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Portrait: August 25, 1967

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PORTRAIT: AUGUST 25, 1967

Bruce Petronio

(Six months later, two detectives will come to the house)

Luke

A sticky summer evening: Luke leaves the family's lakeside Adirondack cabin an hour before sunset. Sometimes he walks out to the road and sticks out his thumb, hitches a ride to wherever it takes him, just to go, to be *gone*. But this evening Madeline Benedetti awaits.

No dinner had been prepared, yet again, so he and his siblings foraged, again. As he walks the sandy road to Madeline's, Luke idly eats his Wonder Bread PB&J. All at once he whips it into the woods. Then stands gaping after it, as if some invisible force had ripped it out of his hand.

It's a mile to Madeline's family's cabin. Earlier she called from the public beach payphone, finally got through to his family's party line and told him, with coy suggestiveness, that she would be home *all by her lonesome* that evening.

She has had him in a frenzy all summer. He wonders is he *falling in love*? He has experienced the love between a mother and son. A boy and his dog. But between a man and a woman he knows nothing, and has no role model.

Madeline is seventeen, two years older than Luke. Full Sicilian to Luke's half Romano, half Scots-Irish. She teases him about that, the doctor's son, her people from the "South," his from Rome. She's plump-breasted and tough, like those Italian actresses his father likes. Spiky burnt-orange hair, for effect. Luke calls her "Mad," because he wants to encourage the bawdy persona she cultivates.

Luke himself hasn't nearly enough self-control to maintain a persona. Ten months ago, he was a bright-future athlete and bookish honors student. Focused on a hockey scholarship, Colgate, or Cornell. Now, it's as if he's possessed by some sullen other. Now, his stock response to most anything: *I don't give a flying fuck*.

But he's not like that with Mad. With Mad he's a fifteen-year-old subservient to a biological pull it will take him decades to comprehend. They swing side by side on Mad's sister's swing set, until suddenly Luke starts pumping with his whole body. Higher. Higher. To impress, sure, but also to challenge the very idea of control. He seeks the top of the arc, pumping, pumping, *what happens if you go too far?*

Until Mad, slowing, shouts as he whooshes by, "Want to feel me up?" Luke's whole body goes brake-rigid. Hands clench the supporting chains. He sees Mad brake with her feet and hop off, he has to twist to watch her sashay in her frayed jean shorts toward the backyard. It throws his glide path off, he nearly crashes into the frame. When he is able to look again, she disappears into the family's screen house. Impatient to slow himself, he jettisons off the swing and hits the ground running but his legs buckle and he falls full length as if sliding head first into a base. (He abrades an elbow but at the end of this night he will be confused as to how and when.)

Inside the screen house, Mad stands shirtless. His insides lurch at the whiteness of her bra against her Coppertone skin. A silver crucifix dips into her damp cleavage. Breasts overflowing the cups. She laughs, sultry, teasing. Her burnt-orange hair. He gropes for her, she parries his hand, says in a voice that for once seems more rueful than mocking, "You're only going to be a sophomore!" His face shuts down. She takes his hand and places it over a pillowy breast. He bores in to kiss her but she straightens him with two hands to his chest. He winces, confused, and only then does she take his head in her two hands and press her mouth to his, pushing her tongue in. He tries to burrow a hand under a cup's tight elastic, it's sweaty there, but again she pushes away with both hands to his chest and says, "*You* need a cold swim."

So. So, fatefully perhaps, he walks home with "blue balls," testosterone coursing through him as unstable as a cocktail of Spanish fly and nitro glycerin.

Doc P

An Adirondack glacier lake. A low-ceiling night, dense, saturated, oppressive.

In the dead calm, cicadas ratchet and bullfrogs burrr-*rump* and the sounds carry across the becalmed lake as if amplified through hi-fi speakers.

On a knoll above a crescent of beach, a cabin dwarfed by 100' white pines.

Moths bat against the cabin's window screens.

Inside the airless, stifling cabin, a man stripped down to baggy boxers sprawls on a couch while, at a table across the room, his two sons, Hank and Luke, play a game.

The man sprawled on the couch is an M.D., in desperate need of sleep after rushing out to answer middle-of-the-night house calls the past three nights, having to speed forty minutes in his Thunderbird V-8 convertible to reach his patients.

A number of the man's patients are impoverished Italians, from whom he doesn't expect or request payment, making the loss good from his wealthy patients, a lineup of what he calls "the sticky-fingered goombahs."

Everyone (save family) respectfully and affectionately calls him Doc P.

It would be a kindness to say he is odd-looking. Bald but for some side shrubbery, five-feet tall, maybe, but thick-chested and powerful. His boxer's thick neck and flattened nose make him look like a squat lawn gnome, one set out to scare things away but instead commands attention.

One look and you connect his success to his appearance. There can only be one of him. At Hamilton College he was a four-letter star on full scholarship. Quarterback; catcher; two-hand, push-shooting guard; middleweight boxer. Accustomed to weekly acclaim in the student and hometown Utica papers. After graduating in '41, he turned down an offer from the Cincinnati Redlegs and instead enlisted, flew P-38s in the Pacific. Post-war, he went to Syracuse U. med school (where he met and wooed Grace Davidson, a promising art student also on scholarship), and returned to his hometown like a Dickens hero, a Doctor of Medicine.

But, rewind his bio. In 1929, the eleven-year-old who will someday morph into Doc P came to the slow suspicion, over the course of a hushed week when his father didn't come home, that he had left the family. Perhaps for a *goomara*, "a bit on the side," as he'd heard two classmates blithely comment about their own fathers, as if it were expected. Traditional.

When his mother started dressing all in black and attending mass twice a day, he finally asked her and was told, with stoical brevity and finality, "You are the man of the family now. Look after your brother and sister."

Two years later, years of disowning his father, he was queuing in the Catholic church's bread line when an elder Italian kept eying him. He looked away, but heard the man say to another, "That kid's father witnessed the Santucci hit and had to disappear."

At Hamilton, his agnosticism hardened into atheism. His adopted creed: the Greeks' harmony of mind and body. Which in turn became a quest, to become a Renaissance man. Physician-polymath-athlete. But now, day after day after day, he has the *what-have-I-done?* responsibility for a wife and five children.

From the age of eleven he has been the man of the family.

Doc P has forgotten his Italian.

The couch springs dig into his back. He hears his devout mother: *Repent, son, and God will forgive your sin*. His eyes burn with sleeplessness. His mind agog with want/shouldn't want. He tosses, and turns, his erection tent poles his boxers and with each turn his sweaty ball sack flops thigh to thigh inside his baggy shorts.

"Go to bed!" he shouts for the third time, but of course his sons pretend they haven't heard, as if to them he is no longer relevant.

All summer long he has slept on this miserable couch. Twice he has overheard his daughters ask their older brothers, "Why doesn't dad sleep upstairs with mom?" When the boys don't answer, he exhales. How can he explain to his kids that it's their mother's weakness he cannot bear? The periodic collapse of her will.

He tosses, and turns, tosses, and turns. He's an hour late. His want stokes the rationale to just rise up and walk the footpath between the pines to the cabin next door. After all, his sons already know. That message was sent last Saturday. He had invited some friends for a cookout and he was playing touch football on the beach with his sons and his friends' kids, he was the only adult, as usual, a friendly game, competition muted, until Luke stunned him with a statement forearm to the nose that drew blood. His boxing instincts kicked in; his fist was inches away from Luke's defiant face when he pulled the punch. But everyone on the beach wide-eyed his yearning to strike his son. Doc P's never-before-witnessed loss of composure.

Worse, since that incident his boys skulk away when he tries to join in shooting baskets or playing fast-pitch wiffle ball. Their common language has always been sports. Now the boys' hostility is the one spurting wound he can't staunch. Each night that he walks the path to go to his lover next door, he can feel their eyes boring into his back from their second-floor bedroom window, tracking him as though through a rifle's sights. It's a relief they have only BB guns.

But, hell, okay, if they expect him to go next door, at this point hope for it, fuel for the righteous anger of subordinate males to the alpha, *why shouldn't he just leave this particular troop?* His family, his life, full circle. The boys are much older than he had been, they should be old enough to take over, to be the men of the family. Character building. It will make men of them.

11:40 P.M.

Upstairs, Marie, the eleven-year-old, is snuggled into her older sister, Rose, who lies rigid, all ears, attuned to the creak of her mother's rocking in the bed on the other side of the wall. Light shows through the ill-fitting pine boards and Rose, hearing speech, puts her ear to a knothole, hears, in a soft, rocking voice, "I'm small, small, small."

In late July, her mother set up her easel on the beach and in three days painted three weirdly colored but somehow dazzling lake scenes. Then, one morning, a portrait of Rose's father appeared, propped on the fireplace mantle. It didn't look like him but you could tell it was meant to, kinda. It freaked her out, until Luke commented wryly that it looked cubist, and Hank mocked Luke for being "arsty-fartsy."

Their mother would be going strong when they went to bed and when they woke there she was, as if she'd stood by their beds all night, waiting for them to reawaken. She wore the same clothes and was rarin' to go. One morning, she made a breakfast that Hank joked coulda fed all the starving kids in China. The next morning, she rhapsodized about a blueberry expedition, their quest to pick for pies, a baker's dozen. The kids, having forgotten the last time, got swept up in the slipstream of this other, fun mom's exuberance.

Until the morning Rose woke to quiet. Nothing from the other side of the wall or the knothole. She got out of bed and was about to ease her mother's door open, when Hank stopped her, put a finger to his lips, whispered, "She's on tilt again." Rose didn't understand "on tilt." So she anxiously pestered her father, until he finally explained that their mother's nerves had overheated again, she needed a week or two of rest and quiet.

11:40 P.M.

In the cabin next door, Kay, Doc P's secretary/nurse, stands red-headed and negligeeed before a full-length mirror, practicing gestures of impatience. He's so late! Again! She decides, finally, that she'll turn her head when he tries to kiss her.

She cannot know that now, in her and Doc P's final purgatorial minutes, his sons stand tall at the table across the room from him, throwing dice as back alley craps shooters.

11:40 P.M.

Luke plays Risk with Hank, who is recently seventeen, smokes unfiltered Pall Malls and reefer, has a learner's permit and fake I.D., and has begun, as the new school year approaches, to separate himself from his once-inseparable younger brother.

Hank chose Risk's black tokens for his armies because it matches his mood, while Luke chose commie red. Knee-jerk contrarian now, Luke grooves on the shock value of espousing support for commies. Che's poster hangs on the wall in the bedroom he shares with Hank.

Each time the old man snaps at them to go to bed, the brothers stiffen . . . and keep playing. Their father's brazen escalation, spending entire nights next door, stunned them into such outraged helplessness they haven't been able to talk about it. They have no plan other than an unspoken resolve to fuck with their father's tryst.

Luke's red armies crowd the borders of Eastern United States. "Die, America!" he shouts, and sidearm flings the dice so angrily they deflect off the table like skipping stones and clatter against the wall.

"Goddamn it! Go to bed!" Those asleep upstairs—Marie and Rose, even their mother, who has been in bed for the past nine days—jolt awake at the noise, uncomprehending.

Then they hear, "Fuck you, you fucking fuck!" Luke's voice.

11:43 P.M.

The powerful, bare-chested man comes off the couch and charges, his ball sack, free of his shorts, swinging like a bull's. He sees his youngest son step away from the table, brace himself, shout, *C'mon! C'mon!* He has never hit his kids, he wills his hands to his sides, ducks a fullback shoulder, barely registers the punch glancing off his head, collides with leverage, launches Luke off his feet and into the wall, the sharp crack of split paneling. A half-second of remorse. Then an anguished bellowing; as he turns to it, his nose crunches. Dazed. Hank on him, bellowing, landing head shots. Doc P ducks, bobs, hands up guarding his face, copper taste of blood, the boys bore in on each side, he throws short compact jabs, then sweeps them back with his powerful forearms. Grunts. Curses. Grace and the girls are suddenly there, circling, sobbing, shrieking like banshees. It's like a sharp stick in his ear. He bull-rushes his sons in turn, reels them backwards, creates space, ducks into the kitchen and bangs out the screen door and sprints for the path. Behind him the screen door bangs, his sons pursuing, cursing. He steps on a sharp pebble, does a hot foot, turns an ankle on a root and almost goes down but can't slow, has to protect Kay. *What are the boys capable of?* At her backdoor. Locked! He pounds on the door. *Why locked?* Lights pop on. *Open!* The boys closing in. The door opens but he has to turn to face them, glimpses Grace following. Hears Kay gasp, *Anthony!* He ducks, he sees, Grace go't eye to see him pummel his sons but they press in, back him away from the door, *Anthony!* He ducks, he weaves, Grace n't want to eye with Kay, he takes a blow to the side of the head, can't look away, *Bitch! Home wrecker!* Grace spits in Kay's face; a punch he feels in his teeth, his lip split, he uppercuts in a blind rage, unhinged now, a flurry of haymakers drive them back, back, he's gaining ground, he's by the chopping block, an axe buried, as he bends to loose the axe a blow to an ear, he bellows, bellows, wields the axe like a bat . . . *Anthony!*

The two women in his life, in unison, calling out to him.

Everyone paused. He lowers the axe in his hands to waist level. A reprieve. But the air charged, as if such a cataclysm has a half-life. His sons stand off, panting, glaring, *bloodied!* Hank's cheek gashed, a welt on his forehead, bloody teeth. Luke's nose askew. An eye already closing. Doc P's fervent impulse to treat their wounds. But Marie and Rose on the sidelines, sobbing, holding on to each other as if watching their home burn to the ground. *What have they come to?* He sees it on their faces, all thinking it, this one final, shared family connection: *Shame*.

He buries the axe head in the block.

Hears Hank say, "C'mon Ma." Grace retreats, gathering Marie and Rose. Hank and Luke follow, backing away as if poised to fight a rearguard action.

11:56 P.M.

Back inside the cabin, the boys assume command. "We're leaving," Hank states. And Luke adds, "Pack only what you need." They're full of themselves, bravado masquerading as maturity. Their mother shoots them a questioning look: *Do you understand what this means?*

They are 15 and 17 and spilling their blood feels heroic, so no, they do not understand.

All scurry to load up what they can't leave behind. Except Grace. Grace feels no connection now, neither to this cursed cabin nor her once cherished possessions. (She would gag evermore at the scent of a balsam pillow.) She sits on a kitchen chair with her hands in her lap, and stares blankly into a blank future. A mouse scurries across the floor and through a warped cupboard door. He won't want the kids, she thinks, there will be no custody battle. Of this she is certain.

Hank shepherds the girls down the dark path to their mother's station wagon. Luke links arms with his mother and they follow. "Something had to be done," he says to his mother, fishing for approval. No response. Luke reasons that she's gone again. *Relapsed*. But he must confirm. He's about to report himself but they're at the car out of the darkness, Hank's face looms too close and he says, "I'm driving." Without a word, Grace gets in the back over the shoulders of Rose to position the girls on either side of her. Luke gets in and sits high in the seat, finally riding shotgun now that Hank is driving. Hank backs them out onto the country road, and then they're away.

Immediately, immobile in the dark car, time slows. Adrenaline drains away. Maroons them high and dry. The quiet deafening with replay. With *What now?* Hank keeps checking the rearview. "You think he'll come after us?" Luke asks. "Fuck him," Hank snarls, and Marie starts to whimper. Hank looks into the rearview. "It'll be okay," he tries. It doesn't help. He glances over his shoulder. "It'll be okay," he insists too insistently, and it opens the floodgates. Marie and Rose, sobbing. Luke loses it: "It had to stop!" The sobbing convulsive now. The boys look to each other, panicked, desperate to calm their sisters.

And then. And then, their mother: "Hush little babies, don't you cry." The sudden shock of her singing quiets the girls. "Mama's gonna sing you a lullaby." Her voice strong and steady again, after what seems months. "Hush little babies, don't stay a word." A few lingering snuffles, their mother adds verses, ever softer, until the girls are slumped, asleep.

All quiet. The chemical-green glow of the dash lights. As time settles, Luke's angst rushes in, surf roaring in his ears. All at once he turns and looks at his mother, her arms around the girls snuggled on either side. Their eyes meet. Luke's throat fills with thick emotion. He asks, his voice quavering, "Somebody had to do something! Right?"

No reply. He will never ask again.

Six months later, two detectives come to the house. A fellow perpetrator has warned Luke they are coming so he meets them at the door and tells them his father doesn't live here, and his mother is out (she's upstairs, bed-ridden, so at least he can spare her another family "scene"). The detectives arrest him on a number of counts: Breaking and Entering, Criminal Mischief, Burglary. They seat him in their black unmarked LTD's back seat, behind a steel mesh cage. At the station, as his fingers, one by one, are roughly stamped and smudged, he thinks he can sink no lower. But then, mugshots: left, front, right. Within a month he pleads guilty to all charges, but then, due to his father's unsolicited influence, he is sentenced as a Youthful Offender. Instead of incarceration, he gets five-years' probation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After earning an MFA from the University of Arizona, Bruce Petronio was awarded a Distinguished Artist Fellowship, New Jersey's highest literary award. His work has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *MacGuffin*, *Hawaii Pacific Review* and other publications. He has been a resident artist at Ucross, Blue Mountain Center, Fundación Valparaíso (Spain) and Hawthornden Castle (Scotland).



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