The Road to the Island

Tom Hazuka
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What dirty little secrets are in your closet in your parent's house along with the baseball glove and the high school yearbook? In a fine first novel, Tom Hazuka flies protagonist Jimmy Dolan back to Connecticut for his father's funeral and to face the secret guilt he tried to flee.

Why did he leave his hometown, his friends, his brother and parents, and his college sweetheart wife and little son four years ago? And why was his father jogging at 2:30 a.m, and who was the hit-and-run driver who killed him?

Dolan anguishes through the funeral, the cool interrogations of ex-wife Beth, brother Gary, best boyhood buddy and Vietnam vet Roger, his mother, and his son Jim, between flashbacks of his small town childhood and the event that forced him to leave it all. At the center of his ruminations is a mattress in an abandoned house on Leatherman's Island where his high school English teacher Miss Terry took him by canoe the day after graduation with a bottle of wine, a joint, and the means to make a man of him.

Hazuka's pace is slow at first as Dolan must stumble through several awkward encounters and remember too many motifs of American childhood, from pitching ballgames to catching and smashing snapping turtles. Jimmy is too cerebral, worrying his guilt like a bad tooth. Just as the whine of his self-absorption gets tiring, his ex-wife Beth takes Jimmy on "their" bed, exacts a little revenge, and undulates the novel toward a climax. Hazuka has written a deft, engaging expose a la Updike and O'Hara of small town secrets and guilt, Vietnam, denials and divorces. The '60s popped Norman Rockwell's bubble. The Rockwell American landscape is falling to strip malls and developers, while the Rockwellian hero has roach burns in the arms of his Lazyboy and a stash of secrets hidden in a tin underneath.

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