

The Good Son

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I'm on Trailways, staring through dirty windows at mounds of snow piled on the side of the road. I couldn't face everyone's questions, their judgments. Even Shirley at the bank gave me a suspicious look when she handed me my cancelled savings book and the \$357.45 from my account this morning.

We've stopped in practically every town since I got on in Aurora, which is so far north that it might as well be in Canada. The dictionary definition of "aurora" is "dawn," but for me it means "dull." Forests surround the town, so dawn comes late and darkness arrives early, especially at this time of year. I've basically lived in the wilderness with grouchy bears all my life, but I'm out of the woods now and travelling on the Interstate through farmland. Silver silos and farmhouses. Frozen ponds and beaver dams. Battered cornstalks stretching to the horizon.

San Francisco, that's my plan. Stand on a steep hill, look all around and scatter small town rules and restrictions to the wind. I've wanted to leave home since I was thirteen, but I never thought it would happen like this. I know people in town are talking, agreeing that I'm a big disappointment. They'll focus on the sex part, not that I was a coward, not thinking about how I lied to save my own skin.

I bet Mom is crying right now and Dad is pissed. They'll go to church on Sunday and everyone will pray for my "safe return" like I've been kidnapped or abducted by aliens. Reverend Perry will read the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but he'll be thinking Leviticus.

Kids called me a fag. I thought it was because I was a brown-nose. An Honors student. Teachers liked me. I got all A's except in math. I memorized *Webster's Unabridged* backwards and forwards. I won the county spelling bee two years in a row and qualified to compete in the 1994 state championship this spring. Not exactly things that make anyone Mr. Popularity at my high school. Once in a while a girl would tell me she'd kill to have my thick brown hair. But I'm almost as skinny as I was in junior high and I have a bad case of acne which my doctor calls moderate but looks like the Pyrenees to me.

I tried out for the track team because I can run fast. That's how I dated girls, too, running, always double-dating because it was safer. When a girl wanted to kiss, I gave her a light one on the lips or a peck on the cheek. Matt Hendricks never hid the fact that he liked guys, which takes a lot of courage in a town like ours. He even tried to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at school last year, but the principal, Mrs. Greggs, said it was "inappropriate for a Christian community." No one would have joined anyway except Matt's girlfriends in theater club. Mr. Willits always made Matt's life in gym class hell, assigning him extra pushups and joking that his boys should be careful in the showers. The jocks harassed him all the time too. "Matt's a fag. Matt sucks dick. Matt's a pussy!"

Matt must have worked-out all summer because, shock and awe, he returned to school all muscles. The braces on his teeth were gone. He was suddenly an A+, a hunk like the centerfold models in the *Playgirl* magazines I shoplifted from Johnson's Thrift. His biceps competed with the football players who he parodied, walking around school with an ironic swagger. Some of the girls started flirting with him, thinking if maybe they could convert him he'd make a great catch, a smart, good-

looking guy whose daddy owned the biggest supermarket in town. This made the jocks hate him more than ever.

I tried to convince myself that I was just taking a scientific interest in his metamorphosis. But I developed some pretty crazy fantasies. Matt and me making-out in the showers after school. Matt and me jerking each other off in the choir loft at church. Matt and me fucking in the produce section of his daddy's store. I went out of my way to shadow him, passing by his locker between classes or sitting near the table where he ate lunch with his clique of girlfriends.

Mystery meatloaf was on the school lunch menu so I decided to grab a Hot Pocket at the house. I headed toward the shortcut along the river and spotted Matt's car parked at the bridge. Matt was in it, Bronski Beat's "Small Town Boy" playing on the stereo. I pretended not to see him but he rolled down the window and shouted, "Hey, Jason, you want a ride?" I shook my head and kept on walking, eager to say yes but afraid. He opened the passenger door. "How about joining me? I have the new Sheryl Crow CD."

Before I knew it, I was sitting in the passenger seat. I swear I don't remember making the move. He was chattering about something but I didn't hear a word he was saying. I couldn't take my eyes off his full lips. The car was cold. I remember his breath making clouds. He kissed me and I kissed him back and he pulled me toward him and I felt like I was falling into a deep well with no bottom to it. His hands started working their way inside my fly. I pulled away at first and then I didn't. He yanked at my pants and grabbed my junk. I felt his lips graze my dick and then go down on it. I closed my eyes and pushed my head back against the headrest. I had imagined being that close to another guy more times than I could count. I was so excited it only took about ten seconds.

The windows were foggy from our making-out, but when I opened my eyes I could see faces pressed against the glass. Their spiked hair, Goth makeup and nose rings made them look like ghouls. It was those two snitches Emily and Sarah, gobbling like turkeys on speed. “Dick suckers! Ass packers!”

I pushed Matt away, pulled up my pants and bolted from the car.

The Goth Sisters’ jeers attracted a bunch of jocks smoking in the parking lot. They came running, whooping and bellowing just like they do before a football game. They surrounded the car and started pounding on the hood and windows.

Matt must have been totally freaked. One of the guys gave me a look that scared me. “He offered to give me a ride,” I shouted. “And then he tried to put the make on me!”

My lie must have set them all off. They pulled Matt out of the driver’s seat and took turns shoving him around, bellowing: “Cocksucker! Faggot!” Matt howled back, “White trash hicks!” They threw him on the ground and started kicking him. They just kept kicking and kicking. They were snarling and howling like a pack of wolves fast on a deer. Matt tried to protect his head with his arms. His mouth was bleeding and his scalp was bloody. I could almost taste the blood, like clenching a metal knife between your teeth.

I heard Mr. Willits’ whistle blow. I turned and ran when I saw Mrs. Greggs rushing toward us with a group of kids. Halfway home, I heaved my breakfast onto the frozen riverbank.

Mom and Dad were both at work. I grabbed a juice box from the fridge and staggered upstairs. I slammed my bedroom door and collapsed on my bed, my pulse beating in my throat. The news would spread fast.

By the afternoon bell everyone at school would know what happened. Mrs. Greggs would call me into her office. Mom would find out about it from some busybody and she would tell Dad. There was no telling what he would do.

I buried my head in a pillow. I was dead meat.

Hail is pounding on the metal roof of the bus, beading on the windows like crystal bracelets. It makes the landscape look all distorted like a Salvador Dali painting.

We're passing an Indian casino with a giant neon wigwam on top of the roof. It reminds me of the "genuine Indian powwow" the folks took Kat and me to see one summer. Loads of monster trucks and SUVs in the parking lot owned by white folks emptying their wallets at slots and gaming tables owned by red folks. The Car Castle next door is closed. My dad always says, "What's the sense of washing your car in the middle of winter?"

Mount Pleasant. 1 mile. I don't see any mount, just a Texaco station and an Arby's. More signs on the road: *Free Alignments.* I definitely need one of those right now. *His & Her Hair Salon.* Which style would I ask for?

The bus pulls up to Carson's Family Restaurant. *Closed for the Winter.* A family huddles together at the curb. They look like they're Mexican, from someplace south of the border anyway. The father has the boy and girl pulled up close to him. He's wearing a straw cowboy hat like the workers wear at the truck farms all summer. The mother is tiny, not much taller than the two kids.

The pneumatic door opens with a hiss and a blast of freezing air whips through the bus. The family gathers up their belongings and the

mother climbs onboard followed by the boy and the little girl. The father gets on last. Skipping down the aisle, the boy turns and pokes his sister in the stomach. The father says something sharp to him in Spanish.

It's still hailing. Everything outside looks like it's underwater.

I pushed the lock on my bedroom door, opened a window and lit a joint. The smoke curled over my anxiety and I floated until I heard the front door open and slam shut. Thinking it could be Mom, I mashed the joint out on a sandal, but it was my sister. You can't mistake Kat. Her shoes drop on the floor with a loud thud and she tromps up the stairs sounding like a herd of horses.

Kat is only sixteen, a year younger than me, but she's way more advanced in certain departments, more confident and rebellious. She skips school sometimes with her friend Annie and defies our parent's curfews. Her latest insurrection is becoming a vegetarian. "I think I must be adopted," she says. "Maybe I was a crack baby."

Sometimes our father gets so angry I think that he will hit her.

Kat calls me Mr. SuckUp, teases that I always play it safe. I'm the Good Son and she's the Bad Seed. Still, we confide in one another. When she told me that she was having sex with Brad Daley, I confessed that I had a "thing" for Matt Hendricks. She didn't seem surprised at all and laughed. "I know you better than you know yourself, Jason."

I supposed she must have come home early to bust my balls about what had happened at lunchbreak, but Kat made a beeline to the bathroom, gagging. I could hear her vomiting. She flushed the toilet and knocked at my door. "Are you in there, Jason? Can we talk?"

We have a family a rule. Our bedroom doors are supposed to be left open unless privacy is absolutely required. It's probably some guideline

our parents read about in *Midwest Christian Family*. Kat of course barges in anyway, probably hoping she'll catch me doing something embarrassing, like jerking off.

"Can we talk?" Her voice sounded almost pleading which meant the buzz at school must have been even worse than I thought. I really didn't feel like dealing with her right then so I only opened the door a crack. Kat's eyes were red like she had been crying.

I pulled her inside and closed the door. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

She brushed pot seeds onto the carpet and plunked down on my bed. "The entire universe is blathering, Jason."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like, you and Matt Hendricks making out in his car."

"That's not true. He came on to me. I fought him off."

"Really? Like didn't you tell me you had the hots for him?"

"Kat, it was awful. They beat the holy crap out of Matt."

"I know. It was really crazy. I was eating lunch with Annie and then suddenly Mrs. Greggs and all these kids were yelling and running outside. Someone called 911. The ambulance came and took Matt to ER."

I knew that I was totally screwed. "There's no way I can go back to school. What are Mom and Dad going to say? They're going to kill me," I wailed.

"Mom and Dad are going to kill us both."

"At least you've been doing it with a church-approved member of the opposite sex."

She screwed her face up, looking forlorn. I should have known something was up with her but I was way too concerned about my own problem to ask.

“I mean, why did you do it at school in his car, Jason?”

“The same reason you’re having sex with what’s-his-name?”

“So it looks like gay conversion therapy camp for you this summer.”

“Not funny.”

“And permanent exile for me.”

“What do you mean?”

Kat gave me a sad, crumpled look. “I’m pregnant.”

I *had* noticed that she had gained weight lately and her hair looked dry. I automatically reached out to check for split ends but she swatted me away.

“Pregnant! Are you sure? What are you going to do?”

She drew her knees to her chest and hugged herself. “Annie knows a doctor. I’m making Brad pay for it.”

“You’re getting rid of it? You can’t do that, Kat!”

“Oh, for God’s sakes Jason, you’re not exactly Reverend Perry. Brad a daddy? Like that’s ever going to happen. I’m not going to keep it.”

She laid her head against my shoulder, sobbing. I put my arms around her, telling her everything would be okay and wondering if her “little problem” might divert Mom and Dad’s attention from my own.

The Mexican family stow their bundles in the overhead and take two rows of seats across from me. The kids climb in the row in front of the parents. The boy takes out an old handheld Radio Shack console from his backpack, just like the first one I had. The little girl holds a doll on her lap and makes it do a jerky dance. The father takes the mother’s hand and kisses it, reminding me of how lonely I’m feeling.

I had a doll once too. I wanted a Ken but settled for an ugly troll I found at a yard sale. I only played with it in the basement. I liked to tease

its long bright yellow hair and make clothes for it from scraps I found in Mom's sewing room. The troll was ugly and weird, so I could pretend it wasn't a real doll. *Only girls play with dolls.* It was my secret. I felt ashamed but also excited about doing something forbidden.

That was how I felt when I stepped into Matt's car. I can see him lying on the ground, his clothes torn and covered in blood. I just can't deal with that right now.

"Dubuque! Five minutes!" the driver's voice blares over the P.A.

The bus slips across the state line. The sides of the road are jammed with fast food places, strip malls and subdivisions. The sun appears like a fanfare, settling a patch of light over a Wal-Mart before it retreats behind the clouds again.

The Mexican kids turn and stare at me with big brown eyes. It must be rough travelling on buses all the time. I'm starving. I hope we stop long enough to grab something to eat.

Kat left for Annie's. When I called the Gay Crisis Line in Minneapolis, once before, I talked with Mark, an older guy with a mellow voice. He told me that he had come out in college and that I had a lot to look forward to in a couple years. A guy named Jim answered this time. "Tell me why you've called, Jason." He sounded a little geeky, like someone who volunteered because he couldn't get a hot date.

I told him about what happened that morning. Jim asked me if I felt in any physical danger. I told him that I was at home but scared about going back to school.

"Coming-out is not easy. Have you had a discussion with your parents yet?" I could tell he was reading from a script.

“No way. They would totally freak out. They’re fundamentalists. They believe that gays go to hell.”

“Is there anyone who you feel comfortable talking with?”

“Not really.” Minister Perry quoted from Leviticus practically every Sunday. Our high school’s guidance counselor was a retired Marine sergeant who thought ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ was a Communist plot to undermine the U.S. armed forces. My homeroom teacher went to the same church as our family.

I heard the front door open, the rustling of paper bags. It was Mom.

“Sorry, Jim, I have to go.”

“Jason? Katherine!” I tossed my stash under the bed and messed up my hair. She knocked twice before I opened the door, blinking and yawning, pretending that I’d been asleep. My mother looked distraught. She was frowning, her forehead wrinkled, and her hair, usually lacquered in tight curls, hung loose around her face.

“Emily’s mother stopped by at work this afternoon.”

Of course she would have. She was a busybody cunt like her daughter.

“She mentioned something—disturbing—about you and that boy Matt. You were seen in his car and—well, Emily’s mother said there was an—incident—between you and an awful fight.”

My parents try hard to be good Christian people. They avoid talking about stuff. My mother pretends to be meek and everything but underneath she’s as stubborn as Kat. The difference is that instead of raising hell she gets all sullen and silent until she gets her way.

“You’ve never given your dad and me any reason to think—”

My mother lives in denial so it wasn’t hard keeping to my story.

“Matt asked me to help him with a trig problem and used it as an excuse to make a pass at me. I pushed him away and ran from the car and—”

“I just pray your father hasn’t heard anything yet.” Her voice trailed off and she gave me a plaintive glance, as if it were all too much for her. “We can talk about this later. I should put the groceries away.”

Mom needed to believe I had done nothing wrong for her own sake. I was the good son.

Dinner that night was tense even though I could tell that Mom hadn’t told Dad anything yet. I pushed my food around my plate and excused myself early.

Kat called me later from Annie’s house. “I thought you should know. Matt is still in the hospital but at least he’s not in a coma or anything.”

My stomach was churning. “What about the jocks who beat him up?”

“Two of them were taken to the station but they were released. You need to tell the police what happened, Jason.”

“Are you kidding, Kat? No way.”

“It’s all going to come out one way or another.”

“You mean like with you and the kid?”

“That’s real nice, Jason.”

“I’m sorry. I’m upset.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I think I’m going to be leaving, Kat.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have to get out. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Please don’t, go Jason. I’ll be all alone.”

“You have lots of friends.”

“But I won’t have my brother.”

“You’ll still have me. I just won’t be around for a while. I know that you’ll be okay. You’re stronger than me.”

“I’m not as strong as you think I am. Take care of yourself. I’ll miss you.” After she hung up, I wanted to call her back but what else was there to say?

I stuffed my backpack with a sweater, a pair of jeans, my favorite t-shirts, warm socks and some underwear. After the folks went to bed, I snuck into the kitchen and grabbed a couple juice boxes and filled a bag with snacks. And just before I left the house this morning, I searched for the silver cross and chain my parents gave me and fastened it around my neck. I don’t know why. I thought I was done with all that.

An old guy in the restroom smiles oddly at me but I ignore him. The station’s cafe is closed but the vending machines are working, so I get a candy bar and a soda and head back to the bus. It’s windy and snowing and so cold it hurts my lungs. The bus is heading south, right?

Three men wearing camouflage jackets and carrying rifle cases are arguing with the bus driver. They look like kissing cousins of the survivalist guy back home who stumbles into town every few months to stock up on cigarettes, ammo and beer.

“You can’t take those onboard,” the driver insists. “Interstate Transportation Rules.”

The older guy shifts his Day-Glo orange cap backwards. “We stowed them in the overheads on the last bus.”

“I don’t care what you did on the last bus. You can’t bring them on mine.”

The two younger guys grip their rifle cases and step toward the driver.

“Easy, dudes,” their older friend cautions. “We need to get to Des Moines by nightfall.” My mouth is full of Snickers. Otherwise I’d laugh at the cowboy movie cliché.

“You boys need to make the right decision real quick,” the driver says. “This bus is leaving in two minutes.” He grasps the lid of the baggage compartment to pull it down.

“Total bullshit!” the youngest one shouts.

I don’t have an easy time with angry straight men so I get on the bus and take my seat just in time to see the three grizzlies stash their cases. The youngest one stomps onboard first. “Motherfucker,” he bellows, darting glances at everyone in the bus, and takes an aisle seat in an empty row so he can have it to himself. Just like the jocks hog all the big booths at the A&W after a football game. The little girl and the boy are in the row behind him playing a game of patty-cake and singing in Spanish. The man bolts from his seat, scowls at the kids and shouts at the father: “What the hell are you wetbacks doing on our bus?”

Real nice. I wonder what he would call me. Fag, Fairy, Cock-sucker? Pansy, Poof, Queen? Cock Jockey, Donut Muncher, Fudge Packer? Ass Bandit, Bone Smuggler, Butt Pirate?

The father takes his kids’ hands and moves to the seats behind him. He studies the man as if he’s a piece of broken farm machinery.

“Who you staring at, spic?”

His friends chuckle.

The muscles on the Mexican's forearms are twitching. He could probably handle all three of these guys if he had to.

"You should all be goddamned deported! You hear me, Pancho?" The hunter sneers and stretches, showing off his beer belly. "No parlo Americano, huh?" He tromps down the aisle and leaves the door to the toilet open so everyone can hear him pee. He heads back, zipping his fly, and patting the little girl on the head as he passes.

The father stands up.

"Sit back down, wetback."

It hits me. He's no different than the sick morons who attacked Matt. It's like a switch flips inside me. All the anger I've stored up. All the stupid crap I've heard from idiots and said nothing. "Why don't you leave them alone!"

A hostile leer appears on his face. "What you going do about it, faggot?"

"You're a cacophonous cretin with a puny phallus." *Webster's Unabridged.*

His friends choke with laughter and punch one another. Big Mouth lurches toward me. I clench my fists. I'm about to get my head bashed in but I don't care.

"Hey, stop this right now!" yells the driver. Gears squeal and the bus edges off the highway onto the shoulder. He scrambles off his seat and heads toward us. "Stuff it right now, if you guys plan on getting home," he tells the hunters. "Otherwise I'm contacting the highway patrol. Your choice."

"We ain't doing nothing," growls Big Mouth.

The driver heads back to the front, grabs his radio and waggles it in the air. "Let's see what the authorities say."

“Cool it, man,” warns the older one. “We need to get to Des Moines without you making any more trouble.”

“You win.” Before sitting down, he flicks his fingers at the family. “Boo!”

I unclench my fists. My palms are sore from the pressure of my nails.

The father nods at me and touches his heart. “Gracias, senior.” He whispers something to his wife. She reaches into a bundle on the floor, takes out a package wrapped in waxed paper and hands it to me. “Un burrito para ti,” she declares. “You enjoy.”

She breaks into a smile, and I could burst into tears. Leaving home has opened up a big hole in me and until now I’ve had nothing to fill it with but guilt. I was selfish with Kat, thinking only of myself. And I can’t take back what happened to Matt. But at least I’ve finally stood up to a bully. Maybe I’m not the coward I thought I was.

I unfasten the chain and the silver crucifix from around my neck and place it in the mother’s hand. I manage to cobble together a sentence from my one year of Spanish. “Quiero que lo tengas.” *I want you to have it.*

She looks down at the cross in surprise and tries to give it back. I keep on insisting she keep it until, at last, she closes her hands around it. “Muchas gracias. Usted es muy amable, señor.” It’s the first time I’ve ever been called ‘sir.’

“Des Moines! One half hour and none too soon!” shouts the driver.

I see wolves and a wounded deer, tracks of its blood across the snow. I see Kat holding up her squalling newborn.

I wake up and wonder if I had dreamt it all. Matt’s lips against mine. Kat telling me she was pregnant. Leaving home.

I glance across the aisle. The family is gone, vanished during the night at some stop along the way. A piece of paper lies on the seat next to me. On it is a kid's drawing of a boy asleep on a bus. Outside the windows lollipop trees glow brilliant green. A bright yellow sun's rays stream across a blue sky filled with puffy white clouds. Another boy stands by the side of the road, smiling and waving. □