

# Up at the Neck

I didn't want to go but I couldn't say no. Whatever he wanted is what we did. He's a force of nature, a few years older—I follow him around, listening to his stories—as if there was no me. I didn't want to be up at The Neck with him and her. What was I going to do up there, anyway?

Like that time I went with Harry and that girl out to Niagara. Them sitting in the front seat, jiving and kissing, with me in the back seat. I might as well have been seven years old. Later, sitting across from them at a cold, spring, picnic table and me saying I was a good arm-wrestler—mostly to the girl. Then Harry beating me so easy and quipping to the girl, who looked sorry for me, that he couldn't imagine who I'd been arm-wrestling. I tried again to impress her, out on the ice, close to my death, on that last spring ice, melted so thin I could see the river sweeping under my feet towards the falls, and me out there, legs spread, my ass almost on the ice, inching farther, a step at a time, with the ice splinter-craccin in all directions—until impressing her became less important than staying alive.

This was another such cold spring, though not as cold, maybe two weeks later into the year. Too cold for anybody to be up at The Neck, where streams from the mountains narrowed and rushed through, fanning out into a dozen smaller streams that irrigated the valley below.

At one time something happened up here because there was this spit of sand that in the summer was a little beach for sunbathers. All the pebbles around were rounded, like they must have been rolling underwater for a long time, but I didn't think that was it. These were too rounded for that—this place, way up here, had been an ocean or some kind of sea. No, an ocean with breakers—for a million years.

When we got there, her black Dodge Dart was already parked and she was out, sitting on a log, smoking. We pulled up next to the log with that cam sounding all manly, and he just sat there and let it idle. He told me on the last stretch of road that they had nothing in common—that he didn't want much to do with her—he just wanted to fuck her. It sounded like a lousy afternoon for me. Why do they always need a little buddy to tag along?

We all sat on the log bantering, actually he was bantering, she hardly said anything. I didn't know what this was going to be so I went off for a hike up The Neck, hoping he would complete his business, and we would go.

I scrambled up The Neck across a rock formation with rushing water below. The water, a few feet down, was moving way faster than that water under the ice at Niagara, but this was kind of safe with all kinds of hand and toeholds where ancient shellfish had left indentations—more proof this was an ocean. I climbed along slowly, placing a hand before moving a foot, safe enough, but not so safe that it didn't keep you interested.

I thought back when I was a kid and my friends and I would swim up from those creeks below—little narrows of faster moving water that once you got through opened up into placid widenings, with clear and sandy bottoms. After swimming hard to get to one of those, we would

swim along the bottom using the breast-stroke, like we were in some pirate movie. The water was as deep as we were tall and the light, this amazing sunlight made the bottom 3D clear like those crisp photos on a Viewmaster. And in every pool there were schools of tiny, luminous fish—there were so many fish back then.

It was more than an hour until I got back and those spring days were short. This one was about used up. Still the business had not gotten done. He was talking, but the bantering was done. He was in earnest now, like his manhood was at stake, and she was not coming across—just sitting there, impervious to his persuasions—disinterested. I sat down on the log away from them in the direction of the valley. Neither paid any attention to me. I don't know that he was even knew I was there, and if he did, he didn't care. She didn't look at me at all.

The chatter kept on into the last light and I amused myself by guessing at their ages. She had to be older than him—I would say 27. He was 24. Christ, what's he doing hanging around with me—I have only been 18 for a month. I thought on it, remembering me and him cruising the high school and it came to me that he had never gone anywhere after high school. He wanted me around because I was his glory days. To him we both were juniors, and in the fall, we would be going to prom in his ride because I had no ride.

The more I listened, I thought on how stupid this girl—this woman—must be to be up here at The Neck in a light sweater with it getting dark and cold—with this bozo. And, in my t-shirt and zip-up windbreaker, I was also getting cold,

This couldn't last much longer. His sell job was going nowhere fast, and when I finally had enough I asked if he had matches and paper so I could make a fire? If indignation could kill, I would have been the pancake leavings of a squirrel under a semi, out on 172. He had no paper—if I was cold I could get in the car. There was a blanket on the back seat, but not to use the heater because he was talking.

I did that. I got in the back seat where the night cold had not yet fully arrived and I wrapped up in that blanket. I wondered how many girls had taken a pounding on that blanket just so they would not have to listen to him anymore. I thought about the woman on the log, and I began to re-assess her. She was a damn handsome woman—who smoked. And she was formidable—she had not given an inch to him. But, what was up with her that she would drive up here to listen to this? How bad had life done her that all she had was a pack of cigarettes and this asshole? Maybe I was just bored and cold. Maybe she was just coming to The Neck to see what she could see. I was tired and slowly I drifted off.

I woke up cold, even with the blanket. I thought it was the rushing water that woke me, but I was her, dressing him down, cutting him down to size for the nothing he was. In the pitch black she was forceful and more real than any rushing water. Now, he was done talking—she was talking—in measured hostility. There was nothing for him to say—whatever it was he wanted would not be coming. And from her—not a trace of split-tail hysteria. When she was done, only the sound of The Neck remained.

He opened the passenger door with an abruptness, ordering me out. Which was good with me—I did not want to be anywhere with him—not ever. He slammed the door and walked around front to get in, and before any lights came on I bunched that blanket up behind me where he

would not see it. The car made a metallic rumble into life, and this time he did not let it idle. Instead, he did the idiot departure, spraying round pebbles from the spinning rear wheels. Then he was gone, and again the only sound was the stars and the water. There was no moon.

She still said nothing and I could not see her, but soon I heard her car door open and then close. I sat on the log until I was pretty sure she would not just drive off and leave me. Like I said, there was no moon and it was a long walk down to town. I felt my way across that spit of sand and tucked myself in between the huge roots of the tree, wrapped myself in the blanket as best I could, reminding myself that it wasn't that cold, and even if it was, I could go ask to get in the car, and besides, I was young, and before long it would be summer— even up here at The Neck.

In the morning light, she was up, sitting on the log, smoking. Something about her was more unapproachable than anything about him. I sat the base of that big tree, between those grey roots that undulated in and out of the ground, like huge snakes. Thought about when I was here last, this past summer, with another girl who was up from Niagara—how we had argued and how she was sitting there in her panties, and I knew there was something there for me.

This felt like then but the woman on the log was not that girl—not by a long shot. I would look up at here at her, and once in a while she looked at me. I was just a kid but I could help looking. But one time there was something in her look, that said maybe she was there for me. I were wrong I wouldn't want to be me. But, what could I do? When I couldn't stand it any longer I took some careful steps across the sands, cracking twigs, and moving closer to her. It was like approaching a lioness—careful how you approach a lioness. We didn't say anything, but we did it in blue morning light, right there on that spit of sand, up at The Neck. It was over the top intense for me—for her it must have been schoolboy practice. After, she still had not spoken to me, and there was nothing for me to say, so I went back between the tree roots and shrouded myself in the blanket. We there for a time, and again I approached her, and again we went at it, up against the log. Still not a word. Then she walked to the car, got in, and started it up, and just sat there. She was waiting to give me a ride. We drove, she didn't ask where I lived. Instead, we went to her house and we did it again, and then we did it again.

Mostly, I stayed close to that house for nine years, until she died. Now, that seems long ago. There has not been another woman—not really. Time has passed, the pictures have blurred, but never the feeling. The feeling stays, and I knew from then to now there was little chance of finding it again. What was I going to do—anyway? Trade my lioness for some hyena?