

Indian Summer

by Eric Lloyd Blix

June

My, my. Look how much you've grown. The last time you spent a summer here with us you must a been a full head shorter. Now look at you. You're nearly all grown up. I'm wonderin how'd your momma and pop get you to give up a whole summer to spend in this dusty old polio museum we call a house? *Goddamn*. A almost-man such as you. Believe me, your granddaddy and me sure are glad you came. Man alive. You must be payin attention to your little girlie classmates by now, I bet. You look like you could be a regular old little Casanova. A real Joe Coolie. Have you any little lady friends yet? Boy, I betcha you noticed all them signs along the interstate when your parents drove you down. Them big billboards for all the titty bars we got around here. Don't tell your momma and pop I asked you about those, now. They don't wanna hear it, but you're practically a a-dult. I betcha you're almost up to geometry in school. I bet that'll be the first class you take when you start up again next fall, won't it? And all them little classmates a yours, I know it when I say they throw that word *titty* around with ease. You all know quite well what a titty is and what it means to you. You don't got to act like you don't. I can tell. I remember how the boys used to look at us when I was as young as you. Studyin the angles of our bodies like they was a bunch a Pythagorases. Somethin inside em drives em all crazy. Respectable and lowly men lack scruples just the same when it comes to studyin the human form. And you're practically a man yourself. Don't I know it. *Damn*. Your granddaddy used to frequent some a them titty bars back in his day. I got mad at him for it once or twice, I'll tell you what. I'm bein dead as a doornail serious. One time in specific I took after him with a rollin pin I used for bakin, just as you see on them cartoon shows you've outgrown, hollerin at him, what's wrong with what I got for you here at home? and he hollers back at me, nothin, I love what you got just fine. Boy, thinkin back on them days about brings a tear to my eye. You remember the last

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summer you stayed here with us? All you did was stand for three months in that livin room starin at your granddaddy's iron lung. Well. Your legs was about as bald as your butt was back then.

July (the Fourth)

Them clay pigeons was like bombs burstin in air, wasn't they? I'd call your aim *acute*, if anything. *Jesus*. I guess I'm left wonderin who in the city taught you to wield a Colt AR-15 Tactical Carbine rifle with so much damn skill? If ever we need to take up arms against a enemy foreign or domestic, I'll know who to call. That there was shootin like a *man*. You got them clay pigeons' arcs down pat. You up for hangin with your old parents' parents later this evening when the Parks and Rec Department shoots off its fireworks? Your granddaddy can't ever leave that contraption a his, you know. We gotta watch it all from the museum every year because of it. The fact that he can't go nowhere or he'll die. We can't hardly ever see a thing through the windows in our livin room, especially since he ain't able to turn his head for a damn. So I gotta wheel his machine around and ask him if he can see anything until he groans somethin along the lines a *yes* and I can sit down in the metal foldin chair I pull up next to him. I love your granddaddy, and I would do this every night a the year if I had to, because I love him so much and the fact that he ain't able to do it himself makes me want to curl up and lie in that machine a his with him. But I can't, so we watch it as regular a way as possible under our circumstance. Boy, the colors and the sounds just about blow us away. I know I feel it inside a me, a real love of country. I imagine your granddaddy feels it, too, somewhere deep inside that respiratin clunker a his. And we both feel it also, too, this sense that we share that what we each want is just to hold the other's hand, real simple. I tear up and he makes his noises. . . . We're real easy to stimulate, you know. Your granddaddy and me is a couple a a-nachronisms. After we first tied the knot, for instance, we always enjoyed sittin at night with the TV tube playin the Johnny Cash Show. I betcha you didn't even know Johnny Cash had a show, did you? Well, he did. All the stars was on it that you probably don't

even know who they are. Pat Boone. Tammy Wynette. The Statler Brothers. *Shit*. They'd sing and Johnny would crack jokes between songs, and you could see it on the crowd's faces that Johnny was real funny in person. Probably more so than on TV. He'd sing and wise crack and everyone there in the crowd would sit in their seats and smile and clap and have a real good time. Well, don't misundereestimate your old grandma. I know you ain't even *capable* a bein turned on by somethin so bland and old-fashioned as that. You don't gotta watch fireworks if you don't wanna. Neither a us will be offended. I'd be surprised, to tell you the truth, if you watched with us. I know it all sounds boring to you. Which is okay. Your granddaddy and me will be fine on our own. You'll wanna leave that old polio museum a ours anyway and go do somethin that you find rousin, like I don't know what. . . Here. The D.Q. up ahead. You wanna stop there for some ice cream, or should I keep on movin'?

Dog Days (Most of August)

You have never seen your grandfather's body. What you think of him you surmise from the documents stored in your grandmother's home office: yellowing books with his name inscribed on the title pages, Jiffy Lube pay stubs that date back to the sixties, fishing licenses just as old. Your grandfather remains, as you approach him, where you fix him in your thoughts, amid the plaque on the wall from the Southwestern Ohio Historical Society and glass cases containing obsolete medical tools. He groans at you when you come near. A tourist couple—the only visitors so far this week—exits out the front door. The gravel driveway crackles as their tires go over it, lifting a cloud of dust that seems to have hardly settled since your grandma went to town for groceries a few minutes ago. You sense your grandfather's stare as it lands on the strip of peach fuzz covering your upper lip. Mostly, he is a mystery to you. You determine from the newspaper clippings your grandmother keeps in a hidden-away shoe box that he is the last documented polio case in

the state of Ohio. Your grandmother is quoted in one article you've found as vowing to keep the awful history of polio alive in the public memory. As a result, your grandfather has been displayed in his iron lung for almost a quarter century. Here he stays. Your family has never let you reach your arms in the access ports on the side of his machine, which you eye and feel as you notice the few dark hairs sprouting on your knuckles. Your grandfather is a medical miracle, you think. An object of wonder. The human body. You imagine that he is curled in the shape of a fetus, perennially gestating, his elderly head attached to a nascent soma. You wonder if he wears clothes. It brings pain to your stomach, but you realize that your grandfather is an heirloom. That he is passed down, comparable to the century-old belt buckles and the brass spittoon your father displays on the mantelpiece at home. You lift the lid of an access port, eyeing your grandfather, who groans, and stroke the rubber membrane beneath with your fingertips. It is a dark, sickly orange, a shade the presence of which causes you to notice that it has not been used much by the manufacturing sector in your lifetime. The rubber membrane is divided into eight arcing triangles whose points meet at the center. They bend with ease. Your grandfather's blue eyes, they sparkle. You extend slowly, deliberately, your arm inside, brushing something, the hair on his wrist, perhaps, and you reel back, hugging your own heaving chest, and the lid of the access port drops closed. You feel ashamed. You scold yourself. You realize that, for the attention you've given to your grandfather's body, it is not only what's contained. Your grandfather, he has a mind. The iron lung's large cylinder is battened down by several airtight seals, which your grandmother has properly and regularly greased and which you thus unlatch without difficulty. Your grandfather gasps, and you can see the labored rise and fall of his white chest in the gap you've created. You slide off your shoes. You begin to climb.

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School started this week, two full months before white tail rifle season. The Ohio River is clear and cuts slowly through its banks, which are yellow and mostly dry and crunch when they are walked on, save the pockets of mud where the frost has come to the surface. The landscape is still, seems somehow purified. Four boots, two larger than the others, a father and his son, trudge along the river. They speak nothing. The elder has eyes which seem to squint permanently from years outside, pink patches lingering beneath them where the skin has chafed. His yellow hair is weighted with sweat—he walks with two rifles slung over his shoulder, and the ground is soft. The boy, sunbleached, sulks in his camouflage. The clothing is made for cooler, more inclement weather, though must be worn to avoid their being seen. The father called the school early this morning and left a message that the boy couldn't make it to class, that he had to get some shots at the doctor's office and would be out all day. They walk, and the father speaks. *Out of season my ass. Your granddaddy hunted on this man's land for years. If we got spotted we could a told him that we were just sightin' in. Ain't no reason I see that you suddenly got to be such a little girl about it.* They walk further toward the thicket where the father hid the truck, some overgrown trail on the edge of the woods. The only sounds are the empty flows of air and water. They soon reach a large frost boil, a bubble in the ground the size of a driveway slab. The father squats, places the rifles at his feet. His breathing is heavy. *Here*, he says. He stands, takes the boy's hand in his, so that they don't fall in the mud when they cross.

