood even though I hadn’t told him where to go. He was singing, “Oh a-walking we will go, my Lord and me” just under his breath. This comforted me because I knew that the religious were generally considered good people. Even though my parents no longer believed in God, I thought they were still good people.

We missed the turnoff to my street, but I knew we weren’t far from my neighborhood because I recognized some of the homes despite their sameness, and a municipal pool I’d swam in once. I’d had a friend who

lived around there. I can't remember his name, but I remember his father would putter around in the garage, computers and contraptions taken apart and put back together. I'd asked my friend what his father did for a living, and he said, "Inventor." I'd said, "Cool," with reverence. It was clear my friend either did not think his father's work was cool or had, at some point, been told that it was decidedly not cool. I'd slept over and in the morning his mother asked us what I wanted for breakfast and I said, "Cereal," because that was the breakfast I always got at my house. Everyone else at the table—father, son, sister, and mother—ate eggs, bacon, and toast while I ate cereal. They spoke to each other but ignored me.

The man parked in a concrete driveway split with sunflower weeds and crabgrass. He told me to wait in the car. He ran through the rain, got the door unlocked and then gestured he was ready. I held the towel over my head as I raced to the porch. In the living room, there was an old plaid couch with a pillow and a blanket, an indigo easy chair, and an old-fashioned boxy television set with a dial and rabbit ears. There was only one piece of art on the walls and it was a picture of Jesus Christ with his arm around an army guy who was walking through the jungle holding a machine gun. The unknown house smelled strongly of pine tar and mace, causing my head to swim.

"You're going to need to get out of those wet clothes," the man said.

I didn't move. Maybe, I thought, if I didn't move, he wouldn't see me. I glanced around the room for a phone but didn't see one. I started to cry.

"Hey," he said and nodded into the hallway. "You're a big boy. You can dress yourself."

I was conditioned to follow orders from older men, so I went into the hallway. On the wall were posed pictures of the man but when he was younger. In one picture, he was with a woman and a small boy. I thought I recognized the boy from school. I was comforted knowing that a woman and another boy would be coming home soon. He was even kind of fat, like me. It was the only picture like that.

There were three doors at the end of the hallway—one was the bathroom, and one was locked. I entered the third. It was the boy's room with a blue baseball player bedspread, with photographs of baseball players hanging on the walls. I didn't know much about baseball, but I knew some of the guys didn't play anymore. I liked professional wrestling. I liked the fat guys who would crush the skinny guys with their great guts, splashing off the top turnbuckle. There were trophies on the shelves. I read the trophies. None were for participation.

From outside the room, the man said, "There are clean pajamas on the bed." I pulled off my wet clothes, towed dry, and changed into the stale-smelling pajamas. I felt better, though they didn't fit me all the way and kept sliding up a little on the belly. I listened for his footsteps to recede, but they didn't. After a moment, he asked if he could have my wet clothes. I opened the door and handed him the wet ball of clothes.

Some people might have called me nosy. I say curious. Either way, this has carried over into my adult life. I opened the bedside table, found a Bible and a nude figure hastily sketched with a felt pen. The closet was empty. I went to the chest of drawers, but the man knocked again and said, "Do you want to help me fix supper?"

I'd never helped anyone fix supper. At home, I put a tray into a microwave and then pulled back the plastic after three minutes, releasing steam with a sucking sound. Last night, I had two cold hot dogs, plain, stuffed into a single bun. We ran out of microwave meals because most nights I ate two. It wasn't always hunger. Sometimes it was just for comfort and because there was no one around to stop me.

"Okay," I said and then, "what do I have to do?"

In the yellow kitchen, he looked very old, but this could have been a trick of the light. He put the peeler into my hand and arranged my fingers in a certain way. They kept slipping and he kept rearranging them until I got the grip right. He put the potato in my left hand and then mimicked the movement.

"Long, straight strokes," he said. "Until its bald and white." I started

and got a strip on the floor. I didn't expect violence—it wasn't like that at home—but I expected exasperation. Instead, the man calmly picked up the strip and deposited it into the sink. He slid a stepstool over and I stood on it, stripped the potato into the sink. I finished one potato and dunked it into a waiting pot of water. I did the same with another potato and then another and another until I'd stripped them all of their skins. The man put the pot on the stove. The blue flame burned brightly under the black pot.

"Do you have any schoolwork you need to do?" the man said. "I know Mrs. Johnson gives a lot of homework." I didn't know a Mrs. Johnson. Maybe his boy didn't go to my school.

"I left my book bag in the car," I said.

He whistled through his teeth and looked out the window, the darkening day, the rain like nails on the tin roof.

The potatoes began to boil, and the room smelled like starch and hard, limestone-rich water. He pulled just two pieces of mealy looking chuck steak out of the refrigerator, and my stomach growled. Maybe the woman and the boy got dinner somewhere else, I thought. Maybe the old man was feeling lonely because he'd been divorced, and she took the kid. Maybe he only saw the kid on weekends or over the summers or not at all. Most of the kids I knew, their parents were divorced. The word got thrown around homeroom often—glum boys and girls succumbing to tears and saying, "My parents are getting *divorced*."

"Good to let them get to room temperature," he said, sprinkling salt over the red meat. "Helps them to cook more evenly. Learned that the hard way." He laughed, but sad and sideways.

He told me I better turn on the television, so I did. I dialed back and forth between the stations frothy with static but could only get one, and they were playing reruns of a show I'd never seen. I fussed with the rabbit ears, but the station started to blink away so I stopped.

Soon the meat was sizzling on the griddle and the house smelled of grease and char. The kitchen filled with smoke and the man waved his hand in front of his face. I was watching the show, but the volume kept cutting out.

When he served dinner, the meat looked like something murdered, splattered there on the sickly green plates. Translucent red liquid dripped from the blackened chuck. Before me was a glass filled with foamy milk. I wondered how it'd happened for Jimmy Moulton. It'd probably been going along for some time, as that's how those things often go. The man said, "Don't play with your food."

The red-checked paper napkin beside my plate was absent a knife. The man reached across the table and cut the meat into smaller, more suitable chunks. Even though I was hungry, I had to summon an appetite. I nervously stretched the bottom of the pajama top and the man again told me to stop fussing and eat. I brought a bite of the meat to my mouth and it tasted good, salty and fatty. The potatoes I'd helped prepare were buttery and soft. I watched the man swipe a chunk of the meat through a white tuft of potato and I did the same.

We didn't talk much. At one point he laughed and went like he was going to let me in on the joke but then he shook his head and didn't. He kept his eyes on his plate and ate like someone was going to take the food away from him at any moment. At one point he asked me how school went and, when I answered, it was like his heart really wasn't in the question and he wasn't really listening anyway. I still don't know now whether the man was entirely aware of what he was doing. But I don't begrudge him. I'd like to write him a letter sometime or give him a phone call, but I believe he is probably dead now.

After supper he asked me to help clear plates. I brought the dishes to the sink, started the tap, and let the basin fill with water. I dunked the dishes, disappeared them in the murky suds. The man cracked a beer. With one hand he worked the dial on the television and with the other sipped the beer. I knew this ritual. He managed to draw in the religious station. An old dude in a suit stood on a stage illuminated by powdery blue lights, which gave the scene an ethereal feel. The old preacher talked about the Lord and the eventual return of all lost things.

I sat on the floor in front of the set. The man noticed this and said, "Not there." I looked around the room. "Sit there," and he pointed to

left side of the couch. I stood up and moved to the couch, which smelled strongly of a dog I never saw.

The rain was still coming down. The ceiling in the kitchen leaked onto the floor. I was feeling tired and my eyes were dry. I kept nodding off. I was afraid of what would happen if I fell asleep, but I wasn't afraid too. I thought I knew what was coming either way and had to make a kind of peace with it. Eventually I shut my eyes and listened to the soundtrack of the man cracking beers and the dude on television talking about forgiveness.

After a while, the man said, "Christian," and I raised my head a little, and he said, "Christian, you ready for bed?" I nodded.

He took me by the hand and walked me down the hall. We passed the pictures of the family who'd never arrived and was maybe all gone. We passed the locked door and the bathroom. He opened the bedroom door and placed me inside. He stood over me. In this moment, he appeared very tall. I couldn't make out his features in the near dark. He could have been anybody. He could have been my father.

"Goodnight," he said and kneeled. He hugged me, wrapping me up in his arms and squeezing tight. He kissed the side of my head. I felt the warm pangs of confused affection in my gut. I wanted to say, "I love you." I wanted to say, "Thank you." Instead, I repeated, "Goodnight."

He left the door open a little, just a crack. I heard him make water in the bathroom and then go back to the living room. He turned down the volume on the television but the blue static light stretched down the hall so I could still see it. I shut the door the rest of the way, quietly, and spun the lock on the knob around but it wouldn't catch.

I sat on the bed. Lean shadows darkened the corners of the room. Lightning flashed bright white, and I counted the seconds until the thunder growled low. The storm was very close. I wondered when it'd end.

I don't remember much of the next series of events, but I'd fallen asleep and then woken up with the man in bed with me. He was crying like a child into the spot between my shoulder blades. He kept saying, "I'm

sorry, I'm sorry." I still had all my clothes on. I felt very normal. Nothing was happening except for the crying and apologizing.

I waited for a while, but it started to sound like he was falling asleep, half snoring between the sobs. I got out of the bed and faced him. Another crack of lightning illuminated the room and thunder resonated right after. His face was tight and wet, his lips pursed.

"Molest me," I said but he didn't seem to hear over his own weeping, so I repeated a little louder, "Molest me."

He sat up in the bed. "What?" he said. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'molest me.'" I stripped off my shirt and stood before him, half-naked and pale and tubby. Another bolt of lightning struck. The baseball players were all watching us now.

"You would never say anything like that," he said, and I could hear the fury coming into his voice. "You would never, ever say that. Christian and I would never do that. I would never do that." The man got out of the bed and stood over me.

"Molest me," I said again, this time with vigor, taking his hand and placing it on my neck, his thumb in the ditch of my throat.

"He would never say that," he said, removed his hand from my throat and then slapped me hard across the face with the back of his hand. I felt every knuckle and could count them as they connected. The pain erupted in several places, and I could feel the blood rush to the side of my eye. I sat down on the carpet, clutching my new warm wound, and began to cry. The man left the room, slamming the door behind him and I heard something in the hallway fall from the wall and crash to the floor.

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET and empty. I could feel the absence of his presence in the home. The man was gone, and I was alone. I went to the back bedroom, the door still locked. I wrenched on the knob and put my weight into the door. This action was purposeful, angry but it wouldn't budge.

I looked at my face in the mirror over the sink in the bathroom. I strained hard, feeling the veins pop in my neck, and pushed all the blood and breath to my face. My eyes starred, head swooned, lungs burned for air. The spongy rind of bruise throbbed against my eye's bony socket.

I walked down the hallway and stretched out my hands. I wanted to touch all the ghosts in that place. In the living room, I found my clothes dried and folded on the couch, my book bag placed neatly beside them. I dressed, folded the pajamas, and then placed them on the couch. I left the house, locking the bottom lock behind me.

With the previous night's rain, the day was hot, bright, and humid. A mosquito landed on my neck and I let it suck some blood. I tried to orient myself to my surroundings. I recognized a service station, so I walked toward it, eventually finding my way to a street, the name of which I knew. I started sweating. I unscrewed a hose from a sprinkler in someone's front yard and drank from the open end, the falling water dampening the front of my shirt.

I went past my house and through the cut of pines behind to the street where Jimmy lived. A car full of stoned teenagers passed and I jumped when they yelled in a chorus of off-key voices that I should be in school and laughed. There was nobody home at Jimmy's place. His father was in jail and his mother had taken Jimmy somewhere I didn't know, probably an aunt or grandparent's house. I never saw him again and I don't know where he is now, but he was my best friend.

I looked through all the windows, put my sore face up to the screens. The furniture was all still there, lonely and waiting for their people to come back. I tried the front door, but it was locked, and I couldn't get it to open no matter how much shoulder I gave it. In the backyard, there was a blackened stain on the green lawn where a fire had burned. I stirred the dried sludge with a stick, found pieces of tie fabric and a pair of silver cufflinks I put in my pocket. I tried the back patio door but it too was locked.

I marched back through the cut toward my house, the wet pine needles softening my footfalls. I waited for a while outside. I thought about

how I could still walk to school and go for half the day, make up some excuse no one would care to hear. But I was drained, and desired only to go back to sleep. I slid the door open quietly. The cold air caused me to shiver. From the living room, I could see into the bedroom and caught sight of my mother's hair draped over the yellow plastic bucket she kept by the bedside. The sound of her retching gnawed at my insides. She did not notice my entrance or ignored it. She spat twice and lay back down.

On the couch where my father slept, I folded the blanket and fluffed the pillow. I cleaned up the empty beer cans and deposited the unfinished dregs of gin back into the bottle. I went into the kitchen, poured a large bowl of sweetened chocolate cereal, laced it with chocolate syrup, and filled the rest of the bowl with a half-drunk Yoo-hoo. I sat on the cool linoleum floor and crunched my cereal and felt so good.