

Real

Country

Dark

Jessalyn Wakefield

Soon it was trees and dark, my brothers, with real country dark.

*A Clockwork Orange* [film], Stanley Kubrick

**M**y lover looks my cousin up and down in the rearview mirror. My lover stares at my cousin; he stares at his mouth. The car is silent. The four of us; me, my sister, my cousin, my lover, we sit in silence in the car. It is winter. It is night. My sister's fury is a drug in the air and my jaw is clenched. She makes me feel high. I breathe her rage in deep and get real fucked up. My lover clenches the steering wheel and looks my cousin up and down again. Then he looks at the road.

The sky is a dull, throbbing red. A dead sunrise. There's a fire somewhere and it smudges the night a wicked hue. My lover is driving too fast for the rural highway. It's winding and narrow and he isn't used to these roads. His knuckles are white from clenching the steering wheel, and I can't tell if it's because he's nervous about driving or if my sister's fury is making him nervous. Or if it's something else. The dark trees twist and whirr past us. Crippled dancers whimpering for an encore. The hills gently buck the car past the vast fields.

"Look," I say, turning around in the seat to face my sister. "I'm sorry. I am really sorry I said that."

My sister shoots me a look and then turns her head to watch the red sky. Her poison seeps out fresh. I breathe it in and grin a little. My lover looks at me with concern but when he sees my dopey smile his face melts into something like scolding. He looks at my cousin and then he looks at the road.

The visit to my parents had been horrible. But our neighbors were out of town, and I knew how to open their back gate to get to their hot tub. My lover and I spent the better part of an afternoon soaking.

"I feel like a genius," he had said.

"Why?" I asked.

"When I do something like this. Sitting in a hot tub naked in February, outside, in California, with you. There are so many people who would be jealous of me right now."

When we grew bored I got out of the water and walked to the lemon tree in the middle of my neighbors yard. I plucked a fruit and then I bent down and plucked two buttercups. I slid their stems inside my cunt. The weight of the lemon in my palm was comforting. It was a useful weight. A hummingbird had watched over our bathing, gripping the uppermost branch of a leafless tree. I had never seen a hummingbird motionless. His song was shrill. I watched the hummingbird a moment, naked in my neighbor's lawn, with a pale ripe lemon in my hand, my cunt blooming and I thought *If I stayed here, I could grow my hair long. I could pain my nails rose. I could cease to be dangerous and instead become frightening.* Then I wrapped my body in a towel so he couldn't see the buttercups any more.

When we reach my cousin's house my lover and I get out to help him.

"What can I carry?" I ask.

"I'm alright," my cousin says. The color of the sky hurts my eyes. I think that the color hurts my throat, too, because I should smell smoke. I can't smell smoke. I shield my eyes from the strange color and give a little cough. It is the middle of the night and I am coughing from phantom smoke.

"Are you sure? Can I take your sleeping bag?"

"No, I've got it."

"What about this bag?" I say, reaching for a lumpy backpack. My cousin grabs it before I can touch the canvas.

"Thanks," he says. He starts walking toward the front door. The house is dark. I can remember how this yard looks in the daytime, even though I haven't been here in ages. The grass is dry in patches but tall and full in others. The ground is uneven and you've got to watch out for screws and nails. The porch is wooden and broad and peeling. It's always humid here. The air is always heavy and smells like men.

"Is your dad home?" I follow him toward the porch and my lover follows me, very close.

“I don’t think so. I don’t think he’ll be home till late.” His bags are sticking out at crazy angles. I quicken my pace and grab the sleeping bag that’s slipping out from under his arm and carry it the last few feet to the porch. I smile at him and set it down. He looks at me hard, but only a sliver of his face is visible, smoked red. The rest is hidden in the shadow of the porch. I can’t read the expression.

“Do you want to call your dad or anything? Do you want us to wait until he comes home?”

“It’s fine. I have keys.”

“Well. Okay. If you’re sure. I hate to leave you here. In the dark like this.”

We all stand there, the three of us stand there and I can here my lover breathing. It sounds like he’s breathing through both his mouth and his nose. The sound makes me clench my teeth.

“Well, okay,” I say again, feeling stupid. I walk up and give my cousin a hug. I look deeply at his face, which I can see better now, this close, to find evidence of our common blood. Yes. It is there. “It was good to see you.”

My lover steps up, smiling, his long wolf teeth looking dirty, dull, catching the light and tossing it back dimmer. Elongated enameled moons. Full, werewolf moons. He slides an arm around my cousin’s shoulders and my cousin looks down at his things. My lover’s arm pulses a few times, pulling my cousin closer and then further away, my lover says, real tight against my cousin’s ear, “Stay in touch, now, it was great to meet you. It was.... great.” He holds him a moment longer and then releases my cousin’s shoulders and slides that long arm down low across his back.

At the car door I turn around and raise my hand goodbye, smiling. My cousin is sitting on his bags in the dark porch. He raises his hand, mirroring mine. I can’t even see that sliver of his face any more.

I decide to sit in the back seat beside my sister.

“You still pissed at me?” She doesn’t even look my way. I slide over and bury my face into her neck. “I LOVE YOU!” I rumble the words deep in my throat, loudly and tickling. “I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU!” She starts to giggle from the vibrations. I sound like a goblin. I sound evil, buzzing against her neck. “I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I’M GONNA SEE SATAN!”

“Stop it! Stop it!” She laughs. I stop and smile and we’re both smiling. “God you make me so mad!”

“I’m sorry. I really am. That wasn’t nice. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Don’t do it again.”

“Okay. Never again.”

We lean back and watch the landscape. From the front seat my lover says, “It amazes me, how women so quickly reach depth of emotion that men can’t usually access.” I nod for a change instead of arguing, thinking instead, *‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.’* Now where did I learn that, red sky, red sky. The light like that, filtered through ash. Purified blood. Pure blood. Pure blooded.

The car pushes aside the stained darkness before us, purring a wildcat purr, bumping and rocking us on the narrow highway. Lately I am never sure if I am dressed and presentable. I don’t think anything I wear coordinates. I feel greasy and harsh. I had told my lover *I want to learn how to be silly, to have a light heart; that’s the only thing I want to change about myself right now.* This is a lie. In that moment, I just couldn’t remember what’s bad about me. A shifting weight. A small discomfort of the blood.

“What’s the name of the road we’re looking for?” he asks. I tell him. “That’s a weird name,” he says. I climb into the front seat, precariously, trying to move with the motion of the car.

“It’s a long name, anyway,” I say, settling and turning my head to look out the window. My sister starts kicking the back of my seat. “What, are you six years old?” I make a face at her and then laugh. The car slows as we come up to some railroad tracks slicing diagonally across the asphalt. They gleam like surgeon’s

blades left forgotten in a patient's flesh. We roll across them and I shiver and close my eyes until the car speeds up again. We drive a little further and then I ask, "How far down is that road?"

"I don't know. There was a sign back by the tracks but I couldn't read what it said."

"What do you mean you couldn't read what it said?"

"I couldn't read what it said."

"Well why didn't you ask us?"

"I thought you'd say something if you saw the sign for it!"

"Don't yell, okay? Let's go a little farther and if we don't see it we'll go back and see what that sign said. I don't think it'll be much farther. I think it's close."

The car goes quiet again. The car goes quiet for a long time. We grow anxious and restless and no one wants to be the one to say *Turn back, it's not up here, turn back*. Going back seems shameful. If we got back we've failed. Something. We've failed something if we go back.

Abruptly, the tops of three buildings drip into our horizon. They appear to spiral upward as we crest a hill. Their presence is startling. The landscape has been nothing but grotesque trees and tall grasses, disintegrating barbed wire fences barely supported with rotting wooden stakes. The occasional collapsing tin barn. The buildings set our teeth tight and forward.

"What town is that?" my lover asks.

"I have no idea. I've never seen it before. I've never been down this road this far."

The road seems to pass right between two of the buildings. We are still far away but the buildings seem enormous. Towers are perched atop their roofs like mechanical birds of prey. Their lights blink in secret signals. The red sky seems to grow darker around the edges of the structures, creating a threatening aura. I do not want to go to this city.

The wheels spin forward and we are silent again. We race toward the city and I feel my breath beginning to choke me. As if the red

air has finally gotten inside the car. It's just as unbreathable as it looks. It's air from Mars. Where else would red air be from. Where the hell else would red air be from. My God.

"Pull over and turn around," I say. I know my sister can hear the panic in my voice but I don't think my lover can.

"There's nowhere to turn around," he says.

"Just pull over on the shoulder."

"There's barely any shoulder."

"Who cares! We haven't seen another car this entire trip! Just pull over and turn around in the road."

He ignores me and grips the steering wheel. His lips set thin. I can't breathe. I don't know how I'm breathing. The buildings are getting larger and closer and if we pass between those two buildings, if stay on this road we will be taken right to the heart of that city. My own heart is pounding my red blood, my heart is pounding my red blood in circles around and around my body. My blood is a small rodent trapped in a wheel. Around and around and around. My lover accelerates.

"Up there," I say, panting. "Up there, there's a spot you can pull over and turn around. We have to turn around. The road isn't up that way." The buildings are too close and I want to let my rodent-blood out, it's scrambling, it's clawing against my skin and I don't want it in there any more. I press my nails to my skin and dig and pant. I want it out.

A motorcycle roars up behind us. Its Cyclopean headlight is so bright I have to raise my hands to my eyes. The rider guns his engine and passes us. The taillights swish past, briefly lingering a harsher red against the red air. It only takes a moment before the rest of the pack to blare into our rearview mirrors. Two abreast on the tiny road, their lights side by side joining to make a new beast. The slide past us with their danger and roar toward the city. They don't stop. They keep coming. My lover jams the wheel and we spin off the road into gravel. We sit and watch the motorcycles stream by, the riders silent, voiced by their machines. We all feel

our blood scabbling. Why aren't we crying. Why isn't a one of us weeping.

When the last motorcycle is gone I grab my lover's hand. His skin is cold and white and I kiss his fingertips. He's shaking. The city is very close. I can see lights in the windows of the buildings. He squeezes my hands and then releases my hands and puts the car in reverse and turns around. Nobody looks backward at the buildings.

When we reach the train tracks we slow and read the road sign.

"Is that the name of the road?" he asks.

"I can't remember. I think so. I can't remember." He presses his lips thin again and turns down the road.

The light is more black here and the trees less twisting, more drooping. Soon we begin to see homes with porch lights twinkling, hear the cut off barks of dogs as we drive past.

"I need a cigarette," my sister announces from the back.

"You can have one of mine," my lover tells her.

"I want my own pack," she says.

"I am *not* buying you cigarettes," I say, holding her gaze in the rearview mirror. She slides her eyes to look at my lover.

"I'll buy you cigarettes," he says. I sigh loudly.

A gas station is not long in coming and we pull over. I stretch outside the car while they go inside. The night is surprisingly cold. My face is flushed and I feel my cheeks grow slick with thin perspiration. The walk out and my lover hands my sister her cigarettes. She awkwardly begins to pack them.

"I asked for the light blue ones," she says.

"That's what I told him, the light blue pack."

"These aren't light blue, they're green."

"They look light blue to me."

"Those are menthols," I chime in.

She wrinkles her nose. "I wanted the kind you smoke," she says, looking at my lover. He laughs with a little snicker in the

of his throat. She places a cigarette between her lips and I fish my matchbook out of my pocket. I place it in the palm of her hand and close her fingers over it. I grip her fingers tight and look her in the eyes.

“If you ever start smoking, I will kill you,” I speak straight into her eyes. “If you ever start really smoking, I will *kill* you.” Then I release her hand and climb into the car. From the corner of my eye I catch the creamiest flash of fire when she strikes the match.