

Free Birds

a short novel

by

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Ptarmigans are rare birds in the north-country which are illegal to hunt. Some Ptarmigans make a loud croaking noise. In Japan they are known as “thunder birds.”

1.

Abe and I went on the trip with Ernie Cain just after he killed Mr. Cain, his dad. It was in Kearny, New Jersey, County Hudson, on the family estate which doesn't have a long driveway like all the other shithole estates in our town. Abe picked us up the next morning but he didn't hear about it right away.

"Don't say anything to Honest Abe," Ernie said, like he was prepping for a vacation that he truly needed.

If the trip was a year after the bad dinner, it might have been a sanguine, happier time. But it wasn't. And making it worse, the dad incident is nothing compared to what Ernie was involved in, or performed a month later. Whether we should have taken the trip at all—who knows.

If you asked Ernie on the way south-west whether he meant to kill his father, he would've said no. But the fight was clear and ugly. Arguments can turn violent, but no, there wasn't one. It was purely physical and pretty much quiet minus the grunts, skin rubs and bone knocks.

Of course it didn't help that I liked Ernie's ex-girlfriend. I felt very strongly at the time that I simply knew her better. Her brilliance wasn't fully appreciated! He'd been with her for two years, but they had separated months before. They weren't together anymore, romantically involved, dating—whatever the best way to say it is—not an item, not a thing, not sleeping in the same beds, not having sex, to be scientific about it. Yet very surprisingly, towards the end of our long adventure, they still arranged to have a private time. And that's partly why it hurts so much—just the thought of them driving off together, smiling, etc.

They took the Big Trip—and whether they went by air or by water is still debatable. And yes it was partly metaphorical for me because I had to come to terms with both of them being present in my life, their togetherness, and then their disappearing act. They drove off when I didn't expect them to. And I wasn't invited.

Before it, Oli and Ernie were no doubt my two favorite people—despite my general criticisms of the 'Ernie method.' And that's when I decided to write a novel about all this, maybe to be called: *The Life and Death of Human Animals*. And if it's ever turned into a movie, it would end there, with them both looking happy, flying in the car halfway over the water.

After three weeks on the road, the first chat with Ms. Olive stands out in my memory. Ernie indeed cried a little. He sniffled with his eyes red and wet and stood up from her table and excused himself. I had seen him cry before, but it was a decade ago when we were ten or eleven. I was a little on the surprised and honestly happy side for seeing him break down a bit.

“Sorry, I don't know why I did that.”

“Sit back down, Ern.”

“Dude, you killed your dad,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, whatever. My dad died a long time ago.”

Ernie was definitely correct in one way, but an emotional death is much different than a physical death. He, and his sister Cate who lives out in Seattle, could no longer fight with, or ignore, their dear old dad.

The road trip was right after school, in fact just a few months before my cousin Dwayne turned my world upside down, but that's another story. When Abe picked us up at the short Cain driveway, Ernie was hosing off the blood-stained pillow from the couch, but then he shook his head and threw it in a plastic bag, coiled it up, grabbed his duffel bag, and we hopped in Abe's vacation-vehicle sport-trooper. When Abe asked him about the wet pillow, Ernie just said: "Maybe later."

For the first time, I had a general nervousness—with all the extended hang-out on the schedule—that had never been actuated before. In the past, people were somewhat cautious around Ernie the more physical kid. But this minor fear had been taken up a notch. It was realer than expected, than I knew what to do with. Pal Ernie had always been the guy who, in theory, was a bit more dangerous. In yearbook verbiage, he would have been elected: Most Likely to Actually Kill a Person. Now by sad circumstance, he'd made a reality out of the joke, and it didn't take much effort to be a bit overwhelmed. It was yet another thing to think about, or to try to leave behind and not think about.

A year before, south of Perth Amboy on the Garden State, on our way to the Shore for a beach day, we got pulled over by a DOT trooper. And then a second trooper showed up. We were confused because we weren't speeding at all, maybe seventy-two in a sixty-five zone. The trooper asked whether we saw the alert on the electronic billboard a few miles back for a blue Subaru with Ernie's license plate—and then we were doubly confused. Ernie figured it was a typo in the plate number and a coincidence in the color, but the cop said it was a silver alert for two young men who had mugged a man back in Kearny, and who matched our general descriptions.