



BACKWARDS ADVICE

by Tyler Barton

I FOUGHT a fireworks war. Me versus the party house down the coast. A chaise-lounge, cheap beers, my good lighter, the long lake. The party egged me on and on. That far-off clapping I heard every time a bombette blew: a thousand little slaps to my sorry face. To win an argument and the last dregs of my daughter's attention, I set off my whole stockpile. Every mortar wasted, a two-decade's collection. I'd toss up one pink punch, and they'd send a rainbow barrage. I kept reaching for another. I didn't know what we were fighting over, or who my opponents were, or what winning even looked like. Above the ocean of Lake Ontario, the fading lights drifted in a cloud of their own making.



I had been living alone, mostly, in the little maroon cottage for the summer—a glorified shack, the most misguided use of my savings—seven miles from our house. I ate Pop-Tarts and beer, napped all day by the lake—dreams of saving my daughter, Tara, from a car on fire.

I had never pictured myself unemployed at midlife, separated from my wife, and losing an American pissing contest against my neighbors, blowing maybe my last chance to be heroic.

Tara never joined me. She stayed planted on the couch inside while I worked my way through the last of my stash and a case of Labatt. The battle raged until I ran out around three, my palms grey with the nitrate, my thumb rubbed raw from striking the lighter. When I passed out, my launch tubes were angled so far to the east you could argue I wanted somebody to burn.

Never before had I been off work for the Fourth of July. Tara and her mother, Alice, had always spent the holiday up in Rochester, watching explosions reflect off High Falls. Alone at the fire station, I'd sit and

imagine a beautiful, loud retirement.

The first thing I did the following morning, the morning of July fifth, was take a leak in the lake. I balanced on the break wall in my elastic water shoes, watching my blurry head in the reflection, feeling shock at how gaunt it'd gotten. My glasses kept sliding down my nose, not from heat or sweat or gravity: a face can just shrink. I took in the view, trying to love it more than was natural. Sailboats inching along, white wakes dressing the water, the sky washed an '80s denim blue.

I climbed the wooden stairs and stoked the remains of last night's fire. There was a little heat left, so I dumped in a bag of cut grass. The smoke refreshed the warm air, replacing the fishgut odor that wafts up from the water with a scent like pot. In an instant, I was sixteen again, at the graveyard where we use to smoke, with the swim team's scorekeeper I kissed until we couldn't breathe, holding bottle rockets we lit out the Buick's window, which reminded me of Tara, who hadn't watched a single firework last night, but instead sat in the front room of the cottage on her computer, with her back to the picture window, behind which was a warm night, a mown lawn, few bugs, and endless explosions like giant flowers.

My daydream ended with POP-POP-POP-POPPOPOPOPOP. My enemy was back at it, lighting up, twisting the knife. The peonies paled in

the blue morning sky. Somewhere, dogs barked in protest. Gulls took off together. I stood still by the fire pit, with smoke in my eyes.

Inside, Tara screamed.



You plateau, as a dad. I mean, when she's still shitting herself or just begging you to watch her color, you're learning something every five seconds. Change is frequent, fast, and each moment has an arc. Everything's a story. Expectations keep exploding. But eventually, the changes happen less and less. She's only home when she has to be. You pass her driving back from your job. Whole years go without learning a thing. Time runs weird: you enter dad-years. You turn turtle. Every year is ten. It's forever until something happens—say, she overdoses and wrecks the car—but when it does, it's like an egg is smashed. Because I think about my past / present / future like a long carton of mishandled eggs. Every story I have is the smashing of one of those eggs. I could describe the hue of the yolk, and the shapes of shell floating in the broken ceiling of each one, but I'll spare it. In this one, Tara is a bitter sixteen. In this one, I am

slouching toward divorce. I have spent twenty-some years working toward a life I can no longer see. I am floating in a lake of broken yolk. I have my daughter, but barely.



Tara charged across the yard and tossed her laptop into the fire ring. I stared for a second before leaping forward. The computer was so incredibly light I nearly hit myself in the face lifting it out. She watched me, blank. Her blond boy-cut hair was growing back into a mullet that recalled a young me astride a Harley. She wore a black tank-top and running shorts. I'd never seen her exercise.

“What is wrong with this?” I asked.

“It’s ruined.”

“Why’s it so light?”

She then explained, in a tone that sounded even and calm but suggested disgust at my ignorance, that she’d been eating Kix when the morning’s mortars went off, which so surprised her that the bowl dumped out of her hands, onto her pajama bottoms. And her MacBook. There’d

been smoke. The screen: black. She yelled something about insurance, something about telling me so. I didn't catch all of it, because the neighbors lit off a few more mid-rant, the sound drowning her out, a red chrysanthemum falling around her head. I watched her like a foreign movie without subtitles.

“The motherboard is fucking fried,” she said.

“Motherboard.” I nodded, holding her computer.

“I hate the fucking Fredricksons,” she said. Behind her on the placid lake, a yellow jet ski dragged past, parting the water like an open book. The driver was standing straight up, shirtless. I remembered it was Monday, thought, *Why is no one at work?*

“The Fredricksons,” I echoed.

“Are you retarded? You gonna repeat everything I say?”

“How do you know it was them?”

“You don't even know who it is you spent all night trying to impress?”

The Fredrickson's weren't my audience, but I didn't correct her.

She went on: “Fucking Blade posted on Instagram all night. Every single firework, he had to take a pic. Probably forty of them—all the same thing. Each in a different shit filter. I hope he lost all his followers.”

“He appreciates fireworks,” I said.

She stared at me.

“Who’s Blade?” I asked.

“Fredrickson, Dad. Jesus.”

“The Fredricksons,” I said again, feeling for the memory.

The Fredricksons were my first fire.



Back in '85, I volunteered at Hamline Fire Department. There weren't a ton of fire calls—I got used to that fast. I spent a lot of my time at the station sweeping, observing games of Rummy 500, and fixing coffee. My favorite was polishing the trucks. I'd shammy the chrome edges until my face—coke-bottle glasses above a wispy blond moustache—shined clear.

It was The Fourth. A call came around midnight from a lake house out on Norway Heights. I climbed into a suit far too big for my skinny ass. The helmet slid around my head. The drive there was the most exciting my life had been. The possibilities: you never know what you're going to encounter, only the general outline. Norway Road, barn fire, no known

injuries. But still, the place could be a mountain of flame. Barn fires spread like that, unpredictable, nearly impossible to stop. We drove fast. My mind went wild searching the horizon for signs. All the stars were out, but I couldn't find the moon.

It turned out to be a standard, low-drama operation. No one even had to enter the barn. I helped hold a hose. We had things cleaned up in a half hour, the only difficulty being all the denim-clad drunks howling, the shitty country music blaring from a stereo no one thought to turn off.

In the end, the Fredricksons lost a corner of their barn. I wanted a chance to speak to the family. The cause of the fire I did not know, but wanted to assure them that their barn was still in good shape. Things were okay, no little thanks to us. I wanted to feel proud, a small pat on the back from the community. I was nineteen.

Standing around the yard were a dozen or so people losing their buzz. The smoke had started to clear and the fireflies returned. I never found the man of the house, but the Mrs. was kind, holding a swaddled baby mesmerized by either the shine of the truck or the smoke from the extinguished barn.

“The fire...” I began.

But then the Fire Chief stepped up from behind me. “The structural damage is such that,” he said to her, “this barn can no doubt be salvaged.”

I nodded like it was exactly what I would have said. We’d done our jobs. Done them well. She shook her head and smiled. “I would hug you,” she said, glancing down at her full arms. The baby was asleep and I was a firefighter.



Tara was staring, waiting for something. Back at age thirteen, she’d given up rolling her eyes. Instead, when she thought I was being stupid, which is to say whenever she heard my voice, she’d vanish behind this bloated stare. Whenever courage came to me, I’d stare back.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

“That’s my question,” she said.

Like her mother, her lips and ears redden when she’s right. Both of their faces were flames during the fight we had that past March, after she’d been drugged at a rock concert in Buffalo and drove her Kia off the Thruway. The airbag bruised her eye, but nothing broke. Her passenger,

Paige, not yet licensed, drove home while Tara drifted in and out of consciousness. They pulled in with a missing headlight. Tara refused to let me file a report or call a detective. Alice demanded I respect her decisions. I wanted to know everything. Why would someone put a pill in her water, and was she sure it was water, and what other pills had she taken, and what had she been wearing, anyway?

She stopped talking altogether.

There are things I regret in the name of fatherhood. Shortly after the wreck, I started leaving work early to drive up to Buffalo, stake out the club, stalk the dirty streets looking for someone, something responsible. I didn't know what to do. I kept questioning the club manager and was removed via chokehold by a bouncer. When I showed up to work looking ragged and bruised, the Fire Chief asked if I had joined a fight-club, if my life was in danger.

And there she stood now, by the fire ring and flagpole, my daughter, staring me down, looking for answers. Then, a quiet whistle signaled noise was imminent: colors were coming. Before it popped, Tara spun toward the sound and threw her middle fingers skyward, a cool but powerless gesture. The green crossettes mocked her. The design spread into a wide star, each point exploding again into smaller stars.

I walked east, toward the light and sound.

“Where are you going?” Tara called after me.

“Fredricksons.”

“You’re walking?” she said, behind me. “It’s like a mile.”

I was surprised but happy she followed. I had on the pink Walmart watershoes that never left my feet that summer, even during sleep. I didn’t feel up to driving. “We’re walking,” I said.

“Oh my god.” She stopped. “Are you still drunk?”

“I don’t feel great, if that’s what you’re asking.”



It had taken three years of volunteering (meanwhile pumping gas at Crosby’s, living with my dad, and visiting Alice down in Erie) before I was hired by the Orleans County Fire Co. For thirty years, I spent my energy on fundraising and bemoaning this central irony: the more fire safety classes and presentations we taught, the fewer fires there were to fight. In the ’90s, we had two or three calls a week, four if you count medical assists, false alarms, and getting things down from where they shouldn’t be. The blue

Jaws of Life gathered dust. Honestly, I never even knew how it worked.

Since the millennium, we'd lost a permanent worker every year.

I never fought for my job. I didn't know how. They kept me around because I was the number one source of new ideas for fundraisers. I put an end to the bullshit of flagging down traffic, shaking empty buckets, and wearing fake smiles. We held donation safety workshops, sold candy like a ball team (Reese's, not pity, being the way to this town's pockets), and started a monthly summer Water Park Day, all supplies and labor donated, complete with sprinklers, dunk tanks, Slip 'N Slides, and a competition to see who could saw through a fire hose the fastest. It was easier back then. Much more reverence for civil servants. People gave, unafraid of the word hero.

Once Tara was twelve and all plugged in, she was teaching me Kickstarter, online campaigns. She made us a Twitter. I stayed valuable, thanks to her. She wrote her 6th grade "Role Model" essay about Alice's brother, the Marine, despite the fact he never went to Iraq. Then again, I'd only ever saved cats, or barns. My place in the community was hosing down the remains of meth-labs.

This past April, with only two other full-timers left (the Deputy and

his Assistant Chief), I got the call from the county. They wanted to talk. I knew how it went: the haggling of part-time hours, volunteer status. I saw it coming like the tail of a firework, but that made it no less painful or loud. I wanted to tell the Fire Chief to go fuck himself, act like a kid, smash the snow globe on his desk, quit with attitude. Instead, this little maroon lake house went on the market and I moved on it. I stopped showing up to work. Each morning I'd leave the house and drive toward the cottage to spend the day reading John Grisham and sleeping on the sunny spots of carpet like a dog.

Alice and I argued through Spring, went silent in June. Then no one spoke to me.



Tara and I made our slow way down Norway Road. Dirt and stone. On the lake-side of the street sat squat houses, square plots of yard, and silver water stretching to another country. The opposite side held tractors parked beside requisite red barns. Quilt-pattern signs hung crooked on the doors. It was all decoration. No one farmed here. Every tenth one sat abandoned

and sagging into the brown ground.

It wasn't yet nine o'clock. Already a grim heat. Tara switched between texting and chewing me out for getting drunk, for starting shit with the Fredricksons in the first place. She tied the events together in causal chain that equaled my sole responsibility for her fried computer. I nodded, content to have her speaking to me.

"It's their fault," I said. "It can't be legal to set off fireworks before noon."

"And on a fucking weekday!" she shouted.

I loved her so much but couldn't read her, or ever figure out what to say.

Boys on a four-wheeler passed us twice, laughing.



On the subject of her crash (what I called her "attack"), and my insensitivity, and what Alice called our historically dysfunctional respect for each other, I tried often that year to start the kinds of talks with Tara you see on TV. They usually start with "Listen, Tara..." and you just pray her

eyes rise from the screen. It never took. I didn't know how to talk. She hadn't let me in her attic room in three years. She had no pity for my joblessness, had consented to spending the Fourth of July weekend with me on the terms that I'd somehow pay all her college application fees. It was worth it for three days of bonding, but in actuality, the only moment we'd had was this: after I'd taken my third trip to the truck for more ammo, she came out of the cottage and handed me a pillow case.

“Have a beer,” I said to her.

“It's for the pole,” she said. I held it out in front of me like I was reading a map and saw a sort of flag. Red letters on beige:

FUCK
YOUR
SELVES

I clipped it to the rope and hoisted our first flag. It was touching. A wind blew. Tara retreated inside. The flag was a little hard to see in the disappearing twilight, but the message was clear.

It was midnight before I began to wonder what it meant.



The Fredricksons' ugly barn came into view. Only three spots of red paint had yet to chip away. Tara walked five steps ahead of me. I trudged straight through mud puddles while she side-stepped them gracefully.

“Do you like the cottage?” I finally asked.

“Uhh.”

“Do you appreciate it? I mean I think it’s—”

“It’s nice.”

“Nice,” I said.

She stopped walking. “But couldn’t you have bought something farther away? We live ten minutes down the road. Coming here just feels like we have a new backyard.”

“A beautiful backyard,” I added.

“There’s a whole world, Dad.”

I thought of all the campaigns Tara had launched at school and online. Save this old movie theatre this and raise money to help this family or that.

She was always collecting money for people and places I didn't know. When I asked her how she knew band X who needed Y amount of funds to buy back the equipment that had been stolen from their van, she'd say Facebook, Snapchat, or sometimes simply: Internet. I knew that in a year, the second she had her diploma, she'd be far away. Of course, I wouldn't have much to give her for tuition, but she'd design her way, her own life, complete with a job that wasn't increasingly obsolete.

We were one house from the Fredricksons'. I had no plan.

"You didn't even watch the fireworks," I said, finally. It's what I'd wanted to say for the last twelve hours. I needed to practice whatever I was going to say to Mr. Fredrickson, but I was hung up. The ponytailed, eight-year-old Tara used to marvel at our computer's fireworks screensaver.

"No?" Tara said with a tone. "I did."

"You were on your computer, not even facing the window."

"For your information, I saw them. They reflected off the glass of that ugly-ass photo you hung above the couch."

"But it's—"

She looked me in the eyes, and I stopped. With my hand flat I drew an invisible line between our foreheads. She was a tiny bit taller than me.

“—and actually?” she continued, “It’s prettier that way, in the reflection. But I don’t know why I’m even explaining myself to you. I really don’t.”

She turned and walked. I followed her toward the Fredrickson house. Quiet, sweating, we stopped at a mailbox that bore their family name in gold letters. Behind that, the old barn they had never fixed. The charred corner was worse than I remembered, a wide hole worn through a beaten shoe.

“What can I say?” I asked, nervous and confused about our mission. What was the expected outcome? At that moment, I foresaw nothing. All I remembered was deciding to walk, and my daughter deciding to follow.

A drip of sweat fell from Tara’s bangs onto her phone screen.

“What should I say?” I repeated.

She wiped her phone. I hoped she would Google it.

“What do I say to Mr. Fredrickson?”



Nobody came to the door, so we walked around the house and peered over

the fence into the backyard. A handful of people were sitting in lawn chairs, yellow McMuffin wrappers at their feet, drinking coffee and gazing out at the calm surf. The detritus of a backyard BBQ surrounded them—beer cans, stained paper plates, a Slip 'N Slide.

“Hiya there,” I said.

Their faces turned toward the fence.

A voice: “Who goes?”

We introduced ourselves. The gate was opened by a tall, shirtless man wearing cloth shorts that looked dangerously like boxers. He had a confident white moustache above which was a bony nose, above which were two bloodshot but warm eyes.

“Jake Fredrickson,” he said, shaking my hand. “What can we do you for?”

The person I guessed to be his son, Blade, walked over. He wore pale blue Under Armour and seemed to be flexing. He looked like a mall mannequin.

“Tara,” he said, like he was reading a sign on the Thruway. She looked at her phone.

Instead of explaining the situation, I talked about the fire.

“You haven’t fixed up the barn.” I tried to smile. “I helped save it back in ’85.”

“Huh,” Jake Fredrickson scratched his armpit. “Oh! Yeah, sent a Roman candle right into that sucker. One of our first parties, actually.” He laughed and glanced back at the group drinking coffee. “We don’t use it,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. There was a silence that I expected to be broken by the crack of a firework. I tensed, waiting for it.

“We were launching some last night,” Blade said, smirking. “Maybe you saw them.”

“I can’t say I did.”

Tara added: “And this morning, at eight o’clock.”

“God *bless* America,” Jake and Blade said in unison. They cracked up. Squeezed each other’s big shoulders. The tide slapped the Fredrickson break wall, the whole earth an audience. I waved to the onlookers with their coffees. No response.

“Don’t any of you people have jobs?” Tara said. The Fredrickson men froze.

“Excuse me?” Blade asked, squinting.

I wanted to shoot fireworks at his head.

“Listen, honey, I teach our county’s youth—summers off,” Jake Fredrickson said. “And Blade’s up at SUNY Buffalo.”

“Not that he needs to explain himself to you,” Blade added.

Tara took a step toward the two men. I put my hand on her shoulder.

“What exactly brings you two here?” asked Jake Fredrickson.

“Excuse me, *honey*,” Tara said. “But your bullshit show this morning ruined my laptop.”

I jumped in: “You see, the noise startled her and she dropped her cereal...”

I stopped talking because Blade had his phone out, pointing it toward me, and Tara was watching him.

“You were saying?” Jake asked me.

“And. Um. Well, it doesn’t work anymore,” I answered. I wiped my forehead with my forearm. Blade still held his phone out toward me with both hands, like a gun.

“Right,” Jake said. He looked over at his guests and back to me. “How about we take this chat across the street, and stop ruining these nice people’s morning.”



I followed Jake Fredrickson through the warped door of his barn. Surveying the space like a prospective buyer, I saw the loft stacked with sleds and sprinklers, three sets of ladder ball. A row of identical shovels lined one wall. Yellow light beamed in through the charred corner like it was holy.

“Listen, all we want, I think...” I looked around for Tara to confirm, but she was outside. Blade too. I was alone with this man. He breathed out his nose, and his moustache did not move.

“Real audacious of you,” Jake said, clenching his fists. “Coming here like you’re owed something.”

“Just an apology is all,” I said.

“I’m sorry your little girl can’t hold on to her Lucky Charms.”

I took a step forward. We were in arm’s reach, and he stunk like sunburn.

Tara ran in holding her phone out in front her. Blade followed. I heard my own voice through its tinny speaker. *The noise startled her...* I considered

for a second the possibility that I was dreaming. *And. Um. Well.* But no, my words were being played back to me. *...it doesn't work anymore.* I sounded pitiful. I looked at her screen and saw a small man, the lake behind me swallowing my head.

“He fucking posted that,” she said, pointing at Blade, her eyes still on her phone.

Blade held his phone out, the camera angled at my feet. He wanted a shot of my pink water shoes for context. The world would never believe it. The camera made a noise. Blade stood behind his dad. Tara held her phone out to show me, but I wasn't ready to look. I didn't want to see any more. I wanted gasoline. “Let's go,” I said, heading for the door. But Tara wasn't following me.

I looked back as she came at Blade with her right fist.

I found myself instructing her like a boxing coach, but I was only calling out what I saw her doing. When she hit him with the left, I yelled “Left!” Then her right again: “Right hook!” She kicked his thigh: “Use your legs!” She was a bird exploding from a shell. Into endless flight. Her huge wings flurried. “Head up! Head up!” I kept trying to describe what she was doing, in some backward way, giving her advice, but she just kept surprising

me.

“Momentum!” I shouted, after she shoved him hard onto his back.

Blade lay there on the barn’s dirt floor, his red face inside a hole of sunlight. His father did not help him up. Tara stood above him, panting, and I did not try to bring her back. Or away. We were all perfectly still and silent, respecting something honest.

It’s this moment—Tara fighting for both of us—that I picture every sunrise on the drive to campus for my own morning classes. Or as she appears on my screen for our weekly Skype check-in. Or when we hug goodbye on the stoop of my apartment.

“Okay,” I said, looking straight at Jake Fredrickson. “Here’s what’s going to happen next.”

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