

STILL WATER

Clare Pasley

They used to light up the night as the valley slept—the boys with their hatchet job engines and Timberland work boots. Lining up the cars and bikes they built from scratch, they revved the engines and laughed as if they hadn't done it every Friday night since they were fifteen. Those boys in town called out around the world as they went racing in the street. Their laughter echoed against the tin storm shutters pulled down over the liquor store and within the catacombs beneath the old bridges. They flew towards the Copper City town line, knowing nothing would ever feel as fast as this. Nothing so free.

I can still feel the cold, steel fence in front of the train station. The late June sun set behind a cover of fog, and the crickets hummed from the woods. The train came through once, maybe twice a year. The big hurricane from ten years before brought a flood so strong it wiped out the tracks and dug up coffins, sending them floating down the streets that had turned to rivers. The people downwind of the storm locked their doors and let the water flood their windows and drown them in their living rooms. The lush trees became hemlocks, and town officials marked the rising water levels against the beams of the Fall River Bridge with white paint that never dried.

Before the flood took out the tracks, people used to come to the valley from everywhere to find work. Trains from New Haven, Stamford, and sometimes even New York came through the station every day. The factories had constant, billowing clouds of smoke that grayed the air and gave the valley a bad reputation. But people say that if you got fired on a Friday night, you could find a shift somewhere else by Saturday morning. Now the factories are haunted, and kids throw rocks through the glass windows, knowing that, like those old buildings, we were meant to be born and buried here. But we had everything we needed, and the train had a whistle so loud you could hear it all the way over on Church Street.

We walked down Main Street in silence before the chaos of the race would erupt. Louis lit up a joint and handed it to me, and I took a drag deep into my chest.

“Sometimes I wish you never taught me how to smoke,” I said.

“No, you don’t.”

“I do—it makes my dad furious.”

He pulled the joint from my lips with two fingers. He stopped in the middle of the street, standing on the yellow line.

“Something’s gonna kill you.”

“I almost wish it wasn’t by my own hand.”

“Think about that feeling. The one that feels like a deep fog covering your mind. It’s the silence in the corner of the party, and as you get higher and higher the figures blend. Any song that plays wraps around you. Any thought you have lasts only as long as you let it. This feeling is what people look for their whole lives. The feeling in your chest right now.”

“Burning.”

“Yes,” he said.

“We aren’t at a party,” I argued as I leaned against the fence of Jimmy’s tattoo parlor. He cut the power on the blue LED light and locked his doors at night. He never used to lock it but the month before someone had broken in for his needles, so he had to get tight.

“We could pretend.” He threw the joint towards the river and reached for my hand. Rolling my eyes, I stood up and joined him in the middle of the road.

“What do you do at parties?” I asked.

“What everyone else is doing, I guess. We can be anything we want to be.”

“Can I go to Yale?” I asked, hope flickering in my voice.

“Anywhere you want. I’m headed west.”

“To play the bass?”

“A Fender Strat.”

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The red light above us flickered but never changed, reflecting in the water leaking from the sewers. He spun me around and staggered against the double yellow line. Pulling the flask from his shirt pocket, he downed whiskey and drifted farther away from me, the way he did almost every night. He was the perfect picture of rebellion. Nineteen and on fire, Louis was afraid of nothing but his own looming shadow. So many nights, his eyes dreamt of lights brighter than the ones on Main Street, and cars that drove faster than any of the beat-up ones he tried to fix. He began to sink in my arms.

He sighed, letting go of my hand. He took another swig.

“Sometimes it feels like this street is the whole goddamn world.”

We heard the mufflers from miles away as the boys pulled back in, and Louis lifted me on to the roof of his car to watch the headlights break open the darkness. When they returned, they drove slowly. Any scrapes got soaked in iodine and patched up roughly before they hit the bars to tell the stories.

That night we were silent on his roof, sometime after midnight, searching for stars. Louis studied his hands, permanently stained gray by oil from his dad’s car shop. He worked there after school, and once school ended, he worked there in the mornings too. He used a skateboard to roll underneath the cars and change the oil or repair the brakes. His dad taught him how to fix everything on his 78’ Cadillac. His dad worked quietly in the back; very rarely did he make a mistake. He remembered people by their cars, not their names, and could always tell who was coming without lifting his head from underneath the hood. Most nights he climbed the stairs to the kitchen as I sat with Louis, handing him tools I knew by function but never by name. Muffled voices from the TV upstairs echoed into the garage. The fridge door would creak, and then a bottle would open, over and over again. There is rarely a reason for it—that kind of unnamed ghost that causes blood to run cold. It was the kind that stayed underground, leaking slowly through the basement and out through the sewers

and eroding the foundation with tension strong enough to crack the mirror image of a father and son. Louis didn't have much use for love. He'd lived long enough without it.

"Do you ever feel like quitting the bakery and going somewhere really far away?" He asked me, breaking the quiet of the night.

"Sometimes, I guess. I don't know where I would go."

"I've been practicing," he said, sitting up to see my face. "I just need enough money for a plane ticket. Or gas to get me across the country. You could come too. You could be a real writer and live at the Chelsea Hotel with me."

I rubbed my eyes with my palms, sighing.

"I doubt it. I write like a virgin."

"Well, are you?" He asked, giving me a sideways glance.

"I'm not reckless enough."

I sat up so our knees touched, and he wrapped his hands around mine to warm them. His dark, Italian eyes stared into mine beneath lids that weakened as the rest of him followed. But his hands were still strong, the way they always were, even at the end of the night. He opened my hands in his, and there was nothing alive but the air between us. He rested his head on my shoulder, and I wondered what he dreamt of. He knew all my secrets because I didn't have any yet. I didn't know a single word of his.

"Do you ever think about not going?" I asked him.

"What, and end up like my dad?"

I eyed his empty flask. He didn't look at me. He rested his head against my knees to look back up at the sky. A dark navy blue, scattered with gray clouds.

"I wish we could see the stars," he breathed. "I bet they used to be beautiful. Before the factories and the trains and the chain smokers. I bet you could see them all the way from the pit of the valley."

After a while I felt his breathing slow against my chest. The early morning chill was beginning to set in as the birds awoke, and I helped him to his feet and through the window to his bedroom. My hand reached for his and I pulled him towards his bed, laying

his head against a worn, yellowed pillow and covering his shivering body with a blanket. I started on the empty streets toward home, knowing he wouldn't remember any of it in the morning. Not the streetlights or dancing by the sewers, not even the sound of motorbikes racing past us. But I always did.

He picked me up from graduation and I threw my robes into the dumpster, running in my new yellow dress toward the car. He drove a gentle thirty and as the windows rolled down and the wind caught in my hair, it felt like we could've existed anywhere. For a moment his hand reached for mine and drifted just over the shifting gears. But then he pulled back, resting it on the wheel. He shut off the radio and there was only silence as the moon followed us towards the main stretch.

"Today we get to go anywhere you want. It's the first day of freedom for you, kid."

"Quit calling me kid. I'm seventeen."

We stopped by the side of the road to share a cigarette. He rested against the passenger seat door, blowing smoke up towards the sky. I felt the chill that comes after dusk against my bare legs and watched the warm glow of his cigarette, waiting patiently for it to burn out.

"I hope you know how proud I am of you," he stumbled through each phrase. "How much I've tried to love you, kid."

We sat on the train tracks as he hoped in vain for it to come around. He laughed as I got up to walk on the narrow cement curb, waving my arms to keep my balance.

"You know, I used to actually do my homework."

"It did take a great deal of corrupting to turn you into one of the burnouts." He laughed as I sat down beside him, resting my head on his shoulder as my smile died down. He took a drink and rested his beer on his leg. Then all of a sudden, he looked as tired as his father did at the end of his shift.

"You're too young." I looked up at him, and his eyes were

dead in the water as he stared at the tunnel wall. His wasted words turned cold. "You've always been too young. You don't know anything yet. You still think that all this could be something. Everything would have to change, but you know that nothing ever will."

"Why is it always down to us leaving?" I felt the familiar pull at my throat, wanting to wash every word down so as not to spit them out. "Would staying be so bad? I could stay at the bakery, you at the shop. We could get one of those houses with a window in the kitchen. Right on the highway, on the edge of town."

"How could you ever want to stay here?" He began to yell, tearing at the seams.

"It's my home."

"But it doesn't have to be."

"If I stay here another minute, I'll become just like him. I'll wake up tomorrow and it'll be twenty years from now. I'll come home each night and crack open a beer before I even say hello to you. I won't love our kids; I won't love anything. Don't you see that?"

As quickly as it had come, summer's youth had let go of its last dying breath. And I could see it. I was a stranger by his own hand. He would find a train somewhere and never look back. So that someday, he could be more than just his father's son.

Sometimes I could see it. There was this house on the corner of Maple Street, between the grammar school and the graveyard. It was painted light blue with white shutters and dead grass. The one next to it burned down a few years before so the front yard seemed bigger than it actually was. Sometimes I thought about what it might have looked like on the inside. How my bare feet would feel against a winter morning's hard wood floor. Or how cold coffee being poured into the sink might sound. Brown bag lunches and zipped up backpacks, a kiss on the forehead goodbye. The end of a long day, or the final quiet when kids are asleep, and our parent's old cars are in the garage. Swaying to Tom Waits under the kitchen light, my head rested on his shoulder and his warmth so close to mine. Never wanting to run away. I wondered how it all might feel

inside my hands. That house with the light blue paint and white shutters was just up the road. But it might as well have burned down too.

In town, they would say “going west” when someone was dying. Dying and leaving the valley were sort of the same thing. We knew a few people who left for Massachusetts or New York, one for California. People never came back once they left. But most people never left once they were raised. It seemed as if we couldn’t wish for a better hell than the one we were already in. To him, I’d stay seventeen, coughing whenever I smoke. And he’d always be driving the car with the windows down. I was young enough to think it could all last forever. That the boys who race in the empty streets don’t grow up to be broken men. That the smoke never burns our lungs, and the streetlights never go out.