

SHORT STORY NIGHT



"THE STATE"

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Tommy Orange

March 19, 2018

Before you were born, you were a head and a tail in a milky pool—a swimmer. You were a race, a dying off, a breaking through, an arrival. Before you were born, you were an egg in your mom, who was an egg in her mom. Before you were born, you were a nested Russian doll of possibility in your mom’s ovaries. You were two halves of a million different possibilities, a billion heads or tails, flip-shine on spun coin. Before you were born, you were the idea to make it to California for gold or bust. You were white, you were brown, you were red, you were dust. You were hiding, you were seeking. Before you were born, you were chased, beaten, broken, trapped in Oklahoma. Before you were born, you were an idea your mom got into her head in the seventies, to hitchhike across the country and become a dancer in New York. You were on your way when she did not make it across the country but sputtered and spiraled and landed in Taos, New Mexico, at a peyote commune called Morning Star. Before you were born, you were your dad’s decision to move away from Oklahoma, to northern New Mexico to learn about a Pueblo guy’s fireplace. You were the light in the wet of your parents’ eyes as they met across that fireplace in ceremony. Before you were born, your halves inside them moved to Oakland. Before you were born, before your body was much more than heart, spine, bone, skin, blood, and vein, when you’d just started to build muscle, before you showed, bulged in her belly, as her belly, before your dad’s pride could belly-swell at the sight of you, your parents were in a room listening to the sound your heart made. You had an arrhythmic heartbeat. The doctor said it was normal. Your arrhythmic heart was not abnormal.

“Maybe he’s a drummer,” your dad said.

“He doesn’t even know what a drum is,” your mom said. “And the man said arrhythmic. That means no rhythm.”

“Maybe it just means he knows the rhythm so good he doesn’t always hit it when you expect him to.”

“Rhythm of what?” she said.

But, once you got big enough to make your mom feel you, she couldn’t deny it. You swam to the beat. When your dad brought out the kettledrum, you’d kick her in time with it, or in time with her heartbeat, or with one of the oldies mixtapes she’d made from records she loved and played endlessly in your Aerostar minivan. Once you were out in the world, running and jumping and climbing, you tapped your toes and fingers everywhere, all the time. On tabletops, desktops. You tapped every surface you found in front of you, listened for the sound things made back at you when you hit them. The timbre of taps, the din of dings,

silverware clangs in kitchens, door knocks, knuckle cracks, head scratches. You were finding out that everything made a sound. Everything could be drumming, whether the rhythm was kept or it strayed. Even gunshots and backfire, the howl of trains at night, the wind against your windows. The world was made of sound.

But inside every kind of sound lurked a sadness. In the quiet between your parents after a fight they'd both managed to lose. Or when you and your sisters listened through the walls for the early signs of a fight about to start. For the late signs of a fight reignited. The sound of the church service, the building wail of worship, your mom speaking in tongues on the crest of that weekly Sunday wave. Sadness because you couldn't feel any of it, though you wanted to. You felt that you needed it, that it could protect you from the dreams you had almost every night about the end of the world and the possibility of hell forever—you living there, still a boy, unable to leave or die or do anything but burn in a lake of fire. Sadness came in the sound of your dad snoring in church, even as members of the congregation, members of your family, were being slain by the Holy Ghost in the aisle right next to him. Sadness came in the quiet of the street when the days got shorter at the end of summer and the kids weren't out anymore. In the color of that fleeting sky, sadness lurked. Sadness pounced, slid into everything it could find its way into, through anything, through sound, through you.

You didn't think of any of the tapping or the knocking as drumming until you actually started drumming, many years later. It would have been good to know that you'd always done something naturally. But there was too much going on with everyone else in your family for anyone to notice that you should probably have done something else with your fingers and toes than tap, with your mind and time than knock at all the surfaces in your life like you were looking for a way in.

You're headed to a powwow. You were invited to drum at the Big Oakland Powwow even though you quit drum group. You weren't gonna go. You haven't wanted to see anyone from work since you got fired. Especially anyone from the powwow committee. But there's never been anything like it for you—the way that big drum fills your body until there's only the drum, the sound, the song.

The name of your drum group is Southern Moon. You joined a year after you started working at the Indian Center as a janitor. You're supposed to say custodian now, or maintenance person, but you've always thought of yourself as a janitor. When you were sixteen, you went on a trip to Washington, D.C., to visit your uncle—your mom's brother. He took you to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where you discovered James Hampton. He was an artist, a Christian, a mystic, a janitor. James Hampton ended up meaning everything to you. Anyway, being a janitor was just a job. It paid the rent, and you could have your earphones in all day. No one wants to talk to the guy cleaning up. The earphones are an additional service. People don't have to pretend to be interested in you because they feel bad that you're taking their trash out from under their desk and giving them a fresh bag.

Drum group was Tuesday nights. All were welcome. Not women, though. They had their own drum group, Thursday nights. They were Northern Moon. You first heard the big drum by accident one night after work. You'd come back because you'd forgotten your earphones. You were just about to get on the bus when you realized they weren't in your ears when you most wanted them, for that long ride home. The drum group played on the first floor. You walked into the room and, just as you did, they started singing. High-voiced wailing and howled harmonies that screamed through the boom of that big drum. Old songs that sang to the old sadness you always kept as close as skin, without meaning to. The word "triumph" flashed in your head then. What was it doing there? You never used that word. But that was what it sounded like to make it through these hundreds of American years, to sing through them. That was the sound of pain forgetting itself in song. You went back every Tuesday for the next year.

Keeping time wasn't hard for you. The hard part was singing. You'd never been a talker. You'd certainly never sung before. Not even alone. But Bobby made you do it. Bobby was big, maybe six-four, three-fifty. He said that it was because he came from eight different tribes. He had to fit all of them in there, he said, pointing at his belly. He had the best voice in the group, hands down. He could go high or low. And he was the one who invited you in. If it were up to Bobby, the drum group would be bigger, would include everyone. He'd have the whole world on a drum if he could. Bobby Big Medicine—sometimes a name fit just right. Your voice is low, like your dad's.

"You can't even hear it when I sing," you told Bobby after group one day.

"So what? Adds body. Bass harmony is underappreciated," Bobby told you, then handed you a cup of coffee.

"The big drum's all you need for bass," you said.

"Voice bass is different from drum bass," Bobby said. "Drum bass is closed. Voice bass opens."

"I don't know," you said.

"Voice can take a long time to come all the way out, brother," Bobby said. "Be patient."

You walk outside your studio apartment to a hot Oakland summer day, an Oakland you remember as gray, always gray. Oakland summer days from your childhood. Mornings so gray they filled the whole day with gloom and cool, even after the blue broke through. This heat's too much. You sweat easily. Sweat from walking. Sweat at the thought of sweating. Sweat through clothes to where it shows. You take off your hat and squint up at the sun. At this point, you should probably accept the reality of global warming, of climate change. The ozone thinning again, like they said it was in the nineties, when your sisters used to bomb their hair with Aqua Net and you'd gag and spit in the sink extra loud to let them know you hated it and to remind them about the ozone, how hair spray was the reason the world might

burn like it said in Revelation, the next end, the second end after the flood, a flood of fire from the sky this time, maybe from the lack of ozone protection, maybe because of their abuse of Aqua Net—and why did they need their hair three inches in the air, curled over like a breaking wave? Because what? You never knew. Except that all the other girls did it, too. And haven't you also heard or read that the world tilts on its axis ever so slightly every year so that the angle makes the earth like a piece of metal when the sun hits it just right and it becomes just as bright as the sun itself? Haven't you heard that it's getting hotter because of this tilt, this ever-increasing tilt of the earth, which was inevitable and not humanity's fault, not our cars or our emissions or Aqua Net but plain and simple entropy—or was it atrophy, or was it apathy?

You're near downtown, headed for the 19th Street *BART* station. You walk with a slightly dropped, sunken right shoulder. Just like your dad. The limp, too, right side. You know that this limp could be mistaken for some kind of affect, some lame attempt at gangsta lean, but on some level that you maybe don't even acknowledge you know that walking like you do subverts the straight-postured upright citizenly way of moving one's arms and feet just so, to express obedience, to pledge allegiance to a way of life and to a nation and its laws. Left, right, left, and so on. But have you really cultivated this drop-shouldered walk, this lean to the right, in opposition? Is it really some Native-specific countercultural thing you're going for? Some vaguely anti-American movement? Or do you walk the way your dad walked simply because genes and pain and styles of walking and talking get passed down without anyone even trying? The limp is something you've cultivated to look more like a statement of your individual style and less like an old basketball injury. To get injured and not recover is a sign of weakness. Your limp is practiced. An articulate limp, which says something about the way you've learned to roll with the punches, all the times you've been fucked over, knocked down, what you've recovered from or haven't, what you've walked or limped away from, with or without style—that's on you.

You pass a coffee shop you hate because it's always hot and flies constantly swarm the front of the shop, where a big patch of sunlight seethes with some invisible shit the flies love and where there's always just that one seat left, in the heat with the flies, which is why you hate it, on top of the fact that the place doesn't open until ten in the morning and closes at six in the evening, to cater to all the hipsters and artists who hover and buzz around Oakland like flies themselves, America's white suburban vanilla youth, searching for some invisible thing Oakland can give them, street cred or inner-city inspiration.

Before getting to the 19th Street station, you pass a group of white teen-agers who size you up. You're almost afraid of them. Not because you think they'll do anything. It's how out of place they are, all the while looking like they own the city. You want to run them down. Scream something at them. Scare them back to wherever they came from. Scare them out of Oakland. Scare the Oakland they've made their own out of them. You could do it, too. You're one of these big, lumbering Indians. Six feet, two-thirty, chip on your shoulder so heavy it makes you lean, makes everyone see you, your weight, what you carry.

Your dad is one thousand per cent Indian. An overachiever. A recovering alcoholic medicine man from Oklahoma, for whom English is his second language. He loves to gamble and smokes American Spirit cigarettes. He has false teeth and prays for twenty minutes before every meal, asks for help from the Creator for everyone, beginning with the orphan children and ending with the servicemen and servicewomen out there, your one-thousand-per-cent-Indian dad, who cries only in ceremony and has bad knees, which took a turn for the worse when you were ten and he laid concrete in your back yard for a basketball court. You know your dad could once play ball, knew the rhythm of the bounce, the head fake and eye swivel, pivot shit you learned how to do by putting in time. Sure, he leaned heavily on shots off the glass, but that was the way it used to be done. Your dad told you he hadn't been allowed to play ball in college because he was Indian in Oklahoma. Back in 1963, that was all it took. No Indians or dogs allowed on the courts or in bars. Your dad hardly ever talked about any of that—being Indian in Oklahoma, or even what he felt like now that he was a certifiable urban Indian. Except sometimes. When it suited him. Out of nowhere.

You'd be riding in your dad's red Ford truck to Blockbuster to rent a movie. You'd be listening to his peyote tapes. The tape-staticky gourd rattle and kettledrum boom. He liked to play it loud. You couldn't stand how noticeable the sound was. How noticeably Indian your dad was. You'd ask if you could turn it off. You'd put on 106 KMEL—rap or R. & B. But then he'd try to dance to that. He'd push his big Indian lips out to embarrass you, stick one flat hand out and stab at the air in rhythm to the beat, just to mess with you. That was when you'd turn the music off altogether. And that was when you might hear a story from your dad about his childhood. About how he used to pick cotton with his grandparents for a dime a day or the time an owl threw rocks at him and his friends from a tree or the time his great-grandma split a tornado in two with a prayer.

The chip you carry has to do with being born and raised in Oakland. A concrete chip, a slab, really, heavy on one side, the half side, the not-white side. As for your mom's side, as for your whiteness, there's too much and not enough there to know what to do with. You're from a people who took and took and took and took. And from a people taken. You're both and neither. In the bath, you'd stare at your brown arms against your white legs in the water and wonder what they were doing together on the same body, in the same bathtub.

How you ended up getting fired was related to your drinking, which was related to your skin problems, which was related to your father, which was related to history. The one story you were sure to hear from your dad, the one thing you knew for certain about what it means to be Indian, was that your people, Cheyenne people, on November 29, 1864, were massacred at Sand Creek. He told you and your sisters that story more than any other story he could muster. Your dad was the kind of drunk who disappears weekends, lands himself in jail. He was the kind of drunk who had to stop completely. Who couldn't have a drop. So you had it coming, in a way. That need that won't quit. That years-deep pit you were bound to dig, crawl into, struggle to get out of. Your parents maybe burned a too-wide God hole through you. The hole was unfillable.

Coming out of your twenties you started to drink every night. There were many reasons for this. But you did it without a thought. Most addictions aren't premeditated. You slept better. Drinking felt good. But mostly, if there was any real reason you could pinpoint, it was because of your skin. You'd always had skin problems. Your dad used to rub peyote gravy on your rashes. That worked for a while. Until he wasn't around anymore. The doctors wanted to call it eczema. They wanted you hooked on steroid creams. The scratching was bad because it only led to more scratching, which led to more bleeding. You'd wake up with blood under your fingernails—a sharp sting wherever the wound moved, because it moved everywhere, all over your body, and blood ended up on your sheets, and you'd wake up feeling like you'd dreamed something as important and devastating as it was forgotten. But there was no dream. There was only the open, living wound, and it itched somewhere on your body at all times. Patches and circles and fields of red and pink, sometimes yellow, bumpy, pus-y, weeping, disgusting—the surface of you. If you drank enough, you didn't scratch at night. You could deaden your body that way. You found your way in and out of a bottle. Found your limits. Lost track of them. Along the way, you figured out that there was a certain amount of alcohol you could drink that could—the next day—produce a certain state of mind, which you over time began to refer to privately as the State. The State was a place you could get to where everything felt exactly, precisely in place, where and when it belonged, you belonged, completely O.K. in it—almost like your dad used to say, “In'it,” like, “Isn't that right? Isn't that true?” But each bottle you bought was a medicine or a poison, depending on whether you managed to keep it full enough. The method was unstable. Unsustainable. To drink enough but not too much for a drunk was like asking an evangelical not to say the name Jesus.

And so playing drums and singing in those classes had given you something else. A way to get there without having to drink and wait and see if the next day the State might emerge from the ashes. The State was based on something you read about James Hampton, years after your trip to D.C. James had given himself a title: Director of Special Projects for the State of Eternity. James was a Christian. You are not. But he was just crazy enough to make sense to you. This is what made sense: he spent fourteen years building an enormous piece of art work out of junk he collected in and around the garage he rented, which was about a mile from the White House. The piece was called “The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly.” James made the throne for Jesus' second coming. What you get about James Hampton is his almost desperate devotion to God. To waiting for his God to come. He made a golden throne from junk. The throne you were building was made of moments, made of experiences in the State after excess drinking, made of leftover, unused drunkenness, kept overnight, dreamed, moon-soaked fumes you breathed into throne form, into a place where you could sit. In the State, you were just unhinged enough to not get in the way. The problem came from having to drink at all.

The night before you got fired, drum class was cancelled. It was the end of December. The approach of the New Year. This kind of drinking was not about reaching the State. This kind of drinking was careless, pointless—one of the risks, the consequences of being the kind of

drunk you were. And will always be, no matter how well you learn to manage it. By night's end, you'd finished a fifth of Jim Beam. A fifth is a lot if you don't work your way up to it. It can take years to drink this way, alone, on random Tuesday nights. It takes a lot from you. Drinking this way. Your liver. The organ doing the most living for you, detoxifying all the shit you put into your body.

When you got to work the next day, you were fine. A little dizzy, still drunk, but the day felt normal enough. You went into the conference room. The powwow-committee meeting was happening. You ate what they called breakfast enchiladas when they offered them. You met a new member of the committee. Then your supervisor, Jim, called you into his office, called on the two-way you kept on your belt. When you got to his office, he was on the phone. He covered it with one hand. "There's a bat," he said and pointed out to the hallway. "Get it out. We can't have bats. This is a medical facility." He said it like you'd brought the bat in yourself. Out in the hallway, you looked up and around you. You saw the thing on the ceiling in the corner near the conference room at the end of the hall. You went and got a trash bag and a broom. You approached the bat carefully, slowly, but when you got close it flew into the conference room. Everyone, the whole powwow committee, heads spinning, watched as you went in there and chased it out. In the hallway, the bat circled around you. It was behind you, and then it was on the back of your neck. It had its teeth or claws dug in. You freaked out and reached back and got the bat by a wing and instead of doing what you should have done—put it in the trash bag you were carrying with you—you brought your hands together and with all your strength, everything you had in you, you squeezed. You crushed the bat in your hands. Blood and thin bones and teeth in a mess in your hands. You threw it down. You would mop it up quick. Wipe clean the whole day. Start over again. But no. The whole powwow committee was there. They'd come out to watch you catch the bat after you'd chased the thing into their meeting. They looked at you with disgust. You felt it, too. It was on your hands. On the floor. That creature.

Back in your supervisor's office after you'd cleaned up the mess, Jim gestured for you to sit down. "I don't know what that was," he said. Both hands were on top of his head. "But it's not something we can tolerate in a medical facility."

"The thing fucking . . . Sorry, but the thing fucking bit me. I was reacting—"

"And that would have been O.K., Thomas. Only co-workers saw. And I was told you smell like alcohol. Coming to work drunk, I'm sorry, but that's a fireable offense. You know we have a zero-tolerance policy here."

He didn't look mad anymore. He looked disappointed. You almost told him that it was from the night before, but maybe that wouldn't have made a difference, because the alcohol was still in you, in your blood.

“I did not drink this morning,” you said. You almost crossed your heart. You’d never even done that when you were a kid. It was something about Jim. He was like a big kid. He didn’t want to have to punish you. Crossing your heart seemed like a reasonable way to convince Jim that you were telling the truth.

“I’m sorry,” Jim said.

“So that’s it? I’m being fired?”

“There’s nothing I can do for you,” Jim said. He stood up and walked out of his own office. “Go home, Thomas,” he said.

You get down to the train platform and appreciate the cool wind or breeze or whatever you call the rush of air the train brings before it arrives, before you even see it or its lights, because of how much it cools your sweaty head. You find a seat at the front of the train. The robot voice announces the next stop, by saying or not saying, exactly, but whatever it’s called when robots speak, “The next station is 12th Street Oakland City Center.” You remember your first powwow. Your dad took you and your sisters—after the divorce—to a Berkeley high-school gym, where your old family friend Paul danced over the basketball lines with that crazy-light step, that grace, even though Paul was pretty big, and you’d never thought of him as graceful before. But that day you saw what a powwow was and you saw that Paul was perfectly capable of grace and even some kind of Indian-specific cool, with footwork not unlike break dancing, and the effortlessness that cool requires.

The train moves and you think of your dad and how he took you to that powwow after the divorce, how he had never taken you before, when you were younger, and you wonder if it was your mom and her Christianity, the reason you didn’t go to powwows or do more Indian things. The train emerges, rises out of the underground tube in the Fruitvale district, over by that Burger King and the terrible pho place, where East 12th and International almost merge, where the graffitied apartment walls and abandoned houses, warehouses, and auto-body shops appear, loom in the train window, stubbornly resist all of Oakland’s new development. Just before the Fruitvale station, you see the old brick church you always notice because of how run-down and abandoned it looks. You feel a rush of sadness for your mom and her failed attempt to make you believe, for your failed family. How everyone lives in different states now. How you never see them. How you spend so much time alone. You want to cry and you feel as if you might, but know that you can’t, that you shouldn’t. Crying ruins you. You gave it up long ago. But the thoughts keep coming, about your mom and your family at a certain time when the magical over- and underworld of your Oakland-spun Christian evangelical end-of-the-world spirituality seemed to come to life to take you, all of you. You remember it so clearly, that time. Before anyone was awake, your mom was crying into her prayer book. You knew this because you saw the tearstains in her prayer book. You looked into that book more than once because you wanted to know what questions she might have

asked God, what private conversations she might have had with Him, she who spoke that mad-angel language of tongues in church, she who fell to her knees, she who fell in love with your dad in Indian ceremonies that she later called demonic.

Your train leaves the Fruitvale station, which makes you think of Dimond Park, which makes you think of Vista Street. That was where it all happened, where your family lived and died. Your older sister, DeLonna, was heavily into PCP, angel dust. That was when you found out that you don't need religion to be slain, for the demons to come out with their tongues. One day after school, DeLonna smoked too much PCP. She came home and it was clear to you that she was out of her mind. You could see it in her eyes—DeLonna's eyes without DeLonna behind them. And then there was her voice, that low, deep, guttural sound. She yelled at your dad and he yelled back and she told him to shut up and he did shut up because of that voice. She told him that he didn't even know which God he was worshipping, and soon after that DeLonna was on the floor of your sister Christine's room, foaming at the mouth. Your mom called an emergency prayer circle—friends from church—and they prayed over her and she foamed and writhed and eventually stopped when that part of the high wore off, the drug dimmed, her eyes closed, the thing was done with her. When she woke up, your mom gave her a glass of milk, and when she was back, with her normal voice and her normal eyes, she didn't remember any of it. Later, your mom said that taking drugs was like sneaking under the gates into the Kingdom of Heaven. It seemed to you more like the Kingdom of Hell, but maybe the Kingdom of Heaven is bigger and more terrifying than we can ever know. Maybe we've all been speaking the broken tongue of angels and demons for too long to know that that's what we are, who we are, what we're speaking. Maybe we don't die but change, always in the State, without ever even knowing that we're in it.

When you get off at the Coliseum station, you walk over the pedestrian bridge with butterflies in your stomach. You do and don't want to be there. You want to drum but also to be heard drumming. Not as yourself but as the drum. The big drum sound that makes the dancers dance. You don't want to be seen by anyone from work. The shame of your drinking and showing up to work with the smell still on you is too much. Getting attacked by the bat and crushing it in front of them is part of it, too. You go through the metal detector at the front and your belt gets you another go-through. You get the beep the second time because of change in your pocket. The security guard is an older black guy who doesn't seem to care much about anything but avoiding the beeping of the detector. "Take it out, anything, anything in your pockets, take it out," he says.

"That's all I got," you say. But when you walk through it beeps again.

"You ever have surgery?" the guy asks you.

"What?"

"I don't know, maybe you have a metal plate in your head or—"

“Nah, man, I got nothing metal on me.”

“Well, I gotta pat you down now,” the guy says, like it’s your fault.

“All right,” you say and put your arms up.

After he pats you down, he gestures for you to walk through again. This time when it beeps he just waves you on. About ten feet away, you’re looking down as you walk and you realize what it was. Your boots. Steel toe. You started wearing them when you got the job. Jim recommended it. You almost go back to tell the guy, but it doesn’t matter anymore. You find Bobby Big Medicine under a canopy. He nods up then tilts his head toward an open seat around the drum. There’s no small talk. “Grand Entry” song, Bobby says to you, because he knows everyone else knows. You pick up your drumstick and wait for the others. You hear the sound but not the words that the powwow m.c. is saying, and you watch for Bobby’s stick to go up. When it does, it feels as though your heart stops. You wait for the first hit. You pray a prayer in your head to no one in particular about nothing in particular. You clear a way for a prayer by thinking nothing. Your prayer will be the hit and the song and the keeping of time. Your prayer will begin and end with the song. Your heart starts to hurt from lack of breath when you see his drumstick go up and you know they’re coming, the dancers, and it’s time. ♦