The Lineman

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Abstract

S HE KNEW what he was. Just an extended muscle from his thick, bullish neck through the toughly conditioned body. A rock, a big dumb rock, unmoved by beauty and tender thought. Action, only action...
She knew what he was. Just an extended muscle from his thick, bullish neck through the toughly conditioned body. A rock, a big dumb rock, unmoved by beauty and tender thought. Action, only action.

Greg was a jock, and she knew what that meant. His role was evident that first day of class. The tall, bulky frame that never seemed to tire under its heavy burden. The burden of strong, meaty arms and wide shoulders. The burden of animal action and physical responsibility.

She scorned what he was. But, as the first classes of fall had come and gone, Greg was a surprise. He was literate—Greg is a jock . . . jocks are dumb . . . Greg is dumb—no, he was perceptive, intelligent. Listening to one student’s composition, then another, he was quick to discover incongruities and distorted images. He always spoke suddenly, “Look, nobody could ever stand back and take that. It’s not real; they’d probably . . .” Always force, always fight.

“Nancy? How about going out for some brew? Ah, c’mon, a little brew’s good for ya. OK. In fifteen minutes,” his voice was rough and confident on the phone.
What business did she have running out "for some brew"? Good God, there's the exams Friday and tomorrow's paper! Angry at the sudden invitation, Nancy pulled on a thick, soft sweater. This is ridiculous . . . can't be out long . . . have to study. But the sweater matched her blue eyes.

Greg's shiny convertible cruised through the streets. One green light after another flashed him on to the secluded park outside the city. They talked easily about the few things they both knew. In the background the radio moaned softly between commercials. This isn't so bad, Nancy thought. Guess I needed a break anyway.

Their was the only car to park under the quiet trees that night. As Greg cut the motor, "See if there's a church key in the cubby hole, will ya. . ." and she found it underneath a shuffle of road maps. Greg handed her a cool open bottle and took a long drink of his own beer. "Man! This is so good! Haven't had a drink in a couple weeks for some rotten reason."

"That's too bad," she commented sarcastically. Nancy wasn't that fond of the bitter ale to be sympathetic. "Do you drink much, Greg?"

His voice was loud, defensive. "Oh, no. A bunch of us go out to tip a few after the games." Greg took another drink and continued. "Course there are house parties and stuff. Did we have an orgy last spring! I have never," he gestured with the near empty bottle, "never seen so much booze in my life! Ever hear about it?"

But he didn't care if she had. Greg described the party, every drunken detail, in the animated idiom of those who swing.

Sipping as she listened, Nancy tasted disgust in her beer. Doesn't drink much . . . oh, no . . . sounds as though that's all he lives for, that and throwing his stupid weight around the football field.

He finished one bottle, then another. "Then there was the trip some of the brothers and I took to Florida last winter. Was that a stitch! Drank all day, drove all night. God, I thought we'd never make it. At Florida U. we took a wrong
Sketch

turn and ended up on the football field. Almost hit the
damned goalpost! Jeez, what a riot!"

Literate or not, Nancy thought, he’s not a bit different
from the rest. All alike! As he rambled on, she wished she
hadn’t come. So what if the Tri-Sigs in Tampa were on pro­
bation for a nude swimming party! Or that he had dodged
seven men to score the winning touchdown in the big game
of his high school career.

Greg paused thoughtfully, staring at his brown glass
bottle. “Yeah, my mother thinks I’m an alcoholic. Last
summer, I’d get off work late and go to the dives with some
guys.” Bitterly, he laughed, then abruptly threw his empty
out the car window. “She really believed I was on the juice.”

“I can see how she might get that impression,” Nancy said
wryly.

His shoulders shrugged under the tightly fitting Madras
plaid shirt. “Ah, who the hell cares! I don’t start hitting
it the minute I get outa bed in the morning,” Greg threw
his final empty from the car, “so I guess I’m not.” Reaching
for her hand, he pulled Nancy toward him.

“Sorry, I haven’t finished this yet.” She laughed inside
at using the despised beer for an excuse.

Greg took the bottle from her smoothly. “Now you
are . . .” and his eyes played upon her, ready for the extra
point.

Nancy sighed. Might have known this would happen.
Why had she thought it might be different? “Look, Greg, I
just don’t feel like it.”

“Don’t feel like it!” Disbelieving, he mocked Nancy.
“C’mon now! You can come up with a better one than that.”

“What’s wrong with it? I just think . . .” she groped for
a firm stand. Why do I always sound like a damned Sunday
School teacher? “Couldn’t we just talk? It’s nothing per­
sonal; I just don’t believe. . . .” Nancy inwardly discarded
half a dozen well-worked phrases for what he wanted. “‘Just
why do you think that tonight has to end this way?’”

Carefully, Greg took her hand again, and Nancy antici­
pated his next line. Sure, you’re a jock, and I’m so lucky to
be with you. I should catch every pass that comes my way. Maybe throw a few myself. Oh brother!

He began to speak slowly. "One thing I've learned from football is to be in there all the time or you get run over. You have to keep trying, take every chance you get for what you want." A matter-of-fact shrug summed it up.

"I really don't see what that has to do with me."

"Well, you've got to grab every opportunity that comes along or someday you'll hate yourself, that's all."

"So I'm an opportunity!" Nancy returned cynically. "All right, you fight for your opportunities and I'll fight for mine."

"If you want to look at it that way, I guess so," he was patient, unperturbed by her tone. "Say you're behind ninety to nothing and there's only ten seconds to play. What would you do then?"

She giggled, "Punt."

But he ignored her. "You keep trying, that's what. You might not win, but you keep trying!" Greg was obviously pleased with his cleverness.

Deliberately, "Greg, it's ninety to nothing. The game's over. Please take me home," and she hoped he didn't sense the laughter behind her words, laughter not at him, but at their own game.

He groaned and slumped onto the steering wheel. A resigned sigh, then Greg started the car. After a bit, he spoke, almost unwilling to favor her with even a word. "Written your final story yet?"

"No, I just have an idea, but it's not too clear yet. Have you begun?"

"Nah. I'll get around to it."

Silence. Now that she had won, Nancy rather liked him. His reasoning seemed so pitiful. She wished he would talk but knew his disgust with her prevented it. The scowling face, his large jaw, now set in anger. What was he thinking? She could guess. Oh well, he got his "brew" anyway!

"Where's this little Victorian burg you're from? You are a small town girl, I presume."
"Southwest Iowa," she said in amusement. "But it has little to do with my ideas."

Greg was insistent. "What's its name?"

It didn’t seem important, but "Oak River, near Council Bluffs."

He stretched back at the wheel, never looking from the road. "Doesn’t mean a thing to me."

Nancy couldn’t help adding, "I’m sure it doesn’t."

As he stopped the shiny convertible in front of her dorm, "Do you need an escort to the door or . . . ."

"No, thank you," she replied just as flatly. "I can make it. Sorry to have botched up your study break."

"Oh, it’s been interesting. Good night."

Nancy walked jauntily to the door. What a damn waste of time . . . typical jock. She knew what he was. But a "maybe" nagged at the back of her mind.

Adolescence at an A & W

Near the Base of Highway 20

by Michael Leonard

English, Grad.

God when I think about it:
we were kind of mindless, really—
like someone gave you a veiled invitation to
sit out a sallow hot Sunday
and could you say no to your buddies,
or they to me?

From here though: I was special.
The dead of day leaned on me heavy.