



John Talbird

Why Can't You Write Here?

You stand on the corner of Flatbush and 8th smoking, the street littered with the cigarettes you've smoked. Across from you is a bank, part of the industry of Flatbush, the street which slices between the yuppie havens of Park Slope and Prospect Heights. A Ford truck—jacked many feet off the ground on big tires and miscellaneous shocks and springs—pulls up obtrusively amid all the Japanese compacts, Mini Coopers, BMWs and SUVs and you climb into the back seat behind your sister and her boyfriend, Chuck. You look down from Chuck's truck onto the street as if from a guard tower.

“What'd you learn?” he asks, looking you in the eye in the rearview.

You shrug, try to act nonchalant, but you're already scared and there's no definite date. “The bank car came at four o'clock on the dot. They took out about six canvas bags.”

Chuck nods sagely as if this means something. He has done this before he claims. Lara smiles and rubs his chest, kisses him on the cheek. She's excited and young. You

stare out the window at Prospect Park passing you on your left, at the people skating and biking and walking hand-in-hand and not thinking about robbing banks.

You are an adjunct instructor of English, teaching Composition to bored community college students at two different CUNY campuses, one in Queens, one Manhattan. Your students seldom learn your name, instead calling you "Professor" or sometimes "Mister." You teach the arts of argument and description and expression, of reading and interpretation and, you hope, thinking. You are crowded into offices with five or six other part-time faculty and your mail slots are even in a different portion of each office from the full-time faculty. The chair at the Queens location clearly doesn't remember your name although you've taught there for running on eight years. This week, in one of your classes, the required reading is Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," a very short story about a bank robbery that goes terribly wrong, a story told from the point of view of a book critic who, as someone might guess, takes a bullet in the brain and then continues to narrate his story even as that projectile takes the swift trip through his cranium and out the other side, killing him. Luckily for Chuck—since he has to work today, making hamburgers at a downtown diner—you don't teach on Fridays so you're able to "case" the bank.

You have known Chuck for many years, longer, in fact, than your little sister has. You remember him from the East Tennessee town where you all grew up. He was just a kid in your community who was known for his wildness, who was a good pitcher on city league baseball teams, who tended to crack up his cars from driving drunk. He was also known

for engaging in more eccentric reckless behavior like, for instance, once when he came into the Apprentice Bar, rebel-yelled and said to Bob, the huge bear-of-a-bartender, “Get everyone a drink! I got some great news today!” Bob took the orders, which mostly involved twisting off caps on beers, and then Chuck said, “I got fired today!” There was a pause and Bob asked quite logically, “How the hell are you going to pay for all these drinks?” Chuck laughed and said, “I said get everyone a drink, not that I’d pay for it!” He loves bragging about that story although apparently Bob beat him senseless for it.

You have seen a pattern in student behavior over the past few years that you don’t remember from before. Students enroll in your classes and don’t do any work. None. To be specific, this isn’t completely new—a version of this has always existed. Only, in the past, students would drop your class to avoid receiving a failing grade. Or they would at least come to you and give you a bullshit excuse about why they hadn’t done any work. This type of student still exists. However, there’s another type, a student who will come to class faithfully, nearly every day, who will sit in class and zone out, staring straight ahead or out the window, but who will never read a book or a story or essay and who will never write a sentence. Even when you urge that student to drop your class, he will smile and say he thinks he’ll stick it out and see what happens (the pronoun is a conscious choice, not sexism; that student is almost always male). That student is seemingly not insane. He’s calm and expresses himself relatively well. He’s often even friendly. He keeps coming to class and then one day the class is over, you plug in an “F” for his grade, and you never see him or hear from him again.

You awake breathing hard, pick up your bedside digital clock and hold it to your face, attempt to understand what the red glowing numbers are trying to say. You had a nightmare, dreamed that you had robbed a bank, had shot a customer in the head and killed him. You’re relieved that it was just a dream. You hear your sister and Chuck speaking softly in the living room where they sleep on the floor. She giggles which is followed by the murmur of his voice. He’s very affectionate and gentle with her although you remember that back in your little Tennessee town he was feared by many and for good reason. He’s not a big man—average height, skinny build—and he doesn’t even have a rough face, it’s almost pretty. But he’s unpredictable and seems to have no fear. He’s not afraid of fucking up his life and seems to be indifferent about who goes down with him.

The following Friday, you are asked to case the bank again, though you’re not really sure what it is you’re supposed to be looking for and Chuck is vague about communicating this detail to you. You only manage a couple hours and then drift up Flatbush to the park to sit on a hill and watch people skate and bicycle around the loop. It’s sunny and beautiful despite the fact that it’s winter and all the trees are naked of their leaves; you remove your jacket after a while. You’ve brought student papers with you and you grade a few on your lap, but quickly lose your taste for it and so you just stare into the distance and zone out. New York is very different from East Tennessee. You’ve been to the West Coast too, specifically Seattle, and the world seems very different there too. And yet, all these places are numbingly the same too. They have the same plants, same animals, even the same landscapes with only slight variations. The weather is the most dramatic

difference and even that is often undependable, New York might be mild like Tennessee, Tennessee might be bleak and rainy like Seattle, etc. In graduate school, you dated a young woman named Melanie and she took you to her home town of Seattle which she was obviously proud of and homesick for. You stayed at her parents' house and remember being amazed by the crows. They looked just like your East Tennessee crows, but there were so many of them. Perched in the trees and calling to each other. They sounded like a flock of ducks. Or better yet, plastic toys. Something childlike, something weird, like babies from outer space. Something not-crow. That relationship didn't work out.

It comes out that you are not going to help in the robbing of the bank, although you really could use the money since adjuncting pays so poorly. You're very in-debt from college and you've maxed out three credit cards and can barely make minimum monthly payments. You're trying to finish your novel, but you've got writer's block and so you're years away from finishing it, let alone making any money from it, if, indeed, you ever do. You were just standing on the corner to help out. And, in fact, you don't approve of Chuck involving your little sister, even as the relatively safe getaway driver.

Chuck goes from calm to psychotically angry without a beat. You are on your back on the floor, his fingers around your throat, your sister saying, "Chuck, Chuck, Chuck," much too calmly for your taste.

On your first day of high school, you looked around at all the bigger kids, the kids who seemed to know and like each other already, who were "too cool for school," and you

thought, “I’m going to be valedictorian.” You studied hard, achieved that goal, and then went to a small state college on academic and need-based scholarships and got a BA in English. Afterward, looking around for something to do (i.e. pay the bills—you just wanted to write fiction), you applied to grad school on a whim and got into several. You got a free ride—teaching assistantship with a stipend and tuition waiver—at the University of Tennessee. You also got into City University of New York without any financial help and decided to go there.

“Why the hell would you do that?” Jen Loest, your girlfriend since high school, asked with not a little bit of anger. You were a bit tongue-tied, but managed to get out your desires and dreams to be a writer, the necessity of being in New York City, the long fabled history of New York as a mecca for writers, etc. “Why can’t you write here?” she reasonably wanted to know.

There was no good answer for that and she broke up with you soon after. In the fourteen years since, you’ve not had sex with a woman you found so attractive. She was fat, gigantic really, much taller and twice as wide as you, with huge breasts. She would lie naked on her stomach and you would take her voluptuous ass in your hands and just squeeze. You could do that for hours.

Chuck and your sister have disappeared, you’re not sure where to. You don’t think they know anyone else in the city and you try to imagine how long they can get away with sleeping in Chuck’s truck. You wait to hear from them in your apartment. You wait for them as you wait on the train to go to work. You wait in the waiting room of your doctor’s office in order to get antibiotics or something for this winter cold you can’t seem

to dislodge from your chest. You wait at the front of your class for a student in the somnolent room to answer the question which you have asked and already forgotten.

There is a knock at your door in the middle of the night, a knock that repeats itself a few times until you stumble from your dreams and bed to the door. It is Chuck without your sister. He has somehow bypassed the security door and is now on your doorstep and now in your little apartment, smiling, shaking your hand. Apparently, all is forgotten from the earlier choking incident. He says, “Trusty friend. Faithful Tom Acox,” for that is your name. “Lara has gone back to Tennessee, so it’s just the two of us.”

Once, for a period of just a few days or weeks in high school, Chuck was assigned to your study hall period. You’re not sure why as he was a few years older than you, also you’re not sure why he decided to sit next to you, bookish, not popular, but there he was. You had just discovered a book of M.C. Escher prints and you looked at the images together—passageways which seemed both to go over and under arches, water which ran uphill, but also down—and debated about which images could really exist in your world. The librarian would hush you if you became too excited which sometimes you did. Later, after he had ceased coming to study hall, when you would see him in the hallways or out in the street after school, you might connect eyes and he might give you a slight nod. He always had a new girl on his arm and managed, somehow, despite his working class background, to always have a new car or truck, even if he had wrecked one recently. By comparison, your life of the book and your goal of being first in your class in four years, seemed, at best, a gray sort of living. Sometimes your life was so wearying, so tedious and dull. So you joined the swim team and the duty of getting up before the light, hitting

the pool, and just swimming the laps, the repetition, up and down the length of white concrete, going under, flipping, and kicking off the wall put some air in your chest, gave you some hope. When you went to class, you smelled of chlorine and your eyes were red if you had forgotten your goggles. But you had a circle of friends now, people like you, thin and pale as creatures who live at the bottom of the ocean.

Without Lara, Chuck’s approach to getting you to join his doomed bank-robbing venture becomes more friendly and earnest—less violent, more insistent. You imagine what life would be like in the prison compound with him (for some reason, this is the only future you can imagine, not one in which you roll in stolen money and light cigars with hundred dollar bills). You would probably be abandoned, Chuck drifting naturally toward the more criminal, the radical element, most likely the white supremacists with their racist tattoos and cue-balled heads. The popular crowd, just like high school. And you, also like in high school, would try to retreat into books and studying, to find others to cling to if possible, or just to become invisible. You would eat alone in a corner of the noisy cafeteria, fattening yourself against attack on hashed meat and fish and vegetables rolled into little balls and deep-fried in fat. You would follow the stern dictates of the prison guards and warden, and navigate the harsh combat zone of homemade shivs and nighttime rapes, waiting out your time.

Where did he get all those cars? You much preferred the cars to the current truck, remember particularly a beautiful fastback Chevy with a deep blue paintjob with silver sparkles in it that glittered in the sun. The whitewall tires seemed to whisper against the

Talbird/“Why Can’t You Write Here?”

black asphalt of your high school parking lot, windows down, stereo blasting Skynyrd or Molly Hatchet, always a girl in the passenger seat. The long sloping roof looked like speed even when the car was stationary. It seemed that with a car like that you could go anywhere.

