The Point

by Kevin Clouther

The moon was bigger than it used to be. Amy had noticed too, but she didn't see the point in talking about it.

"Did you think things would stay the same way forever?" she asked.

Kevin didn't think this precisely. It was more that he hadn't thought anything. It was one of many luxuries no longer available to him, such as clean air.

He said, "Do you think the fires—"

"Which fires?" she asked.

"Do you think the car fires are related to the moon?"

"You're being ridiculous."

Kevin didn't want to be ridiculous. He wanted to be the opposite of ridiculous—sober? Not that.

Amy rose from the couch and walked to the door. "Come with me," she said.

"Where are we going?"

They were going to the bottom of the stairs. Amy stood in the driveway and pointed above her.

"You see that," she said.

Kevin looked.

"You're going to need to turn off all the lights," she said.

He walked back up the stairs. He turned off all the lights. Darkness arrived immediately. He followed Amy's voice down the stairs.

"Here we go," she said.

The moon was even bigger than he'd realized. Who knew it could be so bright? Kevin stared at the moon dumbly, waiting for Amy to tell him what else he didn't know.

"It's been like this since yesterday," she said.

"I've never seen it like this."

He could no longer see her. He walked down the driveway. He heard a steady hum of insects. Crickets? Cicadas? The world kept reminding him of his ignorance. He didn't mind. Amy couldn't do the job alone.

She'd disappeared. Kevin felt foolish calling her name. Plus, he didn't want to risk waking the kids. So he looked for her in silence. He could see as far as the moon permitted. When he reached the end of the driveway, he walked into the grass, wondering if he should have brought the dog, though the dog had never provided any protection. Mostly, the dog tried to convince people to throw tennis balls.

The grass felt unusually soft, and Kevin remembered he was wearing slippers, something he'd vowed not to do outside. Amy would be annoyed. He took pleasure in being reprimanded for such crimes. They were a distraction from the larger crime of destroying the planet.

Although it had been hot during the day, nearly a hundred degrees, it was cool enough now that he wondered if he should have brought a jacket. He didn't know how long he would be gone. Already he couldn't see the cabin. The

crickets/cicadas were loud. They had a lot to say to each other. Kevin had a lot to say too but nobody to say it to.

The kids were alone in the cabin. He turned back, but the cabin didn't present itself. He thought he heard something behind the insects, but he couldn't be sure. He kept walking. He didn't know what else to do.

Probably, Amy had gone back to the kids. Probably, they were still asleep. Although they were terrible sleepers as children, they were expert sleepers now. Kevin revered this ability. He woke early every morning, his heart banging against its container. He resented the reminder that he was such a simple machine. By the color of light in the window, he could tell exactly what time it was, whether he should try to fall back asleep. Usually, the time was three or four a.m. In a real dark night of the soul, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, it is always three o'clock in the morning. Fitzgerald died at 44. That was Kevin's age.

Kevin stood in a dark field. Clouds obscured the moon. He tried, unsuccessfully, to contemplate the vastness of the universe. It was a limitation that he couldn't get past his own weedy patch of earth. When the clouds retreated, the moon looked like a trip he couldn't afford. It looked like a place he'd hear about from someone else.

He used to be a different person. Although he'd assumed he would stay the same person forever, it turned out not to be true. He became a different person each year, imperceptibly, like a frog boiling in a pot. The pot was his time on earth. It was all there in the pictures. He didn't look anything like the person he looked like in his twenties. Thankfully, he hadn't kept a diary. He didn't think he could handle hearing what he sounded like then. What if he sounded smarter, more hopeful, more interesting? He knew all of these things to be true.

For instance: the first Halloween with Amy. He dressed as a guy he knew in the neighborhood, Allen, who dressed as Kevin. The joke—the joke wasn't the point. He took Allen's girlfriend, Valerie, to a party. At the time, Kevin was famous in the neighborhood. He wasn't famous for anything in particular. Fame was mysterious, as maybe it always is. Everyone knew who Kevin was. Everyone liked him, or pretended to, though it seemed genuine. He possessed attributes people liked, such as generosity, such as not being a pain in the ass. It was easier to possess those attributes then. This was before the existential challenge—the current one. The last one? One day at a time.

Looking back, the party was ridiculous, but a lot of things looked ridiculous from where he stood now. That wasn't the point either. When he entered the party with Valerie, he was letting everyone know he was in on the joke. He was making the joke bigger. Then people got a little high. They got drunk and forgot it was a joke. They treated Kevin like he was Allen, and Kevin stopped acting like Allen and started being him. It wasn't even difficult. It didn't seem difficult for Valerie either. She leaned in to kiss him, and Kevin leaned in to kiss her back before he saw Allen.

Kevin wasn't dating Amy at the time.

Allen looked surprised but not upset. It was as though he were looking through a mirror and trying to understand his own reflection, which had happened to Kevin. When he pulled back, Valerie also pulled back. She laughed too hard, and the spell was broken.

Valerie drifted into the crowd. She found Allen, and they lapsed into their old roles. Amy walked up to Kevin. She told him he'd taken things too far. She didn't say it unkindly. Or kindly. He was trying to figure out who she was. He was holding a plastic cup in one hand and a plastic bottle in the other hand.

"Do you work in the lab?" he asked.

She was dressed as a blood-drenched white rabbit. She was holding a plastic cup in her bloody paw.

"Not anymore," she said. "I escaped."

"Can I make you a drink?"

She looked into her cup doubtfully. "You can buy me a drink," she decided.

Their first date, as it would later be designated, didn't happen for several more months. Kevin had forgotten to ask for her number. He'd forgotten to ask for her name. He knew her only as a rabbit.

That was when he taught. That was the year of the stoic, a young man of preternatural seriousness, a veteran of horrible wars returned from hell to ask Kevin earnest questions about Ezra Pound.

The stoic showed up first in Kevin's inbox. He wanted to know if he could take Kevin's class without taking the pre-

reqs, a common question. Nobody wanted to take the pre-reqs. The stoic had a list of reasons why he should be excused, none of which Kevin read. It was easier, he'd learned, to say no. The more you explained yourself, the more you opened yourself to questions. Increasingly, he was surrounded by people who wanted him to do things for them. His default had become to do nothing.

But the stoic was persistent. He did something almost nobody did: he showed up to Kevin's office. He brought a bottle of whiskey, which he placed discreetly on a chair beneath the office's sole window. The bottle was never mentioned.

"I heard you're the best teacher in the department," the stoic said.

"I can't imagine who said that," Kevin said truthfully.

"I heard it isn't close."

Before sitting, the stoic moved the chair so he could see the door. Kevin was used to veterans doing this. Together they observed the empty hallway.

"Do you mind if I close the door?" the stoic asked.

Kevin had been trained not to meet with students behind closed doors. Whether the school didn't trust the students or teachers was unclear. Possibly, the school didn't trust anyone. He didn't care. He followed the policy scrupulously. Students had a habit of weeping in his office, which an open door discouraged, though not as much as he wished.

"I can't do that," he said.

The stoic studied Kevin with curiosity. Or maybe it was pity. He was comfortable with both. It was admiration he struggled with.

"Rules are important," the stoic said.

"With the pre-requisites—"

"Your hands are tied."

He lifted his hands. Had the stoic had been taken prisoner? How often did that happen? What if he'd survived torture only to be informed he couldn't take a poetry seminar.

"I think you'll like the fundamentals class," Kevin lied.

"I'm not sure a class is what I need."

In the hallway, a student studied a poster on the wall. She stood by herself. The poster held her attention completely. Kevin must have walked by the poster a hundred times. He couldn't remember one thing about it.

"What do you need?" he asked.

For the first time, the stoic showed discomfort. He followed Kevin's eyes to the hallway and back to the office. Kevin rested his elbows on his desk. He clasped his hands. As a teacher, he'd learned what to do when the room turned quiet. He used to fill up the space. Now he waited.

The stoic turned his eyes to the bookshelf behind Kevin. Students rarely commented on the books. More often, they referenced the bobblehead he'd placed there, though nobody recognized the player, a second baseman who never graduated to the major leagues after several years with the local minor league club. The player's crazed persistence and obscure failure served as a memento mori.

"I—" The stoic searched for the right word. "Experienced things. In Iraq. I'm ready to write about them. I wasn't before."

Kevin waited.

"But a class. I don't know. What if everyone else doesn't want to hear about it. I wouldn't blame them. With the way things are now. Trigger warnings—"

The stoic gave Kevin an opportunity to have an opinion about the way things are now and trigger warnings; he declined.

"We all have PTSD, obviously. Maybe that isn't obvious. Is it obvious?"

"Freud wrote about shell shock in soldiers returning from World War I."

"This is what I need."

"It was a problem for his dream interpretation."

"This sort of back and forth."

Kevin hadn't waited long enough. He turned around to see if Freud was on the bookshelf. Kevin used to have strong opinions about Freud, but now he seemed a distant and cartoonish figure: the close white beard, the little round glasses, the cigar as cigar.

"What I need," the stoic said with new confidence, "is structure."

Kevin opened his hands. He didn't want to be responsible for any more structure. He was already responsible for so much. Too much? It was hard to say. His own father had spent Kevin's adolescence in a bathrobe, but nobody needed to hear that story.

"Structure is important," Kevin said vaguely.

"You learn that in the military."

The stoic grinned. Kevin searched for irony but detected none.

He said, "Setting up a schedule—"

The stoic retrieved a small notebook from a jacket pocket.

"You don't mind if I write this down?" he said.

"Of course not."

"I want to make sure I get everything."

Kevin wondered, not for the first time, what you learn in the military. He sometimes entertained a fantasy of himself in basic training: young, musclebound, disciplined. Only the last was still within reach. His bones had begun to announce themselves when he did things like get out of a chair. Or sit too long. Or reach for anything. He assumed everything in the military was heavy. He assumed the showers were cold and the food bad. That's what movies had taught him. He'd become particular about what he ate.

How many people had the stoic killed? Kevin added the question to the list of things he would never ask.

He said, "Different people will tell you different things."

"I'm only talking to you."

"You should talk to other people."

"Why?"

The stoic held a pen above the notebook. Kevin lifted his own pen. He'd become particular about pens too. How could he have ever fired a gun at somebody?

"Nobody has all the answers," he said idiotically.

"I'm not looking for answers."

"What are you looking for then?"

The stoic smiled, as though Kevin had finally asked the right question. He didn't want to play games. Even as a kid he hadn't liked games, which was weird, but he was never comfortable as a kid. He was always waiting not to be a kid.

"You don't have to answer that," he said.

"I don't mind."

"When did you decide to become a solider."

"I wasn't really a soldier."

"Whatever you were."

The stoic looked, for the first time, surprised. He lowered the pen. He hadn't written anything.

"Nobody's asked me that in a long time," he said unconvincingly.

Kevin resumed waiting.

"I don't even remember."

He knew the stoic was lying.

"I remember some things."

Kevin recalled, with pleasure, the release of waiting.

"My father was against my enlisting. He told me I was making a mistake. He told me I was only enlisting to piss him

off. I knew he was right, but I did it anyway. Getting blown up in the desert seemed preferable to admitting he was right. That's something somebody who's never been in the desert would think. Not that I was in the desert long. Most of the time, I was in Korea. There are a lot of American soldiers there. My father is Korean, but he's never been to Korea. He took my deployment personally. It wasn't like I had a say in the matter. Once I enlisted, I mean. I don't look Korean because my mom is white. My father's parents were immigrants. I never met them. I have a story. I think it's a good story. I know it is."

Kevin didn't doubt that the stoic had a story. Many people, in Kevin's experience, had a story. Having a story isn't the hard part.

"What are you looking for?" Kevin asked again.

The stoic nodded curtly. He respected getting to the point.

"What if we worked one on one," he said, "like an Oxford tutorial. I don't need course credit."

Kevin leaned into his chair. He hated saying no, though he said no a lot. He wished he had a stamp he could use in place of the word. He couldn't recall anyone's arguing with a stamp.

"Anyhow, that's my pitch." The stoic stood.

Kevin stood too. They shot their arms out at each other. This was when people still shook hands.

"I'll think about it," Kevin said, knowing he would say yes.

The stoic knew too, which Kevin resented. He opened the bottle of whiskey that night. He had three glasses while he watched a football game. People still played football on television then, though they wouldn't much longer.

Wayne stepped into Kevin's sight as if from behind a thick curtain.

"Beautiful night," Wayne said.

"Do you come out here often. At night, I mean."

"Often as I can."

This sort of answer annoyed Kevin. "I lost my wife," he said.

"Amy's just over there."

Wayne pointed into the darkness. Kevin nodded, though he couldn't see anything.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked.

Wayne stepped closer. He smelled like soil and smoke but not unclean. While Kevin fussed in the rental with Amy and the kids, Wayne did an owner's real work, mostly—almost entirely—mysterious to them.

He offered Kevin a cigarette. To his own surprise, he accepted. Wayne lit both cigarettes with the same match.

"What's your question?" he asked.

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"To what?"

"To the future. All of us."

Wayne held the cigarette away from him like his face might catch on fire, like Kevin might catch on fire too. Or maybe that was just what he saw. It was very dark.

"I don't try to predict the future," Wayne said.

"You guys are smoking?" Amy pushed aside the curtain.

"You still have to prepare." Kevin felt like his body was glowing from the cigarette. "I know you're preparing."

"Prepare, sure," Wayne said.

"Can I have a cigarette," Amy said.

She leaned toward him—closer, Kevin thought, than was necessary—and Wayne placed a cigarette between her lips. He took his time lighting it.

"When do you think the car fires will stop?" she asked.

He frowned as though there were something improper about the question.

"They have to stop," she said sensibly.

"We're not the first ones here," he said, "and we won't be the last."

"You mean native—"

"I mean the world doesn't end when we do."

Amy looked away. Human extinction embarrassed her. She felt responsible. Kevin liked this about her, though the feeling made her sad. He liked this about her privately. He also felt responsible but in a resentful way, like the way he felt about the dog.

"What do you think is causing them?" he asked.

Wayne took an indulgent drag of his cigarette.

"Do you know?" Amy asked.

Kevin thought Wayne liked being asked but didn't like giving answers. Kevin could understand. He didn't like giving answers either. It was one of the problems with being an administrator. His job consisted of providing answers and then responding to people who didn't agree. Now nobody asked him anything. He missed the presumption of authority, even if it was quickly dispelled. His children treated him like a turnstile to be brusquely pushed or, if necessary, leapt over. Amy mostly ignored him. Certainly, she didn't ask if he knew what caused the fires, no matter how often he talked about them.

"I don't know," Wayne said. "I have some ideas."

"What ideas?" Amy asked.

He dropped his cigarette and stomped it out in one motion. He walked behind the curtain, and Kevin and Amy followed. For some time, they walked in darkness. The moon wasn't as bright anymore. It might have been clouds, or it might have been something else he didn't understand.

"Do you think the kids are okay," he whispered.

Amy didn't hear or acted like she didn't. Wayne led them to a part of the property he'd never visited. Kevin tried to determine, unsuccessfully, where they were.

"I don't think I've been here," he said, louder this time.

"Of course you haven't," Wayne said.

Kevin looked to Amy. He wanted her to say something about having never been here too, but she didn't say anything.

"This is the part where I need to blindfold you," Wayne said.

"You're joking."

"You need to watch for rattlesnakes. They were never here before, but a lot of things changed."

"What do they sound like?"

"Like rattles. Leave them alone."

"What if they bite?"

"Then you have about two hours."

Kevin wondered if this was also a joke. He didn't want to ask. He began to hear rattlesnakes everywhere. A hatch opened, and he was surprised to find himself walking down stairs.

It was an old-fashioned bomb shelter. Kevin felt nostalgic for the apocalyptic fears he grew up with. Humanity still had control then. The end of the world could be managed through meetings and speeches. De-escalation remained an option. At least that was what he chose to believe. No comparable delusion was available to him now.

The bomb shelter was still, cool. It was as if the air had always been here, just like this. Kevin felt like a pharaoh in his tomb. He kept looking above him, but he could no longer see the hatch. He considered grabbing Amy by the wrist and running back up the stairs, but he couldn't see her either.

Wayne lit a match, and the world declared itself. The walls were gray, stone, impenetrable. They looked like they could outlast anything. They looked as thick as the earth itself. Had he built this dungeon himself? Why was he inviting Kevin and Amy inside?

She asked.

"I don't want to be alone," Wayne answered.

They toured the shelter in silence. It explained itself. It was an inhabitable cube, wholly removed from the aboveground world. Kevin wondered how many similar spaces existed. He wondered how people would find each other

when they resurfaced, if they wanted to. He didn't think anyone would be looking for him. He listened, but he couldn't hear rattlesnakes. It was so quiet he could hear his own stupid breath.

Amy studied the shelves, which ran from floor to ceiling on all four walls. She was interested in the jars that populated these shelves, occasionally lifting one to see it better. When Wayne pressed a button, the room filled with light.

"You canned these yourself?" she asked.

"I've been at this a long time," he said. "I didn't wait for a fire."

"What were you waiting for?"

Wayne fiddled with the button, though there was nothing to it.

"You did the electrical?" Kevin asked.

"I did everything," Wayne said.

His eyes moved to the stairs. Kevin imagined—irrationally, irrevocably—that the worst had already happened. When he walked up the stairs, the world he would discover would be unrecognizable. Had Wayne known? Kevin looked to Amy, but she was still busying herself with the jars.

"Beets," she whispered to herself. "Tomatoes, peppers, carrots."

Wayne pressed the button again, and the lights dimmed the way they used to in theatres before a performance.

"Beans, peas, potatoes." As though it had already happened.