A MAP OF TULSA

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I remember the heat the day I came home. I leaned my forehead against my parents’ picture window and the heat came through the glass. Tulsa. For a few days I drove, sailing south on 169 and coming back, sweeping across on the Broken Arrow, retracing old lines, bearing down with new force. My parents were very kind. But I decided I had to go to the bars.

In the city of my elementary school, and of my good blue-carpeted church, this was a step I had never taken. I knew where to go: across from the Mexican restaurant where my parents now ate after-church lunch there was a row of bars—in Tulsa’s warehouse district. They didn’t card here. I parked, I could hear my dashboard clock tick. And even as I watched, three teenage girls in peasant dresses filed out of the Blumont and lit their cigarettes. The sun was setting, the brick wall caught fire. The three girls stood there for some reason, as if in front of a firing squad, squinting in the sun.

At college maybe I became conceited about Tulsa,
mentioning at just the right moments that I was raised Southern Baptist, had shot guns recreationally, had been a major Boy Scout—I may have agreed, when people smiled, and pretended that Tulsa was a minor classic, a Western, a bastion of Republican moonshine and a hot-bed, equally, of a kind of honky-tonk bonhomie. Well, there was no bonhomie, that I had ever found: the silence of the suburban front yards washed up right to the roots of the skyscrapers, in Tulsa. In fact I had never seen so many people from my hometown actually talking to each other, and shrieking, as here in this bar.

Uninitiated, having experimented only at the drinks tables of upperclassman parties, I didn’t know how to order. “Vodka,” I just said.

“And?”

“That’s all.”

The bartender was careful not to look at me as he set it down.

Situated at my little table, flipping my sketchpad open, I did my pencil in curlicues. On the barstools behind me I had an older man, I imagined him with a comb in his pocket, teasing a pair of women (the shrieking). And a lizard-voiced youth who from the pool table across the room was trying to carry on a conversation with the bartender.

“I need a million dollars,” the older gentleman was saying. “That’s all.” And the women shrieked.

I kept my head down. The bar filled up. Dropping a napkin over my sketchpad I rose to get another drink. But sat back down, slowly. I’d seen someone I knew. She sat slumped, looking enviably at home at the Blumont.
She had gone to high school with me. She sat listening to another, smaller girl. While she listened she wore a flat, patient expression, her mouth flat, her eyeballs flat and somewhat skeptical. Her name was going to come to me but I tried to stop it. I wasn’t prepared to make friends with this person today. And yet I remembered all about her: who her friends had been, the stairwell where they ate lunch . . .

Edith Altman. Once I remembered her name I stood automatically. “Are you Edith Altman?”

She was.

“I was always with Tom Price,” I volunteered, “and Jason Brewster and Ronnie Tisdale.” Perversely, I was naming the most unpopular friends I could think of. “Or Rob Pomeroy.”

“Rob Pomeroy, the unabomber?”

I smiled, a little stung. “Yeah,” I said, “totally. Though I seem to recall that Rob always made fun of the way I dressed.”

She sort of laughed. Her friend stared.

When I walked into the Blumont the number of people in Tulsa I was eager to hang out with had been zero. To me Tulsa was a handful of coevals from church; a troop of boys from Boy Scouts; and of course four hundred people from Franklin High School. My “group” of high school friends was worthless: an unpopularity klatch, a rump group—we had clung together to survive, but never took any pleasure in each other.

Edith leaned way back, as if something had occurred to her. “You were Emma’s boyfriend.”

Emma had been the valedictorian.
I think I had been a little famous for the puppy-dog way I followed Emma around, in the last spring of high school. I had no idea where she was this summer, I was happy to tell Edith—probably some internship.

Now I stood managing to look a little bored, with one foot kicked behind me, pretending to balance like a ballerina in front of Edith and her friend.

“Sorry—this is my friend Cam.” Edith began to explain who I was. “So Jim was a mystery in high school. Emma started dating him and that was the last we ever saw of her. Nobody knew who Jim was. He refused to hang out with other people.”

I was going to turn and go—I was not going to be patronized—while Edith carried on and this girl Cam just sat there patting her bangs. I would leave them alone. I could say that I said hello.

But Edith asked to see my sketchpad. “You should get us some shots,” she suggested.

“Read the poems,” I called back from the bar, “the drawings are just like, you know, realism! I could take lessons or something!”

When I ordered not simply another vodka, but three “shots,” the bartender smiled. He had seen me making friends.

Back at the table, Edith was taking my poems seriously: “These are actually good,” she said.

Awkwardly, we didn’t do the shots right away. We started talking poets—until, I think, I got too sweeping about whom I did and didn’t like, and it was suggested we all take a walk.

“The BOK Tower is so beautiful” is the first thing
I said outside. It had gotten dark, and the skyscrapers floated on the other side of the tracks like magnificent holograms.

Cam, I now learned, was not from Tulsa. She had come home with Edith from college. “Isn’t Tulsa weird?” I asked her. “On that side of the tracks, we build up all the skyscrapers, but immediately on this side of the tracks it’s nothing but a warehouse district.”

“Cam’s from Hartford.”

“Hartford must be awesome,” I said.

Cam pointed across the tracks. “So is that where the cool kids hang out?” Under the shadows, opening out between the skyscrapers, lay a half-dim square, dominated by a huge, clanking flagpole. Moths were visible in the security lights, and we could hear what sounded like skateboards, rolling in the dark. The Center of the Universe, I believed it was called. For its Guinness Records powers of echo. But I had never felt I had permission to show up there.

“Do you guys want to go across?” I asked.

“We were actually thinking we should go dancing.”

So we were too old for the Center of the Universe—I assimilated this information painlessly.

Edith—who was trying to entice Cam as much as me—explained that it was Retro Night at the Cain’s Ballroom. “It’s from Prohibition,” she told Cam. “Like the oldest club in Tulsa.”

I lifted up one finger. “Can we make a pit stop at the Blumont first?”

“Well, we can get drinks at the Cain’s,” Edith said. I saw her smile to herself.
I had learned to dance at debate camp, where the pervasive self-consciousness of the smart-kid atmosphere encouraged a freak-out manic dancing, pursued between males, shouting the lyrics in each other’s faces. But we never had booze. At college—in college I had briefly taken ballroom. That was it. And at the Cain’s I did this crazy foot-stomping dance that I think took my new friends by surprise.

Edith raised her eyebrows. The floor was planks, underpinned with old steel springs—advertised as “the largest spring-loaded dance floor west of the Mississippi.” Whenever I stood still I could feel it beneath me, bouncing like a gargantuan mattress.

The Cain’s Ballroom was low, square. Its high-wattage sign stuck up iconically beside the overpass, but I had never been inside before. Portraits of Bob Wills and each of his Texas Playboys hung on the wall. Yet in this honky-tonk we had what in the late nineties was called retro music: music from the eighties. Male vocalists partook in the self-regard of staggering, dying villains. They moaned. The female response was tart. Pop. In high school I had relished this music, privately. On earphones. I thought of it as big sister music—I didn’t have any siblings, myself.

On the walk over Edith had continued to praise my poems. She had apparently decided she was going to encourage me. I wasn’t sure how to take that. In college the point had been to criticize each other’s poems. But Edith was way ahead of me, in life. She suddenly stopped dancing and went to grab the belt loop of a tall clean-cut
man wearing overalls. “Terry works at the jail,” she said, introducing him.

“I love this,” said Terry, who kept splaying his hand on his chest and smiling as if he had to catch his breath. “I love this night. I let it all go.” Edith whispered something in his ear, and glanced at me.

Her own dance was perfunctory. Head down, the knob of her spine working like a camel. Doing glad-hands, matter-of-fact, meek. Cam pranced up, grabbed Edith’s hands, and kissed her. Edith looked sheepish: Cam was already bored with Tulsa, but Edith was trying to entertain her.

The Cain’s filled; people came over. Midsong I was introduced to characters who went to Jenks, Union, Broken Arrow. No one from Franklin. I was glad. I liked being the new person. I danced near to Cam—I hoped she appreciated that I too was an alien here. I took recourse to the bar and was back and forth to the bar while our circle kept expanding.

I swallowed each drink and then hurried back for ever more expressive dancing. I panicked when our circle stopped to take a breath, squeezing as a group through a side door into the triangle lot the Cain’s owned under the highway. We could hear cars swishing their tails overhead and grumbling on the overpass but with our ears ringing it didn’t matter. We shouted in normal voices, though I myself was silent: Edith had so many acquaintances, most of whom didn’t even know Cam yet—so introducing Cam was the order of business. Alone, I snuck back in to the sweat and squeak of the club, and I started casually to work. I think I danced like someone who has
elapsed his workout and is free in blue space, swimming on the elliptical, an exhausted runner with no particular desire to get off the treadmill. I enjoyed the people around me, and this was a gift. My enthusiasm pinged off the things I admired that I glimpsed in the whirl, the girls, their hair, their boots. There was one cropped-haired boy in heavy leather skirts, spinning. Probably from Catoosa or somewhere. His legs were skinny and he looked like Rimbaud. He probably started putting his makeup on at six and got here early and was the only person from his school who ever even came to Retro Night.

My first plan had been to stay at college that summer. I had applied to work on the summer staff of the college newspaper. However, I did not get on. And no other plan or internship materialized. Anyway, as I laboriously explained to my parents, who were public school teachers, I had meant to spend the lion’s share of my days that summer reading, so. I wanted to lay this out for them and wanted them to know that, while I normally would have gotten a summer job, it was better for me to conduct my own independent studies right now, to be at loose ends, to prepare for sophomore year and the choosing of a major. That I didn’t get the job on the newspaper disturbed me, but was maybe for the best, I told myself. That there was more to it—that I had drifted, as spring semester waned, failing more and more each day to make any sort of backup plan while this secretly desired homecoming, the default plan, became a reality—I couldn’t admit that this was what I had wanted until perhaps at the Cain’s Ballroom.
After Edith and her crew came back in, I had to keep to myself, to keep thinking. But the more I kept to myself, turning by half pivots in my dance steps, keeping in time to glance maybe at some girl’s eyes, but basically reeling, the more I also wanted to get back outside again, to have another look at Tulsa.

Edith came up to me. “Hey, we might go soon.”

On the walk back to our cars a pleasant worn-out quiet obtained. Cam hummed. I hoped for Edith’s sake that Cam had perhaps enjoyed herself. We were breezing along. Under the old streetlights the sidewalk was orange, paced with clusters of broken glass and colorless weeds.

I broke the silence: “I love this.”

“You looked like you were having a good time in there,” said Edith.

I was mute.

Edith continued: “Adrienne Booker’s having a birthday party this weekend. Do you want to come to that?”

I remembered an Adrienne, a pale intense girl with a broken nose—I always saw her eating lunch at the picnic table out by the prefabs. Usually alone. She had seemed poor, and yet not—she was always sitting up straight, leonine. I had never followed up or figured out who she was. Something must have happened to her, I thought. I didn’t remember her graduating. “She went to Franklin?”

“Yeah. There’ll be people you know. Actually the party’s at Chase Fitzpatrick’s house.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I didn’t like people who I “knew.” Chase Fitzpatrick was a great preppie, insofar as I used that term. I wondered why Edith would
be hanging out with him. Or this Adrienne. “Wasn’t Adrienne kind of a loner?”

“You know Booker Petroleum?” Edith asked.

“Yeah?”

“Adrienne Booker. She lives on top of the Booker.”

“Like the skyscraper?”

“She’s kind of disinherited, but still . . .”

I looked ahead of us at Cam, who was so diminutive, and who was zigzagging on down the sidewalk, bored again. She probably thought Tulsa was a trap.

“I think Adrienne would almost like you,” Edith said.

I came back to Tulsa that summer for different reasons. To prove that it was empty. And in hopes that it was not. After parting with Edith, I crossed the tracks. All this last week I had been driving, irritably, all over town. But now I had reason to feel I was getting somewhere. As I trudged up the sort of ramp street that led to the Center of the Universe, I heard someone talking. But it turned out to be just two boys, and they didn’t hassle me. They sat huddled in the lee of their wall, hoodies up, like old-fashioned wanderers, with the flame for their pipe in their faces. I sat in the wind. I had no accoutrement or explanatory bottle, but I was not embarrassed.

The sound of the boys’ lighter scorched up the sides of the buildings. I loved them—these skyscrapers. I had been to grand cities, ones with bigger more crenellated skylines—cities like battleships, bristling with darkness. But it was the simplicity of Tulsa’s skyline that had always stumped me.

I remembered on our way back into town as a little
kid I always knew the place to suddenly strain on my seat belt, to catch the skyline swerving into view. This was how I always told myself we were home: like a fanfare of towers, downtown. It was supposed to be our castle.

Oh, we headed downtown for church, or for something like *Disney on Ice*, but the streets were pale, the sidewalks clean; you looked out from the car in vain for anything in the blank street-level walls to tell you Tulsa actually instantiated itself here, centrally. It was dead. It was only way out in the sprawl, in one-story multiplexes, that I ever formed a truly urban ideal, a Chicago or a Boston on-screen with its interlocking traffic and its smooth revolving doors, a downtown that could still swell with pedestrians, jammed and honking—sounds shut off perhaps when upstairs an actress closed the window in an elegant glass-walled penthouse, and the plot began.

That was how I always reserved the idea of such a life (the big city): that it was a lost art. If it existed in Tulsa it was floors above us. Or I saw traces here and there, as with the midtown Cherry Street bars we passed—people outside laughing, guffawing necklaced women—after picking my mom up from night school.

In high school I used to get up from the family supper table: I took my dad’s camera as a prop and I went downtown, riding the highway in, to the inner dispersal loop. You exit, retarding yourself down to twenty-five miles per hour on an empty four-lane boulevard; you stop at the useless stoplight, and your idling motor growls—like the monster who’s apparently eaten all nearby people, the street is so dead. Perhaps you get out and photograph some graffiti, or a broken window, but mostly the city’s
not even vandalized, it’s just dead. I did once run into another photographer; she was female, wearing a puffy vest. We had both come down to the graveled shore of the reservoir, north of Haskell, when I heard her camera, shuttering, about forty feet upwind of me. She immediately turned away, and I followed her at a distance for several blocks until she got into a car and drove off. And then I flew away, to college. And now I was here again.