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On Lust

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Less than two years ago I was a grad student studying school psychology. I was twenty-two years old, happily married, and certain about my future. Then, for reasons I’ll never fully understand, I asked myself what life might be like if I chucked psychology, a subject I like, and leaped into something I love: writing.

Months later I became an undergraduate again. I began with journalism but then discovered literature and picked up an English major. Why had it taken me so long to find literature? Beats me! Over the next year and a half, I met Melville and Faulkner and Whitman and Joyce and Nabokov — all for the first time.

Still, after quitting grad school and the future as I had known it, life felt slippery. Gradually, I found my footing in books, in Tom Marksbury’s American literature courses, and in Kim Edwards’s fiction writing workshops.

Erik Reece mentored the essay before you. I am grateful he grabbed me by the arms, plucked me from a world of comfortable material, dropped me into the strange and the scary, and then said: now write.

I’ll graduate Summa Cum Laude with a B.A. in English in May, 2006 and a B.A. in journalism in August, 2006. By September I’ll be writing in New York City, where my wife, Kelli, begins doctoral training in nursing. Because of her devotion, I can say I remain happily married. You will meet her at a young age in this essay, “On Lust.”

When I was thirteen, I had a friend named Doe Hamilton who lived way out on Cobb Fork — out in the boonies, you might say — in a modest, three-bedroom brown brick house that sat on the edge of the woods. The road that led you there was narrow and cratered. If you drove it fast, you could simulate the sound of a jackhammer with your tires pounding over the potholes. If you met another car on it, one car had to pull off, dip down a little into a ditch, and let the other pass. From this road you could easily spot Doe’s house: it was the one with the enormous ivory satellite dish parked like a flying saucer in the front yard.

The dish was a relic from the 1980s, a still-functioning satellite spawned long before the tiny, inconspicuous DirecTV-type dishes now attached to houses. The Hamilton’s dish stood proudly in their front yard, blocking out a chunk of their home, tilted back, its antenna aimed at God. I’m not sure how, but that dish captured signals for hundreds of channels, all of which the Hamilton’s had ceased paying for some time during the 80s.
The foundation of my friendship with Doe was a curious infatuation with professional wrestling, which his satellite played for hours daily. In fact, the dish picked up all of the World Wrestling Federation pay-per-view events for free (although the audio was in Spanish). Such pay-per-views were a sore subject at my home. I lost a chunk of my childhood begging my mom to order Wrestelmantias and SummerSlams and Royal Bumbles. Never, not once, did she budge.

“Drop it with the wrestling,” she said. “And no, I’m not driving you to Madison Square Garden to watch Wrestelfest.”

“Wrestelmania,” I corrected.

“What?”

“It’s Wrestelmania, not Wrestlefest.”

“Well I’m not driving you to New York for that either.”

She did, however, drive a half hour to Cobb Fork one November night in 1994. Doe had been inviting me over for some time, and Mom had finally relented for the last major show of the year: the Survivor Series.

Stoked with the anticipation of seeing my first live pay-per-view event, I pressured Mom to drive faster and faster. She was game, deftly handling her Toyota Celica over the legendary Cobb Fork craters as if she were a seasoned astronaut maneuvering a lunar rover. Suddenly she said, “Good lord,” and slowed down to gaze at the satellite dish in the Hamilton’s front yard.

“This is it,” I told her. “This is the Doe’s house.”

Mom pulled into the gravel driveway. “Well get out,” she said.

I stepped out and walked around the front of the Celica. “Wait a minute,” Mom said through her rolled-down window. “Who is this boy again? What’s his name?”

“Chad Hamilton,” I said. “I’ll be fine. I’ll call you later.” I waved her on.

Doe’s real name was Chad, but we had called him Doe, short for Doughboy, ever since we had seen Boyz n the Hood. Ice Cube plays a character named Doughboy in that movie. There’s nothing special about him; we just thought it was a cool nickname. Doe embraced the title despite its somewhat cruel overtones. He was indeed pudgy and a bit of a lunatic, even at thirteen. He had a lazy eye, and later, when we were in high school, he drank too much, stumbled down the bleachers at a basketball game, and bounced his other eye off a concrete floor. He lost vision in his other eye off a concrete floor. He lost vision in that eye for a few hours. When I walked into his room at the hospital, his sister, Renee, turned to their dad and said, “Oh my God, he does have friends.”

Doe’s dad reminded me of Johnny Cash. He answered the door that first night I visited Doe’s house, and I instantly noticed he had a head full of remarkable jet-black hair curling in a tall wave above his forehead. The wave looked as if it could break at any moment. “Hello,” he said in a low, rumbling, unrolling voice. I don’t remember him saying anything else the rest of the night.

I waved goodbye to Mom, again, and she backed out of the driveway and clattered onto the pock-marked road. Doe was sitting inside with my other friend, Moe. They weren’t speaking; they hated each other, always did and always would, but I was friends with both of them, and the three of us together got along fine. I do realize that together we were Moe, Doe, and Joe. Never mind that. We huddled around the Hamilton’s big-screen television and watched the countdown show tick away. Doe’s dad settled into the corner of the couch next to me. A cigarette appeared suddenly in his mouth, and the smoke trailing off its ashen end began a long night of saturating my clothes.

The countdown show transitioned to a thank you message for ordering the pay-per-view, which of course we were stealing. Apparently we were not the only ones. The gentle voice that had been saying thanks commenced a quick lecture on the penalties for stealing satellite signals. We brushed the warning off as tough-talk, but then the voice changed strategies for its conclusion. “If you’re stealing satellite signals,” it chided, “what kind of example are you setting for your children?”

The question seemed to linger in the smoky air of the Hamilton’s living room for a full, silent minute. I didn’t realize I was staring at Doe’s dad until he had turned and locked eyes with me. I smiled and felt an incredible impulse to crawl over the back of the couch or possibly slink out a window and hide myself in one of Cobb Fork’s many potholes. That impulse passed the moment the pay-per-view began. It was Survivor Series 1994, the Undertaker versus Yokozuna in a casket-match main event, Chuck Norris as the special guest referee!

And that’s about all I remember about the show. I have no recollection of the match, no memory even of who won. Within another year or two, I would find professional wrestling outrageously silly and stop watching it all together.

I do remember eating pizza that night, though, and cheering and arguing and agreeing and scooting the coffee table into the kitchen to clear enough room for slapping full nelsons and Boston crabs on each other. Doe’s dad never said a word. He just sat on the couch and smoked and looked mysterious. Sometime
after midnight he went to bed.

Seconds later Doe said, “All right. You want to watch some porn?”

“Some what?” I asked.

“Hell yeah!” Moe answered. Moe was one of those dark-haired kids who started puberty a year before everyone else. He had underarm hair in the fifth grade and was therefore too embarrassed to raise his arms when playing zone defense during basketball games. Coach Kouns would sit him at the end of the bench, which was fine with Moe as long as he could keep his arms down and gawk at the cheerleaders. Apparently Moe had known all along that Doe’s satellite picked up multiple porn channels.

I wasn’t even certain what “porn” was. I knew it was sexual. I knew it rhymed with “corn,” which confused me a little, I think, at some subconscious level. It also rhymed with “horn,” as in “horny,” and I knew there was a definite relationship there. I wasn’t a complete novice. More than a few times, I had crawled out of bed in the middle of the night, snuck into the living room, turned the television volume low, and secretly convened with host Gilbert Gottfried (and later, Rhonda Shear) for the USA network’s “Up All Night,” which seemed for years to repeat a single movie: The Bikini Car Wash Company. I had also consumed a few episodes of HBO’s Real Sex series, which taught me that sex was a bizarre transaction between unattractive, meditative old people, though young people walking down the right New York City sidewalk were permitted to comment on it.

I had also slipped a Penthouse inside a Pro Wrestling Illustrated at the Little Professor Bookstore when I was twelve. I was thirteen now, though, and I was in love with Kelli Stidham, the girl who sat to my left in algebra class and in front of me during English. She had a boyfriend and braces and an enormous, electrifying smile that when turned your way coaxed you into believing you shared some intimate connection with her, some unspoken bond that transcended the parameters of boyfriend-girlfriend. She was short, maybe five-feet, and they called her Rudy on the soccer field on account of her hustle. Despite having a boyfriend, Drew Jones, who once cried when I tackled him during a backyard football game at Avez Bashadi’s house, I knew Kelli liked me. We had secretly traded handcrafted valentines on back-to-back years. I kept hers in my underwear drawer next to my Kirby Puckett 1984 Fleer Update rookie card. I knew Kelli kept mine somewhere intimate too.

I was waiting for her to break up with Drew when Doe turned off the lights. We repositioned ourselves on the couch to give each other plenty of room, though we still huddled under a single blanket of silence and darkness as Doe tapped away at three different controllers. That was the only way we could have done it, I think. The quiet and the dark gave us anonymity, freedom to indulge. I had slid down into the cigarette-singed corner of the couch where Doe’s dad had been sitting. The spot was warm but uncomfortable.

Doe pressed a few secret, magical buttons, and the screen flashed from a gray snow to white flesh. Two bodies — shockingly naked bodies, a man and a woman — had materialized on the television, and a car too, a bright red Corvette, across the hood of which the woman lay. The man stood, his legs brown up to the backs of his thighs, then pale, pale skin, paler, giving way to a blinding white buttocks. His eyes were closed, his face twisted into what looked like an expression of agony. The woman was not really a woman at all, just two nipples, two breasts, two red lips curled into an oval. Her tongue emerged from her mouth and licked across her top lip. Her expression contrasted his; she countered his agony with ecstasy, answered his snarls with shouts of “Yes!” He was clearly doing something right, and I wondered what it might be. Occasionally, he’d muffle one of her shouts with a sloppy kiss. They went on like this, repositioning themselves and what not, for ten mesmerizing minutes. We watched without saying a word to each other, our eyes stuck to the screen. I felt an image of the man and the woman’s colliding skin etching itself permanently into my consciousness, and I let it. I wanted to remember. I wanted to bottle what I felt right then and keep it.

Mom picked me up the next morning. Right away I sensed her looking at me, smelling me. My eyes were bloodshot from not sleeping, and my clothes reeked of cigarette smoke and sweat. “Shew,” she said. “You stink.”

“Doe’s dad was smoking,” I explained.

She didn’t reply. She seemed distant, off somewhere on a far-away world. Maybe she was just focused on guiding the Celica out of Cobb Fork, down that narrow road, over the craters, toward home.

When we got there, the man and the woman on the Corvette were waiting on me. I had already forgotten their faces but not their bodies or their movements. They visited every day for a week, and each time they came by, I considered Kelli. I saw an image of her passing me in the hallway. I could count her white teeth as she smiled, but I could not see her against the hood of the red Corvette.