

# Three Point Back (from epiphanyzine.com)

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“So when's Paul coming back?”

Tracey always asks Evan this, about every day for two weeks now, and the answer he gives and has given since after the first or second time is what he hopes will keep her from asking again. “I. Don't. Know.”

“Well then *is* he?”

“Tracey....”

“You call him? Or he calls you at work, right? He's got you keeping secrets from his wife, and me too?”

“I don't know *where* he is; I don't know when he's coming back, *if* he's coming back.”

Some days that ends it for the day. But there are other days.

“He was pointing at *you*, Evan.”

“He was just *pointing*. At the wall. He wasn't even looking where he was pointing.”

“Evan, he was signaling you.”

“Now, look. Donna herself hasn't asked me, not even once. And you—”

“Donna wasn't home yet.”

Donna wasn't home yet from some meeting and Tracey and Evan had just been driving around and stopped without calling. Evan rang the lit button on the back door.

“It's open.”

Paul was sitting at the dining room table. No book, no magazine, no food. And no radio on, or TV; nothing. A clear, shiny wood table. Twilight outside, and no lights on in.

“Just waiting for Donna to show up?” Tracey had asked, though it didn't need asking. “Kind of *still* around here, Paul. Silence is one thing—or maybe you don't like music anymore?”

Paul didn't answer.

“But you should have something *moving* around here.” Tracey looked around, then said, “Paul, you should get a cat.”

Paul did answer that. At first he just shook his head, but then he said, “A cat. No, I don't think so. It's not...”

“Get one and see,” Tracey said. “Paul, you *like* cats. I've seen you around them—you like cats.”

Paul hadn't looked at Tracey when he'd answered. And he still didn't when he pointed and said, “Point at a cat...” And he wasn't looking at where he was pointing either, as he said that, because he was looking at the other curling fingers of his hand, and sort of wiggling them while he said, “And three fingers point back.”

He and Evan and Tracey sat there a moment. Paul didn't say anything else; Evan hadn't felt there was any more to say—he suddenly thought it was kind of nice sitting there at the empty table, the three of them, now each not alone, and sharing that silence and stillness. But then Tracey said, “At a cat?”

Paul didn't say anything. But Tracey wouldn't let up. “Paul,” Tracey said, “are you saying you're a cat?”

Paul would never have said that, Evan knew. Because he finds Paul always says just enough, or maybe less than enough, but never more—unless, Evan learned, you got him off guard. Especially if you weren't even trying. One Saturday down at the outdoor handball court, Paul had been playing straight-out for one hour, two hours, three hours.

“Don't you ever get tired, Paul?”

Evan meant tired at handball. Paul looked through the chain-link sides of the court and started to say, “Yes, I...,” but then he looked back at Evan and said, “Oh, you mean in *here*. No, in here, I don't hold myself back.”

When Evan told Tracey about it, she said, “Paul's crazy—he thinks that's what makes someone tired, holding back? What about before, when he was holding *out*? He got tired that way too. He should count himself lucky to have what he's got, including Donna.”

Then, at the table, Paul didn't have to say a thing, but Evan knew he would, because Paul was always, finally, accommodating. So Paul told Tracey about a woman with a secondhand store who would take in and find homes for stray cats. He brought her one he found in a vacant lot. She said she'd take it if he'd take her and the cat to the

vet. And at the vet, when they asked what the cat's name was, the woman said, "The cat's name is Paul."

Paul said whenever he'd see the woman anywhere, he'd say, "How's Paul?" Until one time she said, "Paul's not called Paul anymore. Got a home. And the people who get my cats like to give them new names."

Evan thought Paul telling Tracey that was a good way of answering, but to let Tracey off a hook can be to put yourself back on one. "Paul," she said, "why didn't *you* keep the cat?"

So then Evan took Paul off the hook by saying the first thing he really said while sitting there. Doing what Paul had just done, one finger pointing off with the lower three curling round, Evan said, "Point at a cat...."

That night, they'd got to Paul's at seven fifteen. They'd left him at a quarter to eight. And it was getting dark then. They got home at ten after. At eight thirty, Donna called. "Where's Paul?"

The first day after, Tracey started saying how Paul should have waited. "He could have sat for another forty-five minutes."

Evan started telling her how time can start to seem long. That maybe Paul wanted to be held. Felt he needed to be, say, at 8:04 sharp. "You know, *held*. Like a cat."

But Tracey said, "Sure, *held*. How about *stroked*?"

And Tracey still thinks that the thing Paul did with his fingers was some kind of signal. To Evan, that he'd be leaving. Even though Evan reminds her she's the one who brought it up, about cats. Says

it was just Paul's way of telling her a person might ask too much of a cat.

And Evan himself gets home every night a little before Tracey does. It isn't dark then, but it's the end of the day. It gets darker, not lighter. And now, he doesn't turn on the lights. When Tracey gets home, she'll turn on the lights.

When Tracey's not home yet, Evan's started to think about Paul, because two days, O.K.; two weeks, O.K., maybe. But two months? Or two years?

Though Evan can get tired thinking like this, he's starting to learn how to remember exactly the things people say: Say what they said, and do what they did when they said them. When Evan does that, three fingers point back.

