

What Kind of Man

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THIS KIND OF ROOM

It's that kind of soft, not too hot, summer day
when all I want to do is be young enough
to run fast break full courts until night falls.
I don't want to subway into the city, stop
in book stores, thumb through bins of used
vinyl for hours, stand in line at the Angelica
for one of those movies where I don't care
if the main character lives or dies. I don't
want to be back in love with Erica, driving
to some quaint upstate town, windows
down, in complete control of the tape deck
and we're both singing along as loud
and as off key as we please: Springsteen,
Beach Boys, old live 1969 Poco. Don't want
to linger over brunch, wander into tiny shops
filled with scented candles and antiques,
not even if we stop at a roadside park,
find a deserted shady spot, spread a blanket
and end up making out like we first met.
I want to be the first and only guy at the schoolyard,
feel the grooves of the ball with my fingertips,
hear it echo off the handball walls, the four
floors of empty brick classrooms, as I take
a few dribbles, make easy lay ups. I don't want
to be in Maine, back in love with Helen
at the Wadleigh Valley county fair watching
Jesse stroke some bored cow, taking pictures
as he rides the long rainbow slide nineteen
straight autistic times no matter how ecstatic
he looks every time. Don't care if he sleeps
through the night and we cuddle through
some video, walk to the bedroom for slow
mind blowing sex and an early morning
rewind. I want to stand at the foul line,
hit a few shots, watch the ball softly fall
through the not yet stolen net. No, not
a little kid on a back in Brooklyn Sunday,

my grandfather, my father, still alive, mom complaining there's nowhere to place the lasagna pan and my favorite uncle, Dom, with his crutches by his side, always saying *'just as long as there's this kind of room in heaven, we'll all be alright.'* I want to nod knowingly, maybe slap palms, flick bounce passes when the other guys start showing up, talking shit, late night west coast box scores. I definitely don't want to be sitting inside at my desk, clicking through emails, reading about my old schoolyard friend Duden's kidney transplant and how it all went well, he's recovering nicely. Don't want to think about my own kidney condition especially since it's now official that the medication didn't work. I don't want to spend a moment making a list of who would contemplate donating a kidney for me, who would get sick of visiting me in the hospital first. Today, all I want to do is shoot for sides. Duden's my first pick. He grabs a rebound, hits me with an outlet pass. I glide down the sideline, cross over, take off and soar to the hoop. Even if my shot somehow rims, spills out, the Dude will tip it back in, fill the basket.

GOD'S GIFTS

It's the kind of day that feels like a gift from God. An early April morning with temperatures already flirting with sixty degrees. Bright blue skies, a few wispy clouds and a whisper of breeze lifting the short skirts of women that make you want to sing hymns of praise. One of those days you can't resist, a day that forces you to cut class or call out from work so you can spread a newspaper across a table at the corner café. Waiting for pancakes, sunny side eggs, you turn to sports, believe all the Yankee veterans will have one more injury free year and their prize prospect will exceed every bit of hype. Later, you'll walk to the schoolyard, get picked for a three on three. You are totally unstoppable and your squad streaks to a string of six straight wins. You call Suzanne who says she can get away, meet you by Prospect Park. You stroll along holding hands, stop for soft serve ice cream with sprinkles and lick the slow drippings off of each other's fingers, spread a blanket behind a bunch of bushes and make out. Coming up for air, she promises to leave her husband.

But no, today you are waiting for the late as always Access-A-Ride to drive you to dialysis. You'll sit in the waiting room, listen for your mispronounced name to come through the speakers. You'll lie back while the machine removes liquid,

filters your blood for three hours as you try to fall asleep, but can't. You feel colder and colder and closer to cramping as you watch the clock creep forward, the orderlies lift the one-legged woman into her wheelchair. Home, you fix a bland, tasteless lunch, drink a few sips of water, limp to your bedroom and let your clothes drop down to the floor. You nap restlessly, dream of a smiling Suzanne, happily married, living in Austin with two kids. You wake up with a splitting headache in time to catch the Yankee game. Five games under .500, their starting pitcher gives up a first inning, two out, three run homer and they helplessly keep leaving runners on base as the game grinds on. Between pitches, you remind yourself that dialysis is keeping you alive, and that you are happy not to be dead yet as you pray for one full night of sleep.

SOME LONG AGO SUMMER

Once upon a time I slept with a woman who worked a few months at the group home I run, but only after I fired her for a no call no show weekend that left the shifts severely understaffed. Next day, we ran into each other on the subway, rode through Manhattan together, hugged goodbye. Four days later, Denise waited for me outside work, went all the way home with me. After fucking the night away, we went to the diner for breakfast. Grits for her, home fries for me. We ended up at the schoolyard. She took me down low, bumped me with her lovely ass, while I tried to ignore my hard-on. I kept the score close, but always won. She was younger, I was older. I had money, she had none. I was lighter, she was darker. She was beautiful, I was not. We never could agree on a radio station. We both liked Al Green, but never the same songs. She loved the back to back black shows on NBC Thursday nights, I preferred Law and Order. She never read my poetry. I felt her rap rhymes silly and forced. She liked things rough and hard, I liked to watch my cum slide slowly down her dark inner thighs. I didn't know if she was hoping to get her job back, looking for some kind of love or a few weekends of outside the neighborhood fun. I wasn't doing any thinking at all. Just last week, she was standing in line at the corner bodega. Coffee for her,

Snapple for me. She still looked good.
Me, worse than before. Once, she said,
she saw me walking by in some long ago
summer as she sat in a shady park rocking
her baby for an afternoon nap. She said
I never looked her way, but she knows
if I did I would have stopped, leaned
down for a soft quick kiss and told her
that her daughter was as beautiful
as she is. I smiled, knew she was right.

AUTISTIC BASKETBALL

You are following Jesse
through a new-to-you part
of his neighborhood. You ask
if he knows where he's going,
how far, and he says *straight*.
You ask again, he points ahead.
You sat at the morning table
listing activities on the page
he titled Saturday September 15.
He chose basketball instead
of the Lake Champlain ferry.
He walks with his two hands
in front of him, holding the ball
like a mechanical waiter
balancing a tray. No dribbling
between his legs, behind his back,
no stutter stepping or head faking,
no flipping it back and forth
between you and him, no racing
across the court, a pass floating
in the air, catching you in stride
as you rise with the memory
of your first taste of schoolyard
grace and lay it softly against
the backboard so the ball settles
in the net's momentary embrace.

Basketball with Jesse means
taking turns for a certain number
of shots. You negotiate, he agrees
reluctantly to 10. You haven't touched
any kind of ball in 7 years: kidney
disease, open heart surgery, hernia
strangulation, dialysis, and finally
the kidney transplant. You run
out of breath trotting a half block
to catch your morning bus, cling

to a pole as it drives, afraid
you'll fall across the aisle
as it turns onto the service
road. You walk slowly, watch
where your feet land. You stand
at the foul line. Jesse's a step
and a half in front of you.
He shoots first with a stiff, over
the head, Jack Sikma-like release
that banks in. You're next, still
trying to imitate Earl The Pearl
of the long gone Baltimore Bullets.
He counts the shots down, only
smiles when he gets to shout
10 so he can go home, sit
at the table, cross basketball
off his list, move on to McKee's:
*apple juice with ice, chicken
fingers, French fries, extra hot.*
Jesse's 10 for 10, You're 1 for 10
with an air ball. He doesn't care.
You have to tell yourself not to.

ABOUT TIME

After my father's funeral mass,
friends and family gather
on the church steps to hug and cry,
complain about the priest's
African accent and how he knew
nothing about my father's life.
They give directions to the gravesite,
to our house, while I walk around
to the schoolyard. St Ann's school
has been closed for years
and the schoolyard seemed
so much bigger when I was twelve
and it was filled with hundreds of kids.
Girls in long lines rocking back and forth,
trying to find the right rhythm for jump rope,
skirts flying as they sprinted, leapt, floated
while I hoped to catch a hint of their panties
for a second or two. Circles of boys flipping,
scaling baseball cards against the wall.
I was always a first round draft pick
for punch ball, the only fifth grader
who could send a Pennsie Pinkie flying
over the roof. Down by the lunchroom rail,
Regina Rowland broke my heart
for the first time and showed me everything
wouldn't turn out the way I wanted
when she said that Tommy Schmidt
had already invited her to Rye Beach
and she didn't know how to tell him no.
Nuns in black habits took turns patrolling
the grounds like sentries, black beads
clicking, bouncing as they rushed to break up
a fight. The bell rang at 8:45 and everyone
froze until one of the sisters pinched her clicker
and we silently lined up in size place by class.
I walk back to the church, whisper something
to my youngest brother that makes him nod.

I put my arm around my mother, lead her
to the limousine, open the door for her.
I watch the altar boy kick the door stop,
pull the church door shut and see my father
on one knee telling me to smile, stand up
straight as he focused his Kodak camera
that muggy day in May when I made
Confirmation, became a man like him.
Tears fall out of my eyes and my sister
says it's about time I did some crying.