

Long Time Ago Good

Sunset Dreams from Austin and Beyond

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The great pain in our heart we are now trying to alleviate by following the mirages of new frontiers. On the broad flat plain of monotonous living we see the distorted images of our desires glimmering on the horizons of the future; we press on toward them only to have them disappear completely or reappear in different form in another direction.

--Walter Prescott Webb

Long time ago good. Now not so good.

--Hemingway

Long Time Ago Good

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Brindled Pit Bull

AFTER SHE MOVED TO TEXAS FROM CALIFORNIA, MARLA HAYDEN DECIDED SHE needed some Western Art on her wall. She found a Charlie Russell print online and bought it—a painting of a haggard, miserable, freezing steer caught out in the middle of a blizzard, surrounded by hungry wolves. It was called “Waiting for a Chinook,” a Chinook being a warmer wind that would sometimes blow across the Northern Plains for a few winter days. Marla had the print professionally framed and she hung it over the couch in her living room. Though she liked the cool, soothing blues and grays of the painting, she mostly liked it because she saw herself as one of the wolves—an alpha bitch, perhaps, successful and fearless. But when the software company she worked for, Nntych, laid off 300 people, including her fiancé, who worked in the finance department, and shipped another 150 or so jobs to India, Marla took the print down and put it in the back of the utility room and hung drying clothes off the edge of the frame. Maybe

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she wasn't a wolf, after all. Six months later her boss told her, very casually, that her own job was also going to Bangalore.

The next day Marla called in sick.

For most of the morning she lay on the couch watching television, gazing solemnly at a series of bad comics on the comedy channel. She hadn't had the heart to tell her fiancé, Jim Lueckert, about her job the night before. He had been telling her for months that her job was in danger—even before his own layoff he had been telling her that Nntych was in trouble, that sales were lagging, that the officers had been spending far too much money. But that seemed absurd: even after the great boom of the late nineties it was apparent that growth, slower growth, sure, but *growth* would go on forever, forever, everybody knew it, you only had to look around Austin. Seventy or so people a day were still moving in—the streets were jammed, new housing developments were going up everywhere, new strip malls, new buildings downtown, in the three years she had lived in Austin the city had been transformed—it was a totally different place, and was still changing, still becoming. And Nntych was a strong young company, an innovator, Nntych hired the smartest kids from the best colleges in the country and they were putting out the best systems management software in the world. Nothing could stop them.

Her cell phone rang. Marla glanced at the displayed number—it was Jim, calling from his new job. She punched the button to answer.

“Hi,” she said.

“I called you at work,” Jim said. “They said you were sick.”

“Yeah, they were right.”

“Marla—”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Marla said. “I’m just tired—my stomach’s messed up, too. I just figured I’d take the day off.”

“Poor baby,” Jim said. “You want me to bring you something?”

Marla looked at the wall where Charlie Russell’s doomed steer had been. Where the successful, hardy wolves had been. In its place she had put up a corny painting of Texas bluebonnets, a horrible painting of a happy dog romping in an endless field of cheerful blue flowers in the spring sunshine, a painting so ugly and bad it was actually kind of cool. If you had a sense of humor.

“No,” Marla said. “Maybe later—I think I’ll go back to sleep.”

Jim worked in the billing office of a large law firm downtown and considered himself lucky to have found a decent job. Where was *she* going to go? Who wanted programmers anymore? Who wanted front-line managers anymore? India was taking all the jobs—everybody over there in India was a genius, and they worked for nothing. It wasn’t fair. Marla dreaded having to break down and tell Jim that he had been right about Nntych the whole time.

Fucking Nntych! Goddamn corporate culture! Greed, idiocy, short-sighted foolishness! The big managers had ruined everything. Jim had told her that the canceling of the cab perk had been the first outward sign that the company was in trouble. The cab perk: Nntych’s recruitment brochures talked about the company’s “work hard, play hard” philosophy, but the company also frowned on drunk driving and so had offered free cab rides—unlimited free cab rides—to all employees. Jim told her the cab perk cost the company almost \$30,000 a month. Really, they all took cabs all the time, everyone, all the employees, all the young people from

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the best colleges in the country, all of them new to Austin, new to Texas, new to each other, taking cabs down to the Sixth Street nightclub area two, three, four times a week, maybe stopping to get sushi on the way downtown, then milling with the vast crowds along the street, partying along with students from the university, other high tech workers, some locals, everyone drinking and laughing. On some corners, mostly toward the east end of Sixth, there would be knots of hard-looking young black men and they always sort of shocked Marla: they scared Marla, though she knew she wasn't racist—California had lots of black people, of course, and lots of Mexicans and Asians, too, Marla got along with everyone, she treated everyone the same—but these young men, they scared her with their open shirts and flat rippling bellies, and they disturbed her because they weren't supposed to be there. Texas wasn't black people—Texas was cowboys. Texas was George Bush. Texas was the old frontier, where stupid white guys in pickup trucks would drive around and drink beer and brag about barbeque or football or something equally vulgar.

In a group with Jim and their friends from work, Marla would sometimes circle Sixth Street in the bright flickering neon night, shot bar to shot bar to dance club and on and on, and she felt safe in her group, even though when a hard young black man might try to get their attention—“Hey, can you tell me what time it is?”—no one would answer, they would fall silent, and they would all keep walking silently until they crossed the street and went up the block or whatever. Generally, Marla and her friends kept to the west end of the street; it seemed safer, and the bars were just as fun. Later, going home in the free cabs, taking long trips to their homes in the far Southwest or far Northwest sides of town, everyone would be laughing

and making calls on their cell phones, gossiping about work, telling each other how wonderful Austin was, with restaurants and Sixth Street and music and all the cool people at work, but how weird and crude and out of it the rest of Texas was—Texas they had seen only from car windows as they drove in from San Diego or wherever, or gazed down on from a mile up in the air as they flew in from Seattle or Boston—and the cab would speed by neighborhoods where the locals lived, the ones they saw on the TV news for winning chili cook-offs, or going on killing sprees, or getting in car wrecks, all those would-be cowboys sitting in the night in their camped little houses drinking beer and cleaning their guns and admiring their Confederate flags while their girlfriends snorted crank and their kids rolled around squalling in dirty diapers—a whole class of left-behind losers that no one would ever take seriously. The cab driver if he was cool would laugh along with them, knowing he was getting a good fare and a good tip, and it had all been such childlike, endless fun, one long party, it was never going to stop, the jobs would get better and better, and pay more and more and more—but, no, now it *had* ended. It had stopped.

The idiots who ran Nntych had totally screwed everything up. They cut the cab perk, and that was the first sign the company was in trouble. Then they downsized, and downsized again. They still made money and the stock went up, so they went ahead and outsourced. Marla wondered, What did those fuckers over in India need *her* job for? She had house payments to make.

After she told Jim to call her back later, Marla rolled to her side and found herself gazing into the eyes of Ginger, a sleek long-haired dachshund. She scooped Ginger up onto the couch and hugged her tight.

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“Oh, baby,” she whispered, “what’re we gonna do?”

Ginger didn’t say anything and snuggled up close to her and they drifted off to sleep.

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When Marla awoke she saw from the clock on the DVD player that she had slept some three hours. It was early afternoon. She’d placed the TV on mute when Jim called; it was still on, showing a movie or something with a car racing around banging into things. Ginger was scratching at the patio door to get out. Marla found the remote and switched the TV over to a news show, where people were screaming at each other about something. She didn’t want to know what; she kept the television muted. She got up and let Ginger out into the back yard, and went to pull a Diet Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator. Then she heard angry barking coming from outside.

“Baby!” she yelled.

Marla dropped the Dr. Pepper on the kitchen counter and went to the door. Ginger was at the edge of the yard, frozen, staring at the privacy fence. Barking was coming from the other side of the fence; a nasty brindled pit bull lived over there.

“Ginger! Get in here!”

Ginger didn’t move—growling, maybe. The barking and snarling—more than one dog, Marla could tell—went on.

“Ginger!”

Marla went out and crossed the yard in her bare feet. The afternoon was hot: even the grass felt hot, and the peonies planted along the back of the fence were wilting under the gray hazy sky. The barking beyond the

fence was growing—snarling, growling. Ginger’s teeth were bared and she stood trembling staring at the fence until Marla yanked her up and held her tight.

There was movement on the other side of the fence—a dog fight. Marla stepped over to peer through a knothole but a giant pale shape—a dog?—slammed into the fence and she jumped back. Ginger was wriggling in her arms.

“Hey!”

The dog on the other side of the fence sounded like it was trying to chew through the fence—to attack her, to get Ginger. Then it sounded like there was another dog over there—and maybe another. The anger radiating through the wooden fence was incredible. Marla took another step back. Ginger was growling.

“Be quiet,” Marla said. Ginger struggled to get down out of her arms and so Marla turned and went back to the house and dropped Ginger inside. The little dog tried to shoot out but Marla blocked her with a leg and slid the patio door shut. Ginger looked up at her through the glass.

The dog noise from next door grew—two or three dogs—a dog fight. Marla slowly crossed the lawn and stood next to the fence. It was shaking. Marla placed her hand on the rough wood: she could feel the vibrations of snaps and growls transformed, not just hearing them now, but feeling them. She looked through the knothole: nothing. Marla put her foot on the bottom of the fence and pulled herself to the top and looked over. She saw two big dogs, strange dogs, a white one and a brown one, savaging the brindled pit.

“Stop it!” she yelled. “Hey!”

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The brindled pit was in a corner trying to protect itself. The two other dogs—also pits, Marla saw, big ones—were going after the brindled dog, the brown one at its flanks, the pale one going for the throat.

“Stop it!”

The dogs ignored her. Marla dropped down from the fence and ran to the gate at the edge of her backyard. It was locked. The fighting dogs sounded like they were going crazy. Marla crossed to the patio and went inside the house—pushing Ginger out of the way—through the living room and out the front door. She ran next to the house next door and rang the bell. There was no answer, so she banged on the door with her fist and yelled. The house was dark—she was pretty sure the people were away. She didn’t know their names, had only seen them occasionally, brown-skinned people from Pakistan or Mexico or someplace, people who wore nice clothes, had a nice Mitsubishi and a big Ford Excursion. They had that brindled pit bull, too. But a lot of people had big dogs, sometimes when Jim went running in the neighborhood rather than down by the lake, Marla could tell what block he was on by where the dogs were barking at him—though now, someone’s big dogs were loose and had gone after the brindled dog—they could have gone after a child, if there had been children in the neighborhood, or if one had been on the street.

Marla looked around. All the houses on the block were blank-looking, closed off, with small windows on the front and recessed doors, big houses of stone or brick that almost filled their lots and seemed to push forward with seven-foot wooden privacy fences crowding up behind them. It was a good, new neighborhood, people had to have good jobs to live out on the far edge of town with their cars and big dogs, and apparently everyone was

off at their jobs now, for nothing was moving.

The dogs were still fighting. Marla ran back to her own house and went inside. Ginger was waiting for her by the front door. “Stay!” Marla said as she crossed the house and went out the back, but Ginger followed her through the house to the sliding patio doors and stood and watched. Marla went to the side of the house and began pulling at the water hose—she’d maybe spray water at the dogs, get them all wet and make them stop—when there was a quick pause in the dog noise from next door. Then a growl, a snap, and then silence.

Marla dropped the hose and went over to the fence and listened. She thought she might be hearing the panting of tired dogs. She pulled herself to the top of the fence and saw the brindled dog dying, sprawled out in the sun, bleeding, trailing guts, a hind leg twitching. The brown dog and the creamy one were in the shade next to the house, resting, panting, pink tongues lolling, looking over at her. The creamy one had what looked like blood on its face and neck. Marla watched the dogs for a long time before she dropped off the fence and went back inside her home.

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In the evening, after work, Jim came over and let himself in. He brought her a bottle of wine, and cans of chicken soup, and a couple of movies to watch. Marla was still drowsy—disturbed—as he was unpacking, getting herself a glass of water, and she almost didn’t notice when Jim stepped over and opened the patio door to let Ginger out.

“No!” Marla jumped over and slammed the door shut, almost catching Ginger in it. “No!” she said. “Ginger only goes out with a leash now—only with a leash.”

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“Baby?” Jim asked slowly. “Are you okay?”

“Fuck no, I’m not okay,” Marla said. She pulled Ginger’s leash down from a hook and fastened it to the squirming dog’s collar. She noticed her hands were shaking, and she frowned up at Jim. “Don’t just stare at me—go fix some soup or something.”

Outside the evening was quiet and warm. Car sounds came from the distant expressway. Marla walked Ginger past the yard’s sole tree, a lonely mesquite, tugging Ginger at times, the stubborn small dog not used to a leash in her own back yard. Then Marla went back and tied the leash to the tree. Marla left Ginger and touched the fence. The wood was warm and motionless. No sound came from beyond it. Marla pulled herself up and looked over the top.

She saw a black lump in the center of the yard, a dark lump close to where she had last seen the dead brindled pit. There was no sign of the cream-colored dog or the brown one. She was sure they were gone. The house beyond was dark. All the other houses in the neighborhood were dark. Nothing moved.

“Marla?” It was Jim, standing out on her patio. “Marla? Are you okay? Is something wrong?”

Everything’s wrong, Marla thought. But she didn’t say anything. She swung over the fence and came down into the back yard next door. The dead pit was in front of her, a few feet away, and in the dark it seemed to move. Marla took a step toward it. She could hear Jim calling, “Marla! Marla!” and even though he sounded like he was just on the other side of the fence, she didn’t answer. She heard Jim say, “Ginger, what’s wrong with your mommy?” Marla focused on the dark dog stretched out on the

ground—maybe it moved again. Then it *did* move—it wasn't dead. The hind leg sort of kicked or scratched or something, and Marla knelt down beside the dog, and she touched its shoulder and said, "Poor boy." Then the brindled pit wrenched around and snapped her by the wrist.

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The next afternoon Marla went to work. Nntych's headquarters were in an office park located on top of a canyon on the far west side of town, and from the parking lot Marla could look down at the flooded river below, Lake Austin, and the Loop 360 Bridge crossing it, and beyond the bridge to the towers of the city. There were two boats down below her on the lake towing water-skiers, and a few golfers strolled around at the country club course just downstream from the bridge. People at play under the hot white Texas sun, she thought, Texans at play, and the thought made her angry. The play seemed just a gloss over something incredibly crude and vulgar. Above her vultures rose floating on the updraft from the water, while grackles strutted around the parking lot picking at bits of trash.

She turned her back on them and went inside. Marla passed the security desk and the silent, newspaper-reading guard and took an elevator up to the third floor. She walked down a long, open room, passing several empty, sterile, office cubicles, and other cubicles occupied by bored or depressed-looking people, cubicles that were soon to be empty. Her boss, Conrad, was standing outside his office door—he had a real office instead of a cubicle, an office with a door and a window—and he saw the bandage on her forearm and asked, "Are you all right?" but she walked past him, like a zombie, and took her chair, at her desk. Some weeks before Jim had given her a half-dozen little plastic frogs to put on her desk, to cheer the

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place up, and three days earlier, in a playful mood, Marla had arranged the frogs in a long, humping daisy-chain of sexual frolic. Now, though, Marla just looked at the happy frogs and sighed and said, “Well, shit.”