

Neha

by Andrew Fowler

I lean against the railing, and take a drag off my cigarette. Exhale, and the paper curls back, the red filament recedes with each breath. I stick my head out, and it's illuminated, slightly, in the pale, clouded light. I stick my head back in, and am again swathed in shadow, and pull my scarf tighter..

Traffic moves past, a stream of cars about to coast down the hill of Burlington Street, flying down the slope and getting shot across the bridge towards the limestone bluff on the other side.

My watch beeps, and it's 10 AM.

I've got a book, and have been reading it intermittently, trying to focus on something else. Jesus' Son. Named for the Velvet Underground line, not vice versa. In this paragraph, he talks about an all-night gas station at the corner of Burlington and Clinton Streets. Now the gas station is long since torn down, but it's funny to consider that I'm looking at the very spot he's describing. Which is more relevant to the story: the gas station or the point on the surface of the earth where it once stood?

I went for a walk earlier. Fall leaves and pieces of paper blew in the prairie wind, bums gathered in public spaces, sorority girls up early (for a Saturday morning in Iowa City) chatted on their cell phones, wearing University of Iowa sweatshirts. The walk ended at a cafe, where it was still dark and smoky and full of junkies, hiding from the bright autumn morning.

Back at the railing, I'm examining the skyline. New buildings that are all plates of glass, that remind me of how I imagine Berlin would look, and old buildings with chimneys and dusty windows and faded advertisements. When I turn around, a long, angular passage down through the parking ramp to a parallelogram of light at the far end. I walk down it, towards my car, unlock my old Honda, and take a seat. I fall asleep.

Twenty minutes later. I writhe awake, and run my hand through my hair. I keep sitting in the darkness, not wanting to move. I imagine that passersby in the few cars coming in and out of the ramp think I'm on a stakeout, but really I'm just looking at my cell phone.

Neha calls me at 11:30, and I go to pick her up at the clinic. She walks over to the car, and sits down. I ask her how it went.

"I think I'm alright"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I think I might just sleep for a while"

"Hey, I'm going to go get a sandwich, do you want anything?"

"No, I'm good."

We barely say anything for the rest of the drive, and on the way out of the sandwich place, it starts to rain softly.

On the ride home, she fell asleep. Her apartment and mine were fairly far away from each other, and the restaurant was halfway in between. There she sat, curled up in her sweatshirt, looking frail, fitless, occasionally moaning.

She was adopted from India. Her parents were professors at Stony Brook. They were culturally sensitive and gave her a name from her home country. She laughed about it the first time I met her. “Neha Weinstein. Who the hell would name their daughter Neha Weinstein? God, I was the curiosity of my bat mitzvah class.”

We used to joke about how if the evangelicals in the Supreme Court ever started to bare their teeth, we would start a back alley clinic. “I could perform the operation and you could sanitize the coat hanger,” she would say.

When we reached her apartment, I hugged her goodbye and said I’d see her the next day. I made some crack about going home and drinking the rest of the night away in the dark, and she smiled slightly.

The drive back was silent and cold. My car stereo wasn’t working — another thing to worry about that I didn’t need. I liked the sound that the tires made when switching from one type of pavement to another, from the bridge to the street proper, and then across the railroad tracks and up the hill, and then down a narrow brick street to my building.

Neither of my roommates were home. The cloud-deadened light filtered in through the kitchen windows. Below us, our downstairs neighbor played piano, as she often did on Saturday afternoons. I wandered over to the kitchen window, and stared down into the tiny park next to our building. The pea gravel on the playground was rain-wet, and with the steel play structure and the muddy lawn, it looked like a railroad siding. I called my roommate Alex to ask if he wanted to start partying early. He didn’t pick up his phone.

After the rain stopped, the park unfolded like a flower, and little kids in jackets played on the swingset, sweeping away the beads of water with their hands hidden inside their sleeves.