

How to Walk in the Dark

They burned what was left of her in Arthur's backyard. It wasn't nighttime. Someone walked a dog down the street. Someone pushed a stroller. "I can't get the cookbook to burn right," Arthur said. Joe watched as his neighbor and best friend took a long drink from something that almost certainly had alcohol in it. Arthur drew a breath in through his teeth before setting the glass down on the arm of his plastic lawn chair.

Joe took a can of WD-40 from Arthur's feet and spread the pages of the cookbook like a fan in the fire-pit, being careful not to touch the smoldering bottle of coconut skin lotion—he never knew you could burn a bottle of lotion until that day. The flames were red, not orange, and lotion oozed slowly from the wounded bottle. Joe drenched the splayed pages of the book, then ignited them with a long lighter that was sitting on the cement-block perimeter.

"I didn't realize you were an expert on book-burning, Joseph," Arthur said. He lifted his glass in an approving gesture before taking another large sip. Joe pulled a similar plastic lawn chair over to the fire-pit, sat down, watched the pages of *50 Exciting Vegetarian Recipes* curl and turn to a crumbly gray.

"I don't know what to say."

"You know what you need?" Arthur said. "You need to meet a girl who says 'I don't know' a lot."

Joe laughed, realizing Arthur was trying to think about something other than Jamie and why she was gone.

"You're always saying 'I don't know' about something," Arthur continued.

"I guess. I mean, I don't—"

Arthur shook his head slightly, grinning. “She left the pictures right where I would find them. She got in the shower and left them right there on her phone. Goddamn redneck too. I mean, I wouldn’t even be as mad if the guy was better looking than me. I’m not great, I know, but that piece of shit?”

Joe nodded. The spine of the cookbook finally buckled and fell into the cluster of ashes and half-burnt pages around it. “She’s gone now, anyway.”

The truth is Joe *had* met a girl who said ‘I don’t know a lot.’ He didn’t mention her at the time, because it didn’t seem appropriate. He couldn’t bring himself to go on about her when Arthur just saw his relationship of two years go down in a toxic blaze.

It had been nearly the end of the semester for Joe, and he had been friends with Evy for the majority of that semester since their meeting in class for the first time. As finals week grew closer and closer, though, he was concerned that they would go their separate ways—as people do at the end of semesters—and possibly not see each other again. He couldn’t bring himself to admit it to Arthur, but it had taken him weeks to come around to asking her out for more than a bagel at the campus café.

Joe and Evy were walking between buildings, their final classes having let out, in order to have lunch on campus a final time before summer.

“Hey, Evy?” Joe asked. “I know I’m going out on a bit of a limb here, but what if I said I wanted to be more than friends?” She turned to him as they walked, the breeze scattering her hair across her face.

“What are we in, fifth grade?”

Joe’s face burned. All at once he wished he hadn’t opened his mouth and was relieved that he had—that he wasn’t just *wishing* he could say something to her.

“I’m just really not good at relationships,” Evy went on. “What happens if we break up? Things could get weird and I would hate that. Not that I’m a bad ex. I’m still friends with my exes.”

“Me too. I still keep in touch with a couple of mine.” Joe watched Evy’s hands—she was wringing them as they walked, wrapping her long fingers together then unwrapping them. “But wait a minute,” he said. “We haven’t even agreed to anything yet.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, staring at the ground in front of them as they walked.

She didn’t give him an answer that day—said she would need a couple weeks to think about it. At this, Joe told himself to give up the whole thing altogether. Classes were over, and there were only two finals between him and the full force of summer. He was convinced that soon the only people he’d see on a regular basis were his dad, Arthur, and Little Nick.

The summer was shaped like a beer bottle, he decided. The beginning was quick and full of enthusiasm, a neck of cool amber, and the rest was wide and ponderous and full of empty spaces.

Joe had been working at Little Nick's Landscaping for the past couple of weeks. Dropping him at a job near the center of the village, Nick lifted the steel grate that formed a ramp into his trailer and slammed the latch into place. He crushed what was left of his cigarette under a steel-toed boot. "Well, there ya go, Joey. I'll see ya back here around four, alright? Should give ya time to get this mowed."

"Yep, no problem." As Little Nick's Ford drove away, pebbles popping under its tires, Joe rode the mower over to the edge of the West Springs Commons. The Commons included a complex of doctor's offices, a day-care center, and 14 apartment buildings. All were surrounded by wide, flat lawns that had grown significantly since he mowed them the previous week.

That summer was going to be different. Normally, Joe hated the summer, the brightness, the heat. He would step outside and the sun would fall on him like a twelve-pound hammer, and there would be that inescapable sensation in his head—the pressure, the thought: this summer will be the one that kills me. But that was all going to change. He'd do his work with a smile on his face, mow in neat, straight lines, south to north, north to south. Get up early every day, smile more, lose some weight. Stop feeling sorry for himself, stop wasting time.

He wasn't sure how to do all of these things, but he could start with the straight lines. Joe accomplished this so well that he surprised himself. Some days, there is just nothing more beautiful than the way mower blades sweep the grass into alternating stripes of light green and dark green. From one end of the lawn, his passes were light-dark-light; from the other end, they were dark-light-dark. It all depended on where you stood while you admired the job. As if anyone but a lawnmower stood and admired the job of a lawnmower. But there he was being a downer again. Smile. Stay positive.

By four, Joe had finished. He was ready to stop imagining how dumb he looked bouncing around on the mower seat with a grin painted on his face. Little Nick pulled up in his Ford, twenty minutes late as usual, and rolled down the window. "Dude, I'm really sorry. Had to get the damn blades fixed on the other mower again." Joe drove the mower onto the trailer and strained to lift the ramp up behind it and slide the pin into place.

"I'll take ya home," Nick said when Joe plopped down in the passenger seat. Joe noticed a glass pipe leaning in one of the cup holders and the smell of what Nick had been smoking in the air. He wondered why Nick couldn't wait until he was home to smoke, and what would happen if a cop pulled them over. But Joe didn't comment. The rivers of colors in the glasswork reminded him of the marbles he and Arthur used to play with as kids—a time before

booze and broken hearts and rednecks, a time when nothing needed to be fixed. They'd roll the marbles along the grooves in the wooden picnic table in Joe's backyard, pretending the glossy orbs were sentient. A marble's worst fear was falling from the end of the table, off the track, off the edge of the world into whatever lay below. Joe thought how easily something like this could happen. It took so little effort to become lost.

Soon, the Ford pulled up in front of Joe's house. Joe sat there for a moment, thinking Nick might pull out his wallet, pay him for at least some of the hours he had worked.

Nick seemed to notice that Joe wasn't getting out yet. He scratched at the stubble on his cheek. "Joey, I feel like a jackass, but I don't have the cash for ya right now. I'm gonna have to wait till I get paid to pay you this time. Is that okay?"

"Sure, man," Joe said. "It's not like I need it right this second anyway." He smiled at Nick before getting out of the truck. Joe thought he had about enough money left in the bank to buy some beer, but that was about it.

When he got inside, he realized the house was empty—his dad still not home from work—and he stripped down to his boxers and lay on the floor in front of the small oscillating fan. It swept the air back and forth, and he thought his body must be radiating its own heat like a glowing iron or the embers in a dying fire.

Joe was back at the fire-pit, the lump of scorched plastic that was the lotion bottle still nestled in the ashes. Arthur stacked up thick dry logs of wood in the lawn nearby, then arranged a few of the logs in the pit with some kindling and began to start a fire. "I invited Denny to come down tonight—he'll probably bring Maryanne. You're obviously invited to stick around."

Soon it was dark, and a respectable fire cracked in the pit sending embers drifting off into the night above. Joe wondered if the embers went dark when they got enough distance from the flames, or if they were just too far off to see.

Denny showed up then. He carried a bottle of Johnny Walker and Maryanne trailed along behind him. This was normal for Maryanne. It seemed to Joe that she'd been following Denny around since high school despite the fact that he often blew her off. Joe was used to seeing them together, and he figured Denny and Maryanne were also so used to being around each other that it wasn't likely to change anytime too soon. "Hey, guys," Denny said, drawing out his vowels to show he was excited to see them.

Once they all had a place to sit, the shots started. Joe did one, then two, then stopped, because moderation was one of his goals for the summer. He would avoid drinking too much, sleeping too little. Every little bit counted toward being a better person, the kind of person who loves the summer and

the sun, smiles, and is comfortable whether he's by himself or with others.

Denny and Maryanne didn't ask about the absence of Jamie. They seemed content to sit on the opposite side of the fire, not really talking to one another but both doing something with their phones. Joe thought this was probably for the best since Arthur actually seemed relaxed—staring into the fire, drinking, laughing at the occasional joke one of them would make.

Arthur continued staring into the fire, but spoke in a voice just loud enough for Joe to hear. "She came over earlier."

"What?" Joe said.

"We fucked and then she went home. We both agreed the fucking was worth it. She's not my girlfriend."

"That's disgusting," Joe said, not realizing what he was saying before it came out.

"What do you mean by that?" Arthur said.

"I mean, it's disgusting how she treated you."

"Yeah, whatever. I don't know anyone else," Arthur said.

Maryanne looked up, apparently catching bits of the conversation, but she didn't say anything. Joe realized that he had just judged his friend, found it disgusting that he would still have sex with Jamie when she was probably seeing that other guy. Then Joe told himself that Arthur had good reasons for what he was doing, and that Joe couldn't possibly understand, having never made a relationship last for even close to two years. "I know you think I shouldn't," Arthur added.

Joe propped his feet up on the perimeter of the fire-pit. Denny got up and walked inside for the bathroom as Maryanne drank another shot of the Johnny Walker.

"I love him, you know," she said, gesturing toward the house with the empty shot glass, where Denny was. "I've loved him for years and it's like he barely notices me. But I'm still here. He'll come around eventually, maybe." She put the glass down by the bottle and the fire danced in the reflection and in the golden liquid it held.

Joe wondered if he loved Evy. Was it love that made him feel so raw when one day after another went by without hearing anything from her? There'd been no text messages, no calls. He noticed a shred of paper in the bottom of the fire-pit—part of a list of ingredients next to a picture of something that looked like asparagus. He was amazed at how something so light and flammable could sit right in the midst of all that heat and avoid oblivion.

It wasn't until the middle of June that Evy called. "Hey, you still haven't seen the new *Gatsby* movie, have you?"

"Nope, not yet."

"You want to meet me there Saturday? I've seen it, but I'll watch it again

with you.”

Joe told her that he would, and they agreed on a showing time.

They shared a coke. Joe bought one for himself—Evy said she didn’t want one—but she changed her mind once the movie started and had some of his. During the movie, Joe glanced over at her without her noticing, at how the light from the screen intermittently illuminated her profile. He didn’t try to put an arm around her, hold her hand, any of that. He had given that up—he would just be the friend he knew he could be. He’d do well at that.

“About what you asked me the other week,” Evy said as they walked out to their cars. “I’m sorry it took me so long, but this is a very belated yes.” She stood by her car, looking at Joe uncertainly.

Joe was exultant, but he didn’t know how to react or what would be the appropriate thing to say. He was happy, but he didn’t seem to have control of it—even just enough control to put it into words. “Oh, okay,” Joe said. His voice sounded flat to him. “I’m really happy to hear you say that.”

“Let’s meet up again soon?” Evy said.

“Yeah, of course.”

She walked over to Joe and hesitantly wrapped her arms around him in a hug. He hugged her back, feeling the light presence of her head against his chest.

Saturdays were usually the nights when Joe would hang out Arthur, so when he pulled back into his driveway at 10 pm, he glanced across the street at his friend’s house. Arthur’s parents’ car was gone, but *her* car was there. She wasn’t Arthur’s girlfriend. She was Jamie, the girl Arthur fucked. It was already late; there were no lights on in the house, and Joe knew there would be no fire that night or walk around the village, no way he’d have a chance to tell Arthur about Evy. He felt sick that a girl who cheated on Arthur and didn’t even seem ashamed of it took priority over their usual weekend plans. But that was just how it was, he supposed.

Joe didn’t want to go inside and do nothing until he fell asleep. He called Denny and drove up to his apartment, grabbing a six-pack of beer on the way.

“Wanna play some Hold ’em?” Denny said. He had just bought a new set, shiny plastic chips, felt mat, and all. Maryanne was sitting in a bowl chair nearby, reading something on Denny’s laptop, by the looks of it.

“Sure thing,” Joe said. He didn’t need to talk to Arthur about Evy, or talk to anyone about her for that matter. He could just be happy and play poker and leave it at that.

“Can I have one of those delicious things that you brought into my home, Mr. Joseph?” Denny was looking at Joe’s beers.

“Of course you can. I’m not an asshole.”

“Thank you so much, man, and you can try one of mine if you’d like.”

Joe did try one of Denny’s, and he also had the other five of his. In what

felt like very little time, Joe and Denny had played six games of Hold 'em and it was after five o'clock in the morning. At some point he realized that nothing had changed. This could have been the same night last summer, or the summer before. He was wasting time with the same people, drinking the same beer. It didn't matter that Evy told him yes, or that she put her arms around him. Joe didn't know when he'd see her again, or if she'd change her mind about it before he even had a chance.

There was a knock at the door to the apartment.

"Hello?" Denny said, cautiously.

"It's Arthur."

"Come in, man," Denny said.

When Arthur came in, he saw Joe sitting by his poker chips. "Sorry, Joe," he said. "Some shit came up last night, so I wasn't able to hang out. Thought I might find you here."

"I'm sure some shit came up," Joe said, standing up and sliding his shoes on. "I was actually just about to head home. My car's right out there." Maybe it was the beer, or a combination of the beer and his exhaustion, but Joe had to lean on the back of his chair for support.

"You can't drive," Arthur said.

"I'll just fucking walk, then." Joe realized he sounded mad, and didn't want to, so he put on a smile. "It's not even that far, and it's a good night for a walk."

"Alright," Arthur said. "I'll go with you. But I'm not sure we can call it night anymore."

"Fine," Joe said. "Whatever." Something in Joe's tone of voice was funny—as things can only be funny after staying up all night playing Hold 'em—and they all started laughing. "Anyway," Joe said, in his most amicable of voices, "thanks for playing cards, Denny. Good to see you, Maryanne." Joe shook Denny's hand and stepped outside with Arthur, pleased with himself that he had salvaged the situation.

And there it was. As Joe and Arthur stepped out into the front lot of the apartments, Joe saw the sun rising, turning the eastern sky a lighter shade of blue, obliterating the stars. Joe already felt the pressure rising in his head along with the gradual increase in light and the excited chirping of the birds. Watching the sunrise that morning, Joe felt with undeniable certainty that he had failed to turn himself around. He had failed to be disciplined, moderate, to smile enough.

"We had a fight last night that lasted for hours," Arthur said. "I said I just wanted to have sex and that was it, but it's bullshit. I can say whatever I want, but as soon as I'm in the same room with Jamie, I'm her boyfriend again like nothing ever happened. Well, not like nothing happened, but just that nothing's that different. I still care about her I guess, you know?"

But Joe wasn't paying much attention. He was focused on putting one foot in front of the other on the sidewalk, praying that if he only looked at the concrete, and not at the sky, the sun would slow its ascent just this one time. "Yeah, Arthur, I get it."

"She said 'I love you' after we finished, and that's when the fight started."

"That's rough," Joe said. He wanted nothing more than to lie down in somebody's front yard and cry, if for no other reason than that Arthur might understand how he was feeling. But Joe settled for quietly letting the tears run down his face, unseen by Arthur in the half-light. Joe kept talking, no longer about Jamie, but rather simple nothings that would be lost along with the rest of the night.

Joe decided not to go to bed. It would be almost like turning back time if he just never went to sleep, like Superman flying around the world in reverse to save his Lois. Joe thought he might be able to save his summer, that he could make friends with the sun and convince the burning thing to take it easy on him.

When Arthur and Joe got back to their street, they sat in Arthur's yard by the cold fire-pit until the morning was in full-stride. They talked about *Gatsby* and about literature, and about how movies are sometimes better than the books but worse at the same time.

There was a lull in the conversation. A jogger plodded by on the street. "So I guess I've got a girlfriend, now," Joe said.

"Oh?" Arthur said. "That's kind of a big deal. You could have opened with that, you know."

"I don't know."

Joe *did* sleep, but not until about noon, and only for a few hours then. When he finally rose, he thought of how he talked with Arthur until he didn't even know what he was talking about anymore. He thought about Evy's tentative form against his, and he realized that things weren't so bad as they felt when the sun first broke the horizon. Thinking back to his Irish literature class last semester, he remembered there was a man in one of the novels who said: *There comes a time when you either run amok completely or try to make a go of it.* Joe figured he would make a go of it. It didn't matter if he slipped once in a while—he could still keep trying. Tomorrow was Monday; there would be lawns to mow, and he would mow them in smooth lines of light and dark.

Because it was well into the afternoon when Joe finally rose, it seemed as if the sun set remarkably early that day. It was the kind of summer evening that Joe could say he enjoyed, without even pretending. And that Sunday night, he and Arthur went for a walk when the sun had completely given way to the crisp, cool night.

"She's not coming back." Arthur said. "She made that clear, and I feel

okay about it.”

“You sure?”

“Yep. I’ve got a plan. I’m gonna see if I can get back into school this year.”

Joe said that sounded like a good road to be on, that he would be happy if Arthur found something he really enjoyed and was skilled at. For a while they walked quietly, then they came to the place where they would normally cut through the backside of an overgrown used car lot. There was a tractor-trailer truck sitting in the lot that night. Its windows were dark, and there may have been someone sleeping up there, but Joe couldn’t tell.

“Look at this,” Arthur said. He paused as they passed the truck, holding his hands out toward it. “It’s funny how some things can look so impossibly big sometimes. Like, I realize that this is a large truck *anytime*, but it’s *really* large right now. You know?”

“Yeah,” Joe said. It made perfect sense to him. If he could smile one day and cry the next, if Evy could be in his arms but feel so beyond his reach, that truck could be normal one day and goliath another.

Joe stared straight up at the stars as they stepped across the railroad tracks. He would have been afraid of tripping, but they had walked this shortcut so many times that he didn’t need to watch his step. It was one of those crystal-clear nights when the Milky Way is visible—when the stars seem to meld into one bridge arching over everything. Joe thought of that common sentiment, that we could look to the night sky to make our petty concerns and problems fade away—we were insignificant compared to the vastness of space. But Joe felt the exact opposite as he stepped over the rails. Looking to the stars, he could be endless, at least for a moment.

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