

Seth Harwood

Too Early

(from *Bayou*, Spring/Summer 2003)

Cari rolls onto her side. This gives Adam the chance to retract his arm from beneath her and cradle it to his chest. He is glad to change the position of his shoulder. He's been awake for a time, thinking, lying with his arm uncomfortable under her neck. It is 4:37AM.

He holds both arms against his chest now, waiting for sleep, though when it doesn't come he cuddles Cari, kisses the back of her neck. She rolls over to face him with her eyes still closed, and traces her fingers across his chest.

"I can't sleep," he says.

"Then tell me a story." He has done this for her in the past, and it has worked—for both of them. But tonight he has no story to tell.

He asks her to roll back over and she does, putting her back to him. He fits his knees behind hers and brings his top arm around. She holds it, pulling his forearm to her chest, then lifts her head for him to slide his other arm beneath it. Gently, he slips his arm under her pillow, the angle of his shoulder changed just enough, and reaches around to his other arm, hugging her. Careful not to let her hair tickle his nose, he moves his head closer, close enough to rest his lips against her neck.

He can still feel the wall too close behind him, frigid and distinctly foreign, unnatural. She brings the inside of his wrist to her lips, and kisses it. “Are you OK?” she asks.

He tells her he will be all right.

She knows him as a writer, though he has not written in weeks. This she does not know. She asks him to tell her stories: always in bed, always late at night. The first few times he told her important stories, ones he had to tell. But now those are told; he has no more.

“Make me sleepy,” she says.

“I can’t, or I don’t know if I can,” he says. “I can’t sleep either.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What are you thinking?”

He doesn’t know. His thoughts have drifted from one important-feeling idea to another. He’s had this trouble before. “I’ve been awake,” he says.

As she repositions her head on the pillow, her hair tickles his nose. His shoulder begins to shake again from this position, so he straightens his arm.

“Once,” he begins, and then says, “I can tell you a small one, but it might not even be a story, really.”

“It’s OK,” she says. “I want to hear it.”

“I went to Washington D.C. with my dad once. I was seven, maybe. Eight.” He moves his legs closer to hers so that they are parallel, and sneaks his feet in between hers. She fits her head slightly higher on the pillow, moving her hair away from his face.

“I like D.C.,” she says.

“I loved it. We saw the Smithsonian, Air and Space, the monument. I can’t remember why we were down there, I think he had a conference or something.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good story.”

He waits, but she doesn’t say anything. Then she kisses his hand. “It’s OK,” she says.

With his eyes closed, he tries to picture the vacation, to see the story he’s trying to tell. “We stayed in a high-rise hotel,” he says. “It was brick, I think, or dark concrete, and not so close to downtown. My father took me to a play I remember. I guess he tried to show me a good time.”

He doesn’t know what to do: whether he should make things up or tell what really happened. Neither will make much of a story. And they are new enough in their relationship that he still concerns himself with seeming perfect; some parts of himself he still tries to hide, such as his tendency to wake in the night wondering what could turn bad, or analyzing decisions he’s made until they seem ready to dissolve.

“There’s no story tonight,” he says. “I’m sorry.” His eyes closed, he listens to her breaths and tries to match them with his own. But her breaths are deeper and farther apart. In comparison, his seem shallow and quick. He feels her chest and shoulders expand with air then shrink.

Perhaps because she seems peaceful and might fall asleep, leaving him alone, or because he is no different than anyone else—just pushing forward blindly in life, trying only his best to find what’s right at any moment—he keeps telling what happened that night.

“We took a cab home after the play,” he says. “A taxi. The cab had no meter—there’s some system of zones in D.C. that tells how much a cab ride costs. My father just had a question because he didn’t know which one we started in. But the driver didn’t like that. He turned around in his seat and looked at us. I remember his eyes were tired, cold. He said, ‘You think I don’t give you right fare? You think I want rip you off?’” Adam doesn’t remember the man’s exact words, but these phrases come to him—whether from deep in his memory or from a desire to tell the story, he doesn’t know.

“My father didn’t know how the fare was decided, how they did it without a meter. The driver said, ‘You look on map. Three zones! You look.’ There was a map on the back of the front seat, below the glass. ‘I don’t understand,’ my dad said. The cab driver hit the seat in front of us then threw his door open and got out of the car. He opened the door next to me and leaned inside, across my body, pointing to the map. I could smell him, this man who had sweat on his clothes, sweat and something else, something I couldn’t place at the time but that I now know was curry. He tapped his finger against the plastic covering over the map, counting the places we had passed through. ‘Three zones!’ he said.

“My father had his wallet out already, finger-counting the bills. But then he put it back inside his coat. He opened the door on his side and got out of the cab, pulling me with him, away from the driver. ‘I’m going to ask this doorman,’ my father said. ‘I just want to ask someone. I just want to know how this all works from one other person.’ He saw the cabbie walking around to meet us at the front of the car and, raising his hands, said, ‘It’s not that I don’t trust you.’

“The cabbie met us at the front of the car. ‘I have no time for this,’ he said. My father reached into his pocket and brought out the key to our room. He held it out to me and told me to go upstairs. He said to go watch TV. The room key was too big for my hand; I remember its big square top took up all of my palm. It was marked 325. ‘Go!’ my father said. The hotel doorman passed me as I started toward the hotel. ‘Go!’ my father said when I looked back. I could hear the cabbie yelling even as I moved inside the revolving doors.

“Inside I stopped to watch a young couple leave the hotel and start toward our cab. When they saw what was happening, they turned sharply and began walking away. The driver yelled after them. Then he said something to my father, pointing at the couple. At that point my father looked around. He saw where I was and our eyes locked. ‘Go!’ he yelled again, loud enough I could hear it through the glass. I ran to the elevators and reached up to push the button. A lady in a fur walked up and smiled at me but she didn’t say anything. She got onto my elevator and stayed on after I got off. I ran down the hall of the third floor to 325, my feet clapping on the hotel carpet, and opened the door and ran straight to the windows.”

He shifts slightly in the bed, edging away from the cold wall, closer toward her. “Cari?”

“I’m here,” she says. “Still listening.” She lifts his hand from her chest, kisses it. “Keep going,” she says.

“Our room was on the front of the hotel, the driveway side. I climbed up on the radiator and put my hands against the glass, but all I could see was a part of the cab, not my father. A big concrete overhang, the kind to guard our entrance from rain, blocked

my view. It was covered with a layer of pebbles like a driveway. The window was cold against my hands, I remember, and outside it was dark and the sky was black and without any stars. Across the street from our hotel was a park with some grass.

“I want to say I remember seeing the White House in the skyline, or some capitol building, the lights on a dome in the night, but I don’t know if that’s true, or even possible.

“I stayed against the glass, looking out into the night, wanting to see the cab leave. I watched a man walk down the sidewalk on the other side of the road from me. He fought against the cold, leaning into the wind with his hands in his pockets. For some reason I wanted him to see me; I wanted him to look up and see me so I could wave and he would know everything was all right. But he never looked up, just walked with his face toward the ground. Finally the cab drove off, puffs of condensation trailing from its tailpipe. I got down fast and put the TV on then, and waited on the edge of the bed for my dad.”

He feels too warm in the bed suddenly, as if heat has built up through the night, and he would like to take away their blankets and lie in the air. Without disturbing her, he slips one leg out from under the covers. “Can we roll this way?” he says, taking her arm and hinting it toward the wall. His shoulder is shaking again and his side is tired. “Is it OK to switch over for a while?” He wants also to be spooned, to feel her arms around him, even though her body is small. Willingly, obligingly, she moves.

On his left side now, he touches the wall in front of him with the tips of his fingers, his hand a spider on the wall. He feels its tiny bumps and craters, but then she is

kissing his neck and he closes his eyes. She slides her arm under his, close to his body. He puts his hand on hers.

“Is this OK for you?” he asks.

She hums a simple noise that means yes, squeezes him tight around his chest.

“What happens in the story?”

He closes his eyes, feeling her breathing behind him, the small movements of their bodies. The image of his father coming through the door of the hotel room stands in his mind. He sees the dark blue handkerchief his father held to his brow, the blood in a line down his cheek. This is the part he has not wanted to tell, the part that matters.

Adam pushes himself up onto his elbows.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

“He got punched—my dad. When he came in he was bleeding from over his eye. The cabbie had hit him.

“My father,” he says.

He lies back down beside her, his hands by his sides. She has retreated her arm and he wants it now, but doesn’t ask, can’t. In telling this, he has passed what he knew was right to say. Now he is open to her evaluation. He closes his eyes.

“Adam?” she says. When he doesn’t answer, she reaches across his body for his hand and pulls it toward her. She tugs at him, on his side, rolling him over, and sets his arm behind her back. Again she slides her arm under his and this time squeezes him more tightly against her. Though he feels like dead weight in her arms, he allows himself to be moved, held.

“The cabbie punched him,” he says. “My father told me the guy lost his temper, grabbed at his sleeve. Then, when my dad jerked away, the guy hit him. Just cocked and swung. Then the doorman stepped in.

“I remember my dad had a handkerchief pressed up against his face to stop the blood. He went into the bathroom, but I could see him through the open door. I stood outside, watching as he washed the blood from his face with a washcloth. I watched him run water into the sink and cup his hands in it, bring water up to his face. Blood ran over his hands and down his wrist. He wet the handkerchief and held it against his temple.”

After he hasn't said anything for a while, she asks if that is all.

He can see her clearly now in the morning light. Somewhere the sun has begun to rise. People will be starting their days.

“That was the story,” he says. “The hotel doorman broke up the fight, really it was only that one punch, not a fight so much. That's the whole thing.”

She examines his face, and then lays her forehead against his chest. His hand has found her hip, but he feels it shouldn't have. Her leg feels too hot, her skin smooth, like the wall. He lifts his hand away, rests it on his side.

“I'm sorry I told you that story,” he says.

In the silence he can hear a humming from far off, a distant rumble that he's heard at night before when he can't sleep, when he's alone. It has to be the highway, he knows, though that's over a mile away. He hasn't heard it since he met her.

“Do you hear that sound?” he asks. “It's the highway, I think. Must be the trucks going across at night.”

“I hear a bird,” she says. “I hear what you’re saying, but a bird too. I guess it’s morning.”

“We’ll be tired today.”

“Do you hear that dog?” She brings her hand away from his back and he feels her fingers tickle his side then move along his chest, up to his neck and then the side of his face.

He hears the clear, distinct barking of the neighbor’s dog. It barks at anything that comes near. “I hear it barking,” he says. He touches her shoulder gently, at first, then cups his palm over it. He can feel the strong bone under her skin. He slides over, as close to her as he can come, his legs intertwined with hers. He kisses her.

“I’m sorry I kept you from sleeping,” he says.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I am though.”

He feels small, as a scared boy who is lucky to have someone with him feels, and remembers begging his father not to leave the edge of his bed at bedtime when he was a boy. He isn’t sure what to say now, or what to do, and worries that what he’s already done might scare Cari away. If he can just stay quiet, he hopes, this feeling will pass. Perhaps she will soon forget it all and believe that he is strong enough to sleep through the night.

“I wake up sometimes in the mornings,” he says. “Like this. When it’s too early to get up. I just wake up and think and I can’t stop. I wish I could sleep.”

He closes his mouth, fights off the urge to say more. He waits for what will happen, counting his breaths. If he can wait long enough, he might fall asleep, he thinks.

His arm is draped awkwardly over her. He can feel the pains in his stomach for breakfast, but ignores them. There is a tingling in his legs, above his knees.

Cari rolls over so her back is against his chest and cradles his arm in hers. “Put your other arm under my head,” she tells him. He puts his arm under her neck again and his shoulder feels tender, but he doesn’t move it. With his top hand, he touches along the slope of her side and explores the space below her belly-button: the slight pucker around her middle. They bend their knees. Her breasts are small, like half-peaches, but her nipples are full, round. He touches them and she taps his hand, weaves her fingers between his. Her hand feels rough and dry. Her fingernails are cut short, like a man’s. With his thumb, he feels the place on her finger where the nail sinks in at the middle as if it’s been struck with a hammer, but he knows it grows like this—she has told him. He runs the tip of his finger along the crease.

“That’s my funny thumb,” she says.

He wants to tell her he’s sorry for it, for her thin arms and dry hands. He wants to apologize for the time she lost her job and how his legs are bowed and because his chest isn’t muscular and his stomach is too round.

“I wake up early sometimes,” he says.

She holds his hand in hers and brings it up to her mouth. A gentle stream of breath tickles the inside of his wrist. Then she kisses his palm. “It’s OK,” she tells him. “I don’t mind.”