

Excerpt from Home  
By William Neale  
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After they passed the small Methodist church where his parents and he had belonged and where the funeral would be held the next day, Lucas let out a soft whistle at Rogan's apparent neighborhood. They were driving up Booker's Mountain, which Lucas recalled as an exclusive part of town where only very affluent people lived. Homes there boasted panoramic views of the small city of fifty thousand and even more impressive views of the nearby Smoky Mountains.

Rogan pulled into the drive of a large cedar shake house built to look like a mountain chalet. It had an A-frame roof and expansive floor-to-ceiling windows designed to maximize the scenic views. Landscaping spotlights illuminated the exterior and made it look more like a ski resort in Vail or Aspen than a policeman's house in Moorestown. He thought with a wry smile that either the city paid its deputy chief of police a huge salary or Rogan was a cop on the take.

"Come on in," Rogan yelled. "Just let me turn on some lights inside."

"Be right there," Lucas shouted but instead stopped to admire the sweeping night view of his hometown. It was an oppressively warm and humid July night and despite how much he was sweating in his coat and tie, he stood there for a few minutes taking in the lights that made the town look a lot larger than it really was. He detected a once familiar sound.

Yes, that's what he thought he'd heard. A mockingbird was perched somewhere close in one of Rogan's trees, performing his evening concert. Lucas smiled, not having heard a mockingbird since he'd left the South so many years before. It sang a long medley of bird call's greatest hits and despite Lucas's jumbled and conflicted emotions about returning home again, it was a comforting sound, reminding him that not all his memories were bad.

"Nice out here this time of night, isn't it?" a deep voice said next to him, startling Lucas out of his pleasant trance. "I sit up on the veranda sometimes until late just so I can look out at the lights and hear that little bird sing his heart out. Course one or two of these improves the view considerably." He handed Lucas a generously poured highball glass of scotch. "You said you like it on the rocks if I recall?"

"Couldn't be more perfect." Lucas smiled, gratitude in his voice. "To your hospitality," he toasted. They clinked their glasses and he took his first sip. "Boy, I sure needed this," he sighed. "I appreciated everyone who came out tonight for my dad but it sure did wear me down."

"Then there's plenty more where that one came from. Let's take these up on the veranda and park ourselves in a rocking chair," Rogan suggested. "Rocking always relaxes me no matter how stressful the day. Of course the scotch might have something to do with that too," he chuckled. "Why don't you dump your jacket and tie over the porch rail here," he pointed, as Lucas sat his drink down and slipped off his jacket. He noticed that Rogan had already stripped down to his t-shirt, revealing strong, muscular biceps that bulged out of white sleeves, starkly contrasting with his deep tan. Lucas couldn't help staring at his powerful arms.

"Hope you don't mind the undershirt. I was sweating like a horse in that damn funeral suit. Oh sorry – I didn't mean any disrespect."

Lucas laughed. "I'm sweating like a horse in *my* damned funeral suit too! I think I'll go in my t-shirt also. It's really hot tonight. I forgot how humid it gets here."

"Welcome to summer in East Tennessee. Does it get this hot up in Cleveland?"

“How’d you know I live in Cleveland?”

“Well your specialty license plates that say Cleveland Indians are sort of a giveaway. But actually your dad told me. He was always talking about you. I also know you’re some kind of high-powered advertising executive too. Sam was real proud of you.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Rogan asked.

“Long story, Rogan. I’m just surprised, that’s all. My Dad and I weren’t exactly on good terms when he died.”

“I’m real sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. I’m dealing with it. But how ‘bout we change the subject, okay? So tell me about yourself. You told me you’re the deputy chief of police but that’s all I know about you. Are you married?”

“No, divorced about three years ago. I’ve got two great kids – twins – Amy and Rogan Jr. They’re eight years old now. My wife and I parted on reasonably good terms and we still talk, but she got remarried last year and her husband was transferred all the way out to Seattle shortly afterwards.”

“That must be tough on you. Not seeing your kids every day and all.”

“Yeah, it’s real tough, especially at their ages. You don’t know how much I miss them. But the guy she married is good to them. I talk to them almost every night and they still call me Daddy and him Bob. So it’s working about as good as can be expected. They visit during school holidays and I get them for a few weeks every summer. But when they’re not here I get kind of lonely being here all by myself.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I live alone too. In an old Victorian I restored that’s way too big for just me.”

“You ever marry?”

“No, that’s one of the things you used to call me that ended up being true.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m gay.”

“Really? You are?”

*He said that like he was surprised, Lucas thought. This coming from a guy who must have called me a fag hundreds of times. What’s that all about?*

“Yep. One hundred percent ho-mo-sex-ual.” He lengthened the pronunciation to emphasize each syllable. “So tell me, Rogan. You still hate fags?”

Rogan choked on the sip of scotch he had just taken. “Christ, Lucas! Of course not. Come on. I’ve been beating myself up for calling you that for what now – ten, twelve years?”

“Twelve since we graduated. Sixteen since you started it,” Lucas said flatly, betraying no sign of the conflicted emotions that used to plague him when he was around Rogan. “So I hope you’re not now disgusted or embarrassed to have brought a gay guy home with you tonight.” Lucas enjoyed teasing him, for once able to turn the tables on Rogan.

“Damn it, Lucas, we’re not seventeen anymore.” The serious tone of Rogan’s voice surprised Lucas. “Your sexual preference is nobody’s business but your own and I frankly don’t give a flying shit whether anybody knows I brought a gay guy home with me. I meant what I said before about enjoying the company. I’m really happy you’re here, and I’d even like it if maybe we could become friends after all these years.”

Lucas could tell he had hit a nerve. The question was whether Rogan's lengthy and emphatic reaction was the result of guilt, over compensation, or from yet something else Lucas couldn't identify.

"Relax, Rogan. I was just having a little fun with you. Truth is, I'm glad you invited me and, yeah, it'd be good to have a friend here. I don't know anybody in town anymore – other than a bunch of relatives I don't really want to see." He paused and then chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Man, I never thought I'd ever, and I do mean ever, be drinking scotch with Rogan James. But I'm really enjoying being here with you like this."

"You mean that?"

"Sure I do. I'm sitting here, rocking on a porch – excuse me – veranda, like I used to at my grandma's. I'm looking at this gorgeous view of the town lights and listening to a mockingbird's free concert. I'm drinking good scotch. And I'm getting to know someone all over again who seems to have turned out to be a really nice guy."

"Hearing you say that makes me feel a whole lot better now. And also – well, also thanks for accepting my apology. It was way too late in coming, man. I should have sought you out years ago. I actually tried to tell you right after our high school graduation, but I chickened out. And then again at the ten year high school reunion but you obviously didn't go to that."

"I had to be out of the country at the time, but I don't think I would have come anyway. Just more baggage in those memories than I wanted to open again."

"Meaning you didn't want to see me again," Rogan said softly. "That reminds me of the rest of what I wanted to explain. I wanted to tell you *why* I used to hassle you so badly."

"I figured you just hated me."

"No, it was just the opposite. The truth is, I liked you. I even envied you."

"No way. Rogan James envied *me*?"

"Yeah, I secretly admired you. But I was so immature and insecure that instead I had to show off for my buddies and give you abuse for being so damned perfect. I know now that I must have really hurt you, Lucas. Way too many times."

"But why would – let me see if I remember right from 'Who's Who' – 'Best Athlete,' 'Most Popular Boy,' and 'Most Handsome' possibly ever be envious of Lucas Reed, the number one geek in the school?"

"And as *I* recall, *you* were voted 'Most Likely to Succeed.' We had geeks and you most definitely weren't one of them. It was because from my perspective, you really were perfect. You were probably the smartest guy in school whereas I was just a dumb jock. Or at least that's what I let myself believe at the time. You had real friends who defended you when I'd fling some insult at you. My friends were mostly a bunch of cling-ons who hung with me because I could score touchdowns and also score them dates. I'd see you acting in a play, or I'd read something you'd written in the school paper and knew that you had more talent in your little finger than I had in my entire body."

Lucas could hardly believe he was hearing this.

Rogan continued. "You also showed courage when I'd confront you. And dignity. You never backed down when I'd go after you. And no matter what kind of shit I threw at you, you never broke. I never saw you shed a single tear even though I sure tried hard to make you cry sometimes. I even wished that I were as good looking as you."

"Now you've *got* to be shitting me. You were by far the best looking guy in school. Hell, you're even more handsome now. And since I'm gay, I can get away with saying stuff like that."

Rogan laughed, a bit uncomfortable with the compliment, before continuing. "Like I said, my self esteem wasn't the greatest in those days. I thought I looked like a gorilla. My skin was always tanned too dark, my big hands hung down to my knees, and my body was too hairy for a teenage boy. And I was also way too bulked up from the weight room. I looked like some Incredible Hulk wannabe. I'd look at you and you were, like, all fresh-faced and wholesome. Like some good-looking kid in a milk commercial. You were a lot skinnier back then but seeing you now with those big arms and shoulders, it looks like you're hitting the weights pretty hard yourself these days."

"Thanks. I try."

"You more than try. But anyway, like I was saying, you were tall and thin but not gangly or awkward. You carried yourself with confidence without being cocky. And don't take this the wrong way. Remember, I'm supposed to be the straight guy here. But you had, and still have, the most striking blue eyes I've ever seen on a man or a woman. I'll bet you've used those eyes to mesmerize half the gay men in Cleveland."

Lucas laughed. "Trust me, I haven't mesmerized anybody."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Lucas. You don't know the effect you have on people."

What an odd compliment, Lucas thought. What "people" was he referring to since they knew nobody in common anymore? Could Rogan be referring to himself? And what was that line "I'm supposed to be the straight guy here" all about? *Supposed* to be?

"Anyhow, I just wanted you to know that I acted that way because I secretly *did* like and envy you. I wanted what *you* had."

"Rogan, it's sort of mind boggling to hear you saying that after all these years. But here's the funny thing. Did you know that I secretly wanted what *you* had? Isn't that so ironic? I always wished I were as good an athlete or even half as good-looking as you. And could make people laugh so much, the way you could with your jokes. I always felt awkward and shy at parties and then I'd see you walk into the room and suddenly own it. You could charm anybody who got caught in your smile. If you hadn't been so damned mean to me I probably would have secretly been in love with you." Lucas noticed Rogan's eyebrows arch slightly as though surprised to hear him admit that. He wondered what the odd reaction meant but continued with his point. "Damn, maybe if we'd had this conversation back when we were sixteen or seventeen, we could have become really good friends."

Rogan paused and looked away before answering, his mind seemingly drifting somewhere else for a few seconds. "Yeah, knowing that now, I could easily see that happening. To tell you the truth, I sort of think that if we had become good friends back then, maybe my life might have turned out a whole lot differently."

"What do you mean by that?" Lucas asked.

"Oh, nothing really." Rogan stood up rather abruptly. "Looks like your glass is about empty, mine is too. Up for another?"

"Only if I won't get arrested by your buddies in blue when I'm driving home."

"You let me worry about the MPD, my friend. I know people."