# Why'd You Come Back?

*by* Caleb Stright

It was a tunnel and he was burrowing, the blades of his elbows against the walls, pushing, wriggling deeper. It was just big enough for his shoulders, but soon it wasn't. He was lodged. He was pawing toward darkness, but did it frantically, like whatever was there just beyond his fingers was important, better than air, which was getting thin in his chest.

It was a dream, he knew, as soon as he rolled over. But he still felt the burrowing. On his back, he jammed his finger in his ear but the canal was nearly closed off by something like a huge pimple. He hooked his finger and pulled. He opened his eyes, and as they focused, he saw in his palm what could have been the half-shell of an orange M&M. He turned it over and it looked like the inside of a walnut.

When the legs unfolded out of it, his fingers clamped down around it, crushed and flicked it away.

He closed his eyes, covered his ears with his pillows and tried to sleep again. Because he needed to, because the last 16 of 17 days had been work, all 10-hour days. All he wanted was sleep, but now he couldn't sleep, because on his hands was that smell of rotten wood and rotted pipes that only exists inside lady bugs. He had tried to curl the hand under his pillows, bury it under his body, but the damp smell was everywhere and seemed to grow. He went to the bathroom, to the sink and scrubbed it, and, because he wasn't tired now, went to the steps. There was a window, there, in the stairwell, that was only good for watching weather. And, because it was late October, and snowing, he decided, to do just that. He'd watch the fat early flakes bury the fire-colored trees and pumpkins and hopefully fall asleep right there. Maybe nod off and topple down the steps, break his neck, and never be not sleeping ever again. But there, up

the street, just coming into the corner of the window, someone was in the middle of the road. Walking literally down the middle, dragging one leg like it was heavy or broken, carving a fat line next to the skinny one the good one made. Soon, there was another and another and he went to bed. Because there was something obviously wrong and if he saw it, he'd have to do something about it and tomorrow was his day off.

x x x

When his phone went off, the sun had filled his room but he knew it was too early. The clock said 8, he said motherfucker, and answered.

“You know I wouldn't do this unless I needed help,” she said.

He knew. He dressed and pushed water through his hair and brushed his teeth. Because she might smell his breath.

And as he drove, he thought, this is what he was afraid of. This is what he had hoped would happen.

After breaking off a four-year high-school relationship for her, because she was pretty and small and he wanted pretty and small, after breaking it off with her because he was afraid he was having some premature crisis, some quarter-life panic, because she was so young and there was no other explanation, after he went to college, after he heard she was doing journalism, too, after he came back to the hometown  paper here, after he saw her resume on his editor's desk, this is what he was afraid of. That she was following him.

This is what he had hoped would happen.

He found her out in the country, the pumpkin farm they sent reporters every year. Because every Halloween you have to have a story about the harvest. About how too much rain, not enough rain

stunted the big orange gourds' growth. How this year's biggest pumpkin was the biggest pumpkin ever.

Her car was there and he yelled for her. He wandered toward the porch of the big old farm house, still calling, but she didn't answer.

He found her on the farmer's couch, hand over her face, small shudders of crying, looking smaller than ever.

“He's dead,” she said. And she put her head on his shoulder and her arms around him. Her head landed right where it always had. He didn't even think about it, just wished he'd touched her first.

She cried for a second and it was warm on his shirt, but soon she'd have to show him. The body. Because they'd need pictures for the paper.

He pulled the camera from her lap and she pointed outside. Out the sliding glass door, over the back porch and to the back yard, where she trailed him, holding the back of her hand to her eyes, trying to stop the tears.

“I tried to,” she said as he lifted the camera to his face. “I just couldn't.” She would eventually. It was part of the job. You had to take pictures of the dead. She was still too new.

He turned toward her and meant to say, You shouldn't have come back. I can't apologize. The things I said to you to make you go away, I said because I needed you to go away. Because I couldn't have you relying on me. Because I wanted you to rely on me. You can't be here.
It hadn't snowed for hours and the early sun had warmed the air, but it was starting to get cold.

“What happened?” he asked. There weren't any marks on the body.

The farmer was just there, in the grass, like he was sleeping. Like he was going to walk in the back porch but go too tired. Decided to lie down and take a rest.

“I don't know. His fucking dog's dead, too,” she said. She was crying on her hand and pointing with the other to the little poodle by the bushes.
“I called the police right after you,” she said. “They should be here soon. I don't know why they're not yet.”

The snow had started again. It was frosting her hair. Just like when she was 17 and he was home on break. When she hit a deer and its bones slashed her tire and she called him because it was near his house and a good excuse to see him. And he put on the spare as she watched and was covered in snow. She tried to kiss him to thank him, but he turned his cheek. Not because he didn't want it. Because there was another girl then. A college girl. A girl from New York and three years older than her. And because he wanted it.

He centered the dog in the camera, and as the shutter snapped, in the corner of his eye, the farmer was up. He turned and the farmer was on his feet.

“Sir, are you all right?” he asked, holding a hand out to the farmer. But the farmer didn't answer. His face was the color of mud and his eyes were unfocused. They looked melted and moved like warm gelatin in their sockets. The snow didn't melt on his skin.

“Sir, sir,” he said. “Are you all right?”

But the farmer only grunted. He sounded angry. He was to his feet and pushing sounds through his half-closed mouth and moving toward them, resting his weight on one leg before throwing it to the other.

They were between the house and the farmer, and she stood behind him. They walked backward toward the house, and she pointed.

“Look at the dog!” she yelled. The poodle was yapping, but its eyes were closed. It ran at them then stumbled. It opened its eyes. They looked rotted out. It circled toward them, fell again and rolled, screaming noises that seemed too big for its little chest.

They retreated inside, in through the porch's sliding glass door and watched the farmer stumble up the steps. He fell once, rolled to the bottom, but when he was up again, he was walking. He had figured it out and was moving with a purpose. They stood behind the glass and he banged on it wildly with the heel of his open hand. It was a long, hollow boom, but the glass held. He brought his hand like a hammer against it and the other. Each blow coming faster. And harder.

She was behind him, squeezing his arm.

“I thought you said he was dead,” he said.

The dog was behind the glass now, too, and barking, its face, its nose, and nails thumping and clacking, bouncing and sounding again, smearing the glass with the fluids of its face.

He edged around the kitchen table and pulled a knife from a drawer.

When he turned back around, the farmer's hand was through the glass. His arm was cut but not bleeding. He shook his fist through the hole and groaned through it, too. The farmer tried to walk like his whole body could make it through the jagged opening he'd made, but he just bounced like the dog. Clunk boom. Clunk boom. Clunk boom. The farmer backed up, rocking, led with his face, stumbled through, and rolled through with a shower of glass. With his feet still outside, the dog climbed him like a bridge. It had just learned to

run, too, and was after the couple. They weren't backing away now; they were near the front door but running and the dog's teeth were in the cuff of her jeans. He pulled at the door, and as it swung open, he kicked the dog, got his foot under its ribs, and it flew against the wall. It bounced but landed on its feet. But the door was closed and they were outside.

She was running toward her car.

“No,” he yelled. “We need to be here when the cops get here.” He ran to her and grabbed her arm. “You'll never get a story like this again.”

She shook her head and tried to pull away, but he led her by her arm.

They were running; their breath left a long white trail in the air.

They got to the barn and he put his shoulder against its huge door. It was heavy, though, and was hung up on its track. He looked back, all the way back to the house, and the farmer was falling through and out a window. The farmer rolled and was to his feet, sagging at his waist but still rambling toward them.

She was yelling, hands over her mouth. He jarred the door loose and opened it enough for them to squeeze through. They slammed it shut and backed into the warm open air of the barn.

“Why'd you come back?” he said. He spoke to her, but didn't look at her.
They stared at the door and waited for it to shake.

“I don't know,” she said. She looked at him.

“Couldn't find a job anywhere else?”

The farmer was against the door now and it was rattling in its track, swaying.

“No,” she said. She grabbed his hand and pulled on it. They ran back, to the hay loft. She grabbed the ladder and he hoisted her with his hands and shoulder. The farmer was crashing at the door.

They climbed to the top and settled on the bales.

“I missed you,” she said. She was looking at him and moved beside him.
She was against him and warm through his coat.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “The things I've said. I just needed to …” and she kissed his cheek. He knew she did it because she didn't want him to answer. As it was, everything after this was easy. If he talked, if he said what he was thinking, it wouldn't.

The farmer had clawed through the door and was thrashing toward them.
He stumbled and fell and rolled but was going right for the ladder.

“What are we going to do?” she yelled. He wanted to say, we're going to walk right out of here. We're going right to my bed and we're going to do the things we used to only be able to do in the back of an Oldsmobile in the comfort and patience and warmth of my sheets.

Her fingers were pushing into his arm and he wondered how long this would have taken if this never would have happened. Would he have ever gotten drunk and called her? Would he ever have been able to drink that much? Or would it have always taken the dead coming back?

The farmer was on the ladder. He was hanging off, lurching one rung at a time up, as quickly as he could figure it out.

He picked up a bale, stood at the top and dropped it. There was a snap as it hit the farmer and he fell.

But with the thud and crash of his body against the bottom, there were other animals now, too. At the door and around the walls. Maybe just the dog, but it sounded like cows, too, goats, growling outside, the same as the farmer.

Her eyes were widening, growing with her fear, and he smiled, because that meant, too, growing need for him. The farmer was on the rungs again, the ladder clattering. He dropped a bale again and the farmer fell again, but he didn't stay.

“We can't do this forever,” she said. She'd panic soon and he didn't want to see that. She'd cried enough.

He took another bale, slid it with his foot near the edge; he pulled a lighter from his pocket, lit it, put it to the bale, and when flames had grown over half of it, he let it drop. It hit the farmer, again, and he fell, again, but this time he was aflame. He stood and stumbled and circled. And as he did, something came out of him. From his ear. Something flying in a meandering corkscrew. It was a ladybug. And the farmer fell finally to his knees.

That's it, he thought.

They could hear the sirens finally coming.

“It's over,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “It's over.”

And then she looked at him, and as she did, he panicked, because even though the stray hay that carpeted the floor below them had caught fire, too, she looked bored already.

And he didn't understand how she could have beat him to it.