

Nightmares & Lullabies

Stories by Ronald McGuire

(Excerpt, about 560 words)

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Fitting In

As a boy, I longed to speak like the other boys I met when we moved to Georgia. My parents divorced when I was 4, and my earliest memories are blissful and dreamlike days and nights on my grandparent's farm in Iowa, early dawn hours of sweet air laced with dew, drifting in with the birdsong through the open window by the bed I shared with my uncle. He was eight, and my moon and stars. I was parked there for a year while my mother went out of state to work and figure out how to make a new life as a single mother. She married a man in Texas, and his job took us from Houston to New Orleans, then landed us in Georgia, just outside Atlanta.

We got to Georgia as I was starting third grade. A teacher decided there was something wrong with the way I talked, so they set me up with a speech therapist. I don't know what they set out to fix, but I could take a guess. All I know is I wanted to sound like all the other kids.

The boys in Georgia would say things like “ain’t” or “dang-it” or “fixin-to” or “crik” and I soaked it up like the earth soaks up the sun. My mother had no intention of raising what she called “a redneck kid.”

“You won’t go anywhere in life if you don’t speak proper English,” she would say. I never dared ask her what that said about her new husband, the man I called “dad,” and his Texas drawl.

I secretly cataloged the Southern-isms I heard and by high-school I could pass as a native, at least among those who didn’t know the truth. It felt good, those times I was anonymous, and could drop into the drawl and twang at will and be accepted like any other kid.

It had other uses too, like the time a cop pulled me over for speeding. “Awright young man, I’m gonna write you a warnin’ this time, but I ketch you drivin’ hell-bent for leather agin an’ I’m writin’ ya for real, ya unnerstan’?”

“Yes, sir, I do, you ain’t never gonna see my face agin, off’ sir, I swear.”

I could start a new job and slip into a conversation with the other employees without anyone asking me “Where you from boy?”

Living this dual-dialect life also came in handy as training for how to deal with bigger problems. Like being gay at a time and in a place where such a thing

could get a person killed, without much consequence. I had to talk a certain way, walk a certain way, be a certain way. I had to fit in. I perfected the act, until one day in Texas, senior year in college, when the lie was ripped away and the truth spilled out like the bloody entrails of a butchered animal.

I had to face a new reality. I had to deal with it. I had to survive those walks across campus where it seemed everyone found joy in shouting out words like “faggot” and “cocksucker” and “queer,” perverting the beauty of their colloquial speech. It was a small school in a small town and everyone was in on the game.

Then one Friday night, I had to fight it.